

## BACKGROUND:

The *Couch to £500K* programme delivered during the 2022-2023 academic year provided researchers with a structured approach to writing a grant proposal while also learning about the UKRI funding process. UKAN+ ran an application process that resulted in 11 early career researchers and academics signing up to the programme.

## STRUCTURE & ETHOS:

The programme blended taught content, discussion, reflection, homework activities, and feedback to develop the participants' knowledge and understanding of writing competitive fellowship and grant proposals. This active learning approach was designed to assist in the development of current proposals and provide long-term understanding of the proposal process.

The programme was delivered by a former academic (Professor Dan Allwood) and a former EPSRC portfolio manager (Dr Elaine Massung). This gave participants a clear view of the UKRI funding process and the preparation of research proposals.

The fellowship-specific version of the programme consisted of the following elements:

- Ten sessions, each 2.5 hours long. The programme was divided into an introductory first stage that was open to all (Sessions 1-2) and an in-depth second stage to the named participants (Sessions 3-10).
- Content included taught material, peer-to-peer activities, reflection points, question-and-answer time, and homework assignments that allowed participants to build up a draft fellowship proposal over the duration of the programme.
- Individual feedback was provided on homework assignments, both with regards to general content and to improve the clarity of the language.
- Participants had the opportunity to participate in mock interviews as well as experience reviewing a draft proposal.
- The trainers were available via email for any additional questions outside of the programme.
- Programme materials and offline recordings were hosted on a cohort-specific course website and will remain available to participants for a year after the end of the programme.

## CONTENT:

The general topics covered by the *Couch to £500K* programme include the funding process for fellowships and standard grants from submission to panel decision, how to write a PI response, and how to prepare for a fellowship interview. The following technical topics were addressed by explaining their purpose and how to consider each component in the development of a competitive proposal:

- Summaries
- Aims and Objectives
- Academic Beneficiaries
- Track Records / R4RI Narrative CVs
- Background
- Programme of Work
- Project Management
- Risk Management
- Work Plan
- Impact Activities
- Public Engagement Activities
- Project Finance
- Ethics

Throughout the programme, clear communication was taught through topics including:

- Communicating a Message
- Considering Your Audience
- Readability
- Competitiveness
- Editing and Proofreading

## FEEDBACK & TESTIMONIALS:

Feedback from all Couch to £500K cohorts identified the strengths of the programme as:

- Structured approach was very much appreciated
- Homework and feedback produced improvements
- Precise, relevant, and comprehensive content
- No boring content or videos
- Learning 'behind the scenes' (e.g. funding process)

We asked participants how confident they were in writing a UKRI grant proposal before and after the course. On average, UKAN+ participants increased in confidence from 6.25 to 8.0 on a 10-point scale. This compares to the average for participants across all cohorts increasing in confidence from 5.0 to 7.6 on a 10-point scale.

We asked each participant how the programme had helped them as a grant or fellowship proposal writer. Based on the feedback provided by all cohorts, the programme provided greater insights and knowledge in writing a grant proposal and creating protected space to get writing done in an ordered manner.

The feedback shows that the *Couch to £500K* programme proved effective, with participants increasing in their writing confidence. The structure of the programme allowed for the production of first drafts, and several participants were also able to submit final versions of grants or fellowships. The course only finished recently, but one participant has already been awarded a fellowship.

Participants were also asked to provide named feedback if they felt comfortable doing so; the following testimonials were submitted from the UKAN+ cohort:

### **AMELIA GULLY (Lecturer, University of York):**

I found the sessions really interesting, and the way the course was structured meant that I was able to build up a full proposal draft over time without getting overwhelmed by the enormity of the task. Elaine and Dan's feedback was useful and specific. I learned a lot of things ranging from seemingly small adjustments I could make, to large-scale differences in mindset and how to think about the proposal and the whole writing process. For anyone with an idea in mind that needs help crafting it into a proposal, I highly recommend the Couch to £500K programme.

### **ALLAHYAR MONTAZERI (Lecturer, University of Lancaster):**

The course helped me a lot to gain a clearer view of how to develop a high-quality proposal from an idea to a fully written proposal. What is the meaning of competitive proposal and develop myself through several self-reflection opportunities throughout the course. Feedback provided on the pieces of coursework was also a valuable part to go through an iterative process of gradual improvement in writing a clear and understandable proposal.

### **EMILY CORRIGAN-KAVANAGH (Research Fellow, University of Surrey):**

The Couch to £500K Fellowship course is a really well organised and suitably paced course that effectively covers all aspects of writing a successful fellowship as well as interview preparation. Under the guidance and advice of Elaine and Dan, I was able to craft an impactful fellowship proposal and felt well prepared when I was shortlisted for a follow-up interview. The Couch to £500K Fellowship course played a key role in my subsequent success of winning this fellowship and I strongly recommend this training to anyone considering a fellowship application. Thank you again to Elaine and Dan for an outstanding training experience!

## **FUTURE PLANS:**

As shown above, the *Couch to £500K* programme appeared to work well in preparing participants for writing a competitive UKRI grant or fellowship.

The next *Couch to £500K* programmes will have some changes based on our observations and feedback from the cohort. These changes will include:

- Increased number of sessions;
- Session length increased to three hours to give more discussion time;
- One-to-one sessions with participants to provide additional individual support.