Guidelines for writing PDP applications

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These guidelines draw on previous submissions and workshops run each year by HR. The contents are designed as ‘advice’ and are not meant to guarantee success. PDP is a competitive process and other factors can determine the outcome, for example, the number of applicants from the same teaching group.

The examples are limited because it is not appropriate to provide complete, previous applications. Each PDP application is distinct and individual – the ideas in these guidelines are intended as prompts as you are writing/reviewing your own application. You may wish to also refer to the comments from PDP committees (also on the HR website).

What makes a strong PDP application?
A strong application takes time to prepare. It is advisable to commence planning and drafting ideas well in advance as you may need to obtain email support from an overseas institution, or develop a robust collaborative research proposal with colleagues at another institution, or identify critical field work and need to get permission to carry it out. The most successful applications have the following characteristics:

- Clear, convincing and straightforward
- Relevant to strategic directions
- Have clearly outlined and achievable outcomes
- Provide sufficient detail to show thoughtfulness in preparation
- Have a realistic budget and timelines
- Show strong support from HoS

It is important to proof-read final versions as sloppy editing does not help make a convincing case. On occasion, the PDP Committee may ask an applicant to clarify or re-work an aspect of their PDP application. Examples of further information required might include:

1. Details of the 2 articles and the journals in which they are to be published to be provided to Executive Dean.
2. Additional information confirming that program will be used to maximum extent possible to enhance future research activities to be provided to College Director of Research for approval.

The following guidelines look at re-worked examples (in italics) from past PDP applications to highlight particular points that may help you when writing your submission. The guidelines provide examples from the different sections of the submission. They are taken from a wide range of previous submissions across many years, and represent submissions from early career researchers to experienced researchers.

The section numbers relate to the section numbers on the PDP Template. The guidelines only provide advice. Each completed PDP submission contains substantial detail that cannot be fully represented through brief examples. The preliminary sections (1 – 4) on the template are for factual information. Sections 5-9 are the focus of these guidelines. It is important to keep within the word limit of 5 pages.
5. Abstract - clear and straightforward, but brief

The purpose of my PDP program is primarily in order to undertake essential historical field work research in China. The publication that will be the primary outcome of this PDP research project will greatly enhance my scholarly reputation and will enhance the research profile of UWS.

This is a very brief abstract but it sets out clearly the primary purpose of the PDP, and relates this research to both personal reputation and the research profile of the University. It is a little vague and would benefit from more detail up front. It is important that the abstract (just as in a journal article) is clear and concise but at the same time conveys the depth and planning in the rest of the submission. In most submissions the abstract is less than half a page but some are longer. The 5 page limit of sections 5-9 means that the length of each section must be carefully considered.

5. Abstract – strong and clear statement

The primary objective of my proposed Professional Development Program (PDP) is to undertake field research in the U.S. and U.K. as part of my ARC Discovery Grant project. A secondary objective is to develop networks in the U.K., U.S.A. and Europe to identify participants for future external grant applications that will be made during 2012-2013. I will also be spending part of the PDP in writing three papers to be submitted to A* journals (target journals are XXXXXXX and Academy of XXXXXX Review). The outcomes that will result from my field research undertaken during my PDP (articles to be submitted to ERA ranked journals and a book) will contribute to enhancing the research profile of the College of XXXXXXX and the University in the area of sustainability and climate change which are priority research areas for the College and the University as well as a National Research Priority.

This abstract is from a more experienced researcher and identifies very clear aims and outcomes for the PDP period. It links research specifically to a funded grant, and also identifies the aim to establish relationships for future research projects. The publishable outcomes are clearly stated and specific journals mentioned. The alignment with strategic goals is clearly identified. This is a very succinct abstract.

5. Abstract – early career researcher

The key goal of this proposed Professional Development Program is to improve my standing as a newly established researcher. The proposed PDP program is about taking the opportunity at this point in my professional development to focus upon research, to consolidate and build upon a record of achievement in publications, conference presentations and research project development, and to develop and enhance my research competencies, through work on two specific research projects linked to the goals of the College and in particular the research area of XXXXXXX.

Some researchers explain their level of research experience because this helps the panel manage their expectations. In this example, the researcher has clearly identified himself/herself as an early career researcher. The PDP panel is keen to see researchers from different levels of experience funded to undertake PDP. This researcher wants to consolidate recent research and work on two funded research projects (described in more detail within the submission) which are strategically aligned.
5. Abstract – weak
Comments by Associate Professor Paul Wormell (who wrote this example based on his own research)

There is considerable interest in new approaches to developing computational analyses of biological molecules, including those that contribute to photosynthesis, flower pigments and potential new colours for food products. These would replace artificial colours that are being phased out for regulatory reasons. A PDP program spent with leading researchers in Australia and overseas would help me to identify new theoretical approaches, potentially leading to a number of research publications, and enhancing my undergraduate teaching. Other work in this PDP would relate to the development of new materials.

- The first sentence reads as if it has been cut-and-pasted from a grant proposal or journal paper.
- The phrase “computational analyses of biological molecules” is jargon that needs to be explained to the reader.
- The phrase “photosynthesis, flower pigments and potential new colours for food products” is very broad and vague, suggesting that the program of research lacks focus, and the applicant is trying to sound impressive.
- Who are the “leading researchers”, where are they based, and how would the applicant collaborate with them?
- The statement “would help me to identify new theoretical approaches” suggests that the author does not have a clear plan. A better approach would be to identify new theoretical approaches (from the literature) before applying, and use the PDP program to test these approaches on some well-defined research questions.
- The phrase “potentially leading to a number of research publications” is unsatisfactory for several reasons. “Potentially” is a vague word; “a number” could include zero; “research publications” needs explanation, preferably including suggested journals.
- What does the applicant mean by “enhancing my undergraduate teaching”? This statement is very vague.
- The final sentence sounds like an add-on that is intended to add weight to an application that the applicant knows to be weak.

6. Program objectives and rationale – strong

The objectives of PDP will be to:
- Conduct a systematic literature review project
- Complete data collection and data analysis of project based on postgraduate students
- Write and submit publications based on 4 projects
- Present research findings to 2 international conferences

This submission clearly sets out what work will be done and what outcomes will be achieved. In order to make it easy for the panel to review, the objectives were set out as dot points.

6. Program objectives and rationale - weak

The objectives of the PDP are to generate more publications and strengthen the link of our university with XXXX universities and XXXXX university. My PDP program is aligned with the goals and strategies of the University and the School of XXXXX. One of the focuses of these goals is to enhance our research profile. My research project will lead to conference papers and a possible publication in refereed journal. The results of the study will help the School of XXXXX achieve its goals.

This statement is quite general with not enough detail. It is not enough to just state that there will be conference papers and possible journal publications. It is preferable to show that serious consideration has been given to which conference is most relevant, for example:
- I will prepare and present a paper on workplace issues at the International Social Work Conference in October, 2XXX.
The same applies to journal or book publications, for example:

- I will complete the co-editing of a book on aged care, to be published by Jones Publishing, UK, with a team of international experts in this area (see co-editor CV in Appendix).
- This PDP will be used to work on the write-up and submission of a book manuscript under contract with a leading academic publisher (Appendix: see correspondence from Cambridge University Press). This will promote Objective 2.2 in the College’s Strategic Plan 2011-2013 by developing targeted world-class research in European Studies/History, and is thereby likely to improve the college’s performance in ERA 2 and ERA 3.

Unsubstantiated claims about possible books will not be considered without details and preferably an email from the publishing company. It is preferable to show how the PDP work is aligned with strategic goals.

6. Program Objectives and Rationale – this includes strategic links and benefits

In this section you are required to show how your program is aligned with the strategic directions of the University/Division and School/ Centre. The following statements are examples of the specific ways that alignment was indicated in different submissions.

- These activities will contribute to the Mission Statements for the School and College (explain in more detail).
- A publication in this area will also assist in increasing the outcomes for the XXXX research cluster in XXXX of which I am a member.
- PDP will assist me to develop a strong track record and hence increase my competitiveness in obtaining research funding from bodies such as ARC.
- Achievement of research funding will contribute to School and College goals in this area (and cite them.....).

7. Program Description

This is usually a substantial part of the 5 page submission and includes details of the proposed program.

The following activities will be conducted during the proposed PDP:

Meeting with NHMRC research partners:
[explains purpose in one paragraph]

Undertaking field research:
[explains what sort of data collection and who the stakeholders are in next paragraph]

Visit to University XXXXX
[to discuss.....in final paragraph]

or

Meeting with ARC Discovery partners:
[explains purpose of meeting is to discuss project, provide updates and look at extending the project to additional countries. The group will also work on draft grant applications for further funding].

Field research in Germany:
[data collection information is provided including who the participants will be].

Visit to XXX University, London:
[explains that this visit will also aim to develop a new research project and ties in this particular topic to the research interests of the School].

These two examples illustrate how staff identify stages or different activities for their PDP. They sometimes list them separately and explain each component in more detail. This section often contains details about places,
names of collaborators, and details about purpose and type of each activity. It refers to expected outcomes from current projects and shows a plan to start preparing for future research projects.

8. RATIONALE FOR UNDERTAKING THE PROGRAM AT NOMINATED INSTITUTIONS / ORGANISATIONS (if applicable). This is usually fairly brief but could include:

1. Researchers from the University of XXXX are partner investigators in my ARC Discovery project and I need to work with them on the project. Whilst working in Berlin, I will be able to develop plans to discuss our interests in XXXX and develop plans for a new collaborative funded research project.

or

2. Sydney University has been selected as it will provide a convenient location away from UWS to allow me to complete the tasks set out. It has an extensive library, and will provide me with the facilities to achieve my goals.

9. Expected outcomes – example statements

The table below gives examples of the sorts of outcomes that applicants refer to. Of course these need to be fleshed out a little.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Project</th>
<th>Activity during PDP</th>
<th>Expected Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funded disciplinary study</td>
<td>Title of research paper from study</td>
<td>Manuscript to be submitted to Journal of Advanced XXXX May 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching related study</td>
<td>Data collection by end of March 2009; evaluation and preparation of</td>
<td>Paper presented at XXXXResearch Congress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The primary outcome of the proposed PDP will be a high quality publication........preliminary discussions with CUP

My track record shows that I do deliver [and gives examples].

This outcome will also be of benefit to the University because it will contribute to the achieving of its goals/plans and research profile.

It will also benefit the national and international communities because of its production of new and highly relevant knowledge.

Furthermore it will enhance UWS’s role within the National Centre for Research in XXXX and consolidate the expertise that the School contributes to the associated degree program.

In addition the proposed PDP project will have the enhancement and enrichment of international linkages with key academic institutions in XXXX as a major outcome.

Enhancement of my teaching will also be an important outcome [and explains contribution to particular undergraduate or postgraduate units]

9. Expected outcomes – using tables or lists to differentiate

Sometimes applicants find it easier to present two or three different PDP activities by either numbering them, or identifying them in a table to make the outcomes clearer. This example clearly shows the different activities and outcomes for each section.
9. Expected outcomes – a more clearly defined statement needed

The template states that outcomes will be assessed in terms of value to the University and the applicant needs to demonstrate how these outcomes will be achieved. This requires some specific information to show that thoughtful consideration has gone into the planning.

1. First my PDP will strengthen and establish new links with overseas universities. See attached documents for the confirmation of visiting arrangements.
2. Research paper. I have already done most of the data collection and data analyses. Most importantly I have developed the research model. I have presented the model in several conferences and research seminars, such as XXXXXXXXXXX. I expect completion of two refereed conference papers (names conferences). Also I intend to work towards a publication of one paper in a refereed journal.

The first example is weak in identifying outcomes. Links with an overseas university are often strategically determined and are usually identified by the International office and/or specific College research links. The second example lists work already completed, and so implies that two conference papers might be the main outcome, with work towards a refereed journal article. The journal is not identified, and there are no other outcomes, such as contribution to teaching content for a specific unit or program, or development towards future research grants or collaborations.

9. Expected outcomes – can sometimes be unrealistic

Outcomes need to be achievable. Sometimes a track record will help convince a panel that the outcomes are realistic; however if the panel feels that an unachievable set of outcomes have been stated then they may advise the applicant to review them.

• Significant work towards book publication
• 3 articles submitted to high ranking Journals
• Paper presented at international conference
• 10 visits to research sites whilst overseas
• Professional development resources developed out of research project

This example sets out a range of outcomes all of which sound relevant. However to work on a book publication, submit 3 articles, present at an international conference and visit a large number of research sites as well as prepare resources appears to be aiming too high and the result may well be that many of the outcomes are not achieved. It is a delicate balance to set achievable outcomes and convince the panel that the outcomes are sufficient for 6 months study leave. Getting advice from a senior academic in your School can be helpful in determining appropriate outcomes. You will be required to write a report after your PDP and you will be asked whether you met your stated outcomes. It is appropriate that these may have changed slightly since writing the application (if changed substantially you are required to notify your Executive/Dean/Director of the changes).