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BRISMES GRADUATE SECTION

Online Event · 14 May 2026

Grant Writing and

Pathways to Funding Research

An Event Report

14 May 2026 · Online

Speakers

Dr Shabnam Holliday · British Institute of Persian Studies

Professor Yafa Shanneik · SOAS University of London

Professor Jeroen Gunning · King's College London

Professor Matteo Legrenzi · Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Organised by the BRISMES Graduate Section

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Introduction

How do you find a grant that suits your research, and what makes an application worth funding? These were the questions at the heart of a BRISMES Graduate Section event for postgraduate students and early career researchers working on the Middle East and beyond.

Four speakers shared lessons from their own applications, successful and unsuccessful, and from helping other researchers apply. The discussion ranged from small travel grants to major European fellowships. This report brings together their advice, alongside a few checks on scheme rules. It is a summary of the event, not a substitute for the latest guidance from funders.

The speakers were not offering one formula for success. Their routes into funding differed, and they often approached the same question from different angles. What they shared was a concern with choosing a suitable scheme, making a convincing case for the research, and finding people and institutions who can help turn an idea into a workable project.

Who spoke

Speaker	Focus
Dr Shabnam Holliday (University of Plymouth; British Institute of Persian Studies)	BIPS grants and the British International Research Institutes
Professor Yafa Shanneik (SOAS University of London)	European Research Council grants
Professor Jeroen Gunning (King's College London)	Finding support in a difficult funding climate
Professor Matteo Legrenzi (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)	Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowships

The Graduate Section co-leads moderated the event.

1. Starting small: funding from BIPS and other institutes

Shabnam Holliday introduced the British Institute of Persian Studies (BIPS), which supports research on Iran and the wider Persianate world. Its grants can help pay for fieldwork, archival visits, research assistance or conference participation. Researchers working elsewhere should also look at the other British International Research Institutes (BIRIs): their regional remits and schemes differ.

At the event, Holliday described the network as eight institutes. The currently published BIRI list includes nine, among them the British Institute for the Study of Iraq. For the current list and each institute's funding opportunities, check their websites.

Holliday explained that BIPS supports Iranian and Persian studies through research funding, publications, digitisation and public engagement. She encouraged researchers whose work

covers other areas to explore the other institutes rather than assume that one organisation's eligibility rules apply throughout the network. Even a project comparing several countries may be able to seek BIPS support for its specifically Iranian component.

BIPS scheme	Indicative support / key conditions
Student Travel Grant	Up to £1,200. Open to eligible students enrolled at UK higher education institutions, including undergraduate and postgraduate students.
Research and Research Assistant Grants	Up to £5,000. The lead applicant must hold a PhD and be affiliated with a UK higher education institution; an eligible project can employ a research assistant.
Early Career Researchers Conference Grant	Up to £1,000 in total, with up to £200 per panellist, towards conference registration fees.
Research Fellowship	£20,000 for a one-year project. Early career researchers are encouraged to apply, but it is not restricted to them; applicants need a UK university or museum affiliation.

These are scheme details checked against BIPS guidance, rather than a promise that every scheme is open now. The calls and deadlines change.

Holliday's practical advice was straightforward: check eligibility before writing, prepare the budget carefully, arrange references and institutional paperwork early, and explain what the project will produce. If you need to visit a university, archive or other organisation, make sure it has agreed to host you. Any travel also needs to comply with BIPS rules on risk assessments and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office travel advice.

She stressed that applications can be ruled out for practical reasons even when the research itself is strong. References and risk assessments need to arrive by the deadline. A realistic budget should show what each expense covers; workshop proposals should indicate whom the applicant hopes to invite. Where money is administered by a university, an institutional letter is essential. Student travel awards work differently, with funds paid directly to recipients under the scheme discussed at the event.

BIPS also brings successful applicants together through grant-holders' workshops in different UK cities. Holliday saw these gatherings as part of a broader effort to sustain a research community, not simply distribute money. They can be particularly valuable for doctoral researchers who are still building academic contacts.

She also suggested thinking of a smaller grant as part of a longer research plan. A modest award can help you gather material, test an idea or make contacts before seeking larger funding.

One example was using a modest grant to carry out archival work or a pilot project that later forms part of a larger application. Applicants can explain this longer-term plan directly. For

a workshop, showing that some of the costs will be covered elsewhere may also help the institute support more projects within its budget.

2. ERC grants: give the idea room to grow

Yafa Shanneik spoke about applying to the European Research Council (ERC), particularly its Starting Grants. Her main point was that a strong application begins well before the writing: you need a research question that matters and a convincing account of how the project might change what scholars know.

Shanneik spent years developing her own project idea and several months writing the application. That is her experience, not a timetable every applicant has to follow. She encouraged researchers to discuss ideas widely, test difficult methods on a smaller scale where possible, and be willing to rethink their plans.

For her, the most demanding task was deciding exactly what the project would change in its field. She asked participants to move beyond claims such as 'nobody has studied this before'. Novelty matters, but applicants must also explain what is learned from studying the question and why others should care about the answer.

She described drawing an extensive mind-map of her proposed research, connecting places, themes, methods, staff roles and expected results. The mind-map helped her see which elements belonged together and which still needed a stronger justification. It was a way of testing the logic of the project before committing to a final written structure.

What makes a persuasive proposal?

- Say what the central question is, why it matters and why this is a good moment to investigate it.
- Show what your research will add. Being the first person to study something is not enough on its own.
- Explain why you chose particular places, cases, methods and collaborators. Do not add comparisons simply to make a project sound ambitious.
- Make the plan workable: show who will do what, what evidence you will need, and how you will respond if something goes wrong.
- Ask colleagues outside your immediate specialism to read the proposal. If they struggle to follow it, the panel may too.

The ERC changed its proposal format for the 2026 calls. For Starting Grants, Part I of the scientific proposal is limited to five pages and makes the case for the overall idea; Part II is limited to seven pages and explains the methods and delivery plan. These sit within the wider B1/B2 application templates, which also contain other information. Funding and eligibility depend on the particular call.

Shanneik found the shorter opening section harder to write than the detailed methods section. Its readers may be accomplished researchers who know little about the applicant's

particular country or topic. They need to understand the problem on a first reading. She advised applicants to work especially carefully on the opening summary and the statement of the research challenge, and not to rely on fashionable academic language.

The detailed part of the proposal should make the project feel achievable: what the different strands of work involve, who is responsible, what each will produce, and what happens if fieldwork, access or recruitment plans change. A small preliminary study can provide evidence that a new method is promising. Ambition is important, but the panel also needs grounds to believe the work can be done.

Shanneik also stressed that ERC grants chiefly assess research excellence and contribution to knowledge. Applicants should explain their project's importance without forcing it into a fashionable policy theme.

3. Funding is competitive: look beyond familiar routes

Jeroen Gunning described the pressure on research funding and on programmes focused on particular world regions. His assessment of the climate was based on his experience; it should not be read as a general statement of UKRI's formal funding priorities.

He urged researchers to make clear why their work matters beyond the place they study. A proposal on one country may help answer a much wider question about politics, religion or society. Readers who know little about the country should still understand the contribution.

Gunning drew on projects about Islamist movements and critical terrorism studies to illustrate the point. A well-chosen Middle East case can tell researchers something important about a wider debate. He had seen imaginative early-career applications struggle because they did not quite make that broader connection clear. It is not about pretending the regional detail is unimportant; it is about telling the reader what that detail helps us understand.

He also spoke openly about the role of timing and chance. His own career was helped by wider interest in Lebanon at the moment he was applying for funding. While nobody can plan for such a moment, researchers can put themselves in a better position by presenting at conferences, meeting scholars in other fields and joining collaborative projects.

He recalled applying for a British Academy fellowship on Hezbollah and political inclusion around the time of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. Public attention to the issue may have helped at a crucial moment. He was careful not to present that timing as a strategy that others could simply reproduce. He used it to underline how much of the process lies outside an applicant's control.

What researchers can control is whether others know their work. Gunning described conference presentations leading to invitations to join projects based in other countries. Serving as part of a larger research team can build skills and a record of collaboration that become useful when applying to lead a project later.

A few practical suggestions emerged:

- Apply for a mix of smaller and larger awards. Internal seed funding or a role on somebody else's project can give you valuable experience.
- Keep publishing and sharing work. A clear record of research helps people understand what you could contribute to a team.
- Speak to the host institution early. Some grants do not cover the full costs a university expects to recover, and that may affect whether it can support an application.
- Look outside your usual national funding system. Partners in other countries may know schemes that are a better fit.

Gunning mentioned Scandinavian funders and the Arab Council for the Social Sciences as routes worth exploring. Whether they are suitable will depend on the current call and your eligibility.

He also advised looking closely at the institution through which the grant would be held. Universities may decline to host an otherwise promising application if the scheme cannot cover the costs of administering it. This can be especially difficult for researchers without a permanent position, so it is worth asking the research office before investing months in a bid.

National funding systems can respond very differently to the same idea. Gunning pointed to a research collaboration that received backing in Denmark but not through comparable applications in the UK. His message was to explore several routes and not interpret one refusal as a judgement on the entire project.

4. Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowships: choose the host carefully

Matteo Legrenzi focused on Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Postdoctoral Fellowships, particularly the Global Fellowship route. He described these awards as valuable both for the time they give researchers and for the international relationships they help build.

There are two main routes. European Fellowships support eligible researchers of any nationality to work in an EU member state or a country associated with Horizon Europe, normally for 12–24 months. Global Fellowships are for nationals or qualifying long-term residents of those countries. They include 12–24 months in a country outside that group, followed by a required 12-month return phase in Europe or an associated country.

Legrenzi described the Global route as an opportunity to spend a substantial period building relationships at an overseas institution while maintaining a European base for the final phase. He gave examples of researchers using a fellowship to broaden a doctoral topic into a new comparative project rather than simply funding publication of their thesis.

Applicants generally need to have successfully defended their PhD and to have no more than eight years of eligible research experience after the degree, with exclusions in certain circumstances. There is also a mobility rule linked to where the researcher has lived or carried out their main activity. Read the current guide carefully: these details can determine eligibility.

Legrenzi's advice was to take the choice of host seriously, but not to judge it by prestige alone. Look for a supervisor who knows how to support fellowship applications and an institution that can manage the administrative requirements. For Global Fellowships, securing the overseas host's commitment in time can be a major hurdle.

He emphasised the practical work behind a host letter. An enthusiastic academic supervisor is not always enough: departments and research offices may need to confirm space, staffing arrangements, healthcare or other commitments. A strong potential host is therefore one whose academic support is matched by responsive administration. He encouraged applicants to start those conversations early.

The overseas host does not need to be in the country you are studying. For example, a researcher working on Iran might benefit from a specialist centre or archive in another country. He also pointed to European Fellowships with secondments as an alternative for researchers who do not qualify for the Global route. Secondments have limits and must fit the research plan; they are not an unrestricted way to live or work anywhere.

Legrenzi also highlighted the relatively high success rate of MSCA Global Fellowships, which he estimated at around 20%, compared with 10–11% for European Fellowships and 4–5% for ERC grants. These were approximate figures shared during the discussion, rather than official rates for a particular funding round.

In the chat, he added that a host institution's record of managing fellowships and a supervisor's experience with previous applicants could matter more than the name of a prestigious university. He also explained that a researcher whose field site is difficult to access can make a good case for going elsewhere to gain specialist expertise, archives, methods training or research contacts.

5. Questions from the discussion

Should I apply for small grants before a major fellowship?

There is no single route. Smaller awards can help you try out a method, visit an archive or build experience. Shanneik also knew researchers who won substantial ERC funding without a long list of earlier grants. Choose the scale that makes sense for your project and stage of career.

Gunning encouraged applying at more than one level and trying to join established projects where appropriate. Holliday noted that even small awards can bring a researcher into a wider network. Shanneik, however, warned against treating a long history of smaller grants as a

formal prerequisite for an ERC bid. The right next step depends on what the proposed research actually needs.

Does research comparing different regions have a better chance?

Not automatically. The comparison should help answer your question. Explain why the cases belong together and what you expect to learn from studying them side by side.

An audience member asked specifically about comparing the Middle East with Southeast Asia or Europe. Shanneik warned that bringing in extra regions can make a proposal less persuasive when the reason for comparing them is unclear. A comparison should have a purpose that can be explained in a sentence or two, not be included merely because it sounds international.

What if I am still a master's student or new to research?

The speakers encouraged early participation in academic networks, including organising panels at conferences such as BRISMES or MESA. Students should also check travel and training awards: not every opportunity requires a PhD.

Legrenzi suggested that someone with a master's degree could help organise a panel at a conference such as MESA or BRISMES, even as its most junior participant. The experience is a practical way to meet scholars and become known for a research interest. Holliday also recommended professional association working groups, including those outside Middle East studies, where people may be asking similar questions using different cases.

Should I follow the themes that funders currently favour?

Gunning cautioned against trying to guess the next fashionable topic. Better to start with a question you can answer well and show why it matters. Some schemes have specific aims or policy priorities, so always read the particular call.

A related question was whether funders prefer certain topics, especially beyond security. The speakers did not identify a universal list. Legrenzi noted that MSCA projects cover many subjects, while Gunning urged researchers to pursue substantive questions rather than copy the language of whatever is receiving attention that year. The best approach is to understand a particular funder's goals without losing sight of the research itself.

How do I recover from a rejected application?

Several speakers reminded participants that rejection is common. Ask for feedback when it is available, keep the useful parts of your proposal and consider whether another funder would be a better fit. The hours spent developing an idea do not necessarily go to waste.

Gunning spoke openly about the many refusals behind his eventual successes. Shanneik encouraged researchers to keep the work they have put into an unsuccessful proposal and adapt it where a different call genuinely fits. The moderator reminded participants that the

successes shared in public rarely reveal how many attempts preceded them. Feedback can be useful, but rejection is not always a reliable measure of a project's scholarly value.

Before you apply: a short checklist

- Check the current eligibility rules, deadline and funding limits.
- Ask the prospective host whether it can support the application and administer the grant.
- State the research question and explain why it matters in plain language.
- Be specific about the methods, budget, timetable and expected results.
- Collect letters, references, permissions and risk assessments early.
- Ask someone outside your specialism for frank feedback.

Useful starting points

BIPS funding: https://www.bips.ac.uk/ | British International Research Institutes: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/ | ERC Starting Grants: https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant/starting-grant | MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships: https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/actions/postdoctoral-fellowships

Scheme information reviewed in October 2026. Eligibility, amounts, deadlines and programme rules may change. The discussion above reflects what speakers said at the May 2026 event; any updated rules are identified separately.

Thank you to Shabnam Holliday, Yafa Shanneik, Jeroen Gunning and Matteo Legrenzi for sharing their experiences, and to everyone who joined the discussion and asked questions.