

## Inorms comment special

Managers can be peacemakers – p20

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What to do about rankings? – p22

# Concern over aid money used for research

## Billions routed through GCRF and Newton Fund under scrutiny

**THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION** to spend a sizeable chunk of the foreign aid budget on UK-led research projects is being heavily reviewed.

Observers are increasingly concerned that the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Newton Fund are distorting the priorities of both aid and research spending. The funds are classified as Official Development Assistance.

The GCRF has a budget of £1.5 billion and the Newton Fund has £585 million, both between 2016-17 and 2020-21. This represents a sizeable part of the £20bn science budget for 2016-17 to 2019-20. Both funds support partnerships between researchers in the UK and in lower to middle-income countries. Work must be led by UK researchers, and counts both towards the government's legal obligation to spend 0.7 per cent of GDP on ODA and its target to spend 2.4 per cent of GDP on R&D by 2027.

One policy expert said that the large amount of funding classified as ODA and targeted at low-income countries "distorts what we can do in research" because there is less money for partnerships with other countries. They were speaking at meeting on the internationalisation of research hosted by the Research and Enterprise Network for Universities on 23 May, held under the Chatham House rule. "It is becoming increasingly difficult to set up collaborations with Japan, which used to be a top partner, and Russia, which we are trying to improve relations with," the expert said.

On the aid side there are concerns about the benefits for lowest-income countries, especially those with less capacity to carry out excellent research. Newton Fund rules explicitly state that partner countries must have a fairly developed research and higher-education system and be able to provide match-funding.

Gideon Rabinowitz, a policy manager at the charity Oxfam, said: "A big concern around the GCRF is that there isn't enough emphasis on channelling resource through research entities in lower-income countries." Even where this does occur, it is to institutions in emerging economies rather than the very poorest ones, he said.

In evidence to the House of Commons International

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Development Committee, which is carrying out an inquiry into the definition and administration of ODA, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact warned that the government was getting "closer to the limits of what is a permissible use of ODA under UK legislation and international rules".

Alison Evans, ICAI's chief commissioner, said that concern was due to some funds having a "dual purpose" of helping low-income countries and serving the UK's interest. "That is a complicated balancing act," Evans said. "There is very little clarity around how you achieve and measure the secondary purpose of meeting the UK national interest." The government should be "incredibly transparent" about this and "never allow it to trump the primary purpose of ODA", she said.

The international development committee's report will be published in the first week of June. Conservative MP for Mid Derbyshire Pauline Latham, who sits on the committee, said she thought the government could legitimately spend ODA funds on research but only if the Department for International Development improved its oversight of them.

A spokeswoman for UK Research and Innovation said ODA funds "enable interdisciplinary approaches to tackling complex development challenges, while strengthening the capacity of our partners in developing countries". UKRI is also preparing to launch a £110m fund to support collaboration with non-ODA eligible nations over a period of three years, she said.

A spokesman for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said that GCRF and Newton Fund spending "formed strong relationships" with low-income countries.

But Noel Castree, professor of geography at the University of Manchester, said: "To so classify research as aid implies a certain paternalism of UK expertise—one that many British academics would feel most uncomfortable about."

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