



SOAS
University of London

Policy Brief

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Promoting the SOAS GCRF Strategy: A qualitative assessment of research development processes and partnerships building in collaborative international research

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1. The SOAS internal review process: Context and aims

This policy briefing aims to present key findings from a recently completed review of internal research development processes and approaches to partnerships building at SOAS. Like other universities, SOAS successfully received GCRF QR funding in order to implement its GCRF Strategy, identifying specific outcomes for the period 2018-2020. The current research project was conducted in order to facilitate the implementation of these objectives. It aimed to investigate more systematically barriers related to finance, contracts and compliance in international collaborative research faced in-house and in partner countries, understand current approaches to partnerships building and identify possible improvements and good practices. The research was led by Dr Romina Istratii in her role as GCRF Project Officer and was overseen by the then Director of Research and Enterprise Dr Alex Lewis.

The study was conducted between the months of May and July 2020. It involved semi-structured consultations with SOAS staff in the pre- and post-award teams, Contracts, Finance and HR, Project Managers, Principal Investigators and some of their research partners overseas as feasible. The one-hour interviews were organised around the themes identified above, including an open-ended question about any other relevant issues that participants wished to raise. The research resulted in two reports presenting the results from 16 interviews with professional services staff and 11 interviews with academics/Pis and other project staff, including one partner based in a low- and middle-income country (LMIC). Due to COVID-19 it proved especially challenging to schedule interviews with partners overseas, although important insights from researchers based in LMICs were collected through the [Research for Development lunchtime series co-coordinated by SOAS and Oxford](#) throughout the year 2019-2020. The internal review underwent an ethics review under the direction of the SOAS Ethics and Governance Officer. At the point of obtaining consent, participants were informed that the consultation would serve internal purposes but were also told that an anonymised policy brief would be compiled for the benefits of other HEIs and funders.

It is not possible to do justice to the nuanced issues that emerged in the different consultations. Moreover, many of the issues that emerged were specific to the internal policies and processes of the institution and could not be discussed here. The policy briefing thus selectively focuses on those practical issues that concern most higher education institutions (HEIs) involved in grant management and international partnerships building with the aim to help academics, research development professionals and funding institutions re-assess some of their language, standards and processes in the context of working internationally. Given the current governance and funding landscape, with GCRF nearly completing its first five-year cycle and other changes in the ODA funding landscape, it is especially urgent to review and evaluate what works and what does not in research development and to identify better alternatives together. This policy brief is a step in this direction.

2. Key insights related to research development processes in LMICs

A key message that emerged from the interviews regarded the different types of research environments in LMIC contexts. Conversations with Pis suggested that the in-country research environment should be carefully considered at the stage of proposal development because it can determine the types of collaborations that local researchers or practitioners are most frequently exposed to and will anticipate from prospective western partners. For example, a few Pis explained

that in countries that could be described as donor-driven or may lack a strong academic culture as known in the UK, research institutions (especially NGOs and consultancies) tend to depend on international funding to maintain financial viability. Since they must compete for funds and have limited resources to dedicate to any single project, their staff must share their time across projects. UK-based institutions working with such partners cannot be demanding of their exclusive time or need to find ways to employ them under full-time or fixed contracts.

Equally important was the insight that institutional processes in partner organisations can be as bureaucratic and time-consuming as they often are at UK HEIs (e.g. approval processes can be centralised or highly hierarchical). In some countries, new research collaborations have to be approved by a designated state agency, which can cause delays that should be considered in the timeline of the projects. In addition, key organisational staff can change frequently or suddenly, which can create new challenges to an existing project (e.g. delays in responses, changes in the strategic direction of the organisation, termination of agreements and delays whilst new partners are procured).

Akin to this was the recurrent observation that research partner institutions and academics based in LMICs display different needs and levels of capacity in research development and grant management, depending on their previous experience and the resources available to them. This reality raises the need for a robust and pragmatic approach in selecting appropriate partners. A PI stressed, for example, that one should not simply “outsource” project activities to LMIC partners as this is unlikely to have positive effects. Before delving into new research partnerships, one should understand the “political economy” of partnerships building locally, which requires researchers to be well-grounded in local research contexts and organisational cultures.

Moreover, PIs emphasised the importance of understanding local hierarchies and the power dynamics within institutions / partner teams and how these might influence partner engagement on the ground. It was mentioned that in many LMIC contexts, research partners often are senior-ranking staff or academics whose main incentive for collaborating may be to promote their name. It was suggested that some LMIC partners may even feel compelled to identify “big names” in projects due to the perception that unless they put the “big names” in they will not successfully receive the funding. The problem with this is that these senior-ranking staff or academics oftentimes appear only in name, while the actual day-to-day work is delegated to low-ranking staff, who may not be acknowledged properly, or not at all. Since lower-ranking staff know that the work will not be attributed to them and that they will have no substantive career gains, they have few or no incentives to expend too much energy in these projects.

Important issues were also mentioned around international payments and sub-contracting. Numerous PIs discussed the fact that partners often need advance payments to start project activities effectively, but highly bureaucratic payment regimes in the UK make this practically difficult. In some cases, funders only pay UK HEIs in arrears, making paying large cash advances to partners difficult. An academic spoke of the fact that in some countries, participants expect a daily allowance when attending a workshop, but the funder might not allow this, in which case an alternative solution needs to be negotiated. Another academic faced challenges in running workshops from London because they were unable to transfer funds to the partner institution to

organise the workshops since the latter had not been identified as a formal research partner at the stage of developing the funding proposal.

In terms of employment contracts, professional services staff explained that direct employment contracts create more liability for the institution (pensions, allowance, etc.) and require a higher level of bureaucracy to be established, which can incentivise offices to discourage PIs from employing local research personnel directly (but rather via research partner institutions). Consultant payments were described as particularly cumbersome in terms of paperwork, especially around issues of taxation. It was also stressed that sub-contracting poses challenges for shared intellectual property (IP), with subcontracted service outputs remaining the sole property of the client. This can be problematic in projects that commit to principles of co-production and shared ownership of outputs. In the case that any discrepancies are discovered at post-award stage, there may be limited flexibility to make changes, which raises the need to warn PIs proactively around these matters at the early stage of project development. Overall, staff in the Research Office stressed that employment norms generally differ by context and culture, which requires a level of flexibility and adaptation on behalf of UK HEIs.

Due diligence was a main topic of discussion in relation to partners' capabilities and responsiveness in international projects. Research Office staff explained that research partners may not respond in a timely fashion or may not submit the requisite documentation. The language used to communicate due diligence requirements could make things harder for the overseas partners, with the wording of policies and expectations being inappropriate in some different legal frameworks and country contexts. In other cases, partners may be considerably looser with their due diligence records than is stipulated in funding guidelines and they may not necessarily keep full records or maintain the appropriate documentation unless they are asked to do so and are regularly monitored about it, which can hinder or hurt trust-building. As a remedy to this predicament, professional services staff strongly felt that due diligence should be a two-way process, as opposed to a top-down regulatory approach, with the UK institution leading by example. In other cases, partners might submit registration documentation in the country language(s), which makes it challenging for research development staff in the UK to register such documents. This raised questions around integrating translation services in the research development process and who could assume these costs.

In other cases, partners may be new institutions or new at conducting collaborative international research and may not yet have in place the policies that UK funders expect partners, collaborators or third parties to abide by, such as anti-slavery laws or data management policies. There is, thus, a degree of uncertainty about whether the partner institutions will be able to follow the regulations stipulated to UK HEIs. Professional service staff also referred to the fact that contracts must account for the likelihood of corruption, which can be received negatively by LMIC partners. The Director of an institute in Nigeria touched precisely on this matter when he discussed the suspicion with which western funders often respond when there are financial inconsistencies, even if justified (e.g. when the amount reported by the recipient is slightly different due to fluctuations in exchange rates). In another example cited by a PI, the partner institution was accused for mismanagement and corruption, but these accusations turned out to be politically motivated and inaccurate, suggesting that local politics need to be factored in the due diligence process (e.g. by extending due diligence checks over longer periods of time and diversifying the sources and criteria of assessment).

3. Key insights related to PIs

The interviews suggested that PIs may have an incentive to work with the same partners who have proven reliable and responsive, which could be assessed in conjunction with the dominance of a few elite institutions in international collaborative research, as was noted in [previous discussions at SOAS](#). A few academics spoke about the fact that many of the research partners they work with are from the elite, usually “westernised class”. As it was mentioned earlier, “big names” may be favoured in the country partner as a result of organisational power dynamics and other incentives. On the other hand, one PI noted their choice to collaborate with long-term partners because of their proven ability to respond quickly and to be reliable, and not necessarily due to them preferring the local elite. Other academics stressed the need to bring more lower-ranking and less established professionals and academics into projects. One PI mentioned working with public universities that they considered to be under-funded. Other PIs tried to reach non-elite organisations by expanding their networks through their main partner organisations (e.g. by organising knowledge exchange activities).

Overall, the academics consulted stressed the importance of building relationships of trust with research partners in LMICs and discussing explicitly the expectations and deliverables of the project to agree these at the early stages of the project. Problematically, the tight deadlines of most funding schemes seemed to hinder academics from outlining and negotiating all these details with their partners early on. Many of the academics interviewed reported not having agreed with their partners the allocation of costs and delivery dates in a great detail at the stage of project development. This pattern was often associated with delays at a later stage and was linked to questions of how to hold partners accountable if, for any reason, they did not deliver their part of the agreement. In addition to delivery dates, a few other academics stressed the need to explicitly discuss the methodology of the project to ensure that research partners understand / condone the rationale behind it. Others mentioned the need to agree beforehand authorial rights for project-related publications. These testimonials overall suggest that including an inception phase in all collaborative projects (not only large funding proposals, such as network grants) proportionate to the scale and length of the project to clarify positions of publication, open access, data management, ethics, safeguarding, and projective objectives, could be extremely valuable.

Speaking the languages of research communities was also highlighted as important, although not doing so was not always or necessarily described as a barrier given that most of the PIs who were consulted worked in Anglophone parts of Africa or Asia (e.g. Philippines, Nigeria, Ghana), with fewer working in Francophone Africa (e.g. Mali, Cote d’Ivoire). In countries where English was spoken as a national language and countries with strong international research/NGO sectors, linguistic barriers were generally not considered significant. Language barriers were, however, an issue in countries that did not favour English in day-to-day communication and relied extensively on local languages (e.g. Ethiopia). While linguistic barriers could be navigated, building cultural competence was stressed as essential in the process of building trust-based relationships with partners. Most PIs emphasised the importance of adapting to the research context, understanding how the communities involved might respond to the UK-based PI and the research team with reflexivity of their positionalities, relationship to histories of colonialism and other political, cultural or personal parameters. Dedicating time to building good relationships with project partners outside of work activities was considered beneficial and necessary.

4. Key insights related to funders

While UKRI allows for leading institutions to be based in LMICs for some schemes, in practice funding guidelines make it very difficult for LMIC institutions to apply. This was discussed extensively by an academic in direct contact with UKRI and with a deep familiarity with the GCRF eligibility criteria. As they explained, the eligibility criteria to become a leading institution are challenging to understand and UKRI does not offer enough support to help institutions to determine if they are eligible. They argued that if the applicants had clarity on these eligibility criteria, they might know how to fine-tune their proposals in order to ensure that they are not disqualified, or they might decide not to work on a proposal at all, saving precious time. Overall, it was felt that it is not fair to expect institutions in LMICs to understand the eligibility criteria of western funders since these are framed in a highly specialised Anglophone terminology and bureaucracy.

As it was said, the tight deadlines of most funding schemes may not leave academics sufficient time to outline and negotiate all the project details with their partners at the application stage. One academic reported that in their experience the conception of a GCRF project does not generally arise from “real” research relationships. In fact, they argued that funder incentives can encourage an instrumentalist or dishonest approach to partnerships in funding proposals. Another academic problematised the fact that research personnel are often hired as part of grants after the project is developed. In such cases, research staff are invited to apply and are interviewed following rigorous HR processes, but they are rarely told anything about the budget allocated to them or are invited to feed into decision-making that relates to the work they are hired to do.

The Nigerian Director mentioned earlier reported working with numerous western donors and HEIs and confirmed that issues of inequity propagated via funding structures and norms in partnerships building. The strategy of the institute they lead has been to refuse funds in which Nigerian institutions are not considered equal partners. They insisted that the grant Terms & Conditions must state clearly that foreign and Nigerian researchers will be jointly undertaking the project. In parallel, they caution Nigerian academics who are brought into projects independently to ensure that they are considered equal partners in the agreements they sign.

Lastly, an important point was made in relation to schemes that expect the PI to have intellectual exclusivity of the research idea, with a few PIs referring specifically the ERC mono-beneficiary grants. One academic argued that such expectations can discourage PIs from entering into partnerships because they might think that this will make their application less competitive. Another academic reported that while co-Is can have intellectual autonomy within ERC grants, local assistants do not due to lacking the qualifications to be included in the proposals as co-Is. The first academic reported having avoided formal partnerships at the time of developing their ERC proposal because somebody had advised them that including formal partners could become logistically messy. They subsequently decided to rely on informal partnerships, eschewing direct transfers of funds. However, developing these informal partnerships still required considerable time and energy. As the PI explained, academics may often decide about these important matters on the basis of hearsay and informal conversations with other colleagues, stressing the need for a more informed process moderated by knowledgeable staff in the Research Office.

A final set of insights emerged in relation to the pressure felt by UK HEIs vis-à-vis the due diligence and compliance expectations set by funders. Professional services staff problematised the fact that

fundes seem to be increasingly delegating the responsibility of due diligence processes to universities. It was explained that in GCRF projects, the lead institution needs to ensure that the overseas partners follow all the compliance rules and regulations set by the funder. This creates heavy responsibilities and possible risks for the UK HEIs that are not always outweighed by the possible gains. Some members of staff felt that SOAS is taking unnecessary risks for grants that it does not receive funds for its direct use. For example, the university could be a co-I where a lead LMIC institution receives the full funds, but it would still need to receive the award and to conduct the due diligence on the partner institution. In such cases, unless the UK HEI submits a letter to the funder that due diligence has been completed the funder will not transfer the funds to the partner institution. Such triangular relationships seemed to cause anxiety, with some members of staff thinking that fundes should at least provide designated funds to cover the cost of time and resources expended in-house for this monitoring.

5. 'Equitable partnerships': Limitations and practical alternatives

One of the aims of this study was to understand how SOAS academics and project partners define and think about equitable partnerships, if they believe that equitable collaborations are practically feasible and what strategies they might be using to promote such partnerships in their own projects. In general, opinions varied and while a few related to the concept in some way, the majority thought that it was unrealistic and even susceptible to being used euphemistically.

An academic defined an equitable approach as designing, implementing and disseminating the research project collaboratively with partners. This should mean that all parties are involved equally, communicate with each other frequently and share their views and experiences openly, with no single party dominating the discussions or decision-making. Another academic felt that speaking in terms of egalitarian partnerships would not be realistic since it is mostly an aspiration. They felt that a western PI can more easily walk away from a partnership and that the local partners will know this, which implies an inevitable power asymmetry. This was countered by another PI who argued that western PIs often rely substantially on their local partners, which can create a sort of "reverse dependency". Other academics thought that the partnership is never equitable since the money / budget is in the hands of the western PI and if the partners do not receive funds timely, they cannot proceed with project activities and contribute in the ways they could.

Coming from a slightly different angle, one PI criticised the way in which the language of "equitable research" or "equitable partnerships" is often used to hinder honest collaborations. In their experience, the discourse is often caught up between two extreme positions. While the concept can help to counter some Northern researchers' harmful attitude that they know best, others might deploy it in an extreme fashion to suggest that, invariably, knowledge always sits with the Global South. This academic thought that this rhetoric can, in fact, prevent people from sharing their real stories about partnerships and to admitting real capacity differences between Northern and Southern organisations where these exist. In their experience, structural or capacity limitations need to be acknowledged openly for international collaborations to succeed.

Numerous PIs thought that there are ways to circumvent inherent asymmetries and shared some of the approaches they have taken within their projects to achieve this. Some insisted that trust can be built by treating all research partners equally at the human and personal level. At the more practical

level, academics can work to understand the strengths of the local partners and to leverage better the partners' resourcefulness. To encourage this, partners could be granted more independence in implementing project activities. Moreover, PIs can encourage research staff in their projects to improve their research skills through different training activities and to further their prospects of career advancement.

One academic preferred to speak in terms of "creative or dialectical partnerships". They preferred this language because it allowed them to be honest about the fact that the project was something that they developed on the basis of their own research and experience – an expression of personal creativity, but simultaneously a creative process to bring partners, collaborators and participants in to achieve reciprocity and mutual learning. Drawing from their experience with a collaborative project in numerous African countries, they proposed that western PIs could aim at "humanising" research relationships by showing humility in recognition of their own limitations and by being transparent of their motivations in their projects. Echoing this PI, one of their Nigerian research partners spoke of the need for relationality, reflexivity and multiplicity of perspectives in both the project development and implementation stages.

6. Impact: Definitions and approaches

In parallel to exploring how they understood equitable partnerships academics were also asked how they thought about impact in their projects. Overall, it was agreed that impact can be understood differently across different geographies, communities and research teams. One PI mentioned that it is unlikely that everyone in any project will have the same objectives since project staff come into the project with different roles and with different incentives. They stressed the importance of recognising this diversity as a PI and having open and honest conversations early on to identify which aspects of the project can be most impactful to partners and how this can be achieved best.

Another academic stressed the fact that impact is often not quantifiable and should not be identified merely with project-related outputs. Achieving impact could be understood as engagement, knowledge exchange, creating job positions for less established researches or training the team members in new skills. In other words, impact is not only about what the team achieves to do in terms of the project objectives, but about the *modus operandi* and the advancement of the team itself. One PI insisted that impact will not be achieved if the research collaboration is not locally grounded and is not based on genuine collaborations. They also drew attention to the factor of longevity and permanency, explaining that one should not merely speak of impact, but lasting impact.

The PIs interviewed mentioned different strategies that they have followed to achieve this kind of multifarious impact in their projects. One project has been focusing on building networks with partner institutions locally as a way of ensuring that the project does not benefit only one institution or the same elite partners. Another PI mentioned their team's effort to translate research materials or policy briefs, recognising the need to translate not only across languages, but also across audiences and terminologies (e.g. beyond the academic community to different publics). A third academic said that their team has worked to document how the project team's efforts and activities have been received locally and its other effects (e.g. if research is "picked up" by local agencies and specialists and is considered beneficial by these stakeholders).

7. Trying to be better partners: A roadmap

For this final section, we thought that it would be helpful to highlight some key directions that emerged from the internal review, the lunchtime series mentioned, conversations that were had at SOAS in the past year under the [Decolonising Research Initiative](#) and a good practice workshop delivered on equitable partnerships to ARMA members in 2019.

The suggestions made are organised by stakeholder group: PIs, research offices in UK HEIs and funding bodies. However, the suggestions made for each stakeholder group should not be appraised in isolation but should be understood as interdependent. Our aim has been to stress the importance of cross-sectoral collaborations, precisely because the challenges faced are systemic and require changes and actions from every stakeholder in the UK research development and funding scene.

UK-based PIs

- It is important to discuss explicitly the expectations of the project and the deliverables with the research partners and to agree these at the early stages of the project (consider that research contracts tend to omit important details about the project). Partners need to understand the timeline of the projects well and to expect a quick start after the grant is secured (where applicable).
- Academics can work to understand the strengths of the local partners and to leverage better the partners' resourcefulness. To encourage this, partners could be granted more independence in implementing project activities. Moreover, PIs can encourage research staff in their projects to improve their research skills through different training activities.
- The best kind of collaborations emerged when the PI or lead institution served as a facilitator and abstained from dictating to partners how to do things.
- PIs should ensure that they are familiar and cognizant of their own institutions' policies and procedures in order to plan the project efficiently and anticipate any possible roadblocks.
- If PIs are not familiar with the region they propose to work in, they should consult other researchers with previous experience and their research offices at the stage of proposal development.

Guiding questions:

- Who determines the narrative and conceptualisation of the proposal?
- Is the team diverse enough (e.g. what is the female / male, early career / senior researcher, urban / rural institution ratio, etc.? Are there female researchers from LMICs?) How do the different team members relate to the local communities of study?
- Are partners in LMICs supporting data collection or are they co-producers? Are they credited properly in the research and outputs? Do team members have equal opportunities for growth?
- Who owns the data collected and the research outputs produced? Do partners in LMICs have the right to publish in local languages and platforms of their choice for impact locally?
- What policies and procedures need to be completed to ensure that the timelines proposed are realistic? Have LMIC partners been properly warned about these?

UK-based research offices

- The bureaucracy around payments was found to be the most cumbersome for partners. Speeding up processes would be mutually beneficial because it would mean that the partners can start the project activities sooner. Partnerships can be more reciprocal and western PIs can learn more from their partners if partner payments and contracts are processed in a timely fashion.
- Professional services may need to challenge policies in their institutions (e.g. HR recruitment, procurement, expense policy, travel policy, open access, data management, data protection and contracts).
- Research administrators and managers have a duty to raise awareness across other professional services departments within their institutions about the lived experiences of partners in LMIC contexts and help them to consider their procedures and policies from the partners' perspectives and realities.
- It is important to understand the modus operandi, conditions and different contexts of collaborating institutions and to adapt to these per context as feasible.

Guiding questions:

- What are the implications of different policies or processes for partners in different countries? What is the political status, time zone or language used in the context of study? What climate issues should be kept in mind? Does the country require a permit to undertake research and / or to receive UK funding?
- What are the key ethical concerns, possible risks or unexpected consequences of the project? How does the UK HEI ensure appropriate safeguarding, recognising that definitions of safeguarding are not universal?
- What will the cash flow look like? What kind of exchange rate issues are likely to emerge? Will the country accept sterling? Is the partner getting sufficient funding to carry out the project? Is the partner getting too much money / what is the appropriate scale of funding?
- What does the project management look like? Is there clear and equitable governance over project (e.g. do international partners have an equal say in the decision-making processes? Is there an international Advisory Board and is this composed of a mix of Global South and Global North advisors?) How will the partners share data, outputs, and reports and who will hold the IP for different outputs? What will success look like and how will impact be measured, understanding that this can mean different things to different people?

Funders

- UKRI has a duty to be more involved in supporting LMICs researchers in the application process.
- Funders should encourage projects to have proportionate inception phases relative to the length and scale of the project to enable outstanding bureaucratic processes to be completed (i.e. recruitment, contracts, project policies) and to facilitate collaborative approaches to deciding matters of data management and IP, ethics, safeguarding and security.

- Funding bodies need to understand better the trade-offs of building mutually beneficial international projects. PIs can invest extra time in developing strong, reciprocal partnerships, but funders need to consider how to incentivise / reward such behaviour.
- Over-monitoring can be profoundly frustrating and disappointing for PIs, especially when there is no mechanism to let the funder know how this due diligence mechanism affects the team and how it might be improved.
- Funding which is connected to UK ODA funding should not require a UK HEI lead, although collaboration with one should be strongly encouraged.
- Research England should consider broadening the metrics and methods by which Research Excellence is measured to incentivise UK researchers and institutions to work more equitably.
- If projects are led by an organisation based in an LMIC context, the funder should ensure that there are other partners from the Global South to support them, promoting South-South capacity building and collaboration.

Guiding questions:

- How could you show more flexibility when formulating funding guidelines to account for different levels of research development capacity and legal / policy differences in partner institutions collaborating with UK HEIs?
- Could you include more substantively researchers and scholars based in LMICs in the formulation of funding calls and the review of project proposals submitted by UK-based PIs?
- How might you encourage UK-based PIs to communicate challenges and lessons from their projects in relation to processes and partnerships without feeling that they may be penalised for their honesty?
- How might you establish better communication conduits with research offices in UK HEIs to obtain regular feedback and to collect lessons and suggestions for improvements?
- What can you do to improve the competitiveness of LMIC applicants and to support them with the application process?
- Are there any in-country partnerships you could establish to support LMIC partners with proposal writing and research development processes?

