



## Funder Spotlight: BBSRC and support for Frontier Bioscience

The UCL bioscience community is world-leading. It is also very successful at winning funding from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC): around 60% of UCL's BBSRC funding portfolio is classed as "world-class underpinning bioscience", which is research that supports BBSRC's core strategy but doesn't fit specifically into their [Strategic Priority](#) areas.

There is still room to grow the amount of funding that UCL researchers secure from BBSRC for fundamental, curiosity-driven bioscience research (which BBSRC term "Frontier Bioscience").

We have developed advice, in discussion with BBSRC, to address some challenges and perceptions that might deter the UCL bioscience community from applying to BBSRC. The aim is to encourage researchers to consider BBSRC as an important funder of fundamental research.

### ***Which areas of research are within BBSRC's remit?***

BBSRC [funds](#) bioscience and biotechnology research ranging from the level of molecules and cells, to tissues, whole organisms (plants, microbes, animals and humans), populations and landscapes.

BBSRC funds research that investigates **normal biological function** in humans, including human physiology, cell biology, genetics and genomics research or other disciplines. Importantly, BBSRC **does not fund research into human disease or disease processes**: studies that use patients or animal models of disease are likely to be out of remit.

That being said, research that has the *potential* to impact on disease understanding, treatment etc. can still be within BBSRC's remit: we are aware that to some extent BBSRC will fund research with an element of work on disease mechanisms. At a visit to UCL in March 2017, BBSRC's Interim Chief Executive Professor Melanie Welham said that applicants should consider the *primary intention* of their research.

BBSRC are happy to discuss the remit of a potential application, and which Research Committee it is best suited to, prior to submission: [remit@bbsrc.ac.uk](mailto:remit@bbsrc.ac.uk).

### ***I've heard that BBSRC only fund research within their Strategic Priorities, and funding fundamental bioscience is not as important...***

There has been a lot of recent activity from BBSRC demonstrating how important supporting fundamental bioscience is to the funder's strategy and portfolio, for example:

- BBSRC has a webpage dedicated to how it supports [Frontier Bioscience](#)
- Recent [blogs](#) from BBSRC's Interim Chief Executive Professor Melanie Welham discuss frontier bioscience research that they have funded
- BBSRC Science Team members attend each of the BBSRC Research Committee meetings and capture information about frontier bioscience research that is being reviewed:
  - All the Research Committees fund frontier bioscience research
  - The team report on exciting frontier bioscience research that is funded
  - They also capture where frontier bioscience research was not funded and look at: whether there were problems with assessment; any barriers to this research being funded; and whether there are any specific research areas that are consistently struggling to get funded.

### ***I don't feel confident applying to BBSRC if my research doesn't fit one of the responsive mode priorities***

It is true that BBSRC have a set of priority areas for responsive mode applications that align with the Strategic Priorities, and also that fit with a Strategic Priority is an assessment criterion.

However, BBSRC have emphasised to us that it is truly the excellence of the science that is the topmost driver of whether an application gets funded. Fit with strategy is considered by the Research Committees; in reality it often comes into play to tease apart grants which otherwise (i.e. on the basis of excellence) are closely scored during review. In Responsive Mode, it is never used in isolation or as a primary assessment criteria.

The majority of UCL's BBSRC funding portfolio is fundamental bioscience research that doesn't address a strategic priority, and in 2016/17 38% of BBSRC's research funding went to world-class underpinning research that did not sit in any strategic priority area. So, if you have an excellent bioscience research idea, you should not worry about trying to make it fit a priority area if it doesn't.

### ***The Research Committee remit / membership are geared towards the Strategic Priorities and don't represent fundamental bioscience as a priority***

A few things should be noted here:

- Frontier bioscience is funded by each of the four response mode committees.
- The core committee membership is only a subset of the people who actually attend each committee meeting and review the applications.
- BBSRC keep a core committee membership for continuity and consistency. Additional members are co-opted to each meeting from their Pool of Experts. This Pool is comprised from the bioscience community itself, and the members co-opted are dependent on the subject areas of the applications received in that application round.
- The BBSRC Office will take a view on each application they receive and will move applications to different committees if the expertise of another committee is considered more suitable.

Applicants can look at what each committee has funded in the past to help them decide which committee to apply to by using BBSRC's [Portfolio Analyser](#):

1. Click on "Advanced Grants Search"
2. In the "Committee" field, select one of the Research Committees
3. Scroll down and click Submit. You will get a list (with abstracts) of all current grants funded by that Research Committee.

### ***I'm a bioscientist and I want to participate with reviewing BBSRC applications, what can I do?***

BBSRC hold an annual call for applications to join their [Pool of Experts](#) and [Research Committees](#). This is circulated widely in UCL in May-June each year: look out for this and consider applying.

### ***I've had my frontier bioscience research funded by BBSRC, what can I do now?***

BBSRC would like to work with researchers - to develop case studies of their success - who have recently been awarded BBSRC funding for frontier bioscience research, or who have achieved impact from previously funded work. If this is relevant to you, please get in touch with [Claire Westwood](#) (Research Facilitator, UCL), BBSRC's [media office](#) or BBSRC's science contact for frontier bioscience [Stephanie Blackwell](#).

### ***I have another BBSRC-related question that is not addressed here***

This advice document is specifically based around the fundamental bioscience area of BBSRC's remit. If you have a question about applying to BBSRC within another research area, or you have another question about funding for fundamental bioscience, please contact [slms.facilitators@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:slms.facilitators@ucl.ac.uk).