Reflections on a decade of small grants:
Subjective advice to prospective applicants for Systematics Research Fund grants

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The Systematics Association Small Grants scheme – more recently amalgamated with most of the Linnean Society's previous grant schemes to form the Systematics Research Fund (SRF) – has made 11 rounds of annual awards since its widely welcomed reappearance in the autumn of 1995. In early years, annual awards totalling *ca* £6,000 were typically made to 8–10 of the 30–35 applicants, who were dominantly from the European Union. This year, awards totalling £29,300 were made to 29 of the 84 applicants, who represent a truly international constituency. Thus, allowing for inflation, the scheme has triumphantly trebled in both size and geographical reach, though the percentage of successful applicants has steadfastly remained one quarter to one third.

Another consistent factor across the years has been the bell-curve defined by the aggregate scores awarded by panel members to the proposals. This represents a large number of Good proposals sandwiched between much smaller numbers of proposals rated Excellent or Poor. The Poor tail was never large, and happily has decreased through time. However, based on our respective experiences as SRF coordinators (Bateman 1995–7, Hollingsworth 1998–2000, Littlewood 2001–5, Hawkins 2006>) and frequently as assessors, it is our perception that the Excellent category has not shown significant expansion relative to the Good. The following (admittedly subjective) advice is offered primarily in an attempt to achieve that outcome.

At least broadly follow the rules. SRF has been organised with the expressed intentions of maximising simplicity and minimising the time invested in the scheme by both applicants and assessors (even so, this year's applications took each of the six assessors two full days to score). Confining an application to a single side of A4 paper means exactly that; it does not somehow implicitly excuse images, or bibliographies, or budgets, or supporting letters solicited by the applicant; these supplements consume unnecessary time and paper. Also, the December 31st deadline for applications is real; it does not carry a ten-day error bar.

Optimise your use of the single side of A4. Much of the skill of formulating a one-page proposal lies in a combination of prioritising the content and optimising the logic and structure of the text. Waste neither words nor space, yet don't be afraid to use paragraph headings; after all, this is a short proposal, not an abstract. And illustrations are rarely included by applicants, despite the fact that well-chosen images (small, of course!) can substitute for a significant number of words.

Include a budget. Budgets are still omitted from a substantial minority of proposals, and many of those that are presented are inadequate. Estimates that are clearly over-inflated are laudably rare. Nonetheless, applicants should realise that a scheme that by definition distributes funds in small measures is unlikely to be impressed by the inclusion of budget lines labelled "miscellaneous", "contingency" and even "overhead"!

Avoid appearing greedy. Requests approximating the maximum allowable sum of £1500 will not be funded to that level unless they are

accompanied by a particularly strong justification. There is a good reason for preferring applications in the £500–1000 range; the more modest the requirements of individual applications, the larger the proportion of the assembled applications that we can fund.

Explain why you have approached us rather than another funding body. Relatively few applicants tell us why their primary funding body (including their current employer) is unable or unwilling to fund the fieldwork, or collection visit, or laboratory analyses, or item of equipment, or temporary assistant, that they are proposing. Often, assessors will assume that the applicant has ready access to such funding or materials when in fact that person does not.

Predict the ultimate outputs. The majority of applications fail to specify any explicit outputs, and those that do usually simply state that the SRF will be acknowledged in any resulting peer-reviewed publications. For most projects, it is feasible to predict in advance which journals or publishers are most likely to receive written outputs. Similarly, tell us if web-based outputs, such as interactive keys or educational packages, are envisaged.

Partition large projects into fundable portions. Although they are fundamentally altruistic, the bodies who invest in the Systematics Research Fund are nonetheless seeking an element of quid pro quo from recipients. Wholly amalgamating the SRF contribution into a broader project that is being funded from multiple sources is unlikely to achieve this goal. Specifying at least an element of the project that is particular to the SRF, and will be acknowledged accordingly in ensuing outputs, always encourages assessors. Indeed, why not consider emphasising this element of the overall project in your proposal, rather than giving equal space to every element of the larger project?

Look forward more than backward. Many applicants expend the bulk of their side of A4 in describing the taxonomic history of their chosen group and/or geographical region, often supported by an extensive bibliography. That precious space is better used to describe the details of the approaches to be taken in the proposed research, and to show us that you understand the main strengths and weaknesses of each.

Stand out from the crowd. Remember that almost all applicants to SRF are proposing to study, with commitment and enthusiasm, a particular taxonomic group in a specified geographical area using a limited range of specified approaches. Most applicants aim to generate a taxonomic revision and/or reconstruct a phylogeny, thereby by definition filling gaps in our existing knowledge. Hence, none of these features will, in itself, distinguish your proposal from the others.

Consider the broader impact of your outputs. All too often, biologically fascinating groups are under-sold by their advocates, particularly where their study implicitly offers clear benefits to one or more user constituencies. And by user constituencies we mean other evolutionary biologists, as well as more applied disciplines such as conservation, agriculture, medicine or education. In this competitive age, it is essential that you demonstrate the broader relevance of your proposed research.

Keep your feet on the ground. Lastly, please remember that a modest but achievable project is more likely to be funded than an all-singing, all-dancing proposal that would more appropriately receive substantial funding from a research council. We are seeking to achieve substantial advances from small investments, and there are many ways of achieving that goal. For an established professional, a small amount of pump-priming sequence data can successfully

deliver the aforementioned large research council grant. For an “amateur” researcher, a specially designed net can trap sufficient tropical bats to populate a raft of papers. For a postgraduate student, a well-targeted field trip can bring revolutionary insights into the biology of their study organisms. And for a retired researcher, a digitiser–laptop package can greatly increase the efficiency and affordability of a self-funded collections visit.

In the meantime, those of us involved in administering the Fund will renew our efforts to seek additional sources of cash, in the hope that we can continue to fund a substantial percentage of the applications submitted to this increasingly popular scheme. Naturally, we are anxious to be in a position to fund your Excellent proposal once we receive it.