Fantastic Fellowships and Where to Find Them

James Cheney
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Fantastic Fellowships and Where to Find Them, or: How to be Lucky

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Royal Society URF

• Found out about this in October 2007
  • while also applying for EPSRC fellowship and other jobs

• Applied mid-November 2007
  • Application process fairly lightweight: 1-page lay proposal, 3-page research proposal, publications list etc.
  • So cranked it out & pretty much forgot about it

• Learned of award May 2008
  • one of ~30 awards out of ~600 applications (5%)
  • No interview process at that time

• I was very lucky. (Interviews not my forté.)
Royal Society URF

- 2008 proposal: Mechanized metatheory using nominal logic programming
  - continuing my PhD work
  - original proposal to be held at another host
  - decided to stay here (albeit no guarantee of permanent position)
- 2012: as part of Chancellor's Fellowship interview round, was guaranteed permanent position at end of my URF
  - (RS calls this arrangement a "proleptic Lecturership").
- 2013: was awarded 3-year extension, which expires Thursday.
- 2015: promoted to Reader.
Benefits

- Prestige, networking, perks
  - You get invited to RS events in London (sometimes at short notice), potentially also to help with book/grant reviewing etc.
- RS expects department to give fellows "equivalent" status to lecturers
  - (can apply for EPSRC funding as PI / first grant, supervise PhDs, etc.)
  - Teaching duties voluntary - so, you can volunteer to teach the thing that fits best
- 5 years is a good long time to develop independent research trajectory
  - You also have considerable freedom to change direction, i.e. no "deliverables"
- Budget for individual research expenses (up to £8000/year for travel, equipment, books, publication fees etc.)
- Portable: can move to another department (e.g. to facilitate permanent post)
  - 3 year extension can help with this
  - From host dept's point of view you are a free (productive) CatA REF entry

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Caveats

• No one tells you how to negotiate when awarded
  • Departments vary widely in their treatment of / receptiveness to hosting fellows
  • RS becoming more insistent on host department providing clarity regarding possibility of future position

• Funding is for you (only), so you still need to apply for student/postdoc funding if you need it
  • I struggled with this, was not able to recruit PhD students until 2014
  • But RS now has deal with EPSRC whereby you can apply for a PhD studentship right away

• If you haven't negotiated a long-term post with host dept, other proposals need to fit into the 5-year window (at least, UoE won't assume 3-year extension will be granted)
  • So: Start applying for external funding right away!
  • (I took too long working on EPSRC First Grant proposal and didn't get it anyway.)
Takeaways

- Value of networking factor seems inversely proportional to distance from London
- CS relatively under-represented in RS panels/reviewers
  - Mathematical/semantics/logic side of CS good, software engineering/AI/systems may not fare so well
- Depending on your research goals/plans, URF funding may or may not be a good fit
  - My plans drifted somewhat between submission and award
- Covers 100% of your time
  - thus, can't charge time to another grant, which can lead to being overcommitted
  - (or spending less time on what you wanted to do with fellowship...)
ERC Consolidator Grant

- Applied 2014, invited to interview,
  - 2 practice talks/interviews,
  - didn't get it. But was allowed to re-apply in 2015
- Re-applied 2015 (relatively light revision), invited to interview
  - 3 practice talks/interviews
  - twisted my ankle very badly 1 week before
  - But got it.
- 2016 would have been my last year of eligibility. So, lucky again.
ERC Consolidator Grant

- Project: PL techniques for web programming / scientific data management
  - subject of prior (unsuccessful) EPSRC proposals
  - (one ranked 8th, they funded the first 7)
- ERC proposal was much more ambitious
  - Case for support emphasized that the needed combinations of skills / impact not possible within the confines of a standard research grant
- 5 page "synopsis" + 15 page proposal
  - the most fun you can have writing a grant proposal (?)
  - depends on your definition of fun, I suppose
Benefits

• £££: up to €2m (CoG), €1.5m (StG)
  • Additional funds available if you are moving countries
  • Plenty to support or grow a research group
  • Also portable: to any EU / H2020 participating country
    • up to 50% can be spent outside but you need to spend 40/50% of time at host
  • Can apply for "Proof of Concept" grants for commercialization/impact

• Somewhat more "structured"/bureaucratic than RS, but still pretty open-ended
  • again, no deliverables

• Can choose how much time to commit (>50% for StG, >40% for CoG)
  • good if you intend to keep some teaching going, so you can be paid by dept for that time & use the money for something else
Caveats

- Applications reviewed or rejected in first round largely based on your CV and "salesmanship" skills
- Interview process is high-stakes, and may reinforce existing (structural) biases in science
  - You do not get to see the external reviews until after the interview
- If awarded, forces you to "grow up" fast
  - If you didn't have a research group, boom, now you have one.
  - If you were already managing a small research group, presto, now you are managing a large one
- Transitioning from research with a little management to management with a little research over a short time frame seems tricky
  - I'll let you know how it turns out.
- Brexit - UK H2020 future involvement uncertain, as with much else
Takeaways

• 2-phase process: Take 1st part seriously; don't be overly modest!

• ERC grants are competitive and you may have to wait 1-2 years to reapply if your proposal isn't rated highly.

• Ergo: It makes sense to apply 2-3 years before your last year of eligibility, so that you have time for at least one "cycle"
  • get past the first round, experience the interview,
  • revise, resubmit,
  • ace the interview 2nd time around.
Thanks

• I didn't do this all myself!
  • I got helpful comments and suggestions from many people (on many many drafts).
  • Likewise, many people helped with mock interviews
  • Getting feedback from people NOT in your area is also a good idea
  • If unsure, Jane or others should be able to point you toward people willing to help
Conclusions

• Do:
  • Apply for things.
  • Start writing now.
  • Give yourself a chance to be lucky.
  • Keep trying if not.

• Don't:
  • twist your ankle.