



Data analysis: academics based in the global South

1. Data description

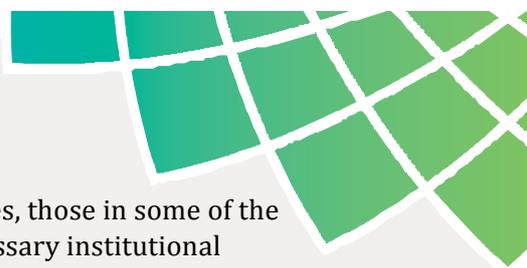
Data were collected from 22 academics based in 16 countries in the global South as well as two transnational academic network organisations. Webinar-focus group discussions were held with four academics based in Africa (Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda); a further three interviews were conducted with academics based in Ghana, South Africa and Uganda; and four written reflections were collected from academics based in Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe. Responses also came from 11 academics based in nine countries in Asia (India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan): seven of these were elicited through Skype interviews while a further four contributed written reflections.

Additional written reflections and organisational statements were collected from two academic network groups: the African Academy of Sciences (representing scientists across Africa) and the South-South Exchange programme for the History of Economic Development (SEPHIS), representing social science and humanities scholars from across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

2. Awareness of and participation in the GCRF, Newton Fund and other UK-funded partnerships

Seven of the Asian and four of the African respondents had not heard of the GCRF (50%). Of the remaining respondents, one Asian and two African respondents had heard of the programme but had not had the opportunity to participate (with nine or 41% having participated in either GCRF or Newton Fund events – including information and networking events, Global Engagement Meetings, the Salzburg Global Seminar, review panels – or funded projects). Experiences in these events were generally positive. One Asia-based respondent who had been involved in peer review panels and design/consultation workshops said: “The process established by the RCUK for designing and evaluating research calls is, in my view one of the best models I have seen or engaged with. The process they have established in terms of identifying research priorities, in bringing large number of selected peers/scholars together leads to rich deliberations ... identification of peers/scholars selected to serve in GCRF peer review panels is based on published literature or the latter’s work as PI/Co-PI in earlier projects. Therefore, the process is objective and neutral and there is an effort to eliminate all kinds of barriers or biases, so that the correct and the deserving proposal get endorsed. So, yes, more or a less a perfect model.”

Others said that their involvement in review panels was “rewarding,” “informative about national research needs for different countries” and strengthened their capacity to engage with research funding. However, two further respondents who had participated in events said their involvement felt tokenistic and that they could have been better briefed. As one said: “We were only brought in during the workshop as facilitators without understanding much about what need to be achieved at the end of the workshop. It would be more meaningful and effective if discussion and brainstorming sessions be made prior to the workshop for a better understanding of what needs to be achieved at the end of the event.” Finally, one African respondent said that while there



was interest in applying to the Newton Fund amongst colleagues, those in some of the “younger” African universities were not able to obtain the necessary institutional support and therefore were excluded from applying.

Another respondent also suggested that applications were often only supported from more senior researchers, potentially fuelling inequalities within the African HE sector.

In addition to funding through the GCRF and Newton Fund, respondents also reflected on their experiences in partnerships funded by other UK sources (including AHRC, ESRC, British Academy,

Commonwealth Fund and DFID) as well as the EU, Ford Foundation (US) and IDRC (Canada). Within these research partnerships, respondents played a variety of roles: most commonly ‘Co-Investigator’ (CI) or ‘partner’/‘collaborator’ but also ‘contract researcher’, ‘research administrator’, ‘Co-Principle Investigator’ (Co-PI) and ‘advisory board member’. The majority of partners had been involved at least to some extent in research design, data collection/analysis and dissemination of research, with many also involved in proposal development, feedback to participants and use of findings. One respondent applauded their involvement, saying: “I was fully involved in all the listed activities through written submissions to the PI, weekly Skype group calls and frequent telephone conversations with the PI.” Another respondent stressed how vital their involvement in the initial proposal development had been: “It was VERY important for African partners to have significant input into the initial design of the proposal, including the budgeting. The budget could have been very inappropriately designed and distributed without this input. There is a wariness about proposals in which LMIC partners are brought in too late with too little information provided. There needs to be a genuine willingness from the partner in the UK to amend the study design and budget based on input from the LMIC partners. This could be amended further during the ongoing implementation of the study based on further input during monitoring and evaluation findings.”

However, fewer respondents were involved in proposal development (41%) and budget development and negotiations (23%), with some feeling particularly excluded from both design and coordination of the project. One respondent stated: “I would have liked to be fully involved in the development of the proposal, including deciding on the main focus and objectives of the research, the budget and determination of expected outcomes as well as assignment of roles of the participants in the project.”). And none of the respondents were directly involved in reporting back to the funders. As one respondent said: “we had minimal involvement in proposal development because the main content of the proposal has been prepared by the UK Principle Investigator. I feel my involvement in the programme is mainly due to the study site being based in the tropics.” Another respondent said that although there had been opportunities to input into research design there had been “not much use of concerns from this end – the agenda was pre-determined.” Others also felt their roles were limited to “arrangement of local logistics during the research visit or field sampling in the host country.” Several respondents also said that the formal dissemination (i.e. writing of peer-reviewed articles) was mainly conducted by the UK-based academic partner.

Only three respondents (14%) had taken the decision not to participate in a UK-funded research partnership. One respondent commented: “I am all for collaborative research because it’s very enriching academically and experientially” while another saw it as a



useful capacity building opportunity “for the younger scientists to be involved and be trained.” Reasons for deciding not to participate included lack of clarity in UKRI calls, lack of outreach, lack of time and capacity (including adequate expertise in the research area) and partnerships imposed by the institution rather than those grounded in existing relationships: “We have previously been wary of calls where the involvement is ‘top-down’ – i.e. senior management in a UK institution wishes to create a partnership with a LMIC institution via their equivalents in that institution. While this may be a nice concept, in practice there need to be academics/researchers/research managers on the ground who already have or wish to develop a relationship with equivalents at the other institution. There need

to be academics on the ground who will drive the development of a proposal and then, if awarded, deliver on it enthusiastically. It is nigh impossible for institutions to carry out this sort of thing unless it is investigator-led, or has some sort of very active champion willing to drive the work.”

3. Experiences in UK-funded partnerships – key messages

Positive experiences included the following:

- Several respondents applauded **UKRI’s commitment both to research for development and to fair and equitable partnerships** as a rare example of funders taking steps to tackle engrained power relations.
- **Generation of relevant/responsive knowledge.** Most respondents highlighted the potential of research partnerships to cross-fertilise ideas and generate new knowledge. Several respondents also stressed the importance of this building on local experiences (at community level) and informing responses with potential global application and crucially, with community knowledge integrated into all stages of the research process and wider agenda-setting/evaluation.
- **Opportunities for learning and capacity building.** Respondents listed their own learning as well as opportunities to train students (either in their own countries or the UK with some going on to study in the UK.) Partnerships adopting a community-based research (CBR) approach were also credited with building the capacities of communities and other stakeholders, contributing to better uptake, adaptation, use and ultimately impact.
- **Strong and sustained relationships.** Several respondents mentioned the positive “rapport” between partners while others highlighted the emergent nature of individual and/or institutional relationships “that develop as collaterals over the research process.”
- **Individual and collective ‘passion’** was also cited as a key ingredient for effective partnerships: “not only should the topic be motivating and creative, but the partners should share their motivation, passion and be willing to take on additional workload along with the regular functions.”
- **The chance to develop new networks** was also recognised as a major contribution of UKRI funding: “there was no existing network in the area of urban development until RCUK supported our initiative on sustainable cities. So, it also played an important role in creating useful networks across the world.”
- **Institutional buy-in and leadership** was seen as an important counterpart to personal relationships with the potential to mitigate issues like staff-turnover and sustain momentum between grants.
- And finally, respondents cited **access to infrastructure** including highly specialised research laboratories in the UK as a key benefit for respondents.



Respondents also identified several barriers to participation, including:

- **Inequitable participation in decision-making.** Many respondents described being excluded from research agenda-setting and evaluation process, decisions about which partners to include in consortia, application development, research implementation and communication. Participation in decision-making was closely linked to allocation of funds but in two cases, budgets initially allocated to partners were reduced once funding was awarded. Most of the respondents listed lack of transparency around budgets and decision-making processes as a major barrier to fair and equitable partnerships.
- **UK-defined research agendas.** Respondents also noted that research agendas often reflected UK-interests (including those of individual academics or research centres) rather than
- important but neglected Southern priorities (“for example, non-communicable diseases and yet this is now reaching epidemic proportions in Africa”).
- Respondents also identified different types of **knowledge hierarchies**, for example, “academics from developing countries remain sources of data rather than of new thinking and paradigms.” This can result in transactional rather than collaborative partnerships and also has implications for equitable recognition/authorship and intellectual property/ownership of data.
- **Exacerbation of national or regional inequalities** was also mentioned as a potential risk of partnerships since funding is currently skewed in favour of higher-capacity countries, regions and institutions, exacerbating existing inequalities between universities and academics.
- **Insufficient time and funding.** Almost all of the respondents cited this as a key constraint to meaningful participation in research, with many respondents claiming that allocation of resources was inequitable: “if research is supposed to be for development then the majority of that funding should go to stakeholders working in developing countries.”
- **Inappropriate funding models.** Respondents, and particularly those based in Africa, noted the practice of reimbursement as not viable for some Southern universities, with scientists having to use their own money to start the research and be reimbursed later by UK-based institutions. Participants also stressed that lack of consultation in budget development often resulted in insufficient resources for Southern partners, with individuals often covering their own costs for internal travel and research expenses. Respondents also observed that the shift from smaller pots of funding to large, international and interdisciplinary grants meant there are fewer opportunities for Southern-based academics to lead projects, access adequate resources and participate meaningfully.
- Another implication of larger grants/consortia identified by respondents was the **heightened stringency of procedures** (and often overseen by so-called independent consultants such as Price Waterhouse Coopers who do not appreciate inequalities across contexts).
- **Funding restrictions**, for example, 30% caps on budgets for non-UK based academics (e.g. ESRC) and sometimes even greater restrictions on what can be allocated to civil society organisations (e.g. Bhabha-Newton Fund) were seen to further inhibit equitable participation and especially community engagement.
- A related constraint was that **British policy and legal frameworks are not always suitable for Southern contexts.** Respondents noted the expectation to comply with practice driven by UK laws (around e.g. data sharing) that might directly contradict obligations of African institutions. Other UK laws such as



those around immigration and visa regimes also constrained travel and in some cases determined the participation of certain nationalities rather than appropriateness for the research.

- **Conflicts between partners.** Respondents listed conflicting motivations and interests (e.g. furthering an academic career versus contributing to social change), cultures/languages, career-paths/professional contexts and generational differences (with younger generations more interested in collaboration/impact and older generations more schooled in traditional academic approaches). Lack of understanding of these differences (and especially of Southern research contexts) was seen as a key barrier to successful partnerships.
- **Reliance on relationships rather than institutional buy-in.** Some respondents also critiqued the over-reliance on “relationships between a handful of people, whose commitment and participation may not be guaranteed in the long run” and exploitation of individual good-will.
- Respondents mentioned **lack of capacity** as an obstacle both to accessing funds and equitably participating in research. At the same time, they critiqued the assumption that “it is always the African partners who are in need of training” when funders might also build their own capacity to develop more inclusive application processes and UK-based researchers
- might develop their capacity to understand Southern contexts. A key issue was that capacity developers are located in the UK when ‘shifting the centre of gravity’ to African funders might provide opportunities for more responsive capacity development.

Respondents had the following recommendations:

- **Context is crucial.** Research collaborations should foreground locally defined needs, priorities and practices at all stages from agenda-setting and design to implementation, communication and use. Respondents stressed that global challenge research is not just an intellectual exercise or an opportunity to “feather nests” but should be grounded in a fundamental commitment to social development. Working with local communities and organisations in a sustainable manner is then crucial. This might involve site-based needs assessments to identify research priorities; ensuring adequate understandings of cultural contexts and engaging local collaborators to promote, adapt
- (translate) and make better use of findings. Several respondents noted that CBR (i.e. working with long-term existing partnerships between local universities and their communities) can be an effective and sustainable way of achieving this. Others suggested that more open funding calls (rather than restricted themes) could capture new and under-researched topics.
- **Knowledge hierarchies should be addressed and the capacity of local research funders strengthened.** Respondents noted that a commitment to sustainability and responsiveness also implies a commitment to promoting and nurturing community-based and academic knowledge from the global South. This also has the potential to expand British disciplinary knowledge by integrating alternative perspectives, priorities, understandings and practices. But respondents stressed that if this is to be realised, more GCRF grants should be managed directly by academics in the global South and more effort should be made to promote South-South knowledge/capacity building networks. This might also involve funding more conferences and seminar series led by Southern



academics to strengthen intellectual capacity and develop new research agendas. Respondents also stressed the need “to shift the centre of gravity of research funding” to the global South and move away from “helicopter science.” This has implications for capacity building with Southern-based research funders better placed to identify and understand regional capacity needs and responses.

- **Better global representation.** Linked to these previous suggestions, respondents also called for better global representation, including some analysis of which countries and regions were represented through funding calls (and to what extent stakeholders based in these areas were participating). Some suggested that UKRI might support the development of more inter-country and cross-country networks. This would also serve to support agenda setting, stakeholder mapping and capacity building.
- **Flexibility, adaptability and space for emergent innovation.** Respondents stressed that global challenge research tends to unfold in complex contexts (often involving humanitarian crises). Where funding doesn’t support time to negotiate these contexts properly or flexibility to respond to unpredictable events, it is unlikely that research will extend far beyond the more risk-adverse/accessible ‘usual suspect’ contexts that limit global representation (see above). Moreover, collaborative research often generates unexpected outcomes that can remain untapped if funding does not support iterative or adaptive practice. A possible response to this could be staggered or multiple-stage budget development. Respondents did, however, acknowledge that greater flexibility might require funders to perform more stringent checks on capacity/potential of the partners in the very beginning.
- **Time to nurture personal connections.** Trust, understanding and shared interests/agendas/values were seen as key ingredients of fair and equitable partnerships.

Respondents proposed that greater investment should be made in the invaluable practice of relationship-building through networking opportunities (especially within countries and regions and building on local capacity) and making an inception/co-creation phase a mandatory part of new projects. Respondents also noted that good communication is a key

- aspect of good relationships, though “an ongoing challenge is how to engage all partners fully without feeling like they are being ‘spammed’ with emails on every small decision.” In response, several respondents highlighted the importance of verbal conversations and face-to-face exchange. Another suggestion was: “having the UK investigators visit the partner institutions in the LMICs and engage with the researchers there actively: if you haven’t been there and ‘seen it for yourself’, it is difficult to appreciate the challenges. There may also be hesitation on the part of LMIC partners to explain some of the very basic/practical challenges faced due to concern for these issues perhaps making the UK partners less willing to collaborate (e.g. if you face basic service delivery challenges, internet challenges, security challenges, how much of this do you highlight if you think the funder/collaborator may be less likely to work with you?).”
- Linked to the issue of good communication was the importance of **clarity and transparency** including clear allocation of roles/responsibilities and good leadership. Respondents emphasised in particular the importance of transparent budgets, as this was a key area many had been excluded from.
- **Equitable ownership of data.** Another widely cited issue was around ownership of the research through authorship of publications (with the lead author

commonly the UK-based PI), intellectual property (commonly held by the UK-based institution) and the submission of data in UK-based repositories such as the UK Data Service. Respondents wondered if instead, participating countries could take ownership of their country findings and publications, with the UK-based organisation taking ownership of the inter-country overview.

In response to the suggestions listed above, respondents proposed that fair and equitable participation could be supported by funders in the following ways:

- i. Better promotion of funding opportunities (drawing on regional networks informed by more systematic stakeholder mapping).
- ii. More seed-corn and follow-on funding (supporting networking, allowing partnerships to be trialled and new partners brought in).
- iii. More contextually appropriate funding mechanisms (e.g. budgets that factor in inflation/contingencies which may be more volatile in developing countries and consider indirect costs where institutions have less public funding).
- iv. Simplification of application and reporting systems (and/or providing training for overseas partners to navigate systems like Je-S and ResearchFish) and compensating time spent on reporting and processes such as collaboration agreements and due diligence.
- v. Making collaboration at the application stage mandatory (e.g. “part of the application form to be filled by the non-UK partners and submitted together with the application to ensure that the non-UK partners are aware of the project and the commitment expected”).
- vi. Clearer evaluation mechanisms (“we’ve experienced frustration with trying to provide M&E plans to a level the councils want, yet can get confused as to what it is they actually want”) with better consensus from partners (“we need to have a process of collective signing off of the success criteria ... the objectives cannot be said to have been achieved unless all parties agree.”).

