

Rapid Review of the Global Challenges Research Fund

A rapid review
Approach Paper

May 2017

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1. Purpose, scope and rationale

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) was announced in the November 2015 Aid Strategy. Its stated aim was “to ensure that UK science takes the lead in addressing the problems faced by developing countries, whilst developing our ability to deliver cutting-edge research.”¹

The purpose of this rapid review is to assess whether the GCRF has the governance arrangements, systems and procedures in place to allocate funds effectively in support of its high-level vision and objectives. The review will evaluate the emerging processes for setting its strategy and research priorities, the coordination and management of the Fund, the allocation of funding and the assessment of results. It will look at the composition of the emerging portfolio and at the role of the GCRF alongside other government instruments and programmes for funding Official Development Assistance (ODA) research.

This review will build on earlier work carried out by ICAI on cross-government aid funds in the Annual Report 2016,² the information note for the International Development Committee (IDC) on the ODA allocation process in 2015³ and the rapid review of the Prosperity Fund.⁴

ICAI rapid reviews are short, real-time reviews of emerging issues or areas of UK aid spending that are of particular interest to the UK Parliament and public. In examining evidence to date at an early stage, the review will note issues of concern and make recommendations intended to enhance the potential for the GCRF’s impact. ICAI rapid reviews are not intended to reach final conclusions on performance or impact and are therefore not scored.

2. Background

The GCRF has a planned allocation of £1.5 billion over the five years of this spending review period to 2021. Spending is allocated among research councils, academies, the UK Space Agency and the higher education funding councils for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Within this envelope there is an unallocated pot of £691 million. It forms part of a wider portfolio of ODA spending on research and innovation by the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). It aims “to ensure UK research takes a leading role in addressing the problems faced by developing countries. This fund will harness the expertise of the UK’s research base to pioneer new ways of tackling global challenges such as strengthening resilience and response to crises, promoting global prosperity and tackling extreme poverty and helping the world’s most vulnerable.”⁵

The overarching framework for the GCRF covers the three areas of:

- equitable access to sustainable development
- sustainable economies and societies
- human rights, good governance and social justice.

A full list of the objectives under those three areas is provided in Box 1. These have evolved from an original design of five core pillars with a number of supplementary areas.⁶

All GCRF funding must be awarded in accordance with the OECD ODA guidelines.⁷ This means GCRF-funded research and innovation must promote the economic development and welfare of one or more developing countries as its primary objective.⁸ The GCRF’s authority to spend is the Science & Technology (1965) and Higher Education (2004) Acts.⁹ ODA guidance has been issued by all delivery partners to applicants.

1. *UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest*, HM Treasury and DFID, 2015, [link](#).

2. *Annual Report 2015-16*, ICAI, July 2016, [link](#).

3. *The 2015 ODA allocation process: an information note for the IDC*, ICAI, December 2015, [link](#).

4. *The cross-government Prosperity Fund, A rapid review*, ICAI, February 2017, [link](#).

5. *The allocation of science and research funding 2016-17 to 2019-20*, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, March 2016, [link](#).

6. The five core pillars were: (1) secure and resilient food systems supported by sustainable agriculture, (2) sustainable health and wellbeing, (3) inclusive and equitable quality education, (4) clean air, water and sanitation, (5) renewable energy and materials.

7. *Official Development Assistance – definition and coverage*, OECD-DAC, [link](#).

8. *Official Development Assistance – RCUK Newton Fund Guidance*, Research Councils UK, p. 2, [link](#).

9. *Science and Technology Act 1965*, [link](#), *Higher Education Act 2004*, [link](#).

The GCRF is governed by the BEIS Research & Innovation ODA Board, chaired by Jo Johnson (Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation), with representation from DFID, the Government Chief Scientific Advisor, the Vice-Marshal of the Diplomatic Corps and the Treasury. This Board is supported by an Officials Group which provides advice and ensures its decisions are implemented. The Officials Group includes representatives from the Treasury, DFID and BEIS, as well as the main delivery partners. The GCRF delivery partners are: Research Councils UK,¹⁰ the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Department for Education (Northern Ireland), the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Royal Society, the British Academy, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the UK Space Agency (see Annex 1 for an organogram of the GCRF).

So far, the Fund has made multiple awards across dozens of research institutions and countries around the world in response to a number of calls for proposals from delivery partners, including several joint calls from research councils. Most awards are led by a UK research partner.

Box 1: GCRF's three-part overarching framework and related objectives

The three areas below provide an overarching framework for the GCRF:¹¹

- 1. Equitable access to sustainable development** - to create new knowledge and drive innovation that helps to ensure everyone across the globe has access to:
 - secure and resilient food systems supported by sustainable marine resources and agriculture
 - sustainable health and wellbeing
 - inclusive and equitable quality education
 - clean air, water and sanitation
 - affordable, reliable and sustainable energy.
- 2. Sustainable economies and societies** - each of the five challenge areas listed above must be placed in the context of the need to create prosperous economies and societies. The GCRF will also encourage research and innovation that, in the longer term, builds:
 - sustainable livelihoods supported by strong foundations for inclusive economic growth and innovation
 - resilience and action on short-term environmental shocks and long-term environmental change
 - sustainable cities and communities
 - sustainable production and consumption of materials and other resources.
- 3. Human rights, good governance and social justice** - the GCRF will also support research and innovation that enables it to:
 - understand and respond effectively to forced displacement and multiple refugee crises
 - reduce conflict and promote peace, justice and humanitarian action
 - reduce poverty and inequality, including gender inequalities.

^{10.} There are seven councils: (1) [Arts and Humanities Research Council \(AHRC\)](#), (2) [Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council \(BBSRC\)](#), (3) [Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council \(EPSRC\)](#), (4) [Economic and Social Research Council \(ESRC\)](#), (5) [Medical Research Council \(MRC\)](#), (6) [Natural Environment Research Council \(NERC\)](#), (7) [Science and Technology Facilities Council \(STFC\)](#).

^{11.} Research Councils UK, [link](#).

3. Review questions

This rapid review is built around the evaluation criteria of **relevance, effectiveness and learning**. It will address the following questions.

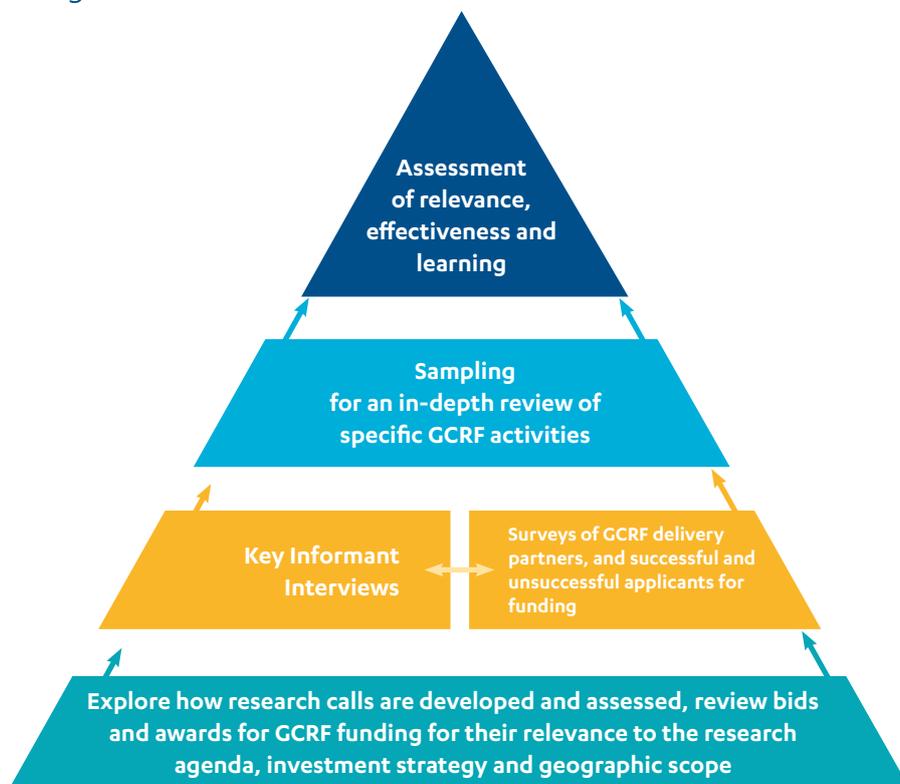
Table 1: Our Review Questions

Review criteria and questions
1. Relevance: Working alongside other aid-funded research, how well does the GCRF ensure that its portfolio is relevant to UK government development priorities and the needs of southern stakeholders?
2. Effectiveness: To what extent do the systems and procedures of the GCRF have the potential to ensure both impactful research and value for money?
3. Learning: Has the design of the GCRF been informed by learning from other similar funds and instruments and any broader lessons from research funding?

4. Methodology

The methodology will include a rapid evaluation of the bids made into the Fund and allocations made to date, surveys of recipients and delivery partners, key informant interviews to explore strategy and governance arrangements, and a more detailed review of a small sample of GCRF activities. We will also seek to gather the views of the primary delivery partners listed on page 2 and institutions that have received awards, including southern stakeholders. Figure 1 provides an overview of our methodology.

Figure 1: Methodological overview



Components of the methodology

Our methodology comprises four key components that build on each other to address the review questions:

Component 1 - Mapping and document review: The first step will be to map the geographic, thematic and institutional scope of GCRF activity. We will undertake an initial review of bids into the GCRF and awards made, as well as the process for making awards across the delivery partners. This will show the emerging shape and characteristics of the Fund's portfolio, allowing us to assess its **relevance** in relation to UK development objectives and the needs of southern stakeholders. We will explore whether there are mechanisms in place to ensure coordination and coherence across delivery partners and with other ODA-funded research.

We will also undertake an initial assessment of potential **effectiveness** by reviewing key GCRF documents covering governance and management arrangements, strategy and objectives, the funding approach at portfolio and delivery partner levels and any early work on results management and evaluation.

We will assess **learning** by reviewing whether the design of the Fund has been informed by learning from the strengths and weaknesses of other research funds, including other cross-government aid funds and instruments such as the Newton Fund, and any steps being taken to build lesson learning into the GCRF.

The results of the mapping process will inform subsequent decisions on our key lines of enquiry for the second phase of our work.

Component 2 - Key informant interviews: We will conduct interviews with staff from BEIS, DFID, the Strategic Advisory Group and a selection of the primary delivery partners in order to assess their understanding and experience of GCRF governance and management processes. These will cover core areas including the application process, the approval/rejection process, the award/contracting processes, any results management and lesson learning. We will assess whether the funding process encourages communication and cooperation across delivery partners and with southern partners and whether it prioritises coherence with other research.

Component 3 - Surveys: Based on the information derived from the initial mapping and document review, we will review a sample of both the delivery partners and the ultimate recipients of GCRF awards. (These are academic institutions across a range of OECD and non-OECD countries.) This will cover issues under our relevance and effectiveness questions, such as the clarity of award criteria, experiences with the application process, the scoring and peer review process and the extent to which southern partners are included.

Component 4 - Sampling of activities for in-depth review: We will then review a sample of successful and unsuccessful bids to the GCRF, chosen by theme, country or delivery partner, once we have completed the mapping and document review components. This will entail a desk review of each bid in the sample, to assess how the funding criteria (including ODA eligibility) are applied and whether quality assurance processes have been applied effectively. We will triangulate this with key informant interviews with selected award winners and losers to explore their experience of the process and their plans regarding delivery, results management and learning over the lifetime of their award. The sampling criteria will be determined once the earlier stages of the review have been completed.

5. Limitations to the methodology

Preliminary findings: The GCRF is still at an early stage of development. Its strategy has not yet been finalised and some of its core systems and processes are still under design. This provides an opportunity for us to influence their development. However, it also means that our findings will be of a preliminary nature. In particular, our findings on effectiveness will be limited to observing whether the systems and processes are suitable for identifying and supporting potentially impactful research proposals.

6. Risk management

We propose the following risk mitigation strategies for this rapid review.

Risk	Mitigation and management actions
The GCRF and its delivery partners do not share documentation or provide access for interviews in a timely manner.	The Secretariat works closely with the GCRF to agree protocols for sharing information.
Survey recipients do not respond in adequate numbers.	We will request that BEIS and its GCRF delivery partners send a circular to grantees encouraging them to respond. In the event that our sample does not include sufficient southern partners, we will explore options for contacting them directly and conducting telephone interviews.

7. Quality assurance

The review will be carried out under the guidance of ICAI Lead Commissioner Tina Fahm, with support from the ICAI Secretariat. The review will be subject to quality assurance by the Service Provider consortium.

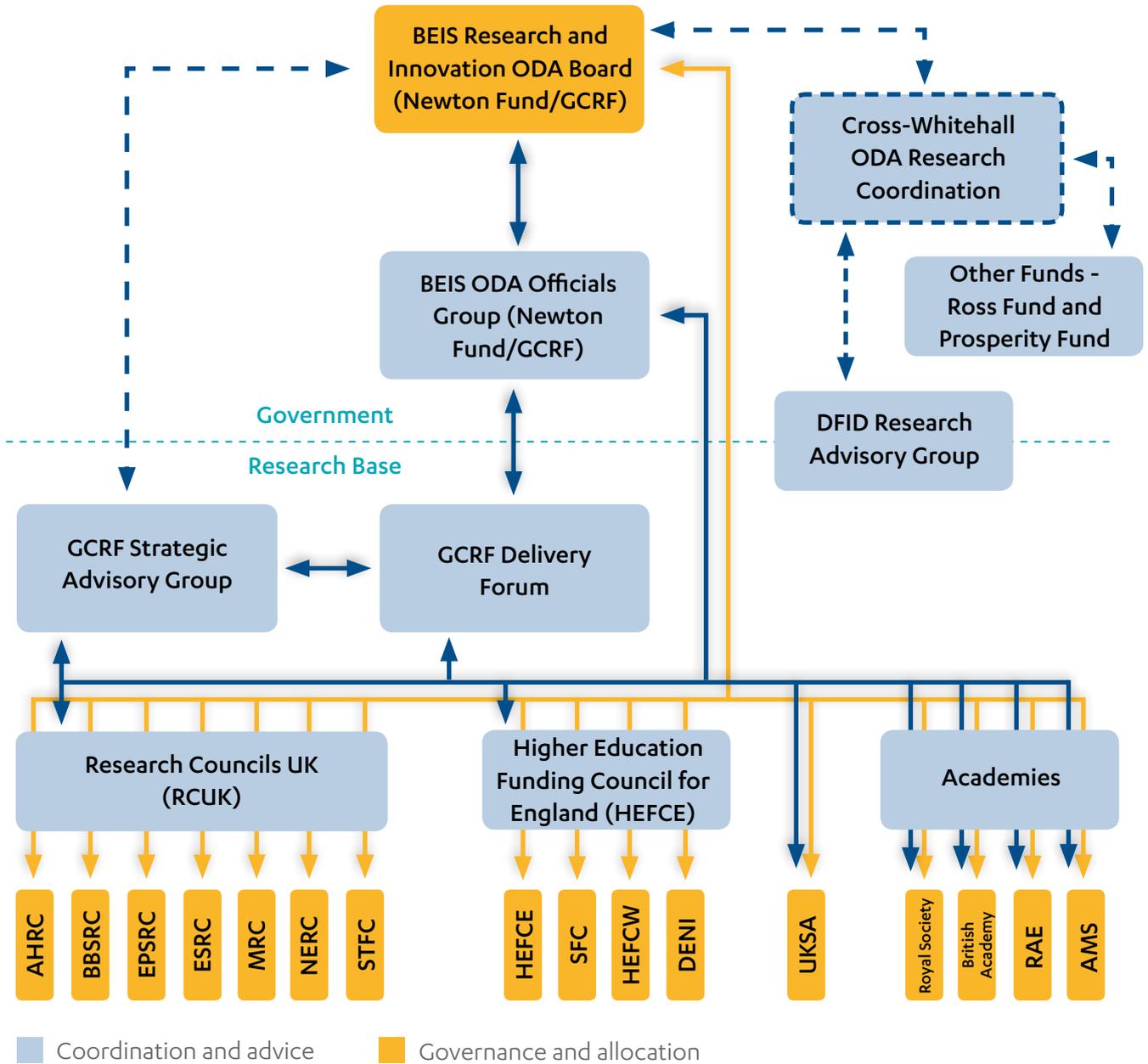
Both the methodology and the final report will be peer reviewed by Cynthia Duncan, Professor Emerita at the University of New Hampshire.

8. Timing and deliverables

The study will be executed over five months from mid-March until mid-August 2017.

Phase	Timing and deliverables
Inception	Approach Paper: May 2017
Data collection	Evidence Pack and Emerging Findings: June 2017
Reporting	Report publication: August / September 2017

Annex 1 GCRF organogram



Abbreviations

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council	SFC	Scottish Funding Council
BBSRC	Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council	HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
EPSRC	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council	DENI	Department of Education (Northern Ireland)
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council	UKSA	UK Space Agency
MRC	Medical Research Council	RAE	Royal Academy of Engineering
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council	AMS	Academy of Medical Sciences
STFC	Science and Technology Facilities Council		



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