



GLOBAL CHALLENGES RESEARCH FUND

The announcement of the Comprehensive Spending Review in November 2015 brought with it the news of the creation of the Global Challenges Research Fund. A year and a half on, Lorna Wilson, a Research Funding Support Manager at Newcastle University, explores the opportunities it offers to the UK research community.

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) was initially brought into being as a means by which to solve significant global issues that society is facing by mobilising the expertise of the UK academic community.

With £1.5 billion allocated over the spending review period, the allocation was given to our Research Funding Councils, National Academies, and HEFCE, and at the time what was referenced to as the "Unallocated pot". Any research funded under the banner of GCRF was to primarily have significant impact within developing countries, specifically those referenced on the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) List of Official Development Assistance (ODA) Recipients.

However, what quickly became clear was that this all wasn't actually new money, and GCRF allocations would be covered from within allocated research council budgets. The cynics amongst us recognised this as some clever double counting on the side of the UK Government. How can the UK both reach the agreed pledge of spending 0.7% of our Gross

National Income on Aid budget allocation, whilst retaining the level of the Science Budget? Many have argued that's the function of the GCRF.

While your feelings about how the GCRF came into being might be mixed, I am asking you to push through this cynicism, and to also see the GCRF in a more positive light. Through it, we have been presented with an exciting, transformative, and – forgive the cliché – "change the world" opportunity for the research community to take the lead on.

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AND THE COLLECTIVE CALL

Providing a platform for the GCRF are the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), part of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Building on the previous Millennium Development Goals, the UN SDGs cover a huge range of global issues from poverty, to clean energy, to health, to peace-building.

Behind each of these goals though, lies the true agenda for the GCRF, which is in the form of 169 targets that the UN and its



partners have all signed up to achieving by 2030. Proposals with strong impact agendas focussed on those specific targets are likely to be those we see come to fruition.

In terms of the GCRF opportunities we've seen, the Medical Research Council and Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (along with support from Arts and Humanities, Natural Environment, and Economic and Social Research Councils) were first off the blocks in May 2016, calling for applications for "Foundation Awards". This was an approach we saw spread across the funders, who all seemed to be dipping their toe into the water through various forms of smaller awards such as Foundation Awards as well as the Innovation Awards.

We then proceeded to see significant opportunities, such as the Economic and Social Research Council GCRF Centres for Inclusive Growth, which offered up to £10 million over five years. If we consider the 24 calls or so we've seen over the last 10 months, you can see the sheer spread of topics and variety of funding models offered through the GCRF.

The most exciting opportunity stemming from the GCRF so far though is through the "Unallocated Pot", which has morphed formally into the Research Councils UK (RCUK) Collective Call. So far only one call has stemmed from here, for projects of up to £8 million in any relevant area of GCRF, with a focus on growing research capability. What makes this so exciting is the sheer financial resource available through this route over the next few years, with allocations growing from £38 million in 2017/18 to potentially £315 million in 2020/21.

Even with an institutional cap of two per organisation, demand was overwhelming with over 200 expressions of interest submitted for the first round. At this time, outcomes are not yet known, but it's incredibly exciting to consider what might have been supported through this and what future opportunities from this scheme may be offered. Suggestions being made are a huge increase in the scale of funding offered, moving up into the double digits of the millions.

CHALLENGES WITH CHALLENGE-LED RESEARCH

As exciting as this is, as experienced colleagues working in development will tell us, aid budget allocation has its difficulties. Words that flare up discomfort in relation to this are "ODA Compliance". While this relates to all aid funding, for GCRF this translates into a requirement that all research funded through this route must have a primary purpose of promoting the economic development and welfare of a developing country. We've seen this linked to Newton Fund funding, but this is something academic colleagues are struggling to address. To demonstrate this, most GCRF calls have requested an "ODA Compliance Statement", and without being able to meet these requirements we've seen applications rejected at office stage from funders.

Aside from ODA compliance issues, we must not also forget the issues we face working in lower middle income countries, not just in terms of institutional infrastructure to process grants and payments, but risk assessment and travel guidance. Currently, from the list of eligible countries on the OECD DAC list, I would not be allowed to travel to South Sudan (for example), and there are several countries included on the list for which institutions will not sign off risk assessments. Alongside this, a huge emphasis of the GCRF is placed on working with in-country partners, with some calls stipulating this as an essential requirement, but even having them register through Je-S can present difficulties.

Institutions, therefore, have to adapt and evolve with regards to working increasingly in this area, and whilst we've worked on development research for years, with this new drive towards interest in this area we really need to get our act together to support our academic colleagues. There is a huge opportunity for the community to work together more closely in terms of best practice and ensuring researchers and partners are safe and able to conduct their projects without difficulty.

FORWARD THINKING

As I write this piece, it is a relatively quiet time in terms of actual funding opportunities for the GCRF with only three relatively sized

calls open. We're also just processing the announcement of the new UK Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, with heads turned at the prospect of some *real* new money for the research community, which in stark contrast to GCRF looks to focus specifically on bringing together business and science to tackle identifiable challenges for the UK.

However, whilst the GCRF submission buttons may be cooling, the community is frantically prepping in the background for the upcoming calls expected. Whispers of the next Collective Call coming in the next few weeks, and with further whisper of even larger pots of funding becoming available, institutions are frantically preparing as much as possible to respond to such calls.

As we move further into the spending period, and we see the grants being funded through the GCRF, I am happy to see that the initial cynicism has certainly waned. The community is certainly evolving, and despite the challenges that the current funding climate presents, I am looking forward to seeing how the UK research community seizes the opportunities ahead.

PROFILE



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