Global Challenges Research Fund: Four Nations

Executive Summary

This summary presents findings from the 2021 process evaluation of the Global Challenges Research Fund's Four Nations Funding Bodies.

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 the Four Nations GCRF QR/block grant funding, a GCRF 'signature investment', aimed to underpin and complement project-based GCRF grants.

The 2017 Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) Rapid Review led to a decisive shift in the direction of GCRF QR/block grant funding. This included the introduction of three-year institutional strategies and rigorous processes for monitoring making the funding stream more focused and strategic. The funding stream has gone beyond ensuring official development assistance (ODA) compliance towards 'ODA research excellence'. Overall, the investment through GCRF QR/block grants has made progress towards meeting the GCRF strategic objectives and desired result, although funding cuts have impeded potential areas of expected outcome as well as the sustainability of achievements made.

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 take 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 GCRF funding through the Four Nations Funding Bodies: Since 2016–17, four UK funding bodies have distributed GCRF allocations to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This aim of the funding is to complement project-based GCRF grants allocated by delivery partners (DPs). The funding is allocated to HEIs as block grants made to institutions, in contrast to project grants, which are awarded on a competitive basis to individual researchers. The four funding bodies are: (1) Department for Economy, Northern Ireland (DfENI); (2) Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW); (3) Research England; and (4) the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

Allocations are made to each nation on the basis of 'standard shares', i.e. shares of total

UK Research Council funding. These are then allocated to HEIs according to the overall quality of their research. There is slight variation for how this takes place in each nation.

In 2017, ICAI published its review of GCRF. The report was critical of the funding stream's ODA compliance processes. It found that allocations made by the funding bodies without HEIs submitting proposals for ODA-eligible research or being assessed for potential impact and processes. It also found a lack of transparency in how funding was spent. Following the ICAI review in 2017, measures and processes were put in place, which Section 3 (Findings) delves into in further detail.

Evaluation findings

The 2017 ICAI Rapid Review led to a change in the direction of GCRF QR/block grant funding, with the introduction of three-year institutional strategies and rigorous systems of monitoring and reporting. (EQ 1)

Following the ICAI review, GCRF funding through the funding bodies has been granted to HEIs only if their three-year institutional strategies were assessed as ODA-compliant. The strategies enabled HEIs to reflect on coherence and the place of funding within their overall institutional strategy. It was evident that funding bodies and HEIs had a clear, shared vision for the QR/block grant funding stream. In addition, funding bodies put in place reporting requirements to ensure funding was being used effectively.

Strategy development and processes introduced supported HEIs to move beyond ODA compliance towards attaining ODA research and innovation (R&I) excellence. The principles of equitable partnerships are evident in HEI strategies and are supported with targeted programming. GCRF priorities, including gender responsiveness, poverty and social inclusion, are embedded and well-recognised components of this funding stream, addressed at project design, during activities and at dissemination.

In all four nations, GCRF institutional officers (IOs) and principal investigators (PIs) utilised existing support networks to coordinate with colleagues in other institutions. The three devolved nations' funding bodies (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) were able, to varying degrees, to offer specific support to their cohort.

There is a shared recognition across stakeholders of the existence of capacity gaps in effectively supporting GCRF research, alongside a recognition of the potential this funding has to bridge these gaps. Structures and processes to strengthen R&I capacity have taken place at three levels – individual, institutional and across institutions. (EQ 2)

At the individual level, the primary beneficiaries were UK early career researchers (ECRs), who were able to gain hands-on experience and widen their networks. Individual low-to-middle-income country (LMIC) partners had opportunities to strengthen technical research skills, with more limited evidence of opportunities for strengthening their capacity to engage in the broader funding ecosystem.

At the institutional level, UK HEIs used this experience to strengthen capacity and infrastructure for managing ODA grants. Evidence suggests that capacity development implemented within LMICs at the institutional level has been less comprehensive than that within UK HEIs often focused at the individual researcher level.

Across institutions, there is strong evidence that UK universities have utilised this stream of funding as an effective mechanism to collaborate and share learning. While there is concrete evidence to support an understanding of capacity strengthening across HEIs in the UK, there is less evidence for how this is happening within LMICs.

In terms of fairness considerations for capacity building, evidence suggests there is a potential for investments to perpetuate an advantage to developing countries or organisations that already have credible institutions rather than directing investment toward poorer partners where capacity building may be most needed.

The tight timelines for decisions, planning, implementation and impact constrained HEIs' scope and ambition. (EQ 3)

Tight timelines for the annual funding cycle and delays to confirming annual allocations caused uncertainty and constrained HEIs in terms of the scope and ambition of their activities. Where HEIs were selective about the types of projects they funded, they were still able to direct the funding efficiently, largely through pump priming and full economic costs (FEC) work.

There was broad agreement that the funding was proportionate and manageable in terms of size, and that it was appropriate to achieving the three-year strategy objectives. HEIs with smaller allocations sometimes found the administrative burden of reporting too great for the amount of funding.

Despite feeling that the QR/block grant stream emphasised equity more effectively than previous projects, respondents questioned the fairness of some funding mechanisms, especially the use of a reimbursement model for LMIC partners. Another issue raised as a barrier to fairness was the administrative burden placed on LMIC partner institutions in meeting UK due diligence and financial requirements.

In spite of the challenges in time frame, there is strong evidence of achievements at the 'results' level as well as progress towards short-term outcomes against GCRF's ToC. (EQ 4)

Funding through GCRF QR/block grants has led to the development of relationships between UK-based HEIs and those in LMICs, as well as co-teaching and collaborative research activities. It has also contributed to enhanced capabilities for HEI stakeholders in the UK and partner countries. A key success of this funding stream is the way in which it has broadened the pool of researchers and institutions, particularly those who have not worked within ODA or who saw their work as relevant to development issues.

The funding cuts have had a devastating impact on expected results and outcomes. In many cases, projects were either cancelled or reduced in scope. HEI stakeholders felt that the work was cut in its infancy or that its potential legacy or impact was jeopardised. Damage to relationships and reputation, both resulting from the cuts, was cited by a wide range of stakeholders. However, there is evidence of HEIs working in ways to shield their partners from the impact of the cuts.

Capacity strengthening through the funding stream, quality of partnerships established, professional networks, and flexibility of the funding were seen as key enablers for overcoming barriers within the context. (EQ 5)

Risks in the research environment were seen as the key barriers to achieving desired outcomes. The time frame for allocation and disbursement of grants had implications for HEIs' ability to plan and deliver within the expected period. It also placed limitations on their ability to build meaningful equitable partnerships. Due diligence was often more complex and time-consuming to support than expected, both for UK HEIs to manage and for LMIC partners to support. It was often cited as a barrier to establishing equitable partnerships.

Risks in the political environment were cited as another barrier that researchers faced. This included political and economic crisis as well as difficulties in navigating political alignments and sensitivities within communities.

The GCRF QR/block grants funding stream is seen as unique for its flexibility – enabling HEIs to meet institutional needs and complement project funding. It has also enabled HEIs to pivot and adapt plans to changing circumstances, such as the pandemic and funding cuts. It also had notable success in promoting interdisciplinarity work and equitable partnerships between UK and LMIC institutions. (EQ 6)

The explicit focus on ODA – including its emphasis on interdisciplinarity, equitable partnerships and challenge-led focus – was cited as unique by a wide number of stakeholders.

The flexibility of the QR/block grants was seen as distinct, as they enabled HEIs to pivot and adapt plans to changing circumstances, such as the pandemic and funding cuts. It also complemented project funding by giving agency to HEIs to allocate funding according to research needs in areas such as pump priming, capacity building and/or meeting the FEC.

The pandemic has impacted HEIs in a number of ways, including disruptions, delays and cancellation of projects. HEIs adapted by transitioning to online working, although this was not without its challenges. The transition also led to more work being undertaken by LMIC partners. Some HEIs felt this led to greater equitability in the partnership; however, evidence for the extent to which this was achieved is mixed.

Overall, HEIs were able to adapt and respond effectively due to the flexibility of the funding stream. There is also evidence of HEIs reallocating their funding to respond specifically to the pandemic, such as research into the impacts of Covid-19 in LMICs.

Conclusions, lessons and recommendations

The 2017 ICAI Rapid Review led to a decisive shift in the direction of GCRF QR/block grant funding. This resulted in the introduction of three-year institutional strategies and rigorous processes for monitoring and reporting, making the funding stream more focused and strategic. The funding stream has gone beyond ensuring ODA compliance towards 'ODA research excellence'.

However, there are structural challenges within the fund that constrain the investment from fully realising 'ODA excellence'. Overall, the investment through GCRF QR/block grants has made progress towards meeting GCRF strategic objectives and desired results. It also demonstrates how funding has complemented project-based grants allocated by DPs, though the intended synergy could be made more explicit. While progress is being made, funding cuts have impeded potential areas of expected outcome as well as the sustainability of achievements made.

Lesson 1: There is value in a QR/block grant funding model with specific criteria attached to the spend, including to complement project-based grants**.**

Recommendation 1: Consider including a similar QR/block grant with ODA criteria attached in any future challenge-based fund.

Lesson 2: The flexibility that the GCRF QR/block grants in the strategy design and allocation enabled HEIs to meet their specific institutional needs and priorities. However, this has resulted in a divergent number of activities, making it difficult to understand the full impact of the investment.

Recommendation 2: Develop a ToC for this funding stream in a future fund, as a means of providing flexibility ('bottom up') while maximising impact ('top down'). The ToC would serve as a guide for funding bodies and HEIs to articulate their contribution towards outcomes and impact, including the intended synergy between QR/block grants and project-based grants.

Lesson 3: The coordination and sharing of learnings within and across HEIs in the UK was a highly valued aspect of this funding stream. However, this is less evident in LMIC settings.

Recommendation 3: Consider resourcing requirements at the funding body level to include capacity to support cross-institutional learning in a strategic manner and in a way that also benefits LMIC partners.

Lesson 4: The time frame was a key barrier to achieving outcomes. This included a short turnaround time for strategy development and establishing partnerships. In addition, the annual funding cycle and the tight timelines for annual decisions about allocation, limited the time available for implementation.

Recommendation 4: Include a 'year zero' to allow HEIs time to establish meaningful partnerships and co-develop the strategy. In addition, guarantee allocation of funding for the three years, increasing the time to deliver and contribute towards impact.

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