Research funding

TRANSCRIPT

Research Ethics Online Course

1. Research funding decisions are reflections of what how we view the role of research in society. Funding decisions highlight what the society thinks is worth studying, how it thinks it is best done, and who are worthy to be rewarded with further funding.

2. These values are part of every funding decision. One way to look at funding is to see it having multiple different continuums for example: Do we believe that research benefits more from public of private funding sources? How do we value the benefits and challenges of each option and form an opinion on how would funding be best allocated? Applied / increase of knowledge is a familiar question to many. Applied research is typically defined by a project with a specific application in mind while increase of knowledge leaves open the timeframe and way in which new information may be applicable in the society. Many say that our research should all be focused on solving questions we have while others point out to the importance of core research to build a foundation for applied work as well as to the unpredictability of research work. Another continuum is formed by choosing to fund individuals in other words offering continuing employment without specified research plan attached to the employment or creating projects within which people are employed for the duration of the project. Asking yourself Which would you prefer and why, will help you explore your values around this questions. And within the project funding approach, we have options to have very specific pre-defined funding programs, which are typically chosen to focus on a social challenge like climate change or obesity. Alternatively the project funding could be more open ended and welcome applications on any topic with scientific merit. All these questions and subsequent decisions reflect our perceptions on what research should be about, our broader social values on what is important, and what we think research can achieve in society.

3. One question to explore your values around research funding would be to ask what you think is the impact of increasing competition in research. Do you think it Increasing competition promotes a drive to excel Speeds up the scientific process because there are tight timelines and everyone is as good as their last their last results. Gives credit to those who excel as results become more personalised and funding follows those with previous successes. And that competition protects quality as all aspects of research work is subjected to accountability and peer reviews? Alternatively, you may consider competition leading to diminished focus on research as everything needs to completed within funding cycles and fit pre-defined program themes. As

competition increases, more and more teams focus on finding the answer to same question, so resources are wasted. Alternatively resources could be considered wasted as researchers spend increasing amount of time applying for funding instead of actually doing research work. There is evidence that increased funding competition increases temptation for fraud as researchers are pressured to reach their research aims in shorter and shorter timeframes and consequences of not reaching them can be disastrous to their careers. As competition often means what is mine cannot be yours, it could lead to reduced cooperation and openness in research. Which set of arguments do you find more convincing?

4. Funding relates to research values in different ways as well. As most researchers deal with fixed term funding cycles, their research work inevitably includes applying for funding. This requires every research to make decisions including how much time to devote to funding applications, where to apply for funding, who to collaborate with, what to apply funding for.

5. While research funding applications have a set of ethical considerations, so does assessing applications. Funding bodies will need to consider the process of providing expert review/assessment to guarantee confidentiality and scientific merit. They also need to have a transparent process of interpreting expert reviews and assessments. Social impact is also a constantly debated area for research funding selection - how is that defined, how much weight is given to it and how to fairly compare diverse ways research impacts society. Research funding bodies also need to consider non-research based criteria can be included - for example if two applications are equal from a scientific perspective, could the process favour one from a smaller regional university in the name of geographical equality? Or could a person who has previously been found guilty of research misconduct be given lesser priority compared to someone who has no such record?

6. When writing an application, the researcher needs to make decisions on how much the research can be re-framed to match the particular funding call while maintaining integrity of the research project and expertise of those working on it. Many researchers are cautious of how much detail are they ready to put into their application on their methodology for example with that potential fear of others plagiarising or otherwise using the details in the application to their own advantage. Explaining personal expertise is also a known ethical challenge - what can you ethically claim as your own in an application - for example saying you have gained funding without detailing that you were actually one of many working on the funding application and someone else actually was the primary investigator would be considered unethical. Lastly, most applications require an estimate of social impact of the proposed research. How much can be promised as of social benefit particularly when the research has not been framed around a specific socially important question. What is a reasonable expectation considering the innate unpredictability of research and how results are adopted in the society.

7. Funding is one of the great drivers for research. Through funding decisions both locally and internationally, we shape the nature of research work. Therefore exploring funding questions from the ethical perspective can give you a great bird's eye view of what values are currently important and which way you think research should develop.