



Research jointly supported by the ESRC and DFID

## **ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme 2015 call specification**

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## Summary

The Department for International Development (DFID) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) jointly fund the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme. Both funders are committed to commissioning world-class research and ensuring the results are available for policymakers and development workers worldwide.

Launched in 2014, this £20 million programme will generate world-class and cutting-edge social science research that addresses key questions on learning outcomes within education systems in developing countries. The programme's aim is to enable more effective policies and interventions by providing policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning and an understanding of how these ideas will translate to their specific contexts and institutions. The research funded will increase understanding of how the achievement of better learning outcomes in developing countries<sup>1</sup> is enabled and constrained by complex interactions between elements of the education system, the context in which they are embedded, and the dynamics operating within that system. Research funding will be awarded through three annual research calls. Each call will have a different but complementary thematic focus that addresses the programme's core interests. Further information about the programme is available at [www.esrc.ac.uk/eddev](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/eddev)

The thematic focus for the 2015 call (call 2) will be on '**challenging contexts**' – where education systems face particular challenges, what enables or inhibits the raising of learning outcomes. The specific contexts of focus will be:

- Remote rural
- Urban slums
- Border cities

Up to £6.5 million is being made available for proposals to this call. Proposals are sought from across the social sciences and may be for fundamental or more applied research, as long as the policy relevance is clearly articulated. There are no geographic restrictions on who may apply for this funding opportunity: researchers from developing and developed countries can work together in any configuration of their choosing, and principal investigators can be from anywhere in the world.

Proposals are invited for projects with a **full economic cost (fEC) value of between £200,000 and £700,000**. Proposals outside this value range will not be accepted. This budget limit refers to the total cost of the project, not the contribution paid by the ESRC and DFID. Projects may be from one year up to a maximum of four years in duration.

The earliest start date for successful grants is 1 March 2016. **The deadline for proposals is 16.00 (UK time) on 14 May 2015.**

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this call, the term 'developing countries', refers primarily to Low-Income Countries as defined by the OECD DAC list of ODA recipients (including both Least Developed Countries and Other Low Income Countries) but includes all countries listed in the call-specific 'Countries of Focus' document available on the call page

## Programme background and overview

Thanks to more effective education policies and sustained national and international investment, many more children are in school across the developing world. However, despite significant progress in educational access in recent years, millions of children still have no access to formal education and, where they do, learning levels can often be concerningly low<sup>2</sup>. There is therefore a need to reorient education systems away from a focus on expanding access towards improving learning outcomes and the overall quality of education for all children.

Increasing real expenditure in education across the developing world in the past decade has resulted in increased school quality as measured by inputs, but has not translated into higher learning outcomes on internationally comparable assessments. We still know remarkably little about how to improve learning and the quality of education in developing country contexts. Further research is needed to improve our understanding of the complex, contextual dynamics which influence educational quality and the effectiveness of policies and interventions intended to raise learning outcomes.<sup>3</sup> This programme does not set a definition of or measurement tools for 'learning outcomes', but does expect research to focus on quantifiable and measurable learning outcomes that include basic literacy and numeracy skills, the development of other important capabilities (such as critical thinking and problem solving), and knowledge that promotes wellbeing.<sup>4</sup>

Against this background, the **ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme** aims to build the evidence on critical policy areas which are currently constraining education systems in developing countries from translating resources into better learning for all, and ultimately positive social and economic change. To do this, the programme will fund a portfolio of research that increases understanding of how complex relationships between **elements** of the education system, the **context** in which they are embedded, and the **dynamics** operating within that system impact on efforts to raise learning outcomes for all. The over-arching focus of the programme is on three areas in which research is needed:

- How do interacting dynamics in the social, political, economic and cultural context enable or inhibit the delivery of quality education in specific developing country contexts? This includes consideration of governance, institutions, social and cultural contexts, incentives and norms, and their influence on efforts to raise education quality and learning outcomes.
- How do specific policies or interventions designed to deliver quality education and learning for all interact with these contextual dynamics, and with what impact? This includes intended and unanticipated effects within and beyond the education system.

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<sup>2</sup> UNESCO (2012) EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012. Youth and Skills: Putting Education to Work. Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of the policy and research background underpinning this programme, see the 2013-2014 call specification at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/international-research/international-development/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-in-education-systems-research-programme/funding-opportunities/>

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of this, see the 'Frequently Asked Questions' on the call webpage

- How do we better understand, measure and evaluate educational quality and learning outcomes in development contexts?

Research funded in this programme will focus on how to raise learning outcomes for all by considering equity as well as quality dimensions of education.

The programme aims to enable more effective policies and interventions by providing policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning for all, and an understanding of how these ideas will translate to their specific contexts and institutions. The programme also aims to enhance the quality of social science for development and education and increase its diversity. These aims will be achieved by:

- supporting projects from a broad range of social science disciplines, including education, psychology, anthropology, geography, sociology and economics
- encouraging inter/multi-disciplinary collaboration and facilitating innovative research that explores new directions in understanding how learning outcomes for all can be raised
- investing in a diversity of methods, particularly strong mixed-methods approaches, and promoting improved attention to and reporting of methodology
- funding research that addresses the lack of sufficient high-quality data in education and development research
- ensuring policymakers are involved in research from the outset to maximise the chance of the findings being embedded in national education systems
- working with other research funders and users to improve the accessibility and use of high-quality research on education
- strengthening the capacity of Southern researchers in research management and leadership, knowledge generation, and policy impact generation.

ESRC and DFID have allocated £20 million to the programme, with research funding being awarded in three annual calls, each with a different but complementary thematic focus. Focusing each call on a specific theme will enable a body of evidence around critical areas to be built up that will be of greater value to policymakers globally. These thematic calls will also increase the potential for projects running concurrently to identify synergies and enhance overall impact, while retaining sufficient breadth and complementarity to enable links between research funded through different calls.

Call 1 (2013-14) focused thematically on ‘effective teaching’ and funded a range of projects that are unpacking the relationship between effective teaching and learning outcomes for all in a range of diverse contexts.<sup>5</sup> Call 2 (2015) will fund research that unpacks the relationship between context and learning outcomes for all, specifically in relation to three ‘challenging contexts’, as set out below. A third call will take place in 2016; the theme for call 3 has yet to be determined and is unlikely to be announced prior to call 2 closing to proposals.

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<sup>5</sup> For information on call 1 see <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/international-research/international-development/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-in-education-systems-research-programme/funding-opportunities/>

Further information about the programme is available at [www.esrc.ac.uk/eddev](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/eddev)

## Specification of 2015 call

### Overview and general principles

The thematic focus of call 2 will be on 'Challenging Contexts' - where education systems face particular challenges, what enables and/or inhibits the raising of learning outcomes? Proposals are invited on any research question which will address this question in relation to one or more of the following specific contexts:

- Remote rural
- Urban slums
- Border cities

Proposals must adopt a contextual lens to increase understanding of the complex relationships between context, education interventions and learning outcomes in these spaces. See the 'Thematic focus' section below for further information.

Within the contexts of the thematic focus, research can engage with a range of contextual dynamics, including cultural, historical, political, economic and geographic aspects of these. It can also ask questions about different dynamics operating within that system, such as governance and accountability. Research funded through this call can explore any element, or elements, of an education system, including teaching and teachers, curricula and policy, assessment, leadership and management, monitoring and organising processes.

Given the strong inequalities that exist within education (related for example to structural inequalities such as gender, disability or socio-economic factors), research funded in this call must focus on how to raise learning outcomes for all by embedding consideration of equity as well as quality dimensions of education and learning outcomes within the research.

The geographical focus of research in this call will be on low-income countries<sup>6</sup> plus a select group of other priority countries.<sup>7</sup> Research focused on middle-income countries not in this list will be allowed, but will need to make a clear case for how the research is relevant to one or more specific low-income countries and include clear plans to engage with stakeholders in those countries, normally from an early stage in the research process. See the 'Geographic focus' section below for further information.

The educational contexts addressed within proposals may include all levels of educational provision - from early childhood education to higher education. To enhance opportunities for scale-up and to contribute to the evidence base on raising learning outcomes in education systems, research must focus on education provision taking place through or in conjunction

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<sup>6</sup> See the OECD DAC list of ODA recipients effective as of 1 January 2015 at <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/daclist.htm> For the purposes of this call, LICs are taken to include both Least Developed Countries and Other Low Income Countries.

<sup>7</sup> A list of these priority countries is available on the call webpage

with government systems (at the national, regional or local authority level) or large non-state/private sector providers.<sup>8</sup>

Proposals may be made for fundamental or more applied research topics, as long as the policy relevance of the proposed research is clearly articulated. All research projects must be grounded in empirical evidence, and should make appropriate use of existing data. Proposals which challenge existing policy and practice assumptions are welcomed. The funders also welcome innovative proposals which explore new research directions in understanding of how education quality can be improved to raise learning outcomes in developing countries.

Proposals to this call are sought from across the social sciences, including education, psychology, anthropology, geography, sociology, economics and political economy. Given the programme's aims it is expected that strong mixed-method approaches will be utilised, and multi/inter-disciplinary collaboration is strongly encouraged. See the 'Multi/inter-disciplinary research' section below for further information.

Within the overall contexts of focus specified for the call, proposals which investigate a single context or comparative studies will be welcome, but all proposals will need to make a strong case for their wider significance for knowledge and policy development. See the 'Thematic focus' and 'Geographical focus' sections below for further information.

All research funded must demonstrate clear relevance to decision-makers and practitioners in the field. Non-academic stakeholders, including potential users of the research, are expected to be included and involved in the design and delivery of projects. See the 'International dimension and partnership/ collaborative relationships' section below for further information.

Applicants must identify the potential impacts of their research on policy and practice, and must actively consider how these can be maximised and developed. See the 'Research impact' section below for further information.

Two key cross-cutting issues are relevant to all research funded through this programme: structural inequalities, and measurement and metrics. Applicants to this call must ensure these important issues are addressed within their proposed research, including through appropriate disaggregation of data and the generation of data that measures impact on learning. See the 'Cross-cutting themes' section below for further information.

### **Funding exclusions**

Proposals which duplicate work previously supported by ESRC or DFID will **not** be funded.

The programme will **not** fund contract research or consultancy work where the results and physical outputs are to some extent already pre-defined and known.

The programme is **not** a source of funding for education interventions. The programme will **not** fund project/intervention or process evaluations that are not guided by social science-driven questions of broader relevance and applicability. Projects centred around particular

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion of this, see the call-specific document 'Frequently Asked Questions' on the call webpage

interventions must not simply assess **if** these are effective in a given context, but must examine **why** this is the case. Projects which assess the effectiveness of a particular intervention without situating that assessment within a broader research and policy context will not be funded.

**Proposals which are not deemed to be within the scope of this call will be rejected.**

### **Thematic focus: ‘Challenging contexts’**

The thematic focus for call 2 (2015) is **‘challenging contexts’: where education systems face particular challenges, what enables and/or inhibits the raising of learning outcomes?** Research funded through this call **must** address this thematic question in relation to one or more of three specific contexts:

- Remote rural: rural settlements which are geographically remote or isolated, for example due to distance from major cities, infrastructure, economic markets or political institutions, or whose terrain or ecology creates physical barriers to access
- Urban slums: urban settlements with inadequate access to safe water, sanitation and infrastructure, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding and insecure residential status
- Border cities: cities near the boundary between two or more nation states.

Context matters in raising learning outcomes, and we know that the relationship between an intervention within an education system and student learning is contingent on context in complex ways.<sup>9</sup> By examining learning outcomes in developing country education systems through a contextual lens, this call aims to increase understanding of the complex relationships between context, education interventions and learning. Such an approach will generate research that enables a more holistic understanding of these relationships than provided by previous input-focused questions. To meet the requirements of this call, research will therefore need to engage with the myriad layers and definitions of context – social, political, economic, institutional, cultural, and structural, as well as geographic. It will also have to unpack what is meant by learning and learning outcomes, and engage with questions of how we can better understand, measure and evaluate educational quality.

We also know that education systems can face particular challenges in enabling the raising of learning outcomes in some specific contexts. The ‘challenging contexts’ specified in this call include those where we have evidence of some of the lowest learning outcomes and yet do not know enough about how education systems work or do not work. This call therefore seeks to fund a portfolio of research focused on three contexts in which education systems face particular challenges:

- Remote rural: Data on student learning, collected increasingly extensively, indicates that the lowest learning levels and fewest years spent in school are found in remote

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<sup>9</sup> Dufler, E, Dupas P and Kremer M (2012) School Governance, Teacher Incentives, and Pupil-Teacher Ratios: Experimental Evidence from Kenyan Primary Schools <http://economics.mit.edu/files/7660> (PDF)



rural areas<sup>10</sup>. Data specific to remote rural areas is limited and through lack of disaggregation beyond *rural* categorisation fails to take into account, for example, students' socio-economic backgrounds<sup>11</sup>. Evidence also demonstrates particular challenges for teacher recruitment and retention<sup>12</sup>, and increased uncertainties over teacher and student school attendance, as well as failure for initial teacher training and for curriculum to meet the needs of remote rural contexts<sup>13</sup>. Weak management of reforms such as decentralisation in the remotest areas often mean these areas fail to benefit<sup>14</sup>.

- Urban slums: Anecdotal data against social development indicators in urban slums suggests that levels of deprivation are akin to humanitarian situations. While basic urban/rural comparisons may highlight disadvantages in rural contexts, insufficient data disaggregation may mask the inequities within growing poor urban environments, including service delivery and the extent of inequalities in educational access and quality<sup>15</sup>.
- Border cities: Cities on or near national borders bridging two education systems can be places where service delivery is weakest, where populations are transient and where the effects of conflict and humanitarian crises can be most protracted. Service delivery is compromised by overstretched systems, by competing and diverse requirements as populations move, and by fluctuating demand. There is little evidence on education systems in these contexts, and obtaining accurate data on learning – let alone learning trajectories – is a challenge particularly recognised for refugee children<sup>16</sup>.

We recognise that some of the challenges within these contexts may be cross-cutting: for example, lack of disaggregated data, weak school management and demographic shifts may be challenges across all three contexts. This may make comparison across more than one challenging context valuable. It may also enable grants focused on different contexts to complement each others' findings.

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<sup>10</sup> UNESCO (2014) EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013/2014. Teaching and Learning: Achieving Quality For All. Paris: UNESCO

<sup>11</sup> Westbrook J, Durrani N, Brown R, Orr D, Pryor J, Boddy J and Salvi F (2013) Pedagogy, Curriculum, Teaching Practices and Teacher Education in Developing Countries. DFID Education Rigorous Literature Review [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/305154/Pedagogy-curriculum-teaching-practices-education.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/305154/Pedagogy-curriculum-teaching-practices-education.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO (2014)

<sup>13</sup> Westbrook et al (2013)

<sup>14</sup> Kingdon, GG, Little A, Aslam M, Rawal S, Moe T, Patrinos H, Beteille T, Banerji R, Parton B, Sharma SK (2014) A Rigorous Review of the Political Economy of Education Systems in Developing Countries. DFID Education Rigorous Literature Review. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/305753/Political-economy-education-systems1.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/305753/Political-economy-education-systems1.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Jones H, Cummings C and Nixon H (2014) Services in the City: Governance and Political Economy in Urban Service Delivery. ODI Discussion Paper. <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9382.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO (2011) EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011. The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education. Paris: UNESCO

Proposals are invited on any research question which will increase understanding of how, within one or more of these three challenging contexts, education systems can be enabled and/or inhibited in raising learning outcomes. Therefore this call will not fund proposals for research within these contexts that lacks a focus on the complex relationships between context, education interventions and learning. Proposals must be led by engagement with a range of contextual dynamics – for example cultural, social, historical, political, economic, geographic or environmental - and the ways in which these impact on efforts to raise learning outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

### **Geographical focus**

While ESRC and DFID recognise that many of the world's poor live in middle-income countries, it is a specific objective of this programme to increase the body of research that is specifically relevant to low-income countries and a select group of other priority countries (a list is available to download from the call webpage). Research focused on middle-income countries not in this list is allowed under the programme - however, these proposals must explicitly detail how the research is relevant to one or more low-income countries. It is not sufficient to note only that the area under study is similar to conditions in average low-income countries. Specific similarities must be articulated and the Pathways to Impact must include clear plans to engage with stakeholders in one or more low-income countries, normally at an early stage in the research process. Proposals lacking sufficient detail in these plans may be rejected by the ESRC office prior to peer review. The funders aim for a significant majority of research projects within the portfolio to focus on low-income countries. In the decision-making process this will come into consideration when making funding decisions on proposals of equal scientific quality.

### **Cross-cutting issues**

Two key cross-cutting issues are relevant to any research undertaken within this programme, regardless of the amount of funding applied for:

- Structural inequalities, including those based on gender, age, disability, ethnicity, race, religion, class, educational status and spatial factors
- Measurement and metrics

Applicants must ensure these issues are addressed within their proposed research, including through appropriate disaggregation of data. These factors will be taken into account by the commissioning panel.

### **Structural inequalities**

The major focus of education efforts globally is now on learning for all. Given the large numbers of children still not in school and the significant discrimination faced by different social groups, especially women and girls, a robust approach to researching what works to deliver better learning for all should include these elements. This research programme

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<sup>17</sup> For further discussion of this, see the 'Frequently Asked Questions' document on the call webpage

proposes to understand how to improve learning across the board without losing a focus on ensuring quality education for the most disadvantaged. There is a possibility that a relentless focus on average quality could undermine the equitable provision of quality education, as it will likely be harder to reach the most marginalised students, compounding their educational deprivation. The proposed research must therefore consider both the **quality** and **equity** dimension in improving learning outcomes.

Failure to identify and explore the distinctive gender dimensions of economic and social policies and institutions – as well as other structural inequality dimensions such as those relating to ethnicity, age, disability and spatial geography – may lead to bias in interventions and processes, or limit impact and value for money. In order to produce knowledge and evidence to inform more effective policies and programmes and to support transformational changes in structural inequalities, applicants must make a genuine effort to integrate adequate analysis of gender and other structural inequalities in their research design, even where this may not be the central focus of the project. We strongly encourage researchers not only to ensure that relevant data – where feasible – are disaggregated by sex, age and other structural inequalities, but also to analyse the different roles and responsibilities, constraints and opportunities or power differentials between, for example, girls/women and boys/men.

### **Metrics and measurement**

Learning is a vital and measurable dimension of a quality education. A well-rounded education should develop both cognitive skills (literacy and numeracy skills), as well as non-cognitive skills (such as critical thinking and problem-solving). The lack of data on learning outcomes and classroom practices in developing countries means that the metrics developed and data collected in this research programme are valuable in themselves. All projects are expected to generate data on at least one aspect of learning. Where appropriate, researchers will be expected to utilise sample-based learning outcome data and benchmark these to internationally comparable tests to enable cost effectiveness comparisons across contexts. Researchers should engage closely with policymakers and build on country data systems where available to reduce duplication and increase sustainability.

### **Multi/inter-disciplinary research**

ESRC and DFID recognise the need for a new research approach to effectively respond to the complex international development challenges of the post-MDG era. This funding programme is focused on research from across the social sciences, including education, psychology, anthropology, geography, sociology, and economics, and **all proposals must be at least 50 per cent social science** - our definitions of social science disciplines are available from the 'Proposal classifications' webpage (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-applicants/is-my-research-suitable-for-esrc-funding/discipline-classifications/>). Any queries on this aspect of a proposal should be sent to the programme secretariat in the ESRC Office (see the 'Contact details' section).

However, although not a pre-requisite for funding, we strongly encourage multi- or inter-disciplinary research projects. This may involve researchers from different social science disciplines bringing together their perspectives, approaches and expertise, or unite social scientists with those working within the natural, environmental, arts and humanities or other disciplines. A key requirement is that applicants demonstrate a clear and strong rationale for

how their proposed research and the approach taken to it meets the criteria for world-class and cutting-edge policy-relevant research addressing key questions on learning outcomes in developing countries, particularly LICs.

Research which takes a mixed methodological approach may also contribute to the quality and potential impact of social science for development and education. Proposals which effectively and rigorously combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies to address a research question are likely to strengthen their case for funding. However, superficial or token inclusion of either quantitative or qualitative elements in a research project is inadequate. Not all research questions are suited to mixed methodologies. Although encouraged, using a mixed methodology is not a prerequisite for funding. Applicants must ensure that their proposed methodology is appropriate to addressing their research questions. These factors will be taken into account by the commissioning panel.

### **International dimension and partnership/collaborative relationships**

By definition, this programme is concerned with international co-operation to address issues of global importance. Underpinning the programme and all funded projects must be a strong research ethic based on mutual respect and understanding for different cultural, ethnic, social and economic beliefs and practices. Solutions to raising education outcomes must be rooted in, and acceptable to, the institutions, communities and societies where they will operate.

Projects with developing country leads or partners are strongly encouraged. Principal investigators can be based anywhere in the world, and funding is **not** dependent on the involvement of a UK-based research organisation. Formal partnerships and collaborators in the research process are **not** a prerequisite for support under the programme. Sole applicants are acceptable and may be based in any country (subject to eligibility requirements explained below).

However, we strongly encourage partnerships and collaborative relationships where these are substantive and meaningful. The programme allows academics from developing and developed countries to work together in any configuration of their choosing, and partnerships may build on existing relationships or represent the development of a new collaborative relationship. The intellectual challenge should be the determining factor when configuring appropriate partnerships and collaborations. The principal requirement is for meaningful quality collaborations or partnerships, demonstrated through clear leadership roles across the proposed partnership, and balance and proportionality in partners' roles and responsibilities. These factors will be taken into account by the commissioning panel.

We also expect non-academic stakeholders, including potential research users and intermediary organisations with a mandate to communicate research who are listed in the proposal, to be included and involved in both the early design and on-going conduct of research projects. This is especially the case where research is taking place within government systems, without compromising the independence or integrity of the research. There is recognition that the exploitation of new knowledge does not just occur at the end of a research project, but rather is embedded throughout the research process itself. The commissioning panel will consider the plans for involvement of non-academic stakeholders in the research process.

## Research capacity

ESRC and DFID recognise three key aspects of capacity development: building the research capacity of **individuals**; building **organisational** capacity (eg management, financial, communications); and **institutional** capacity-building (eg the incentive structures, the political and regulatory context, and the resource base within which research is undertaken and used by policymakers). The capacity to undertake and maximise the impact of research depends on a combination of human capacity, the availability of research resources (including data), and the political and incentive context for policy- and decision-making.

We are **not** seeking to fund capacity-building per se through this programme. Both sponsors fund capacity-building activities through other mechanisms. However, we expect as a minimum that all proposals identify capacity-building activities as part of, and not separate to, the stated research approach. Applicants are encouraged to consider the diversity of opportunities and contexts for capacity-building within their proposed research. Capacity-building elements should be set out in relation to the core intellectual agenda of the research proposal and not treated separately; the focus should be on the quality and impact of the research, and how increasing research capacity contributes to this.

Good examples of capacity-building include co-design of research and implementation, field-based research methods training for developing country partner staff, and opportunities for developing country partner staff to author/co-author journal and conference papers and participate in national and international conferences. Support and mentoring for more junior team members may also contribute importantly to building future research capacity. Successful proposals will also demonstrate a strong understanding of the local research context and ensure the research programme does not undermine local research capacity. These factors will be taken into account by the commissioning panel.

This programme does **not** provide support for standalone doctoral students. Standalone masters and ad hoc courses for UK students will also **not** be funded. Applicants who are considering including a doctoral studentship in their research project must refer to the document 'How to include a grant-linked student' on the call web page for eligibility requirements.

## Research impact

We expect researchers funded under the programme to have identified the potential impacts of their research on policy and practice, and to actively consider how these can be maximised and developed. This emphasis on research impact will be reflected within the assessment process and will be taken into account by the commissioning panel.

As a key component of this research programme is to build evidence within government systems, it is expected that researchers will already have engaged with key stakeholders in the research countries in developing the proposal.

It is recommended that a minimum of 10 per cent of the overall budget should be dedicated to delivering the activities outlined in the impact summary. Researchers are encouraged to be innovative in the kinds of user engagement, knowledge exchange, communications and research uptake activities they plan to undertake during and beyond the period of research

funding. It is important that applicants appreciate that outreach and engagement activities in themselves do not constitute impact. The development of a clear impact strategy will be important to ensuring research impact is achieved. When completing the impact summary section of the form, applicants may find it helpful to refer to ESRC guidance on developing an impact strategy.<sup>18</sup>

It is recommended that each project at the earliest opportunity holds a seminar with key stakeholders in the country or countries where the majority of the research is taking place, to set out the aims of the projects and fully ground it in the local context. This will facilitate the potential co-production of knowledge and will also allow researchers to ‘reality-check’ their plans. If this kind of activity is not appropriate for your project we would expect you to set out the reasons why in your proposal.

## **Open Access policy**

RCUK and DFID have both published policies on open access to publications and data.<sup>19</sup> Researchers funded under this programme will be expected to comply with the requirements outlined in these policies. Where the policies differ from one another, we would expect researchers to comply with the more stringent policy.

Funding will be available for all associated legitimate and proportionate costs but the route to funding will depend on the researchers’ institutional affiliation. UK institutions are no longer able to apply for Article Processing Charges (APCs) as part of a research proposal, but instead funds are provided to research organisations at an institutional level as block grants in order to set up publication funds. For those researchers not covered by the RCUK block grant mechanism, ESRC and DFID will work to ensure that you are not disadvantaged. If APCs cannot be covered by block grants (ie if there is no UK researcher on the proposal or involved in the article in question), applicants should include the APC costs and justify these fully in their proposals. Applicants should seek advice from the programme secretariat as to whether publication costs should be requested (see ‘Contact details’ below).

## **What can applicants apply for?**

Proposals are invited for projects with a full economic cost (fEC) value of between **£200,000 and £700,000**. The fEC value refer to the total cost of the project, and is not the actual contribution paid by the ESRC and DFID. The funders contribution for UK applicants is 80 per cent of fEC. Funding arrangements for non-UK institutions are set out below. If applicants or their host organisations have any doubts about the costing basis of their proposals they should contact the programme secretariat.

**For non-UK institutions** the programme will support in full (100 per cent) all the directly incurred costs of the research. In addition, indirect costs may be charged on staff salary and other staff-related costs (ie statutory contributions analogous to UK National Insurance or

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/developing-an-impact-strategy/>

<sup>19</sup> Please see <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/openaccess/> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-research-open-and-enhanced-access-policy> for more information.

Superannuation contributions). Indirect costs may **not** be charged on non-staff related direct costs, eg equipment, travel and subsistence, consultancies, conferences etc. The following rates for indirect costs should be applied:

- For applicants from developing countries, the overhead rate is 50 per cent
- For applicants from developed countries, the overhead rate is 20 per cent.

Further information is provided in the document 'Costings Guidance for Non-UK Institutions and Partners' - available to download from the call webpage. Proposals from a non-UK institution or which include any non-UK partners **must** refer to this document before completing the Je-S proposal. ESRC will ask for adequate evidence of the costing basis for all direct and indirect costs. If a grant is recommended for funding, budgets may be reduced if considered excessive. All applicants are strongly advised to consult their institutional finance/research offices regarding the financial aspects of their proposal **in good time** before the call deadline. All costs should be broken down and fully justified.

The duration of grants should range from a minimum of one year up to a maximum of four years, though applicants should note the specific rules for duration of projects involving doctoral students.

## **Eligibility to apply**

The principal investigator **must** be based at an authentic organisation with the capacity to undertake high-quality research. This means an institution that possesses an existing in-house capacity to host a grant and to carry out research that materially extends and enhances the national or international research base, and is able to demonstrate an independent capability to undertake and lead research programmes.

Applicants that are not based in a higher education institute (for example work for an NGO or other third sector organisation) should consider whether their organisation is best placed to host a grant and can meet the stringent expectations of RCUK eligibility. It is essential that institutions with minimal research capacity collaborate with a credible research organisation who would host the project

Eligibility checks will be applied to all proposals on receipt at ESRC. Peer reviewers will also be asked to comment on the credibility of the host institution. If you are unsure about your organisation's eligibility, please consult the programme secretariat. **Proposals which are not from a credible research organisation will be rejected by the ESRC office.**

## **Recognised research institutions**

Research Council recognition of institutions eligible to hold grants is a longer and more involved process that will be undertaken once a proposal has been recommended for funding, after the full peer review and commissioning panel assessment. This must be completed before a grant can be issued to the grant holder's institution. The following paragraphs outline this process.

All grants will be awarded to the institution of the principal investigator, and this institution will be responsible for the proper disbursement and accountability of all monies received. In order to be eligible to hold ESRC grants, institutions must be recognised as meeting specific criteria relating to mandate, research infrastructure, governance and accountability. Most UK higher education institutions and some other independent UK research organisations are already recognised institutions, and hence are eligible to apply for, and hold, Research Council grants.

Most non-UK institutions and some UK organisations will not currently be recognised to hold UK Research Council grants. Lead institutions which are not recognised to hold UK Research Council grants will have to obtain Research Council recognition before any grant can be confirmed. In order to minimise administrative burdens and costs to both applicants and ESRC staff, **formal recognition will only be pursued if the grant is successful.**

No grant can commence until full RCUK eligibility has been granted following this process.

Further details of the recognition process for research organisations are available from the secretariat, but in broad terms it covers:

- Research infrastructure, intellectual capacity and critical mass of researchers to undertake high-quality social science research
- Institutional governance and accountability structures
- Audit and accountability procedures
- Sources of core funding and other funding.

This process takes some time. When setting proposed start dates, applicants in host organisations not recognised to hold UK Research Council grants should allow a minimum of two months beyond the earliest grant start date for the recognition process to be completed.

### **Principal investigators and co-investigators**

The programme is open to researchers based in higher education institutions, research organisations or other organisations with a credible research capacity (see above). Researchers may be based in either UK or non-UK organisations with demonstrable research capacity.

Under the programme rules an individual is permitted to be involved in multiple bids to this call, but **cannot be the principal investigator on more than one bid**. No applicant (PI or co-I) can exceed 37.5 hours per week time commitment across current proposals to ESRC or ongoing ESRC grants.

All grants will be made to the institution hosting the principal investigator, and that institution will be subject to standard terms and conditions for ESRC grants with regard to the disbursement of funds to co-investigator at other institutions, and with additional programme-reporting requirements.

**Important note:** In addition to a formal recognition process explained above, all applicants and their organisations must register to use the Research Councils Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system before submitting a proposal. Je-S will be used to receive and



process all proposals under this call. The section 'How to apply and decision-making process' below contains full information and guidance on this registration process. All applicants intending to submit a proposal are strongly advised to read this section carefully. **All applicants and co-applicants must register to use the Je-S system.**

### **Other collaborators (including consultants)**

It is possible to name other specific collaborators in the proposal - for instance public, private or NGO sector experts who could provide invaluable stakeholder input and advice to the project. These must be fully costed on the proposal and their role on the project must be made clear.

Consultants can also be included on a proposal, but clear justification must be provided to explain why a consultancy is the most appropriate way to staff this aspect of the project.

### **Studentships and visiting fellowships**

Doctoral students may be included on proposals, provided the research project duration is three years or more and the student will be based at an ESRC-accredited Doctoral Training Centre (DTC). Applicants who are considering including a doctoral studentship in their proposed research project should refer to the document 'How to include a grant-linked student' - available to download from the call webpage.

Visiting fellowships, both professorial and lecturer/researcher level, may also be included in a research project. In this case the proposed fellow working on the grant should be known and named on the proposal. A rationale for their role and contribution to the project must be included in the proposal.

### **Decision-making process and assessment criteria**

Proposals which are deemed to be within the scope of this call and meet the technical requirements for proposals will be peer reviewed by a pool of expert assessors. Applicants whose proposals are assessed as of sufficient quality to merit consideration by the Commissioning Panel will be given the opportunity to respond to reviewers' comments. The Commissioning Panel of academic and non-academic experts will then assess the proposals and make funding recommendations. Final funding decisions will be communicated to applicants in November 2015. The earliest start date for successful projects is from 1 March 2016.

Peer reviewers and the commissioning panel will be asked to comment on the following criteria when assessing proposals, and therefore applicants are advised to consider all these criteria in preparing their proposals. Assessors and panel members will consider whether proposals are of a world-class standard (being intellectually innovative, well-focused and methodologically sound), and whether the research has the potential to have a real impact on improving education outcomes in developing countries.

## **Research agenda**

- Is there a clear understanding of the issue to be addressed through this research, and is a strong case made for its relevance to the scope of the call? In particular, is a strong link made between the issue to be addressed and learning outcomes?
- Is the conceptual framework of the proposed research appropriate to address the issue?
- Does the proposed research embed consideration of equity as well as quality dimensions of education?
- Is there clarity and coherence in the research design between research questions, research methods and anticipated intellectual outcomes?
- Are the research questions clearly set out?
- Are the research methods clearly specified, appropriate to the questions set, and robust? Where mixed methods are used, are quantitative and qualitative methodologies effectively, rigorously and appropriately combined? Are issues of validity and reliability of data appropriately addressed?
- Does the proposal integrate adequate and appropriate analysis of gender and other structural inequalities?
- Do data management plans follow best practice, and adhere to ESRC data policy?
- Does data collection build on country data systems and/or secondary data sources where available, to reduce duplication and increase sustainability?
- Have appropriate ethical considerations been addressed in the proposal?

## **Project management**

- Are the project management plans and configuration of roles and responsibilities reasonable, appropriate and credible for the given project?
- Are the credentials of the investigators and host institutions appropriate to deliver the project?

## **Capacity-building**

- Are any identified capacity-building activities set out in relation to the core intellectual agenda of the research?
- Is there an understanding of the local research context, and have steps been taken to ensure the research programme does not undermine local research capacity?
- Where a proposal includes a linked doctoral student:
  - Does the proposal demonstrate sufficient evidence of an appropriate research environment and infrastructure for doctoral work?
  - Are the arrangements for the supervision of students adequate and appropriate (including the suitability of the proposed doctoral supervisor/s)?
  - Is the research conducted by a doctoral student a discrete piece of work which is clearly of a standard to be submitted as a doctoral thesis, but will also produce synergy and add value to the main research project?

## **Research impact**

- Does the project have real potential for impact on education delivery in LICs?

- Does the 'Pathways to Impact' statement present a set of clear, well-funded activities for genuine collaboration with a variety of stakeholders throughout the life of the project?
- Does the proposal appropriately address demand for research, either by demonstrating effective demand from policymakers and other stakeholders beyond the academic community, or by setting out a feasible strategy to raise awareness of the significance of the research among relevant stakeholders?
- Is there appropriate analysis of who the stakeholders/potential users of research outputs are and the processes and means for engaging with them at all stages of the research process?
- Are there clear plans to make findings available to target audiences and to maximise research uptake?
- For grants focused on government systems (rather than non-state providers), to what extent have government partners and policymakers been involved in the design of the research, and what is their role in future activities?

### **Value for money**

- Is the budget appropriate and reasonable for the proposed programme of work, including all staff costs, travel, field work, data collection, data analysis tasks and research uptake activities?
- Are there any components of the project costs which appear excessive? (Estates and indirect costs should not be commented on)
- Is the amount of senior staff time on the project appropriate?
- If consultancy costs are claimed, is this the most appropriate mechanism of staffing and are the rates reasonable?

### **Research partnerships**

- Are proposed academic and non-academic partnerships or collaborations appropriate for the proposed research?
- Are the roles and responsibilities of partners and collaborators clear, justified, proportionate and balanced?
- Have all the partners been fully involved in the design of the research and do they have a clear and meaningful role in future activities?
- Have sufficient resources and time been allocated to ensure strong working partnerships across disciplines, organisations and geographic contexts?

## How to apply

Proposals **must** be submitted to Je-S by the call deadline **16.00 (UK time) on 14 May 2015**. Electronic acknowledgements will be sent to the principal investigator and submitting organisation.

All proposals must be submitted in English, costed in pounds sterling and made on the official Je-S proposal using the Research Councils Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system. NB: Proposals can **only** be accepted by electronic submission through the Je-S system (<https://je-s.rcuk.ac.uk/jes2webloginsite/login.aspx>).

Application forms are available on the Je-S system. The proposal has two elements: an online form requesting key information; and a series of mandatory attachments, including the Case for Support, Pathways to Impact, Justification of Resources and CVs for all named individuals, which are to be completed offline and uploaded as (preferably PDF) attachments in Je-S. Generic guidance on the completion of the structured boxes and sections of the form is available from the Je-S Help screens, which can be found at the top right hand corner of each Je-S screen.

The Case for Support contains the substance of the research proposal, and it is essential that a coherent overview of the proposed project is presented addressing the intellectual and academic case, potential for impact on the education and development agenda, any collaboration or partnership configuration, and an appropriate management plan.

Applicants **must** ensure that they have read and complied with the call-specific guidance set out in the 'Je-S Guidance Notes for Applicants' which is available to download on the call web page, as well as the programme criteria set out in this call specification. **Where programme-specific guidance provided in these call documents differs from generic Je-S help, the programme-specific guidance should always be followed.** Care and attention must be given to completing the proposal correctly and complying with all technical requirements. **Proposals that are not completed correctly may be rejected by the ESRC office.**

In order to use the Je-S system, **principal investigators (PIs) and the host organisation** need to register on the system. Registration of both the PI's organisation and their own details must be completed before the proposal can be formally submitted to the ESRC.

When setting up a Je-S account your institution will be asked to nominate **an approver** and **a submitter** whose roles are to check and then submit the proposal to ESRC.

The final submission process is the responsibility of the host institution, and the ESRC cannot accept responsibility for any delays which may occur. It is recommended that applicants submit in good time before the call deadline at this stage. We strongly advise applicants to confirm with their relevant administrator that the proposal has been submitted successfully to the ESRC.

## Contact details

The ESRC is responsible for the implementation and administration of the joint ESRC-DFID calls. Jointly funded by the two sponsoring agencies, a secretariat has been established at ESRC to develop and manage the programme policies and procedures.

All queries or comments about this call should be addressed in the first instance to the ESRC-DFID email address [eddev@esrc.ac.uk](mailto:eddev@esrc.ac.uk) Any enquiries may also be addressed to:

- Daniel Sweet  
Telephone: +44 (0)1793 413047
- Nathalie Kopecky  
Telephone: +44 (0)1793 413125

The Je-S Helpdesk may be contacted by email ([jeshelp@rcuk.ac.uk](mailto:jeshelp@rcuk.ac.uk)) or telephone (+44 (0)1793 444164) and is staffed Monday to Friday 9.00 to 17.00 (UK time, excluding public and other holidays).

Further details on the programme are available at [www.esrc.ac.uk/eddev](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/eddev)