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By Sophie Inge

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To win a Nuffield Foundation Grant for Research, Development and Analysis, you must gear your research towards making a real difference in people's lives, previous winner Gráinne McKeever tells Sophie Inge.

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Gráinne's top tips

- Consider impact every step of the way.
- Make sure your partnership is about genuine co-creation, not about extracting ideas and then deploying them in the research.
- Talk to people who have done other work in your area and engage with their feedback.
- Budget properly and be realistic about what you need.

Nuffield Foundation Grants for Research, Development and Analysis support projects that improve the design and operation of social policy, especially in education, welfare and justice.

Grants range from £10,000 to £500,000, but most are worth between £50,000 and £300,000. The deadline for outline applications to the next round is expected in September.

Gráinne McKeever, a professor of law and social justice at Ulster University's law school, won a £221,642 grant in 2016 for her project on litigants in person: people who represent themselves in the Northern Ireland court system.

Tell me about your research project and how it came about.

It investigates the legal participation of litigants in person. I had already developed a model of legal participation that drew on research on tribunal users and was interested in seeing if that model also worked for court users and whether there were differences in tribunal and court participation. When I applied for the Nuffield grant I had just completed a pilot project on this topic funded by the British Academy and Leverhulme Small Research Grants scheme. Around that time, the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland conducted a major review of access to justice. One of the things that came out of that review was the need to do more research to understand the position of litigants in person in Northern Ireland. The policy context coincided perfectly with the direction of my research and meant there were stakeholders to connect to the research.

What attracted you to Nuffield as a funder?

The Nuffield Foundation had previously funded tribunal reform research I had done for the Law Centre in Northern Ireland, so I knew it was interested in how the legal system works for ordinary people and how the values of the legal system are played out. It was also clear that it had an interest in funding research on Northern Ireland as one of the jurisdictions in the UK—which is not necessarily something that you can assume from all funders.

And you knew Nuffield's application process already.

Yes, the application process is a tailored, staged system. It's not one of those processes where you leap in, do eight weeks of work on a massive grant application and then you either get it or you don't. It's more manageable.

Did you feel a fit with Nuffield's priorities?

The project was certainly a good fit with Nuffield's funding priorities within justice. The type of research we were proposing had the potential to generate evidence-based reform. We knew Nuffield was not a funder for blue-sky research—it wants to actually make a difference on the ground.

Did you consider any other funders?

Not seriously. The Nuffield Foundation was our first port of call. I've done some work for the Legal Education Foundation in the past, who are also good to work with. If we hadn't been successful with Nuffield, we might have approached them.

How did you pull together the bid?

It was a joint bid with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, so we had a lot of conversations with them about what we might do but the academic component of the bid was pretty much left to us. We knew we wanted to do qualitative research but we also thought we might want to do a bit of quantitative research too, which is not my strength. I deliberately brought in colleagues with knowledge in that area. Essentially, it was a series of meetings after which I would then go back and draft something.

Did you work with any other partner organisations?

Yes, and I knew that the stakeholder engagement section was going to be a strong part of the bid. Together with the chief commissioner of the Human Rights Commission I met the Lord Chief Justice, the head of the Department of Justice of Northern Ireland and the head of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service to find out if they were willing to facilitate the research if we got the grant. Getting their buy-in at an early stage was an essential part of the process.

What is the first stage of the application process?

Applicants submit a brief outline application, which is an opportunity to refine your thinking to identify a good research idea and start to set out how it might be delivered. It's a really good process because it doesn't require you to commit too much time and effort. If it doesn't



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work, you can write it off or develop it in a different way; and if it does work, that gives you the opening for a full application.

Did you get any feedback from Nuffield at this stage?

Yes. One of the things they said was: 'We think you could do more on this and for that reason we think your budget might not be sufficient.' It's not my experience that a funder will come back and say you need to ask them for more money, but they were keen to make sure we maximised the project's potential.

What happens next in the process?

If the outline application succeeds, the funder will then invite you to submit a full application. This goes to the reviewers at Nuffield and then back to you with comments to respond to. It then goes back to the director of Nuffield's justice portfolio, who presents it to the trustees to make the final decision. The tight timescale to respond to reviewer comments is quite challenging but it's a really helpful process. The thing I like most about this application process is that Nuffield comes back to you with really substantive feedback that helps you improve the application.

What elements did you bring to the fore in the application?

While some funders—like the Economic and Social Research Council—may be more interested in developing an in-depth theoretical understanding of an issue, Nuffield is more interested in improving society. So that was an important part of our application. In particular, we were keen to emphasise the value that the Human Rights Commission would bring to the project. They provided a legal advice clinic that as academics we wouldn't have been able to do in the same way.

Do you have any tips for future applicants?

Remember that Nuffield wants to make a difference. Academics are under considerable pressure from all the impact planning associated with the Research Excellence Framework. But impact planning really is intrinsic to the research that Nuffield has funded for us. We didn't just do it to get a grant and produce a report. We did it because we could see very clearly that there was a chance to make a difference.

What else is Nuffield looking for?

Another important aspect is partnership working. Our project has just been extended through another major grant from Nuffield and we're now going to be working with the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and others to provide support materials for personal litigants in family law cases. For Nuffield, partnership is not just about working with an organisation to get their ideas. Being able to engage with an organisation on the ground that can sustain and add greater value to the research is something Nuffield has been very keen for us to do. On Nuffield bids it's also important to engage seriously with the feedback. Talk to people who have done other work in your area and get their feedback on your draft application.

This level of engagement can be expensive.

Yes and don't be scared to budget properly. Academics can be nervous about asking for too much in case it seems unreasonable. We were quite modest in what we asked for and Nuffield quite rightly encouraged us to look again at the figures. Be realistic about what you need.

What do you think made your bid stand out?

We were lucky that all the stars aligned in the sense of the policy landscape. So there was an element of luck combining with research at a point in time. Another advantage we had was the size of the jurisdiction in Northern Ireland, which meant that official stakeholders were within relatively easy reach. Working with a partner organisation that brought the skills and audience that we wouldn't have had automatic access to as academics was also quite attractive. I had worked with the Human Rights Commission's chief commissioner in his previous role in the Law Centre so there was a history of being able to work on funded research together, rather than just pulling in partner organisations for the sake of the grant.

CV: Gráinne McKeever

2017-present Professor of law and social justice, School of Law, Ulster University

2001-present Executive director, Law Centre, Northern Ireland

1996-2017 Lecturer, then senior lecturer, then reader, School of Law, Ulster University

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