Proposal for the Provision of Locally-based Research Programme Officers

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1. Introduction

At the Research Committee of Thursday the 8th of December 2011, a document on research funding diversification was presented and discussed. As part of that document possible mechanisms for expanding local-level support for research development were presented.

This document is intended to build upon that discussion by outlining a proposal to develop a team of locally-based research programme officers.

2. Where will the Locally-based Research Project Officers be based?

Computer Science and Statistics, Medicine, CRANN and TCIN all currently have local research officers. It is important to ensure that the likely continued deployment of such officers is not rolled out in an ad hoc manner, that there is no duplication of service between central and local supports and that there is consistency of advice and approach in relation to implementation of both College and sponsor policies whilst also having sufficient staff to deal with more in-depth interaction with and support for researchers, strategic sponsor intelligence gathering and coordination of large College bids.

Going forward, it is proposed that the College supports the coherent development of locally-based research programme officers to be based in schools and/or TRIs (in a phased basis starting with a limited number of officers). As an alternative the committee may wish to consider deploying research officers in support of thematic areas as this might provide access to their services to a greater number of academic staff and allow greater specialisation and network building than associating them with individual Schools alone. The advice of the committee is requested in this regard.

In any case, this is not to preclude other centres/units in College establishing such positions but they are not under consideration in this proposal. Whilst a benchmarking exercise looking at the structures in other universities will hopefully provide valuable feed-in to the effective delivery of research development supports in the College, many of the top-ranked universities employ the use of a hybrid research development office system with some support staff positioned locally in schools or centres while others are positioned centrally – all working together as a team. What is being proposed here is a coherent development of such a hybrid system in a way that ensures consistency across College and hopefully maximum impact in terms of development and realisation of our research funding diversification strategy.

3. Job Title, Specification and Grade

In particular, the consistency indicated above should pertain also to the job title, specification and grade for research officers. There is not consistency at present in terms of job title as some of the existing local posts were designed to focus on the development of EU funding or projects rather than funding across a range of possible sponsors and in some cases to undertake other duties.

3.1 Job Title

The proposed title for the new role is Research Programme officer (RPO). A common job specification will be developed outlining clearly the remit of the job and the relationship with the centrally-based RDO and the expectations in terms of task delivery. This would ensure added value

for the researcher and lack of duplication with services provided centrally. In line with this, a common job grade system should be employed to ensure fairness and equity in the system at the outset.

3.2 Job Specification

A School/TRI-based RPO will work with the School's Director of Research/TRI's Director to develop an implementation plan for the unit's research strategy and to ensure the implementation plan is managed. Particular emphasis should be placed on securing more non-exchequer research funding especially Horizon 2020 funding and, in particular, to identify opportunities for researchers to coordinate projects and help establish the best partners for the consortia. The RPO will maximise the linkage of researchers to networks (eg COST) in order to help establish partnerships for proposals. The RPO will have cognizance of the College's research strategy and ensure linkages from the unit to the relevant thematic areas as they develop in College. The RPO will promote the funding opportunities advertised centrally with locally-based researchers helping them to devise their career development plans (link to a possible mentoring system) as well as contributing to the implementation of the unit's strategy. The RPO will be available to provide advice on budgets and proposal structure but the central RDO will continue to be the central authorised officer on behalf of the College. The RPO will oversee and contribute to the writing of the non-scientific elements of applications being submitted from the school (Central RDO will continue to provide College-based information and broader generic templates for this purpose but the local RPO should have unit-based information on facilities that could be made available and a knowledge of national and EU policies relevant to proposal areas from their unit as well as access to previous successful proposals). They will also try to ensure feed-in to the development of work programmes for sponsors (where relevant) to ensure that opportunities for participation for their unit are maximised. The RPO will be expected to organise unit-specific information sessions (with participation from central RDO) and represent their school at external networking events (eg FET ICT info session in Brussels) particularly at events where there is no central RDO presence. RPOs will also be involved in the delivery of centrally delivered information sessions. In general, it is expected that the RPO will be active in opportunity identification, consortium building and networking activities and will provide a resource for the unit's staff in writing and submitting proposals.

RPOs will utilise RPAMS to see how their unit is performing in relation to the research implementation plan and can work with the Director of Research/Director to support corrective action where necessary.

The RPO should have a background relevant to the unit's portfolio with a postgraduate degree and preferably either research or research administration experience. The RPO will also work closely with the Trinity Foundation in supporting Philanthropic fund raising initiatives for research for the school. The RPO will be considered to be part of the College's RDO function thereby attending team meetings and helping to organise and deliver College research objectives and integrating with other service providers in TR&I (Contracts Office and Technology Transfer etc.) to ensure that all Central College procedures are adhered to in interactions with sponsors. This is expected to have an additional benefit of freeing up the time of centrally-based staff to provide additional services to units that do not (yet) have a RPO.

At present within TR&I, the RDO and contracts sections are working more closely together through the development of sponsor-based multi-skilled teams therefore maintaining sponsor relationship and sponsor intelligence as well as providing more in-depth sponsor support. The RPOs are intended to complement and add value to those supports on a local level and in particular to aid researchers to become more research active in line with the unit strategy, providing more individual in-depth

support than is possible from central services from the pre award stage in proposal structuring up to and including the contract signature stage.

RPOs are not specific project managers supporting the implementation phase of a given project. Post award management is a separate issue than that under discussion and is not part of the proposal outlined here. It is not anticipated that the RPO will be involved in the post award management stage of report writing and claims.

3.3 Job Grade

It should be noted that many of the current locally-based RPOs have a great level of commonality of job specification and grading and can be used to build this common job specification and grading for the RPOs. Most of the current locally-based supports were advertised as grade 2-3 with the ability to recruit at grade 2 for exceptional candidates.

This means that the Gross pay could vary as follows:

Administrative 2 €46,204 €48,221 €50,304 €52,343 €54,466
Administrative 3 €35,985 €37,879 €39,777 €41,308 €42,872 €44,416 €45,935

The cost to College would be the Gross plus PRSI plus 20% pension – (so could range from €47050, starting point admin 3 to €71214 for top of the admin 2 scale)

However, in additional a level of non pay will be required for each post. Given that the College is underwriting the pay costs associated from these posts, it is to be expected that units would contribute to the non pay costs associated with the establishment and maintenance of such posts (PC, travel, consumables etc)

4. How will they be funded?

It is proposed that College underwrites the costs of establishing these posts in the first instance with the anticipation of their becoming self sustaining from the unit's overheads after a period of 2 -3 years.

Such positions would therefore be of a fixed-term contract in the first instance and thereafter linked to the availability of funding (in a similar way as those positions funded through the OIP) and the performance of the RPO in supporting the achievement of unit-specific performance indicators.

It is envisaged that seed funding for these posts would come from a Research Development Fund to be provided by the College perhaps drawing on the Research Committee budget, overhead income, or core funding. Greater leverage of this funding is possible if units are willing to co-fund the initial recruitment of a team of RPOs.

5. Performance Review

The issue of measuring performance is important but will require further discussion. The reason for this is that performance is aligned to the implementation strategy of a unit. The RPO is charged to work with the Director of Research/Director to produce an implementation strategy (with deliverables) and can help delivery of same which become the key performance indicators. However, there are three modifying factors to be taken into account. Even with an implementation strategy in place, unless individual researchers buy into the implementation strategy the delivery of same will prove impossible. Secondly, the delivery of a strategy takes time and it may be difficult to judge results at the point in which these posts are meant to become self sustaining. Thirdly, there are likely to be changes in relation to sponsors and their remits which may or may not adversely affect the ability to deliver the implementation strategy.It is expected that as the College is

underwriting these posts in the first instance and that they are seen as a development of the Research Development Office function in the College, that the first reporting line will be to the central Research Development office and inclusion as such in TR&I and a dotted line to the School. This will assist with training, awareness of College and sponsor policies and continued development of the College's research strategy.

7. Next Steps

In parallel with the identification of a funding stream to support the roll out of this programme, is proposed to develop a call for proposals for RPOs to be targeted at Schools/TRIs for the allocation of support for such RPOs. Among the criteria to be used to assess such proposals would be the level of local support already available for research development, the willingness of the unit to contribute to the support of RPOs, and the existence of a local research development strategy. Ideally, successful units would commit to taking over the costs of their RPOs as soon as possible once their operation begins to result in an enhanced flow of research income.