

Global Challenges Research Fund: Future Leaders – African Independent Research (FLAIR) Process Evaluation

Executive Summary

This summary presents findings from the 2021 process evaluation of the Global Challenges Research Fund's FLAIR Programme.

The Global Challenges Research Fund is a £1.5 billion fund overseen by the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). GCRF supports pioneering research and innovation that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries. The GCRF evaluation examines the fund's Theory of Change, from activities to impacts, over a five-year period running from 2020 to 2025. This process evaluation focused on the Future Leaders – African Independent Research (FLAIR) programme, delivered by the Royal Society (RS) and the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) under GCRF.

FLAIR was a unique opportunity for African postdoctoral researchers to work in African institutions on highly relevant development challenges. It was supported by largely effective, flexible programme processes and was well positioned to deliver results. The programme's focus on scientific excellence has led to an uneven distribution of awards across the continent and meant that less developed institutions have missed out on capacity strengthening efforts, and the Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding cuts in 2021 constrained potential outcomes.

Overall, FLAIR has succeeded in supporting a strong cohort of African early career researchers (ECRs), producing high-quality research on key issues for their countries and linking well into international and regional collaboration networks to support future work. FLAIR offers important lessons for future ODA funds.

GCRF evaluation: The purpose of GCRF's evaluation is to assess the extent to which GCRF has contributed to its objectives and impact. The overall GCRF evaluation takes a theory-based design, tracking the GCRF ToC over the life of the fund. The evaluation is conducted over five years and across three stages. This report focuses on Stage 1b (2021–22), involving six process evaluations of GCRF's signature investments. It seeks to answer the overarching evaluation question: *How are GCRF's signature investments working, and what have they achieved?*

Overview of the FLAIR Programme: The FLAIR programme provides postdoctoral fellowships for African ECRs at sub-Saharan African institutions. In addition, FLAIR Fellows could apply for FLAIR collaboration awards, which provide them with the opportunity to expand their international networks by funding collaboration activities

between fellows and UK-based researchers. The key objectives of the FLAIR programme are:

- to support high-quality research that addresses the global development challenges;
- to support talented ECRs to establish independent research careers in Africa; and
- to provide world-class support, including through the provision of training, mentoring and networking opportunities.

Notably, FLAIR was distinct from other GCRF programmes in awarding funding directly to African fellows and their host institutions, and so were among a very few GCRF investments that were Southern-led. FLAIR fellowships have an initial two-year funding period, with the possibility of a renewal for a further three years. FLAIR fellowships and collaboration awards have been delivered through three funding rounds: 2019, 2020 and 2021. In total, 59 fellowships and 36 collaboration awards have been funded. The majority of FLAIR fellowships have been awarded to South African institutions.

The programme has supported research across disciplines from engineering to physiology, with chemistry most frequently listed as the primary subject of FLAIR research. Multidisciplinary work has also been a focus of the programme, with expertise and inputs from different natural sciences.

Evaluation findings

FLAIR had effective structures and processes in place to support challenge-led R&I with development impact, promoting local relevance, supporting award holders and building links within the cohort. (EQ 1)

The FLAIR programme's objectives are well aligned with GCRF's goal of supporting

challenge-led research with development impact, and there are well-established processes to ensure that commissioned research addresses development challenges. Making the fellowships Southern-led has been an important factor in aligning projects with local development needs. At the same time, the extent to which commissioning processes address specific GCRF development considerations is mixed. For example, the programme has been effective in ensuring that the research supported is relevant to local development needs, but placed less emphasis on coherence between awards. FLAIR has been conceptualised and delivered through an effective partnership between RS and AAS, though there are some elements of this partnership that could have been developed further. Programme management is broadly considered to have been responsive, supportive and adaptive by award holders, though again some areas for improvement were highlighted, particularly around the way in which the cuts to FLAIR funding have been managed. A notable feature of the FLAIR programme has been its efforts to create opportunities for collaboration and cohort building between FLAIR fellows, as well as wider networking opportunities with other like-minded researchers. FLAIR has well-established monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes in place at the programme level, including informal mechanisms to inform programme learning. There is potentially scope for more to be done to leverage monitoring processes to better meet ODA R&I excellence, as well as to promote stronger monitoring processes at award level.

Capacity development was a core focus, and there have been some strong examples, but a lack of clear definition at programme level meant that capacity efforts have been largely applicant-led, with some missed opportunities for broader contributions. (EQ 2)

Capacity development has been a clear priority during the commissioning of FLAIR awards, with all awards having goals or objectives related to capacity building. However, the FLAIR programme has also lacked a clear definition of 'capacity building', with the result that approaches to conceptualising capacity building have generally been applicant-led. While this bottom-up approach has its benefits, it has also resulted in the focus of capacity building being primarily, though not exclusively, at individual level. The lack of a clear definition has arguably also contributed to broader missed opportunities, for example a concentration of FLAIR awards in well-equipped institutions better positioned to conduct world-leading research, rather than in less well-established institutions that might most benefit from institutional capacity support. Notwithstanding these issues, the FLAIR programme provides some very strong examples of capacity development at both individual and institutional level, the latter through both funding and through the programme's due diligence process for host institutions.

FLAIR processes were considered to be effective and efficient, with some exceptions on reporting, and were perceived to offer value for money. (EQ 3)

On the whole, FLAIR processes are considered to be effective and efficient by both award holders and programme personnel, with the FLAIR team viewed as helpful and responsive. Fellows and reviewers, for example, have been impressed by the efficiency and organisation of the application processes and by the flexibility and adaptation of the process between calls. Financial reporting processes and fund transfer processes, however, were notable exceptions to this broadly positive appraisal, with some fellows feeling that quarterly reporting requirements were

excessive and burdensome. Reflecting this, only 30% of those FLAIR fellows surveyed reported that funding was delivered in a timely fashion. In the absence of tailored metrics, the extent to which FLAIR awards offer value for money (VfM) is difficult to assess. Overall, however, FLAIR was perceived by respondents to provide good VfM, though in some cases there were suggestions that grants were possibly overly generous for the purposes.

In a relatively short time, FLAIR award holders have delivered a wide range of outputs and laid the foundations for future outcomes and impacts, despite the significant challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. (EQ 4)

In the relatively short time since the establishment of the FLAIR programme, FLAIR award holders have delivered a wide range of outputs. These have included innovations, publications, presentations, engagements, prizes and wider outputs, including contributions to the establishment of new scientific bodies and participation in scientific research to support the Covid-19 response. In some cases, FLAIR award holders have also successfully engaged wider stakeholders and end users in research outputs. This progress has been made in spite of the wide-ranging impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. In many cases, cuts to the renewal of FLAIR awards pose a significant threat to the translation of research outputs so far achieved into longer-term outcomes and impacts, as it was designed as a five-year programme.

Flexibility and responsiveness in programme processes have helped FLAIR award holders overcome barriers, including political challenges and institutional capacity constraints to position them for progress towards outcomes. (EQ 5)

Constrained institutional capacity has in some cases acted as a barrier to research

and created delays – for example, lack of compliance with conditions of awards leading to delays in receipt of research funding. Relatedly, a lack of institutional postdoctorate culture, along with broader political and environmental challenges, has hindered some fellows' ability to progress their research. At the same time, a range of enabling factors has also helped to support FLAIR award holders, including FLAIR programme support, institutional facilities and expertise, wider networks and collaborations and virtual tools. FLAIR's flexibility and openness to adjustments in the research process has been a particularly important enabling factor.

The FLAIR programme is unique in the scale and nature of funding – notably, awarding grants directly to Southern researchers – and support offered to sub-Saharan African postdoctoral researchers. As such, the programme has provided a unique opportunity for African postdoctoral researchers to work in African institutions. (EQ 6)

The additionality of the programme has arguably already been demonstrated in the context of the cuts to FLAIR funding, with several fellows having emigrated as a result. Beyond harming individual fellows' prospects, there are also signs that the funding cuts have caused significant reputational damage to the UK. **FLAIR had effective structures and processes in place to support challenge-led R&I with development impact, promoting local relevance, supporting award holders and building links within the cohort. (EQ 1)**

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Conclusions, lessons and recommendations

In FLAIR, RS and AAS established a programme well set up to deliver on GCRF's strategic goals. Moreover, in several respects the FLAIR programme provides a strong example of how to deliver an effective challenge-led ODA R&I programme which future programmes may follow. In conducting this evaluation, we have also highlighted a number of areas where FLAIR processes have been weak or would have benefited from further development. Drawing on these strengths and weaknesses, we identify the following recommendations for future programmes:

- **Address questions of fairness and equity at all levels of programme delivery:** FLAIR demonstrates the potential for a strong and equitable partnership between a UK and an African organisation to co-develop and co-implement a programme, while also offering examples of effective and equitable partnerships between UK and African researchers.
- **Provide opportunities for award holders to build networks and collaborations:** While the ultimate impact of these efforts has been weakened by the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic and the funding cuts, there are clear indications not just that these cohort building activities were highly valued by award holders, but also that they have helped to foster new collaborations and partnerships that may not otherwise have been established.
- **Ensure flexibility and adaptability in programme delivery:** Management of the FLAIR programme has been flexible and adaptable, in terms of both day-to-day management and approaches to longer-term programme delivery, the latter supported by informal mechanisms for learning and adaptation. This has been positively received by award holders and has improved the programme's ability to cope with the disruptions caused by unforeseen circumstances, such as Covid-19.
- **Integrate key fund objectives into programme commissioning and monitoring:** While FLAIR is well aligned to GCRF's strategic goals, this evaluation has also found that the tailoring of commissioning and monitoring processes to address more specific GCRF development considerations is mixed. This highlights a broader need to consider alignment at fund and programme levels, taking into account the balance between fund-wide and programme-specific goals.

- **Define capacity building clearly and have clear goals regarding intended capacity building impacts:** FLAIR has contributed to capacity development at various levels but has been hampered by the lack of a clear definition for capacity building. This has contributed to a tension whereby the capacity development of individuals within well-established institutions has taken precedence over the capacity development of less well-established institutions, where support is arguably more needed. By being clear about the specific goals of capacity building, future programmes can ensure that resources and activities are fully targeted towards those ends.

Future programmes and funding allocations need to recognise the long term funding commitment required to support ECRs in order to achieve meaningful outcomes and impact-: While FLAIR fellowships were designed as five-year awards in recognition that ECR's need long term support, the cuts to funding have reduced most FLAIR fellowships to two-year awards, and this has illustrated the inherent difficulty of achieving meaningful outcomes within such short time frames. Future programmes should recognise the long-term commitment required to support ECRs to undertake high-quality, impact-oriented research, and build this into their funding strategies.



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