



External Rapid Evaluation of

The British Academy Global Challenges Research Fund, Challenge-Led Programmes

By The Social Investment Consultancy (TSIC)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) was supported by the UK's aid budget, aimed at addressing global challenges through innovative research. The fund specifically focuses on supporting the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim to improve life and opportunities in developing countries.

The British Academy, a partner in the GCRF, has supported research through its Challenge-Led Programmes. These programmes were designed to tackle significant and complex issues in developing countries by bringing together

interdisciplinary research teams. In total, 105 research projects were funded between 2018 and 2021. Projects were usually for 24 months and with a maximum of £300,000.

TSIC were invited to conduct a rapid evaluation of the programmes. Our methodology included a desk review of application forms and project reports, surveys of Principal Investigators (PIs) (n=48) and Co-Investigators (Co-Is) (n=75), and interviews with project stakeholders and the Programme Director for Urban Infrastructures for Well-Being.

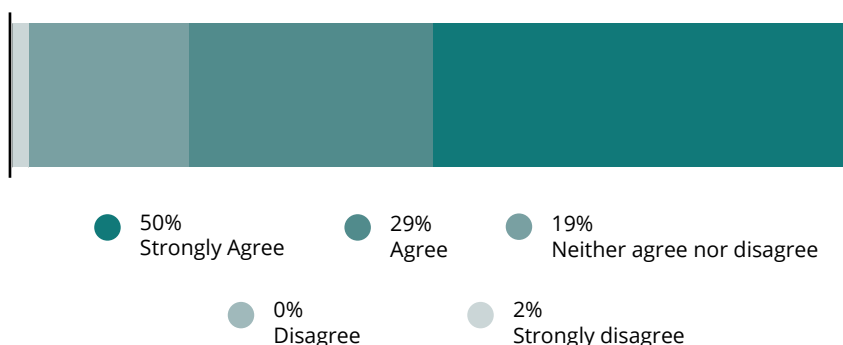
TSIC's evaluation has found that:

Research teams value being able to work across disciplines and recognise this contributes to stronger and sustained impact

The interdisciplinary approaches supported by the programme led to the creation of new frameworks, extensive data sets and comprehensive studies that were perceived to enhance methodological rigour and innovation.

PIs are influenced to take more interdisciplinary approaches as a result of GCRF (n=48)

I plan to take more interdisciplinary approaches in future research as a result of this programme.

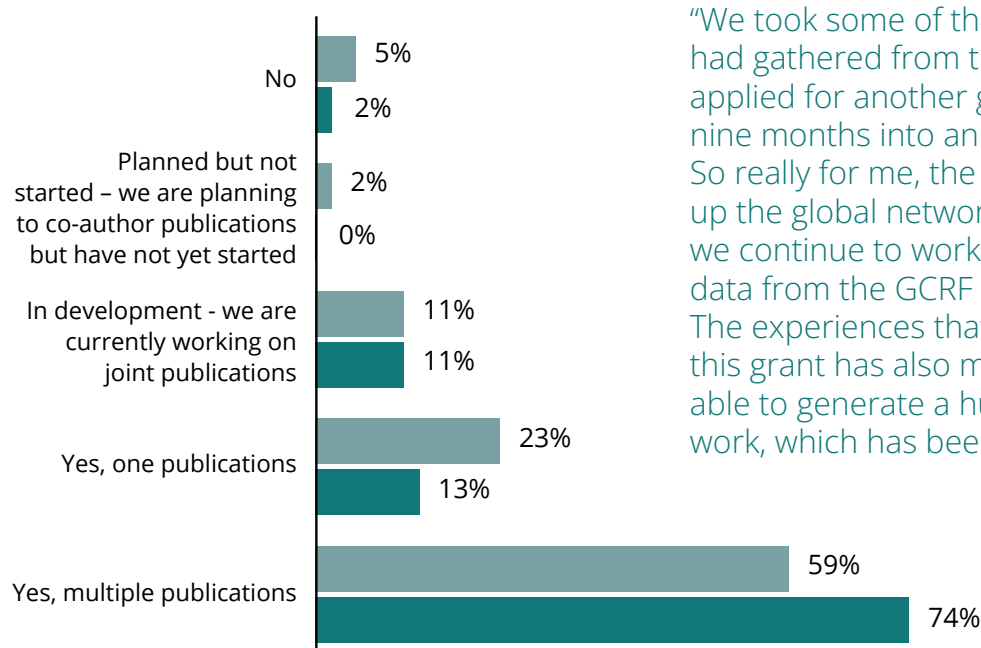


Strong evidence of impact at local community level

Strong partner networks in the Global South contribute significantly to the impact of projects, particularly through their engagement with local communities. This engagement led to notable outcomes at the community level. In addition, there have been some examples of impact for practitioners such as teachers and youth workers. Projects that employ a variety of dissemination methods tend to achieve broader reach and more substantial impact as their research findings engage new audiences. Innovative dissemination techniques helped to ensure that the benefits of the research were widely distributed and deeply felt.

Most PIs and Co - Is report having co-authored publications with researchers in low- and middle-income countries as a result of GCRF (n= 123)

● Col ● PI



“This award has been highly beneficial to my research and professional development, as well as that of my team. It has allowed us to broaden our academic horizons and approach the intricate connections between the city and its infrastructures in a fresh and innovative manner. This perspective, distinct from our previous work on religious urbanisation within the same urban context of Lagos, has enriched our understanding of urban dynamics and the role of infrastructure in shaping the city’s socio-economic landscape.” (PI)

Strengthened research partnerships

There are examples of skills development amongst researchers including data analysis, cross cultural communication, and research capacity for NGOs. Around 90% of PIs and Co-Is rate the quality of partnerships as exceptional or good and approximately 70% of partnerships are expected to continue after the funding period ends.

“We took some of the information that we had gathered from the GCRF grant and applied for another grant. Currently, we’re nine months into an intervention study. So really for me, the GCRF grant opened up the global networks even further. And we continue to work together with the data from the GCRF with our partners. The experiences that I gained through this grant has also meant that I’ve been able to generate a huge amount of other work, which has been fantastic.” (PI)

A flexible funder who placed trust in the grant holders

Applicants experienced a smooth and satisfactory application process. Whilst some Co-Is would value more involvement and direct communication with the Academy, and there were some administrative challenges with getting funds to partner organisations, the British Academy was perceived to be a supportive and flexible funder especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The flexibility of The British Academy was absolutely fundamental. It’s enabled everything that’s come out of the project really. So that’s definitely an enabler” (PI, Heritage, Dignity and Violence).

“The impression I have of the British Academy is that staff there do feel trusted to be able to support the people they’re helping in their research” (PI, Youth Futures).

“I felt the British Academy trusted me as a PI to know what I was doing” (PI, Education and Learning in Crisis).

Recommendations

TSIC’s have made recommendations based on the evaluation findings. These are aimed at research funders supporting Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy. (SHAPE) disciplines to address global challenges.

In summary, we recommend the following:

- Prioritise community-driven, co-developed research to ensure real-world relevance and impact.
- Recognise and value community-level and practitioner outcomes, not just policy influence.
- Acknowledge that impact is not linear and allow flexibility for projects to adapt to delays or emerging opportunities.
- Reframe capacity building as a mutual, two-way process benefiting all partners.
- Maintain flexibility in timelines and budgets to help projects respond to changing contexts.
- Encourage UK HEIs to streamline administrative processes to reduce delays and support equitable partnerships, especially with the Global South.
- Recognise that short timeframes for proposals limit collaboration and co-design. Allow longer lead-in times to build stronger, equitable partnerships.

