# ESRC/DFID Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme 2016 call

# Frequently Asked Questions – updated: 28/04/2016

This document sets out answers to a range of questions which potential applicants may have. It may be updated while the call is open to elaborate or supplement answers, in response to received queries. However, the guidance is a supplement to, not substitute for, the detail provided in the call specification and associated guidance documents. These are available at the call webpage at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016

# Questions on who can apply to the call

### Can one organisation or individual submit multiple proposals?
Organisations can submit multiple proposals. An individual can also be involved in more than one bid (time commitments on grants permitting), but can only be principal investigator (PI) on one proposal for each call. Each proposal can only have one PI, but the number of co-investigators is not restricted.

### Can any organisation submit a proposal?
The principal investigator (PI) **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. The organisation does **not** need to be based in the UK, and we strongly encourage proposals led by researchers based in developing countries, as well developing country co-investigators.

Eligibility checks will be applied to all proposals on receipt at ESRC. The pool of expert assessors and commissioning panel will also be asked to comment on the appropriateness of the host institution's credentials for the proposed research. If you are unsure about your organisation's eligibility, please consult the scheme secretariat. Proposals which are not from a credible research organisation will be rejected by the ESRC office.

### What is Research Council Due Diligence and when is it needed?
Most UK higher education institutions and some other independent UK research organisations (IROs) are already recognised institutions, and hence eligible to hold Research Council grants.

Most non-UK institutions and some UK organisations will not be recognised to hold UK Research Council grants. Any researcher from such an institution applying under this programme as a PI should note that their institution will have to complete financial and capability due diligence checks before any grant can be confirmed. This process can take between two to three months to complete. When setting proposed start dates, applicants in host organisations not recognised to hold UK Research Council grants should therefore, allow a minimum of two months beyond the earliest grant start date for the due diligence process to be completed.

The due diligence process requires organisations to provide full documentation to give assurance of:
- 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

Please note that this process will only be undertaken if the proposal is successful. UK organisations should follow guidance in the ESRC Research Funding Guide (available at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-funding-guide) for IRO status.

**Does an individual need to be registered with Je-S to apply if their institution is already registered?**
Yes, both an individual and their institution must be registered with the Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system to submit a proposal. Applicants can now self-register themselves and their organisation. Information on how to do this is set out in the 'Je-S Guidance for applicants' available at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016. All principal and co-investigators need to have a Je-S account before they can be added as applicants.

**How can I find out if my university is accredited by ESRC to support associated studentships?**
The list of Doctoral Training Centres, and their associated pathways, accredited by ESRC to support PhD students can be found at:

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/skills-and-careers/studentships/doctoral-training-centres/

Please see separate guidance document 'How to include an associated student' available at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016. These rules must be adhered to.


# Questions on what can be applied for in this call

**How much can be applied for in this call?**
Proposals are invited for projects with a full Economic Cost (fEC) value of between £200,000 and £700,000. The fEC cost is the total cost of the project, not the contribution paid by the ESRC and DFID. This call is subject to the fEC funding model, which applies differently to UK and non-UK institutions. Further guidance is provided in the document 'Costings guidance for non-UK institutions and partners' available at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016.

It is important to note that if the full economic cost of your proposal falls outside of these upper and lower limits, your proposal will be rejected.

**How long can a grant last?**
This call allows proposals for projects lasting between 12 and 48 months in total. What the research is focused on and how it will be conducted will determine the most appropriate length for a grant. There is no prescribed relationship between the amount of money applied for and the length of the grant: applicants may apply for whatever balance between time and funds is most appropriate for their proposed research. However, value for money will be a criterion of assessment in reaching funding decisions.

**What indirect costs can be charged by non-UK institutions?**
For non-UK institutions indirect costs may be charged on staff salary and other staff-related costs (ie statutory contributions analogous to UK National Insurance or Superannuation contributions). Indirect costs may not be charged on non-staff related direct costs, eg equipment, consultancies and conferences as well as travel and subsistence costs. The following **rates** for indirect costs should be applied:

- For applicants from developing countries[1], up to 50 per cent of staff salary and other staff-related costs.
- For applicants from developed countries, up to 20 per cent of staff salary and other staff-related costs.

Indirect costs cover the following category of costs:

- Building and premises costs
- Basic services and utilities
- Any clerical staff and equipment maintenance or operational costs not already included under other cost headings
- Costs of the research organisation's administration such as personnel, finance, library and some departmental services.

Guidance on how to include such costs is included in the document 'Costings Guidance for non-UK institutions and partners' available at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016.

**As a non-UK applicant, what exchange rate should I use for the project budget?**
All costs should be in UK pounds sterling; there is no specific exchange rate that you must adhere to, but we would expect applicants to use a current exchange rate and note what this is within their Justification of Resources attachment for reference.

**Should inflation be included within the project budget?**
No, inflation costs must not be included within the project budget. All costs must be entered at the prices at the time of submission. Successful grants will have an allowance for inflation, calculated using standard indices.

**Can project management time and costs be included in the proposal?**
Yes, if this is appropriate for your proposal; you must justify time and cost within your proposal.

**Can I hire researchers in developing countries?**
Yes. The programme allows flexibility for you to configure research consortia in the most appropriate way for the proposed research.

**Can consultants be included in a project?**
Yes. However, it is recommended that a consultancy should not constitute more than 20 per cent of the cost of a project. Consultants should not be from any of the research organisations where principal or co-investigators are based. Clear justification should be provided for consultancy costs, and why the use of a consultant is appropriate and represents value for money.

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[1] See the OECD DAC list of ODA recipients effective from 01 January 2015: http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/documentupload/DAC%20List%20of%20ODA%20Recipients%202014%20final.pdf. For the purposes of this call 'developing countries' includes Least Developed Countries, Other Low Income Countries, Lower Middle Incoming Countries and Territories, and Upper Middle Income Countries and Territories.

**How would the ESRC view proposals where monies would be transferred to countries where there may be the risk of corruption or potential misuse of the funds?**

Where this is a possibility the proposal should explain what risk management strategies will be employed and what contingencies might be deployed. Issues such as this will be considered by reviewers and the commissioning panel on a case-by-case basis.

## Questions on general research eligibility

**Does the research have to have relevance to particular countries?**

Yes. Research funded through this call must generate knowledge specifically relevant to low-income countries and a select group of other priority countries (a list is available on the call webpage at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016. The aim is for a significant majority of funded projects to focus on low-income countries.

**Can research be focused on middle-income countries?**

Yes, but only if a clear and explicit case is made for how the research is relevant to one or more low-income countries. A general statement that the research is broadly relevant to low-income contexts, or that the area under study is similar to those contexts, is not sufficient. In addition, researchers focusing on middle-income countries also need to include clear plans within their Pathways to Impact to engage stakeholders in one or more low-income countries, normally at an early stage in the research.

**Are there certain types of research that are considered more suitable for this call?**

No. Proposals can be for fundamental or more applied research topics. What matters is that a clear case is made for the policy relevance of the proposed research. Research on one or multiple country contexts is also welcome – the important thing is that a clear case is made for the broader significance of the research for knowledge and policy development.

**How willing are the ESRC and DFID to take risks on research that may address contentious issues?**

We welcome research that challenges existing policy and practice assumptions, or which takes an innovative approach to addressing the scope and focus of the call. This includes encouraging interdisciplinary research and innovation where appropriate, which we recognise can be risky. However, the funders expect ethical considerations to be addressed by all proposals, including those addressing more contentious issues.

**Will the programme accept proposals which are linked to projects that have been funded by other organisations?**

Yes, although such proposals must be a discrete piece of work that can be judged on its own merits and does not duplicate previous work. It would be expected that in such instances applicants will demonstrate where there may be added synergies between the two projects.

**Is it possible to apply for funding from this call if a proposal builds on previous research?**

Yes, although it is important that the proposal still proposes new and cutting-edge research of the highest quality.

**Is it acceptable to include researchers from disciplines outside the social sciences?**
Yes, we are keen to encourage inter/multi-disciplinary working where it is appropriate to the research questions posed. However, to be eligible to apply to the programme at least 50 per cent of the proposed research must be within ESRC social science remit, see http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/applicants/proposal-classifictions-ESRC-disciplines.aspx.

**Do proposals have to be multi-disciplinary?**
No. Mono-, multi- and inter-disciplinary proposals are all welcome. What is important is that the disciplinary approach is appropriate to address the specific research questions.

Where research teams do cut across disciplines, it is important that enough time and resource are allocated to make sure that strong working partnerships can be built up and maintained, and that collaboration is meaningful and productive.

**Is it mandatory to have a developing country partner/co-investigator?**
No. However, we strongly encourage applicants to consider including developing country partners/ co-investigators, to maximise the impact of their research and build strong working partnerships in the countries of study.

Where there are international co-applicants, partners and collaborators, we recommend that all research partners should be fully involved in the design of the research, and their role in the execution and management of the project should be clear. Consideration should be given to outputs and impact plans, and developing country partners should be involved in these - ie in co-authoring papers, presenting at conferences and so on.

**What kinds of partnerships are allowed on a project?**
Any form of partnership is acceptable: co-investigators, collaborating partnerships, research fellows and so on. The specific requirements of the project are likely to determine the most appropriate partnership for your research.

**What can the roles and responsibilities of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) be on a project?**
NGOs can be involved in any way that is most appropriate to answer the research questions. It is entirely valid for them to play a research role **similar** to a PI or a Co-I, or to support aspects of the project through providing data, research staff or other expertise. However, many NGOs will not have sufficient research capacity to meet the Research Council recognition criteria, and therefore will not be eligible to be the grant-holding institution on a project (ie the PI). If this is the case, an NGO may wish to partner with a research organisation which does have this capacity, whilst still maintaining a clear and active role on the project as a partner or co-investigator, making a significant contribution to the conduct of the research.

## Questions on the specific thematic focus

**How does the call define 'learning' and 'learning outcomes'?**
We recognise that there are various ways to interpret 'learning' and 'learning outcomes'. This programme does not set a definition of or measurement tools for 'learning outcomes', but does expect research to focus upon 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.

Within these broad parameters, research funded through this call will be expected 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. Applicants are advised to give a clear indication of the understanding of learning outcomes underpinning their proposed research and proposals must explicitly set out how the accountability relationship explored is linked to learning outcomes. This link is expected to be central to the research.

### Does the call require a focus on a specific accountability relationship?
No. Research can focus on any accountability relationship relevant to raising learning outcomes. This can include between learners and teachers, but also education service providers (including public and private schools and universities as well as other forms of provision), politicians and policymakers (subnational, national and international), and citizens, households and communities.

### How does the call define 'education systems'?
We know that there are different and competing conceptual frameworks and models for defining and understanding education systems and how they function. Within this programme we do not endorse a particular conceptual model, and researchers funded through this programme may approach this issue from multiple perspectives. However, this programme is not directly focused on theorising education systems and their functioning as a whole. Rather it is focused on understanding how complex interactions between elements of the system, the context within which they are embedded and the dynamics operating within the system impact on the ability of education systems in developing countries to deliver raised learning outcomes.

### What levels of education can research focus on?
All levels and contexts of education provision from early childhood education to higher education are permitted in this call. The programme is particularly interested in formal education and where this is not the focus of proposals, a strong case must be made for how the research would have relevance to building understanding of formal education systems.

### Does the research have to focus on education interventions being run by the government or a large-scale private provider?
No. Research in this call must focus on education provision taking place *through* or *in conjunction with* government systems (at the national, regional or local authority level) or large non-state/private sector providers. This is to enhance opportunities for scale-up and to generate evidence about how learning outcomes are raised within education systems.

If research focus is on an education intervention that is not being run by the government, the proposal must clearly explain the links between the intervention and government education provision, and must demonstrate strong plans for future scale-up through partnership with the government/large-scale provider.

### Can the grant be used to fund or evaluate an education intervention?
No. The programme is not a source of funding for education interventions. It will also not fund project, impact or process evaluations of interventions that are not guided by social science-driven questions of broader relevance and applicability. If research is focused on a

particular pre-existing intervention, it must not simply assess if this is effective but why this is the case, and situate that assessment within a broader research and policy context.

## Questions on other aspects of proposals

**Do I have to include a stakeholder workshop?**
No, but we strongly recommend applicants consider including one in their projects. Details of this should be provided under the 'Impact summary' section of the Je-S form and should be costed into the project. If no workshop is planned, you are expected to explain the reason for this in your proposal.

**Should a project include an advisory panel or committee?**
If appropriate for the project, we would encourage applicants to consider including an advisory panel or committee on their grant. Their role and duties as well as justification of any costs requested in the budget will need to be set out in the proposal.

**Do I need to complete a Data Management Plan?**
Yes, if you are planning to generate data. It is a requirement of the ESRC Research Data Policy (http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-grant-holders/research-data-policy) that all applicants planning to generate data as part of their grant must include a Data Management Plan.

**I want to include a grant-linked PhD – do I need to name the student?**
No. A suitable PhD student to carry out the specified doctorate can be recruited once a grant has been made. However, the proposed PhD must be clearly defined within the Studentship Case for Support and a letter of support from the DTC director must be included with the proposal.

**Where can I find more on what 'impact' means in this call?**
Please refer to the Research Councils UK established definition of what we mean by impact (http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/innovation/impact/).

**Who should I provide a CV for in the proposal?**
Anyone who is named on the project should provide a two-side CV as an attachment.

**Do I need to provide a letter of support from a partner organisation?**
Only two kinds of letters of support are required:

- Letters confirming factors essential to the successful conduct of the research (eg confirming access to datasets, or confirming access to or use of facilities provided by named organisations). These must be dated within the last six months.
- Letters confirming the level of support (cash or in-kind) being provided to this specific proposal from another funding body or partner organisation.

If the research involves collaborating partners (eg business/ government/ third sector organisations), you should describe and explain their role and involvement in the research within your Case for Support. Letters of support from these partners are not a mandatory requirement, and should only be included where they add meaningfully to the information provided elsewhere.

## Questions about the assessment process

### What criteria will proposals be assessed against?
Assessors and panel members will consider whether proposals are of world-class standard (being intellectually innovative, well-focused and methodologically sound), the overall fit to the call and whether the research has the potential to have a real impact on improving education outcomes in developing countries. Further information regarding the assessment process and a full list of criteria can be found in the call specification available at
http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016

### Is there any weighting assigned to the assessment criteria for this call?
There is no specific weighting assigned to the assessment criteria. However, in all cases the primary criteria will be scientific excellence and the potential of the research to make an impact on policy and practice.

### Would the ESRC ask two project teams to work together if their proposals are found to be on very similar topics?
No, unlike some Research Councils we do not employ a 'synergy' process; the two proposals will be looked at separately. However, if both were successful we would encourage the PIs to explore the synergy between the two projects.

### Will there be an opportunity for the PI to respond to assessor comments?
Yes, applicants whose proposals are assessed as of sufficient quality to merit consideration by the Commissioning Panel will have the opportunity to respond to assessor comments before the panel meeting. You will receive notification of this via Je-S, and will be given five days in which to respond.

### What is the role of practitioners and policymakers in the review process?
Practitioners and policymakers will be involved in the second stage of the assessment process as members of the Commissioning Panel. A third of the panel will be drawn from the research user community. These members will be particularly important in providing assessment of the potential impact of projects.

### When will I find out the outcome of my proposal?
It is anticipated that all applicants will have been informed of the outcome of their proposals by end of April 2017.

## Other questions

### How can I find out what grants were funded through call 1(2013-14) and call 2 (2015)?
Call 1 (2013-2014) focused on system elements, and specifically on effective teaching while call 2 (2015) was focused on contextual factors, and specifically on three challenging contexts: urban slums, remote rural, and border cities. Therefore, although funded through the same programme the awards made across the three calls will have significantly different foci. The call 2 awards are in the process of being contracted and we hope to be in a position to announce these shortly. Details of the call 1 grants are available via the ESRC website –

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/international-research/international-development/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-in-education-systems-research-programme

**I have a question not answered in any of the call documents – who should I contact?**
The full specification and a range of supporting guidance documents are available at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/esrc-dfid-raising-learning-outcomes-call-2016

All queries about this call should be addressed in the first instance to eddev@esrc.ac.uk

Queries 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) or telephone (+44 (0)1793 444164) and is staffed Monday to Friday 09.00 to 17.00 (UK time, excluding public and other holidays).