Policy analysis for equitable international research collaborations

Funder analysis and recommendations

The British Academy   SCIENTIA SCRIPTA

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Disclaimer

The higher education institutions featured as case studies in the report are not necessarily those that participated in this study.

This summary document presents the key findings and recommendations relevant to funders, drawn from a broader policy analysis on equitable international research collaborations commissioned by the British Academy. The full report, prepared by Scientia Scripta, includes a gap analysis of selected policies and terms and conditions from UK funders and higher education institutions (HEIs), benchmarked against four guidance documents on equitable partnerships. It also incorporates insights from a survey conducted with institutions in the Global South. The wider report offers actionable recommendations for universities, funders, and the broader research sector to support more equitable research partnerships. This summary is intended as a standalone resource for funders, with the full report available for download from the British Academy website.

Key findings

The analysis of policies from five UK research funders (AHRC, British Academy, EPSRC, UKRI, and Wellcome) revealed a complex landscape of enablers and barriers to equity. While there is growing recognition of the importance of equitable partnerships, gaps remain in areas such as direct funding for Global South researchers, alignment of ethical standards with local practices, and administrative burdens for Global South partners. The strongest alignment with the recommendations from the guidance documents was found in relation to research dissemination and impact (i.e. encouraging equitable sharing of IP benefits with international partners and promoting open access to research outputs); the weakest alignment was related to Global South leadership and ownership.

Figure 1. Overview on the level of funder policies' compatibility against the equitability recommendations.

Compatability ranking

1 Research dissemination and impact

2 Building and maintaining partnerships

3 Attitudes towards other cultures, peoples and contexts

4 Research capacity strengthening

5 Research budgets, contracts and due diligence

6 LMIC leadership and ownership

Table 1. Key gaps, barriers and enablers for equitable partnerships identified in funder policies

Gaps

- Lack of context-specific research engagement approaches
- Intellectual Property (IP) frameworks that favour UK institutions
- Impact metrics focused on UK outcomes, neglecting local relevance
- Insufficient integration of Global South partners in impact pathways
- Inadequate support for context-sensitive communication and dissemination
- Underfunding of dissemination and stakeholder engagement activities
- Weak or absent post-award structures to sustain equitable partnerships
- Ethical and linguistic frameworks misaligned with local norms and diversity
- Absence of clear policies for research capacity strengthening
- Limited investment in institutional capacity development in the Global South
- No systematic monitoring or evaluation of capacity-strengthening outcomes
- Lack of safeguards for currency exchange rate fluctuations
- Minimal engagement with Global South-led research agendas and priorities
- Restricted access to direct funding for Global South researchers

Barriers

- Persistent power asymmetries that limit meaningful co-leadership and shared decision-making
- Inadequate consideration of local languages, reducing accessibility and inclusivity
- Limited cultural competency in programme design and evaluation
- Insufficient flexibility to accommodate diverse institutional and contextual capacity needs
- Absence of dedicated budget lines or guidance for capacity strengthening within projects
- Capacity-building often framed as one-directional, undervaluing Global South expertise
- Onerous due diligence processes that disproportionately burden Global South institutions
- Overly rigid application of fraud prevention and export controls, impeding timely disbursement and collaboration
- Complex financial and compliance requirements misaligned with Global South systems

- Leadership criteria that favour UK-based researchers, restricting Global South leadership
- Institutional eligibility rules that limit the autonomy of Global South partners
- Administrative and application processes that are resource-intensive and UK-centric
- Short-term, project-based funding models that inhibit long-term collaboration and sustainability

Enablers

- Promotion of open access to research outputs to enhance global knowledge sharing
- Responsive and tailored guidance to support Global South applicants
- Increasing encouragement of collaborative and co-designed research proposals
- Availability of guidelines that promote equitable collaboration with the Global South
- Growing commitment to Global South partnerships reflected in some funder policies
- Support for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration to enrich research perspectives
- Emphasis on culturally sensitive and ethically grounded research practices
- Promotion of participatory and community-engaged research methodologies
- Inclusion of explicit capacity-strengthening components in some funding schemes
- Introduction of more flexible funding structures, including advance payments
- Emerging examples of direct funding mechanisms for Global South institutions
- Provision of workshops and information sessions to build funding literacy
- Support for training and development to strengthen research leadership and skills in the Global South.

Recommendations

Table 2. Quick wins: recommendations for funder policies and practice

Thematic area	Recommendations
Attitudes towards other cultures, peoples, and contexts	**Policy - Expand allowable costs to support language diversity:** allocate and allow flexibility in funding to support costs related to project needs associated with language diversity. This should include funds for professional translation services (both written and spoken communication), translating research outputs into multiple languages to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. The support should extend beyond researchers to incorporate research support staff.
Building and maintaining partnerships	**Policy - Assess equity as funding criteria:** assess equity of partnerships in grant applications as a prerequisite for funding. This should be accompanied by guidance for peer review committees on how to assess equity. **Policy - Build accountability into policy:** include mechanisms by which research stakeholders can check or flag equity concerns throughout the research process. **Practice and Processes - Utilise two-stage funding calls or networking grants:** support and resource partnership building processes, giving researchers time to co-develop research ideas and develop equitable ways of working.
Global South leadership and ownership	**Policy - Direct funding of Global South institutions:** funders should establish dedicated grant programmes aimed at Global South institutions and researchers. These programmes should address the unique challenges faced by the Global South and ensure that Global South researchers can lead projects based on locally defined priorities. Additionally, the programmes should include streamlined and accessible application procedures for Global South institutions, such as clear guidelines and support to reduce bureaucratic hurdles. **Practice and Processes - Establish advisory groups:** initiate Global South advisory groups, or groups more specific to the contexts of where funding is being directed to ensure research priorities and application processes are supportive of Global South applicants. **Practice and Processes - Share learning on direct funding:** funders should share learning on policy and processes to support direct funding to the Global South. Those who have experience of direct funding can provide guidance to others (See **Case study 2: including global south researchers in decision-making** in the main report).

Research capacity strengthening	**Policy - Require assessment of partner capacities and plans for development:** require grantees to assess each partner's relative capacity and plans for sharing knowledge and resources. This assessment should look at partner needs and strengths and should consider the research management and administration support available to each partner.
	Practice and Processes - Invest in mentoring and research development support in the Global South: support initiatives that provide mentoring and research development support within the Global South to strengthen research capacity. This supports the translation of eligibility for research funding into successful applications.
	Practice and Processes - Directly fund research management capacity: include research management support as a direct cost in funding initiatives, moving away from the current model of overheads and allow specific funds within project budgets to cover the costs associated with research management activities. This approach promotes better resource allocation and accountability and enables partners to address capacity discrepancies across research support teams.
Research budgets, contracts, and due diligence	**Policy - Share due diligence:** funders need to find a way to share due diligence information to avoid duplicated efforts.
	Practice and Processes - Support payments in advance: funders should clearly communicate to HEIs that advance payments, or initial funding can be provided to Global South partners in funding guiding notes or terms and conditions, when certain criteria are met. Clear guidelines and transparent processes for advance payments can enhance trust and cooperation between funders, HEIs, and Global South partners and are especially useful in providing clarity for institutions concerned with how such practices impact auditing outcomes.
Research dissemination and impact	**Promote fair authorship:** within researcher codes of conduct and guidance there should be clear expectations around fair authorship practices and sharing of credit with collaborators. Beyond this, funders should implement mechanisms to monitor compliance with authorship policies, including periodic audits of published work and requiring detailed accounts on each contributor's role.

Table 3. Long-term goals: recommendations for funder practices and processes

Thematic area	Recommendations
Attitudes towards other cultures, peoples, and contexts	**Policy - Support language diversity:** address different linguistic needs, not just for research outputs but also provide guidelines or codes of conduct on the need for global research to consider the language in which knowledge is produced. Codes of conduct on international collaboration and ethical processes should mandate that research be conducted in the local language of the region where it is being carried out. **Practice and Processes - Invest in North/South research:** fund more research that addresses both Global North and Global South challenges, allowing researchers from the Global South to analyse and interrogate UK/Global North problems and challenges as well as those in their own context. This will support mutual learning and act to decentre the 'development gaze' of UK researchers addressing Global South problems. **Practice and Processes - Address bias in funding application processes:** consider how biases are built into funding review processes and make efforts to address how inequity may be perpetuated, for example by using institutional and researcher blind reviews (See **Case study 3: proactive approach to reduce inequity and bias in funding application processes** in the main report).
Building and maintaining partnerships	**Practice and Processes - Two-stage funding calls or networking grants:** these mechanisms support and resource partnership building processes, giving researchers time to co-develop research ideas and develop equitable ways of working. **Practice and Processes - Make it easier for Global South researchers to apply for funding:** where calls are open to Global South researchers, funders need to have processes in place that ensure wide awareness of calls beyond existing participant institutions. Actions could include sharing guidance on the process of applying for funding and what a successful application looks like (see **Case study 1: Wellcome's committee observer initiative** in the main report).

Global South leadership and ownership	**Policy - Expand eligibility criteria:** eligibility criteria should be revised to accommodate the realities of Global South contexts. This includes recognising how career trajectories often differ across regions due to varying local circumstances and adjusting criteria accordingly to ensure inclusivity and fairness.
	Practice and Processes - Early engagement on research priority setting: engage as early as possible when scoping research calls. Partnering with Global South-based funders or institutions can be a means of bringing in expertise and knowledge that UK funders do not have.
	Practice and Processes - Develop joint calls with Global South funders: these types of partnerships can allow for dual language applications, joint ownership and ensure contextual and cultural awareness is built into funding calls.