

The Wolfson Foundation

65 years of philanthropy

An independent grant-making charity based in Central London, Wolfson Foundation has awarded some £1 billion to more than 14,000 projects in the UK from Cornwall to the Shetland Islands since its establishment in the 1950s. Chief Executive Paul Ramsbottom explains how academic decision-making is at the heart of what they do, and how they've adapted in the face of a global pandemic.

The Wolfson Foundation is a grant-making charity that has been funding research and education in the United Kingdom for over 60 years. It is now facing one of its biggest challenges to date: the effect of the Coronavirus pandemic on educational and cultural organisations across the country.

In this interview with Chief Executive Paul Ramsbottom, *Research Outreach* found out more about the foundation's mission, what sort of projects it funds and why, and how it is helping cultural organisations in particular navigate the 'new normal'.

What is the mission of The Wolfson Foundation?

We are a charitable foundation with about £900 million under investment. We allocate funding of £30-40 million a year and the aim is to fund research and education in British society. Within that we've got a couple of 'sub-aims'; there's a real emphasis on high-quality research and education. Perhaps what makes us distinctive, and what we're best known for, is that about 85% of our funding is for infrastructure: buildings, refurbishment and equipment. The rest of the funding is for people and includes scholarships, fellowships and bursaries.

We were set up by the Wolfson family in the 1950s; Isaac Wolfson was a refugee who came to Scotland from

the Jewish Pale of Settlement in the 1890s and built a fortune from more or less nothing. In the 1950s the family wanted to give back to British society, and so here we are more than 60 years later. What we try to do as an organisation is to have all the rigour and analysis and detachment of a Research Council but to retain that involvement and colour that comes with family involvement.

How did you come to be involved in the foundation personally?

I have been Chief Executive for just over a decade. My academic background is in history. I did undergraduate and postgraduate history at Oxford University, and I've always been interested in philanthropy and the overlap between private money and public benefit.

How do you decide which organisations or projects to fund?

We've got a strategic framework and a thoughtful board, who frame a broad picture. Within that we are very much concerned with listening to the sectors in which we work, and we talk to the organisations that we're partnering with informally and formally through an anonymised applicant survey. We also have expert panels, which advise the trustees and the executive team in each of the areas that we work.

In terms of what we fund, project by project, we run what you would think



Isaac Wolfson's family came to Scotland as refugees in the 1890s. To give back to society, the Wolfson family founded the charity in the 1950s.



Paul Ramsbottom is Chief Executive of The Wolfson Foundation.

of as a pretty standard, although hopefully robust, peer review system. For example, if we have a big research infrastructure proposal to consider, we go out for peer review and work with around six or seven reviewers in the UK and internationally. Then we go through a process of feedback for the applicants, we have an expert panel meeting, and then make recommendations to the board. That academic model of decision-making is one that we then filter out across all our areas of working. The three big types of organisations that we fund are universities, schools and cultural institutions (museums, galleries, performing arts, heritage organisations, public engagement with science organisations). We also support front-line health and disability charities.



Wolfson Foundation have recently allocated funding to Cardiff University to create a Research Centre on mental health.



University of Edinburgh, King's Buildings campus.
Kim Traynor, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The first thing we did when the storm broke in March was to make all of our grants very flexible.

Can you give me an example of a project that you are fond of?

Like a lot of organisations, we've been concerned about mental health within British society and what appears to be increasing rates of mental health challenges, especially for younger people. It's an area in the UK that appears to have been under-invested in terms of research. A couple of years ago, we announced a £10 million initiative. We put together an international panel of experts and asked for proposals from around

the UK. We allocated the funding to Cardiff for a really imaginative proposal: they have created a Research Centre on mental health, working with partners across Wales, including schools, and using Wales as a giant kind of incubator. It's too early to tell its impact but it's something I feel personally quite proud of. That's such a powerful combination, high quality research in a range of areas (from more basic to more clinical science) and grassroots partnerships across Wales.

Are there any other projects that you've worked on that you'd like to mention?

There is a neat story in terms of investing in research back in the 1960s; one organisation we funded was a microelectronics group in Edinburgh which became very successful and spun out as a company called Wolfson Microelectronics that was floated on the stock exchange about 17 years ago. When we awarded the funding in the 1960s we didn't want to have any interest or stake in any commercial



Philanthropy has become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic.



National Gallery at Trafalgar Square in London, UK. Diliff, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons



The foundation has created a special £10 million COVID-19 support fund for cultural organisations and health charities.



Thought Leader

spin-off, but a proportion of those profits have been ploughed back into the University of Edinburgh for really bright individuals doing PhDs in microelectronics.

Did you observe increased demand for funding as a result of COVID-19? How do you deal with that?

It has been an extraordinary period. When you have a portfolio of partners you may well have an organisation go through a challenging time. What's unique about 2020 is that almost every organisation we work with is going through a crisis of one sort or another. We've divided up our thinking in terms of mainstream education organisations on the one hand and cultural organisations and health charities on the other.

The first thing we did when the storm broke in March was to make all of our grants very flexible. We relaxed a lot of the conditions on reporting, the time period to claim and so on. For organisations that were most challenged (a lot of the cultural organisations), we simply paid

out grants immediately. We made a record payment in April 2020 that was higher than any other month in the foundation's long history.

The more difficult thing has been thinking about what you do in terms of new funding. The foundation's view is that a time of crisis is a time to increase our spending. This might seem slightly counterintuitive because investment levels for our endowment are bouncing around in quite a dramatic fashion. But as a long-term funder, the responsible thing to do has been to maintain and even increase our funding. Part of what we're doing is to say to universities and to schools that we hope to be a constant feature in a moving world. In terms of our infrastructure-funding programme for schools and universities, we want to be there responding to their needs, and for them to know that whatever else is happening, and whatever other income streams are dropping and changing, Wolfson Foundation is sticking with it. Alongside continuing funding for schools and universities, we've also created a special £10 million

COVID-19 support fund for cultural organisations and health charities that's about rapid response, unrestricted funding that allows those organisations to use flexible money to do whatever they need to do to help them through the winter and to rethink as they're reopening to audiences. Regional museums, regional performing arts venues, frontline health charities: organisations that we've been working with over the last few years have been eligible to come in for that fund.

What other organisations do you work with and how do you work with them?

Partnership is hardwired into everything. We are always asking: are there other funders or expert partners that we should be working with? Sometimes it's simply other funders and partnership where we're both putting money in and working together; we've worked quite extensively with the Wellcome Trust over the years, for example. Another model is one in which we work with an expert body such as the Royal Society or the British Academy. In this case, we are providing the funding while

What's the role of philanthropy in society? It may be more important in the next two or three years than it has ever been before.

our partners provide the expertise and administration. Thirdly, we're a little bit unusual as a philanthropic funding organisation who work directly with government. We have a small number of programmes where we're actually directly partnering with central government. We feel very passionately that the best way to have an impact and achieve outcomes is by working with others.

What are the future plans for The Wolfson Foundation?

The big and interesting challenge for us for 2021 will be the extent to which we attempt to move our funding back to where it was in 2019 or how we keep going with the COVID-19 emergency fund. For universities, we will still be focused on research

infrastructure and for the other areas of our funding there is that question still to be asked. We may come up with a hybrid model where we try and do a bit of both: a bit of infrastructure, and a bit of more flexible support. The other thing that's quite interesting (and that goes beyond the Covid response) is: what you can do as a funder beyond simply paying out money?

For example, you've got convening power to get people around the table to discuss issues, you can commission your own policy pieces. You've got your investments and what you do with those. We've just announced that we're divesting from fossil fuel extraction, for example, which, as well as funding, environmental research, makes a statement.

The final thing that I've been quite keen for the foundation to do is to get involved in some of the debates around the role of philanthropy, which has become more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. What's the role of philanthropy in society? It may be more important in the next two or three years than it has ever been before.

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