UKRI-NSFC Joint Call: Understanding and Addressing Health and Social Challenges for Ageing in the UK and China

Summary

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Medical Research Council (MRC), which are constituent bodies of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and the National Natural Science Foundation China (NSFC), are pleased to invite high quality proposals between researchers in the UK and China which aim to enhance the evidence base on understanding and addressing health and social challenges facing ageing societies through interdisciplinary collaborations. The Funders will aim to recommend a balanced portfolio of projects. It is not expected that projects cover all health and social challenges.

Funding of up to £5 million is available from UKRI, with a maximum of £1 million and a minimum of £625,000 (100% fEC) available to be requested from ESRC and MRC per proposal. Funding of up to 2.5 million RMB is available per project from Chinese applicants from NSFC.

The deadline for completing an Intention to Submit form is 16.00h BST on 18 September 2019. The deadline for submitting proposals to the call is 16.00 BST on 17 October 2019.

Background

The Governments of both the UK and China have explicitly recognised ageing as a major societal challenge and have demonstrated commitment to and support for tackling the challenge and related issues. The Prime Minister of the UK recently announced a mission to “ensure that people can enjoy at least five extra healthy, independent years of life by 2035, while narrowing the gap between […] the richest and poorest”. The UK Government has made healthy ageing one of its societal grand challenges to be addressed through research and innovation as part of the national Industrial Strategy. The Chinese state has announced a comprehensive national policy response that places focus on advancement in science and innovation.

The challenge of an ageing society is multi-faceted and many research areas require interdisciplinary expertise. Working together, social and biomedical scientists will be able to better understand and address a range of health and social challenges facing generations of people growing older in the UK and China. For example, many people are now ageing with multiple chronic conditions, known as multimorbidities, which have major ramifications for
the experience, quality of life and behaviour of the older population as well as for the provision of care. Generations of people are also growing older under new social circumstances, with changes in social mobility, job security, family formation and reproductive strategies, social coherence and resilience, caring responsibilities and work-life balance. Collaborative, interdisciplinary research that understands and addresses these and other health and social challenges facing ageing societies will produce mutual benefits for the UK and China. Applicants will be able to take advantage of research strengths across the two nations.

Call details

Call objectives

The overall aim of this call is to enhance the evidence base on understanding and addressing the variety of health and social challenges faced by ageing societies through interdisciplinary collaborations. UKRI and NSFC co-facilitated a workshop in late June 2019 at Peking University in preparation for this call. The workshop highlighted that Healthy Ageing is a major research challenge in the UK and China, and that it is essential to harness inputs from disciplines both within and across the social and biomedical sciences.

The objectives of the call are:

• To commission joint UK-China research projects on understanding and/or addressing key health and/or social challenges facing ageing societies, with consideration of inequalities encouraged.
• To encourage and support the development of innovative interdisciplinary collaborations. The funders’ definition of interdisciplinarity for this call is a meaningful collaboration between social and biomedical scientists.
• To take advantage of research strengths in the UK and China to make advances that would not be possible with researchers from the two nations working separately.

And in doing so:

• Make novel contributions to the evidence base on healthy ageing.
• Provide evidence for key stakeholders in policy and practice in the UK and China.
• Create new and enhance existing interdisciplinary collaborations and partnerships.
• Enhance capacity through the sharing of infrastructure and data, and opportunities for early career researchers.

Scope

All proposals should aim to enhance the evidence base on understanding and addressing health and social challenges facing ageing societies through interdisciplinary collaborations. The Funders will aim to recommend a balanced portfolio of projects. It is not expected that projects cover all health and social challenges.

The following are examples of specific research areas where social and biomedical scientists can meaningfully work together to better understand and address health and social challenges for an ageing society. This list of exemplars is not exhaustive and we would welcome proposals that meet the ambitions of the call outside of these areas.
• Ensuring adequate nutrition and physical activity with age: for example how best to encourage individuals to engage in healthy lifestyle choices, ability to undertake activities of daily living.

• Creating and adapting age friendly environments (e.g., accessible public and private buildings, transport links, outdoor spaces)

• Prevention and treatment of age-related conditions (e.g., dementia, osteoporosis, hearing loss,)

• Ageing well with long term conditions and multimorbidities (e.g., cognitive disabilities, transplant survivors, diabetes)

• Sustaining intergenerational relationships with demographic changes (e.g., adult offspring returning to live at home later on in life, left behind older people in rural areas)

• Nurturing social and community engagement for older adults (e.g., building and maintaining social networks through age friendly services)

• Maintaining work, employment and economic security with age (e.g., the physical ability to perform well at work, the benefits to an individual’s wellbeing of being employed)

• Access to high quality service provision for older adults (e.g., access to responsive and quality health and social care, understanding to what extent is there a need for an increase in the supply of services)

• Age and disability friendly housing including physical and living arrangements (e.g., affordable and accessible housing for older people, changing structure of household living arrangements and the implications on elderly care)

Inequalities – a cross-cutting issue

Inequality in later life is a major issue facing societies, as inequalities can influence health and social challenges (such as obesity, loneliness and mental health conditions). A focus on inequalities in this call is crucial to ensuring that no one is left behind. An enhanced understanding of how inequalities across the life course (e.g., gender, education, disability) impact peoples’ experiences of ageing, could provide key insights into tackling inequality in later life. Therefore, it is encouraged that applications explain how their proposal is relevant to inequalities. For example, the widening gap in health and income inequality between the urban and rural areas.

Approaches to interdisciplinary working

All proposals must be from interdisciplinary teams, including both social and biomedical science disciplines that contribute intellectually to the proposal. Different disciplines should be involved in the conceptualisation of the projects as well as carrying out the research. It is important that collaborations are meaningful, for example, if a discipline appears to have been added as a ‘bolt on’ to fulfil interdisciplinary requirements and is not integrated in any meaningful way, this would not be acceptable. Applicants are required to consider this carefully when assembling project teams, and the funders will consider this in the final assessment of proposals.
Below are exemplars of ways to bridge conventional disciplinary boundaries to better understand and address health and social challenges faced by ageing societies. This list of exemplars is not exhaustive and we would welcome proposals that take other approaches to interdisciplinary working.

- **Interdisciplinary collaboration to analyse existing data sources.** Research on ageing and older people generates a wide variety of data, ranging from essentially qualitative assessments, through epidemiological and clinical measurement, to molecular measurements of biological markers. There is a growing need for research methods that can integrate data from diverse measures, which draw on many dimensions of individuals’ or groups’ social, cultural and biological background. There are a significant number of large data sets on ageing in the UK and China (e.g., ELSA and CHARLS) that would benefit from analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective.

- **Interdisciplinary research on methods for integrating qualitative and quantitative studies on ageing** has the potential to deliver significant added value from existing data sets, and to help foster a research culture in which these kinds of interdisciplinary topics can be more effectively addressed.

- **Approaches for interdisciplinary knowledge exchange should consider theoretical and methodological challenges and opportunities,** for example: design for multiple end users; be explicit about why a particular approach to knowledge exchange is expected to deliver its outcomes; evaluate diverse outcomes; use evaluations as part of the process of delivering knowledge exchange; and use mixed methods to evaluate knowledge exchange.

**UK and China collaborative working**

There are a number of strengths that the UK and China can offer, respectively and jointly, in understanding and addressing the health and social challenges faced by ageing societies. Examples include:

- **Expertise in China; local surveys, innovative pilot studies, fast technology development**
- **Expertise in UK; research ethics, end of life care, data resources**
- **Shared UK-China expertise in; cohort studies, cross-national comparative learning, reform of healthcare systems**

We encourage all applicants to make the most of strengths across the two nations. Researchers in the UK may have expertise relevant to China’s challenges; researchers in China may have expertise relevant to the UK’s challenges; and the bringing together of mutual expertise across the UK and China may enable advances not possible when the nations work independently. We expect to fund a portfolio of awards that facilitate balanced and equal research partnerships which have benefits for both the UK and China, although benefits from each individual award need not offer exactly equal benefits to both nations.

When working across the two nations, applicants will need to demonstrate sensitivity to the differences in policy frameworks concerning ageing in the UK and China, for example different approaches to social security and insurance, along with social and cultural differences.
Please note, the focus of this call is to foster collaboration between UK and China to advance understanding of the new health and social risks to healthy ageing. The primary focus of the research must be on the UK and China.

Sharing research data
If the proposal involves the sharing of data across institutions or countries, applicants are expected to consider what data will be shared across UK-China borders and how this will be managed to ensure the research project runs successfully and within the planned schedule. Data protection in both countries is complex and getting the permission for accessing data can take a long time. Please start this process as early as possible and consider the legal systems in both countries.

Funding
Up to £5million is available from UKRI, with up to 2.5M RMB available per project from Chinese applicants from NSFC. A maximum of £1 million and a minimum of £625,000 (100% fEC) can be requested from ESRC and MRC per proposal.

Each grant will require a UK Principal Investigator (PI) and a Chinese PI who will equally share leadership and project management for each project. Each PI will apply for funding to support their specific component of the team grant from their respective funding agency.

The funding agencies also expect the costs on each side to accurately reflect the research effort to be carried out. It is expected that the research effort on both sides should be comparable.

Spending obligations
Due to the funding of this call, successful UK research organisations will need to adhere to strict spending requirements. The UK payment profiles are likely to be slightly non-standard for this scheme. Researchers should be aware that there will be financial reporting requirements relating to successful grants.

Co-ordination
Each UK application must put aside at least £65K in their proposal to work with the other successful grant PIs to assemble a network. This network will help to develop the interface between researcher, the user community, and the programme membership. It will facilitate the sharing of research outcomes, data resources and best practice between the grants – all designed to maximise impact. This pot will also be used to fund a kick-off event at a suitable point in year one and an impact event towards the end of the grants. These events should include key UK and Chinese stakeholders and the successful PIs should work with the ESRC / UKRI China team for press coverage.

Duration
Projects must be no more than 36 months in duration and will commence from May 2020. The latest UK start date is 15th May 2020. A fixed start date for the UK grants may be enforced.

Eligibility
The call invites collaborative projects between researchers based in the UK and China. Proposals should have a lead applicant from each county.

The lead applicant from the UK should be listed as the Principal Investigator (PI) of UK proposal and must be based at a Research Organisation that is eligible for UKRI funding.

NSFC have strict eligibility rules. Please ask your Chinese collaborators to read NSFC guidance carefully and ensure they are eligible to apply. If your Chinese collaborators are unsure about their eligibility status, please ask them to check with the responsible NSFC colleague, whose contact details are included in the Chinese call guidance.

UK researchers may only submit one application to this call as Principal Investigator (PI) but may be involved in more applications if listed as a Co-Investigator.

If you are unsure on whether the focus of your research is within the disciplinary remit of the funders, please contact them well in advance of the closing date for confirmation. For clarification, UK proposals are accepted within the remits of ESRC and MRC and China proposals within the remit of NSFC’s health and management sciences divisions.

For UK proposals involving health or biomedical research, please also refer to section 1.1 of MRC’s standard Guidance for Applicants for additional information around the types of organisations that can be funded.

Capacity building

We particularly welcome the inclusion of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) in research teams for this call. The UK element of funding will not cover UK PhD studentships.

How to apply

Intention to Submit (ItS)

Please note that we anticipate a high level of interest in this call therefore all applicants are expected to complete an Intention to Submit (ItS) survey via the online form on the ESRC website call page by 16.00h BST on 18 September 2019.

Please note that the ItS is NOT for any assessment purpose. The ItS is to help ESRC, MRC and NSFC plan the peer review and the panel arrangements.

Applicants should not await a response from the funders following the ItS submission or registration, but simply continue with the development of their full proposals.

Please note that applicants should not change between the ItS submission and the full application submission, but additional participants can be added/removed at the full application submission.

Full proposal

Full proposals must be submitted by 17 October 2019, by 16.00h BST via the Research Councils’ Joint electronic Submission (Je-S) System the UK and by 16.00h Beijing time via NSFC’s Internet-based Science Information System in China. The NSFC application should follow the instructions in their call document.

A UK-based lead partner and a China-based lead partner should be identified—each of whom will lead on interaction with the funding agency in their respective countries.
The **UK-based lead partner** should ensure the application is submitted via the Je-S system. If the UK application comes from multiple institutions, then the application should be made on a single Je-S form from the UK-based lead partner’s host institution.

The **China-based lead partner** will apply through NSFC’s system and follow NSFC’s proposal format. The NSFC application should follow the instructions in the NSFC version of this call document and be received through the NSFC e-submission system.

The NSFC application must use the correct Management Science application subject code as the First Application Code in order to be eligible for this call.

The documents required by NSFC for the Chinese applicants can be found via the following link [http://bic.nsfc.gov.cn/Show.aspx?CI=30](http://bic.nsfc.gov.cn/Show.aspx?CI=30)

Both applications should feature an identical **Case for Support written in English** attached in each system.

**For UK applications, please refer to the following additional documents:**

- Je-S guidance
- UK addendum
- Ethics addendum
- International funding agencies resources form

**Assessment Process**

The Intension to Submit is to help ESRC, MRC and NSFC plan the peer review and the panel and is NOT for any assessment purpose. The Full Proposal will be assessed by peer review and a joint UK-China panel. Recommendations for funding will only be made for proposals that receive competitive reviews in both the UK and China assessment processes.

The common Case for Support including the Joint Proposal Form allows for a joint peer review via the process below. Please be aware that information from your proposal will be shared with NSFC. Proposals will undergo peer review within the country they were submitted. The joint panel will be asked to assess the proposals against the assessment criteria. Funding decisions will be made in March 2020.

**Assessment criteria**

Proposals to this call will be assessed in accordance with the following criteria:

**Strength of International Collaboration**

- What is your opinion on the added value of the UK-China cooperation to the research proposal, including the complementary nature of the UK and China teams?
- Does the proposal involve any UK-China comparative elements and if so how does this add value to the work proposed?
- Is the distribution of work between the UK and China partners appropriate? I.e. is it truly collaborative?
- Relevance of the proposal to addressing the call challenges- how appropriate and developed is the collaboration between the UK and Chinese research in addressing the call challenges?
Originality / Potential Contribution to Knowledge

- Is the proposed research likely to make an original and significant contribution to theory, methods or knowledge?
- Is there similar or related work, not mentioned in the proposal, of which the applicant(s) should be aware? If so, please specify.

Fit to Call

- Does the proposal meet the ambitions outlined in the call scope?
- Does the proposal feature a focus on inequalities?
- Does the proposal demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach? Are different disciplinary strengths from the UK and China being utilised? Have the different disciplinary approaches been integrated effectively and how does this add value?

Research Design, Work Plan and Research Team

- Are the objectives of the proposal clearly stated?
- Are the research methods and framework for analysis suitable to the aims and objectives? Are they clearly defined, rigorous and feasible?
- Is the timescale and scheduling of the work appropriate and realistic?
- Are the qualifications and competencies of the participating team members appropriate to the international collaboration within the proposal?

Value for Money

- Is the proposal overall good value-for-money for the total costs involved?
- Are the costs requested clearly justified?
- Are the costs included in the proposal ‘appropriate’ (i.e. are they focused on and necessary for building sustainable partnerships)?

Knowledge exchange, Impact and Outputs

- Are the planned outputs of the proposal appropriate? Have the applicants made adequate plans to disseminate the results of the collaboration?
- Where relevant, have appropriate arrangements been made for engaging potential users (e.g. business and industry) at relevant stages of the project?
- Is the collaboration likely to have significant social and policy impact beyond the academic community?

Ethical considerations

- Are any potential ethical issues addressed appropriately and comprehensively in the proposal?
- Have applicants made appropriate plans for data storage and providing access to data for other researchers?
- Does the Data Management Plan appropriately address issues around data sharing across borders?
Commissioning timetable

- Call announced – 23 July 2019
- Intention to Submit deadline (UK) – 18 September 2019
- Full proposal deadline (UK and China) – 17 October 2019
- UK-China panel meeting – w/c 24 February 2020
- Funding decisions announced – March 2020
- Grant start date (UK) – latest 15 May 2020
- Grant start date (China) – 1 May 2020

Contacts

For further information on UK proposals contact:

- Evie Bate and Josie McGregor
  Email: HealthyAgeingChina@esrc.ukri.org
  Telephone: +44 1793 413175 or +44 1793 413094

- Je-S helpdesk (for all Je-S system enquiries)
  Email: jeshelp@je-s.ukri.org
  Telephone: +1793 44 4164