Sheffield Engineering Enterprise Development (SEED)

The project brief

The contract researcher community represents a major pool of cutting-edge skills, intellectual creativity and ambition, as well as a significant investment of university resources. For a variety of reasons this potential is not translated into new research income or uptake into industry, despite the widespread availability of training and support opportunities. An important and recognised factor in this is the lack of capacity for individual researchers to take time out from contractual obligations to develop their ideas and pursue them to realisation.

This innovative project, led by the Engineering Researcher Society (ERS) and supported by the Sheffield Engineering Gateway (SEG) and Research & Innovation Services (R&IS), provides all contract research staff within the Faculty of Engineering with the opportunity to access one-to-one mentoring, industry matching and project development to support the growth of an idea with potential to develop into a realistic opportunity for industry-focused enterprise.

The SEED Fund was available to contract researchers in the Faculty of Engineering at any stage of their research, subject to demonstration on a brief pro-forma of an enterprise-focused idea and an indication of support from their project PI and HoD. Particular attention in promotion of the scheme by ERS was towards contract researchers approaching the end of a project, seeking opportunities to develop an enterprise-focused continuation strategy for their own career at the University of Sheffield.

Key impacts

- Allowing ‘time buyout’ provided researchers with the space to consider their personal development and progress their careers e.g. applying for fellowships, jobs in industry and academic positions both at Sheffield and other UK institutions.
- Project management experience was developed by many of those taking part and involved planning, organising and communicating the project from start to finish with the management of deadlines and people.
- Networking was enhanced - participants expanded their professional networks to include industry and other academic institutions for current projects and future collaboration.
- Mentoring from SEG and R&IS collaborators had a big impact. Mentors challenged the researchers to be more ambitious and consider opportunities outside their own area, which they may not have done so otherwise. It was also invaluable to be able to have one to one advice from an impartial adviser. Feedback from mentors was also good, stating it was a positive experience for them to be involved in this way.
- The fund has developed the relationship with SEG, R&IS and the ERS. It also helped to raise the profile of the ERS and develop the skills of the committee in terms of running and supporting this type of scheme.

1st October 2013
Outcomes observed

The funding was promoted by email, posters and word of mouth within the Faculty. Take up was initially slower than expected. Due to this Heads of Department were emailed for the final call to encourage applications from departments where there had been little interest.

Owing to the initial slow response, the 10 grants were allocated in 3 different stages over the year, instead of at one time. All departments in the Engineering Faculty were represented, aside from EEE. One researcher from Architecture (Faculty of Arts & Humanities) was awarded a grant as she was working in collaboration with Civil Engineering and as such it was felt appropriate to make the award.

All researchers used the RDF as a personal development tool to help highlight skills they needed to develop and improve. Feedback was mixed on the RDF – some were already focussed and knew which areas they wanted to improve so didn’t find it useful, where as others found it useful to identify the areas for personal development they wished to improve.

Outcomes can be measure in the achievements of our participants and organisers of the SEED. We believe that the experience of participating in SEED e.g. receiving one to one support and mentoring is directly related to these outcomes. SEED has prompted recipients to be more ambitious and try for things that they may otherwise not have done.

Positions pursued / acquired:
- Lectureship at Liverpool University
- Lectureship at University of Sheffield
- Final round of selection process for the Vice Chancellor’s fellowship
- Industry position (SEED project discussed at interview)
- Position at University of Wolverhampton (SEED project discussed at interview)

Other achievements
- Application for a patent, proposal submitted to Royal Society and for proof of concept funding based on his SEED project
- Organising of a workshop
- Ambition to develop a researcher society in the faculty of Arts & Humanities, using a similar model to the ERS

The legacy

Overall it was a successful project and feedback from participants and others involved (e.g. in R&IS and SEG) were positive. Ideally, the project should continue under some guise supported by the faculty (perhaps with fewer participants) or with other sources of funding. The faculty now has a full time Researcher Development Manager who supports the development of employability skills in research staff and students and may be able to support the program in future.

The funding model used was something that could possibly also go on to be applied to other training and development schemes for research staff e.g. funding to buyout time from research contracts for personal development or funding of a bank worker. Financial legacy has not been attained for this specific scheme, however projects post funding are continuing through networks made during the SEED project.
In addition, an Enterprise program is being developed between R&IS, SEG and the ERS with funding from EEUUK, where some of the lessons from the SEED project will be utilised.

The legacy for the participants involved, through their career development was achieved. In addition the novel funding method (buyout of time) mentioned has proven to be successful, and as such may be used for other funding rounds.

This project has both helped to highlight the 'untapped' resource of researchers within the Faculty with respect to innovation and enterprise and in part the lack of focussed support and encouragement for researchers relating to their personal development. SEED has shown that with a small amount of encouragement (i.e. one-to-one mentoring) and a low cost investment (10 days of their time over 20 weeks), the participants were energised and inspired to achieve more (ROI is excellent). As such we feel that this type of project should be encouraged within the Faculty and University wide.

**Enterprise**

Projects were not advanced enough to bring to market – however lots of interaction with industry was made and networks advanced.

**Innovation**

The funding model was innovative method of allocating the money (time buyout/bank worker).

All researcher projects were innovative in some manner.

SEED in itself is an innovative way of encouraging career development (through the funding model and mentoring).

**Quotes and personal experience**

“Thank you for giving me this opportunity.”

“Thank you for all your efforts with this scheme. They are much appreciated.”

“A fantastic opportunity with very helpful but accessible support from experts with different backgrounds. I wish the project duration could be longer for future participants.”

**To find out more contact**

Claire Utton (c.utton@sheffield.ac.uk) or Neale Daniel (n.daniel@sheffield.ac.uk)

Faculty of Engineering

1st October 2013