

ICAI follow-up of: Global Challenges Research Fund

A summary of ICAI's full follow-up

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Executive summary

ICAI's follow-up review is an important element in the scrutiny process for UK aid. It provides the International Development Committee and the public with an account of how well the government has responded to ICAI's recommendations to improve spending. It is also an opportunity for ICAI to identify issues and challenges facing the UK aid programme now and in the future, which in turn helps to inform subsequent reviews.

This document is a summary which focused only on the results of our follow up of Global Challenges Research Fund. The full Follow Up report of all our 2017-18 reviews, including overall conclusions from the process and details of our methodology, can be found on our website.

Findings

The Global Challenges Research Fund

ICAI published a rapid review of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) in September 2017. With a budget of £1.5 billion from 2016 to 2021, the Fund constituted a significant increase in the UK government's spending on development-oriented research. The review found that although progress had been made in the first 18 months of the GCRF's existence, the rapid development of the Fund meant that many elements of its strategy, governance arrangements and procedures were unclear or weak. The review made four recommendations, summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Summary of recommendations and the government's response

Subject of recommendation	Government response
Formulate a more deliberate strategy to encourage concentration on high-priority development challenges	Partially accepted
Develop clearer priorities and approaches to partnering with research institutions in the Global South	Accepted
Provide a results framework for assessing the overall performance, impact and value for money of the GCRF portfolio	Accepted
Develop a standing coordinating body for investment in development research across the UK government	Accepted

Formulate a more deliberate strategy to encourage concentration on high-priority development challenges

The GCRF's strategy, published by the time the ICAI review came out, had a broad approach to tackle all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), resulting in a scattered portfolio of research projects. To increase the chances of achieving transformative research impact, ICAI recommended the development of "a more deliberate strategy that encourages a concentration of research portfolios around high-priority global development challenges, with a stronger orientation towards development impact". BEIS only partially accepted this recommendation, but there has been considerable activity to ensure stronger strategic coherence and development impact commensurate with a research fund of this size.

There are now six thematically distinct GCRF portfolios on global health, food systems, conflict, resilience, education and sustainable cities. The Fund has also launched 12 interdisciplinary research hubs around specific development challenges and appointed nine challenge leaders. Together, these initiatives encourage a concentration of interdisciplinary research portfolios around particular global challenges. As a result, the final portion of the GCRF's budget (some £200 million) has been allocated with greater targeting and strategic direction.

BEIS has now strengthened its analytical capability and oversight over the GCRF portfolio with the appointment of dedicated staff and the formation of a new Portfolio & Operations Management Board, whose scope specifically includes oversight of programme-level portfolios. However, we are concerned that strategic oversight is still very devolved from BEIS to the delivery partners, with a reliance on UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), which is only one of the GCRF's delivery partners.

We also remain concerned about the GCRF block grants allocated through the devolved funding councils, of which Research England is by far the largest. After ICAI's original review, Research England required the submission of three-year official development assistance (ODA) strategies from all UK higher education institutions wishing to receive GCRF funding. It has approved the strategies from 107 institutions. While this constitutes a clear improvement in the monitoring of ODA compliance since the ICAI review, it is unclear at this point to what extent the allocations are aligned with the GCRF strategy. It is too early to tell whether the measures taken will be enough to ensure that the block funding constitutes good value for money in achieving development outcomes. We will therefore come back to this topic in next year's follow-up review.

Develop clearer priorities and approaches to partnering with research institutions in the Global South

BEIS accepted ICAI's recommendation to determine the GCRF's priorities and develop deliberate approaches towards partnering with research institutions in the Global South. UKRI, the leading GCRF delivery partner, has taken several actions in response to this. It has led a series of global engagement events in developing countries to provide information about the funding opportunities available through the GCRF. It is also drawing in partners from the Global South in the development of the GCRF challenge hubs and creating North-South research networks around each challenge. South-based principal investigators are now allowed to lead bids on some funding calls.

UKRI has set up an international development peer review college with at least 95% of its membership drawn from countries on the list of ODA-eligible countries compiled by the OECD Development Assistance Committee. It is not yet clear how this college will sit alongside existing peer review mechanisms, but we hope to see a positive impact on the quality and equity of new GCRF research calls. The academies are also developing partnerships with key institutions in the Global South, such as the collaboration between the Royal Society and the African Academy of Sciences.

Provide a results framework for assessing the overall performance, impact and value for money of the GCRF portfolio

In our original review, we noted that not enough effort had gone into specifying the GCRF's objectives across different thematic areas or developing results indicators. We recommended that BEIS should develop a results framework for assessing the overall performance, impact and value for money of the GCRF portfolio, drawing on DFID's guidelines on value for money in research and evidence programming. If done well, the process of developing a results framework could help to drive a higher level of strategic coherence across the Fund.

BEIS responded positively to this recommendation. It has now developed a Fund-level theory of change, led by the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) service provider, but using workshops as a co-creation and collaboration mechanism. An evaluation approach has been delivered by the service provider and will shortly be published. BEIS has also awarded a contract to develop a suite of joint key performance indicators (KPIs) for the GCRF and its sister fund, the Newton Fund. However, at this late stage, their usefulness will be limited.

Separately, UKRI has plans to review the effectiveness of its policies and practices to ensure ODA compliance, not just at the award stage, but throughout the lifespan of the grant. It is considering introducing new mechanisms to ensure continued ODA compliance after grants have been awarded. Until recently, compliance assessments had only taken place at the application stage.

While important improvements are taking place, they are coming too late in the GCRF programming and funding cycle. We also remain concerned about whether the knowledge and learning generated by the GCRF's external MEL service provider will be sufficiently taken up by BEIS.

Develop a standing coordinating body for investment in development research across the UK government

ICAI's recommendation to develop a cross-departmental standing coordination body to clarify roles and responsibilities, avoid duplication and overlap, and facilitate exchange of learning was made to encourage the setting up of the Strategic Coherence for ODA Funded Research (SCOR) Board. The board was established in December 2017, with a senior academic leadership, to coordinate the proliferation of UK spending on development-related research across a range of different government departments. It also functions as the governance body for the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR), which brings together government departments and research funders working in international development. SCOR has approved a new strategy for the UKCDR, and the UKCDR has begun a mapping exercise and analysis of UK development research spending.

SCOR is likely to improve cross-government information exchanges, but it is an advisory body and therefore not actually empowered to coordinate between government departments. It remains unclear what effect the board will have on BEIS's management of the GCRF and its sister fund, the Newton Fund, or on the level of coordination between BEIS and other government departments such as DFID and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).

Conclusion

Since the publication of the ICAI review in September 2017, progress has been made in all four areas covered by our recommendations – often led by the GCRF's delivery partners, and most notably by UKRI. However, we are concerned that BEIS continues to delegate a significant level of the oversight and accountability functions of the Fund, along with the majority of the delivery, to its delivery partners. We would also like to return to the issue of the block funds being allocated to Research England, to assess whether this spending is sufficiently aligned to the GCRF's objectives and priority research themes.

ICAI's recently published amber-red review of the Newton Fund found similar issues about governance, accountability and strategic direction from BEIS. It noted problems with the late development of value for money frameworks and insufficient attention to achieving development impact at a scale and ambition proportionate to the level of ODA spending. We plan to return to these topics in next year's follow-up exercise, to assess improvements for the GCRF and the Newton Fund in tandem.

Summary of findings

Subject of recommendation	Recent developments	ICAI's assessment of progress
<p>Formulate a more deliberate strategy to encourage concentration on high-priority development challenges.</p> <p>Government response: Partially accepted</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of six thematically distinct GCRF portfolios on global health, food systems, conflict, resilience, education and sustainable cities. • 12 interdisciplinary research hubs established under the aegis of UKRI. • Nine senior academics appointed as challenge leaders. • A new BEIS Portfolio & Operations Management Board, including oversight of programme-level portfolios. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thematic portfolios, research hubs and challenge leaders are a strong response to this recommendation. Together they strengthen the chances that the last unallocated portion of the GCRF's budget will be spent in a more targeted, strategic manner. • Strategic oversight of the GCRF remains very devolved from BEIS to the delivery partners, especially UKRI, which poses an accountability risk. • The devolved funding councils have improved their monitoring of ODA compliance, but it is too early to tell if the recently introduced measures will lead to a stronger strategic alignment between the block grants and the GCRF's priority research themes.
<p>Develop clearer priorities and approaches to partnering with research institutions in the Global South.</p> <p>Government response: Accepted</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UKRI has led a series of global engagement events to inform potential research collaborators in partner countries about funding and collaboration opportunities. • Partners from the Global South are included in each research hub. • South-based principal investigators can now lead some GCRF projects. • UKRI has set up an international development peer review college, which will contribute to assessing proposals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is progress towards more equitable partnerships with researchers and institutions in the Global South. • The international development peer review college, with 95% of its membership drawn from developing countries, is likely to improve the development relevance, equity and strategic coherence of portfolios.
<p>Provide a results framework for assessing the overall performance, impact and value for money of the GCRF portfolio.</p> <p>Government response: Accepted</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BEIS has developed a Fund-level theory of change. • A Fund-level evaluation approach is under development, building on this theory of change. The delivery partners also have their own individual evaluation processes. • UKRI is improving reporting procedures to better monitor ODA compliance and capture development impact and value for money of research investments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These are important improvements, but they come too late in the GCRF's programming cycle. • UKRI has plans to review the effectiveness of its policies and practices to ensure ODA compliance, not just at the award stage but during the lifespan of the grant.
<p>Develop a standing coordinating body for investment in development research across the UK government.</p> <p>Government response: Accepted</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Strategic Coherence for ODA-Funded Research (SCOR) Board was established in December 2017 to provide strategic coordination for the UK's ODA-funded research across government departments. • The SCOR Board is the governance body for the UK Collaborative for Development Research, a government entity that brings together government departments and research funders working in international development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The SCOR Board is likely to improve cross-government information exchanges, but it is too early to assess what impact it will have. • It is too early to assess the impact SCOR will have on BEIS's management of the GCRF and its sister fund, the Newton Fund.



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