Grant writing as world viewing – or who is afraid of the SNSF?

The word “competition” comes to mind when we consider academic writing intended for funding applications. How can we frame a proposal to distinguish it from the multitude of other scientific inquiries? How can we meet the criteria, desires, and preferences of those empowered to provide funding? How can we package our research into a conveyable, straightforward narrative that is simultaneously complex enough to sustain itself through multiple rounds of critical scrutiny?

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According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the word “competition” has at least two main meanings in the English language: “a situation in which someone is trying to win something or be more successful than someone else,” and “an organized event in which people try to win a prize by being the best, fastest, etc.”Both apply, to a different degree, to the academic conservation, one of my domains.

The competitive dynamics of grant writing adds a healthy seasoning to the otherwise settled world of research-based academe – it expands our world and widens horizons. Grant proposals are often based on their authors’ advanced research into the topic, thus not just showcasing ideas but also disclosing their perspective on the world – what they believe is worthy of improvement, enhancement and development. In a nutshell, grant writing is an academic genre which entails as much world-views and shaping of the world as other forms of writing. In its propositional structure, it allows for exploration. Through analysing applications, we can discern the individual scholar’s situatedness within and without their field as well as the values that shape their motivations.

Often, the ability to secure funding for research projects from national research councils is restricted to individuals boasting an extensive track record of pertinent, peer-reviewed publications, possessing a doctoral degree or its equivalent and demonstrating success in securing grant applications. In conservation (as in some other fields, nota bene), although it functions as a distinct discipline complete with its own critical framework, higher education degrees and academic writing have not yet been established as prevailing standards within educational and research institutions. Consequently, this fosters a competitive environment where individuals are judged primarily on their track record.

Additionally, in conservation programmes in Switzerland, higher education degrees have predominantly been held by professors in art history, other humanities disciplines, natural sciences and conservation scientists often concerned with material or heritage science. While this trend has started to shift across Europe and Northern America, the pace of change varies among different educational institutions, with Switzerland experiencing a slower transition.

There is a bright horizon, however, and particularly in Switzerland, setting it apart from several other European countries. Switzerland benefits from a considerate Research Council – the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) – that not only offers substantial financial support across various research areas and career stages, positioning the country as a leader in government-funded research globally, but also demonstrates genuine concern for individuals whose efforts may have gone unnoticed. Through providing detailed feedback reports including individual, anonymised reviews – a genre in itself certainly worth a philological study – the Council signals a commitment to taking submissions seriously and engaging constructively with them. Notably, these reports not only acknowledge the effort invested but also suggest a pathway for resubmission, offering a humane touch in the competitive landscape of academia where grant applications often culminate in disheartening rejections and subsequent neglect of promising ideas (see also Thomas Gartmann’s illuminating contribution to this issue on page 12). Drawing from personal experience, having encountered rejection firsthand and, more recently, serving on evaluation boards at national and European levels, I attest to the significance of these initiatives.

One of the premises of research funding is its capability to flow into meaningful pedagogy, unafraid of the intellectual challenges posed by constantly

changing times and sociopolitical contexts. In conservation, it is also to reconcile theory and practice into a narrative that resonates with the younger generation. It's about acknowledging that making and mending are not solely dictated by the power of hand, but by a potent combination of *hand and mind* – an entanglement of theory and practice.

In several conservation programmes, the incorporation of high-end research stemming from governmental funding seems to be lacking. In Switzerland, this is driven, on one hand, by the practice-oriented nature of the curriculum, which often focuses on material-based inquiries (without diminishing the value of their cultural contextualization therein) and, on the other, by the rarity of SNSF initiatives granted to and led by conservators. Are conservators afraid of the SNSF? I do not believe they are. However, one thing is certain: In conservation, we need a movement, not only towards fundamental research and academic excellence but also, and perhaps above all, towards a culture of tolerance and diversity both scholarly and professional. In late Latin, "competere" signifies "to strive in common, to pursue something collectively." Grand achievements can only be strived for collaboratively, and this is where we have to start if we want to keep up with the true challenges of contemporaneity. Otherwise, we run the risk of falling behind.