	BACLS GUIDANCE SHEETS

Advice and Info for AHRC Applications

Jennifer Cooke is on the Peer Review College of the AHRC. The information contained here is not authorised by the AHRC but based on her experience as a reviewer, trained panellist, and an applicant. The AHRC has considerable amounts of helpful information on their website which you are strongly advised to consult in full. These notes are probably most useful once you have actually looked at the application and so are aware of what is required.

Making an application

- Check the AHRC definition of ECR: it has so far remained quite generous and it is definitely worth applying under the Early Career versions of schemes if possible, since more funding is allocated to them in order to develop academics' careers.

- There's absolutely no point putting in a scrappy grant application. Plan it carefully, allow a lot of time (especially if you have Project Partners or are hoping to secure some – see below), expect to revise it and refine it in response to feedback.

- You don't have to put in for 100% of your time for the whole time of the grant. Consider other options, like 6 months at 100% and then 6 at 40% or 20%. The AHRC are interested in value for money.

- If you can, try to make sure that there's a process of review in place for your application by a senior colleague and preferably one familiar with AHRC applications. If there's no one in your department/university who can help you, it is worth asking BACLS through our forum whether there is someone who could spare the time to look over your application. Different universities have different resources and we need to share our knowledge and expertise to improve the success of grant capture for contemporary projects.

- Application review by someone familiar with the AHRC is particularly important for practice-led research projects, since there's still (in my opinion) some opacity and perhaps even confusion surrounding what these kinds of projects are and how they work, especially among non-practitioners (who might be your reviewers, or on the panels that discuss your project). So far, the AHRC lacks specific guidance for the interpretation of what practice-led research should look like – although I'd keep a close eye on the Guidance Notes to see if this changes. Any application should be distinguishable from an Arts Council grant.

- You do not have to be at the start of a research project to apply for a grant. For instance, if you have half a monograph written, part of the grant can fund its completion (part of the grant also goes to delivering other aspects of the project, such as its impact, or results dissemination).

- Do not have too many research questions and make sure they are clearly achievable in ways that can be measured/demonstrated.

- You do not need a technical plan for a blog!

- The AHRC want to see a project that is deliverable so there is a balance between ambition and practicality that needs to be born in mind. This is particularly important for the schedule you need to provide. Don't over-estimate what you will get done.

- An impact strategy needs thought and perhaps some creativity (I think it is good to brainstorm ideas with someone else for how your research might be applicable outside of academia. Sometimes it can be hard to do this alone as the researcher is too 'close' to the project and its finer details). The impact does not have to be built around the minutiae of your research findings, but can reflect quite broad findings/knowledge/information/perspectives. Think of it as a deliverable strategy, rather than speculative. Just saying you might go on the radio or invite some politicians/policy makers to an event is not sufficient. Try to make sure that the impact events or ideas is linked in some tangible way to the research. A really good impact plan I saw for a history project included an agreement with park tour guides (as Project Partners) to include information from the project in their tour notes: here the research informs a very specific activity that relates to the project well.

- The main impact form is called 'Pathways to Impact' because the AHRC knows that impact is not always achievable quickly. Not all impact needs to happen within the time of the grant (e.g. if your findings inform a project that will continue after the grant, then great! Even if that project does not start until after the end of the grant, if you have an agreement with the Project Partner, then that too is fine to include).

- You really need those letters of support from your Project Partners. Partnerships are not born overnight and can take time to develop – months or even years. Bear this in mind. Think about how you might approach your partners. Big organisations and charities will be familiar with funding applications (not necessarily with the AHRC) and will be aware that some projects do not secure funding; smaller organisations will need to have this explained and their expectations about involvement managed carefully. There has to be something in it for them – that's what they will want to know first when you approach them. It might be worth doing a smaller pilot project/event with them first to consolidate the relationship (though this is not necessary: it really depends on the project).

- The AHRC like to see institutional support for applicants. If it is possible to apply for some internal funding from your university for a small aspect of the project (or a lead-in/pilot

project, as suggested above), then try to secure some pre-funding to prove your university is invested in you and your project.

- Especially if you are an ECR, make sure that you have a project over-sight team in place. This should be senior academics to whom you are accountable regularly during the project for how it is going.
- The keywords you identify are particularly important (even though they might not seem it as they right at the end of the online form). It is these that are used as the subject areas from which to choose your reviewers. Don't feel you have to tick lots of these: tick or pick or complete the words that are closest to your project. Do you really want someone from political thought reviewing your 'literature and politics' project, for instance? If you do, great, but if not then don't pick this as one of your key subjects.

The review process
(See an AHRC flow chart here: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/peerreview/panels/main-stages-of-the-review-process/)

- Unless you are applying for funding for a Network Scheme, your application will be usually reviewed by 3 different people (and a Technical Plan reviewer, if you submit a Technical Plan), all of whom are part of the AHRC Peer Review College, although in some special cases where no expertise is available the AHRC might appoint a reviewer outside of the PRC. After the reports are collected, they will be released to you.
- Scores are out of 6. Each section of the review gets a score, and then there is an overall score. It is the overall score which is used to see if you get through to the next round.
- It is not unusual for reviewers to award different marks.
- 2 or more reviews which result in 3 or below will mean the project does not go forward to the next stage.
- If you go forward to the next stage, you will be invited to respond to the reviews. This is crucially important and can alter the options the moderating panel have (at the next stage). ALWAYS RESPOND.
- Your reviewers will not see your responses, but the moderating panel will.
- You MUST address problems and questions that are raised. At this point, it is fine to alter plans, e.g. to add in something to the impact plans, to add a conference if they say one is needed (although you can't alter costs, so you need to offset this in some way or prove how it could be cost-free), to redraft a research question. If a reviewer says your plans are too ambitious, narrow the scope of what you have said you will do. Your willingness to take advice on board and address these concerns will be highly appreciated by the moderating panel and could alter the outcome. It is also fine to justify or further explain an aspect of the

project that reviewers have questioned or might not have found clear. However, always keep your tone polite (not defensive).

- DO NOT respond in anger, defensiveness, or with rudeness (you'd be surprised how many do!) even if there are grounds for it, e.g. if a reviewer clearly has not read the proposal properly. If there are mistakes in what the reviewer has said, then point these out respectfully and clearly, without sounding upset or speculating as to why a reviewer was in error.

The moderating panel

- The structure of how the moderation panels work is complex, but all laid out on the AHRC website. It is worth reading this information: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/peerreview/panels/
- The panel read your proposal, the reviews, and your response. They are there to check the reviews are fair; that the grades are consistent (e.g. a reviewer who has routinely given 3s and 4s but then gives the overall project 5 is not an accurate reviewer and the panel will take this into account); that the response addresses issues raised; and to assign a final grade.
- The final grade assigned can be anywhere between the top grade you were given and the lowest grade you were given. At this point, decimals are used (e.g. your overall mark might be 4.7). So, if your reviewers graded the project 3/ 4/ 5 the lowest mark you can get is 3 and the highest is 5. It is not simply the case that you will be assigned 'the middle mark' (a 4 in this case).
- The moderating panel discusses the quality of the reviews. If, for instance, the review that gave the project a 3 has got details wrong, clearly hasn't read the project carefully, or makes irrelevant points, then this review can be given less credence when it comes to the final grade. This is also the case if a review seems scant on information or if it is overly positive in a manner inconsistent with the other reviews.
- Everyone on the moderating panel gives each project a grade. This is then turned into an average.
- Finally, the moderating panel have to rank all the projects in the meeting. You will be up against projects from different disciplines. At this stage, even with a good project you might miss out. Providing you have followed the advice above and provided a rigorous and careful response, there's nothing you can do to control this stage of the process. Just getting a 4 or above in this meeting does not guarantee funding and there is really no way for applicants to tell. You might get a final 5 and not get funding. You might get a final 4.2 and get funding. It all depends on how many projects, what they are given, what the projects you are up against are given, and so on. You have no control over this.

- Even after this stage there is a final internal sift at the AHRC (to make sure, for instance, that all the projects funded that year were not proposed by white history professors). This is also a point where you might miss out. This is very much out of your control.
- If you get funding, bravo! And make sure you share your new expertise with others who have been less lucky (as you can see above, there's luck in this matter at several stages, from the reviewers through to the panels and internal sift).
- If you don't get funding, don't despair. You will have learnt from the process. You should also consider 'adapting' the project for a different funding body and funding call so that all your work has not gone to waste. The majority of projects are not funded so you are not alone.