

Review of ESRC-DFID Impact Support, Synthesis and Cohort Building Services for ESRC-DFID Joint Research Programmes

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Executive summary

The review

In mid-August 2019, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Department for International Development (DFID) commissioned a Leeds Beckett University (LBU) team to carry out a review of the effectiveness of support services to three ESRC-DFID research programmes: the Growth Research Programme; Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research; and Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems (RLO). The intensive review has focused on the impact, synthesis and cohort-building support to the research teams funded through these programmes, and their partners.

Background to the programmes and service support

In 2005, ESRC and DFID formed a Strategic Partnership for developing joint research programmes to provide a distinctive source of evidence for policymakers and others to address international development goals. Three ESRC-DFID joint programmes have been the focus for this review, each centred on low (and medium) income countries:

- The *Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research* (Joint Fund) with its first (of three phases) starting in 2006, and funding (to date) a total of 184 research projects and collaborations aimed at informing policy and practice to reduce poverty amongst the poorest people and countries globally.
- The DFID-ESRC *Growth Research Programme* (DEGRP) or 'Growth' Programme, funding 43 separate research studies since 2012 in four 'calls'. Most are also now concluded but with some additional follow-on funded activities to intensify impacts.
- The most recent *Raising Learning Outcomes Research Programme* (RLO) starting in 2014 and funding at present 31 grants from three annual calls and with further funding being agreed at the time of writing.

Three¹ specialised providers have been commissioned to provide support across these programmes (at different stages since 2012):

- The *Evidence and Policy Group* (EPG) which has operated since 2012 through the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) working only with the Growth Programme.
- The *Impact Initiative* operated since 2015 jointly by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre (REAL) at the University of Cambridge working across the Joint Fund and RLO.
- The *Programme Research Lead* (PRL) operated by a small team from St Anthony's College, Oxford, working with RLO only from 2017 to 2019.

The providers were variously tasked with supporting projects to strengthen non-academic impacts, cross-project synthesis and research cohort-building in low income countries in the global south. PRL focused only on scientific synergies² and that support was limited to RLO.

Review aims and approach

The review has focused on the effectiveness of this provision, and lessons to be learned for any future similar support of multi-grant research programmes. More specifically it looked at:

¹ A predecessor support programme, the Strategic Advisory Group, was set up for the Joint Fund in 2010, concluding its activities in 2013.

² At the start of its activities, EPG did provide embedded support for the Growth Programme on scientific synergies but this was discontinued to focus on impact support and evidence synergies.

- a) How appropriate are the design and implementation of these services, in achieving their shared objectives?
- b) What are the effective and ineffective aspects of these services in delivering their shared objectives?
- c) To what extent do services such as these add value?

To meet these needs, the review has used largely qualitative methods to provide an in-depth review of the experiences of funded research projects, partners and stakeholder, through:

- Documentary review and a range of interviews with funder's and each of the providers.
- A survey of lead contacts (Principal Investigators, PIs) with a smaller number of Co-Investigators (ColS), with a 51% response rate and low levels of response bias.
- In-depth interviews with selected researchers in 38 projects and including 59 individuals including PIs, ColS, southern researchers and in-country partners.
- In-depth interviews with selected national and international stakeholders.

To this evidence has been added a *benchmarking* review of parallel experiences of programmatic support in 11 similar research programmes.

Findings – design and implementation of services

The review has shown that the lack of concurrent roll out of research grants and impact services impaired awareness and early embedding of support among projects, especially in the Joint Fund. It has also shown:

- PIs, ColS, and their projects showed substantial diversity in their focus and characteristics, as well as in their support needs across their project lifecycles. This placed an emphasis on relationship building and developing a spectrum of responsive services to 'reach' and inform projects.
- Early, often provider-led, contact with grants at or close to inception appears to have greatest influence on subsequent engagement. However, this window of opportunity closes quickly as in-project and partnership demands accelerate for PIs and ColS.
- Pre-grant awareness of support was low, except where there were pre-existing working relationships, placing an early emphasis on building understanding of the support offer.
- In different forms, *participatory* and inter-project activity has encouraged greater take up than *passive* support services such as practice guides and other resources, although both have a role to play in providing lifecycle support to meet different needs.
- Web-based infrastructure is important as a cost-effective way of promoting activity and findings to a wider audience. This is also helpful for intra-programme and inter-project communications but with risks of over-reliance on wider knowledge exchange.

The review also showed that for reasons usually beyond providers' control, active engagement of, and capacity and cohort building of, Southern researchers is an identified weakness, with likely consequences for programme legacy. Here, providers have often struggled, for various reasons, to address the apparent over confidence in early design of programme support on PIs' ability to communicate information about support within projects.

For both EPG and the Impact Initiative, management arrangements between funder's and the individual providers have evolved and unlike those for PRL have been generally seen as effective. Collaboration between providers has also taken place but has relied mainly on informal arrangements which have been strongest where there were pre-existing working relationships.

Findings – service effectiveness

The evidence paints a generally positive picture of service effectiveness for EPG and the Impact Initiative. Taking account of the scale and diversity of the programmes, much has clearly been delivered which has been widely, if not universally, welcomed by service users. There is scope for future enhancement of effectiveness and where the evidence shows:

- Particular challenges arise from the great diversity across projects in both their focus and also their starting point on impact capability and the potential for effective use to contribute to programme goals. The spectrum approach to service delivery used by EPG and the Impact Initiative has gone some way to addressing these challenges and also changing demands across project lifecycles.
- Effectiveness may have also been held back by often persisting issues of constrained project-level awareness of the service scope and focus among some projects. This may originate from a mixture of lack of awareness or understanding of the support and its intent by some PIs, holding back their aspirations to engage.
- Service effectiveness has also been constrained for some projects by enduring, and probably inaccurate, views among some PIs that the specialised focus of their particular projects means the available support is unlikely to add value to their uptake or impact.
- A particular challenge to effectiveness has been limited engagement among southern-based teams and partners which stems largely from limited profiling by some PIs of the available support within teams. If the services are to be effective it would seem this is at odds with expecting all PIs to act as gatekeepers for awareness and access to support.

The most common constraint to service effectiveness has been unchanged low aspirations among some project leads to engage with the available services. The evidence shows that early and usually pro-active relationship-building by providers with such projects can have a transformative potential for raising their aspirations and motivations for use of support.

Findings – added value of services

The available evidence indicates that the services of EPG and the Impact Initiative were broadly effective in contributing to a range of improved outcomes for projects, and adding value to them. This was not the case for PRL which, in its short life, was less effective in facilitating or encouraging demonstrable *scientific* synergies in RLO. Other evidence shows:

- The contributions of support services, although modest for most projects, were most noticeable in relation to support for achieving early policy and practice outcomes, and in terms of inter-project networking and building capabilities for future impact potential.
- There have also been several 'high impact' projects where there was a demonstrable and acknowledged contribution to their successes from the support services; more such legacy examples are likely to emerge as longer term contributions emerge for instrumental and conceptual impacts on policy and practice.
- Events were found to be especially valued for their contributions particularly in facilitating networking and synergies across projects, although with some concerns about the optimal organisation and focus for events and especially an over-reliance on what was seen by some as an *Anglo-Saxon* focus for location, content and language.
- Services helped many grants to better communicate and disseminate their research to policymakers and with evidence of some clear successes for early research uptake for enhanced practice by local policy makers and practitioners.
- Both EPG and the Impact Initiative have been effective in facilitating join up and *in-working* cooperation between lead researchers across projects but are more constrained in facilitating *out-working* contacts, especially with local policy inter-locators and other in-

country stakeholders. Providers have had limited success in engaging local DFID offices to help fill this gap.

The evidence also suggested that there was greater scope for providers to work alongside PIs and CoIs to work to build support relationships with in-country project partners. These were felt to be often better placed to develop, and sustain, local 'user' relationships to foster practice and policy impacts in low income countries. This is dependent on PIs working more energetically and effectively to raise the profile of available support with Southern researchers and partners within projects.

Findings – comparative assessment (benchmarking)

Looking across other multi-grant research programmes, there has been a trend away from *devolved* individual grant support with a reliance on PIs and their teams to prioritise non-academic impacts. This trend has seen the evolution of more *distributed* and specialist programmatic support. As with the three programmes in this review, the distributed approach anticipates an active partnership between projects and specialist additional support through appointed service providers working across grants. Although the experiences of other multi-grant research programmes suggest there is no clear pathway, or single service delivery model, likely to fulfil the needs of very different programme contexts, they provide some important insights into what is more likely to work:

- Effective support is most likely to combine older forms of largely passive infrastructure- and 'opportunity'-based services with more recent emphases on active and differentiated support through project outreach.
- More pro-active support provides greater scope for providers to lead and mobilise engagement but at the cost of some independence of PIs in managing or directing these arrangements within projects.
- Broad aspirations for programmatic support need to be reflected in clear, realistic and tangible expectations of what can be achieved and demonstrated within programme contexts, timeframes and resources. This may help address a common underlying confusion between support aspiring to optimise *research uptake* or to facilitate achieved *research impacts*.
- Support services are effective where research-leads are incentivised to engage with them, and where this raises aspirations and addresses participation barriers. One successful incentive is the use of discretionary funding to support emerging and usually localised uptake opportunities. However, beyond this, current experience does not (yet) show a clear pathway for systemically incentivising projects to engage with support.
- Maturing, more complex and differentiated support models have cost consequences. This has widely increased tensions between resourcing and support effectiveness, with the consequence that uptake and impact support is commonly underfunded.

For commissioning purposes funder's often distinguish between support for impact, knowledge exchange and synergies, and capacity development. The benchmarking evidence suggests that unless well managed this can risk the necessary integration of these activities in programmatic support.

Lessons and implications

The review shows that the support arrangements across these three funded programmes have successfully tackled many of their delivery challenges and achieved much within the limits of available resources. Support achievements are difficult to attribute to specific services but remain tangible, if for most projects moderate, and may yet intensify. An important contribution legacy appears to be in raising PI and CoI confidence in strengthening

researchers' ability to work towards impacts although this may have yet to cascade down to many Southern researchers.

The review suggests that the model of external (to grants), distributed and specialist programmatic support is likely to better meet funders' needs for optimised impacts than fully devolved individual grant support. In the absence of counterfactual evidence, this remains a preliminary assessment, but it does take account of wider evidence on research uptake and impact achievements.

Challenges that remain for future service design and development need funder's to look at some of the specific suggestions for improvement emerging from this review but also to rethink some fundamental issues of expectations of them. These include the extent of PI discretion in engaging with support, strategic oversight and integration of provision, as well as who leads on profiling the support services within projects. The review also sets out a series of recommendations for how any future programmatic support could be enhanced.

Recommendations for service development, delivery and use

The recommendations of the review are aimed at intensifying the effectiveness of future similar programmatic support for: *Design and development* of programmatic support model and integrated services (1.1 to 1.8 below); and *Effectiveness* of service delivery, engagement and use (2.1 to 2.8 below). These are set out below and discussed in detail in the full report.

Recommendations for service design and development

Recommendation 1.1: *We recommend concurrent development and alignment of strategies for research investments and their programmatic support to ensure that start lags are eliminated. Procurement needs to anticipate the need for programmatic support investment and resources to be put in place ahead of the first project starts, including for the preliminary support infrastructure and lead staffing and with the capability of providing early engagement with start-up projects.*

Recommendation 1.2: *Where contracted provision involves more than one provider either in a consortia or multi-provider arrangements, robust formal arrangements should be mandated for inter-provider liaison meetings, appropriate co-ordination and additional joint-liaison reporting to funder's (through existing contract management arrangements).*

Recommendation 1.3: *A small and independent Strategy Advisory Group or similar body combining high-level academics and senior representatives of stakeholders should be appointed by funder's with an appointed chair supported by a small secretariat. The group will have agreed high-level reporting arrangements to executive manager(s) in funder's. Its terms of reference should provide for a strategic oversight role across the management and delivery of programmatic support and for establishing a legacy consistent with programme objectives. The group will meet on at least a bi-annual basis.*

Recommendation 1.4: *Prior to procurement of support provision, a theory of change (ToC) or similar model for the underpinning rationale for programmatic support should be developed, and tested with appropriate stakeholders. At a minimum this should set out working assumptions, and risks to, the impact mechanisms and transformations which support is anticipated to achieve, and the outcomes expected. The ToC should be provided to bidders for the procurement services, and a condensed version also to applicants for research funding.*

Recommendation 1.5: Project call documentation should establish the expectation that projects will engage early and appropriately through their project lifecycles with the available impact maximisation, knowledge exchange and collaborative support. This should be mandated in subsequent grant and provider contracts with a requirement to report on their engagement with the support service perhaps in 'Research Fish' submissions to ESRC.

Recommendation 1.6: The strategies for research investments and programmatic support need to be closely aligned. This will need to look at robust mechanisms for cohesive development, oversight and resourcing which reflects the scope for support providers to work with natural clusters of impact potential. This might be linked to the role of the Strategy Advisory Group, or a suitable strategy oversight group, which in multi-call programmes would also need to advise on changing demands on the support strategy and aspiration from, for example, new project selection and spread.

Recommendation 1.7: A layered monitoring evaluation and learning (MEL) strategy should be put in place at the start of programme support contracting, which provides robustly for both: i) an outputs-focused and comparative reporting framework to provide for consistent contractual management and performance tracking requirements; and ii) outcome indicators and a longer term measurement framework which provides for assessment of progression towards high level aspirations of support provision and programme legacy.

Recommendation 1.8: Funders' continuing review of programmatic support should provide for clear separation of monitoring and evaluation. This will require an independent and formative approach to evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of support with at least one interim and a final evaluation with both reviewing early and achieved outcomes and the 'trajectory' towards funders' longer term goals.

Enhanced effectiveness of service delivery and use

Recommendation 2.1: Future programme funding calls should build in a requirement for successful grant applicants to work with support providers to develop a clear and realistic Impact Pathway statement for research uptake and impact aspirations of their funded activities. This should be developed within 3 months of confirmation of grant and with projects encouraged to refine this throughout their project lifecycles to reflect changing opportunities and potential.

Recommendation 2.2: Providers should be mandated to adopt a chain approach to project-liaison, starting with PIs, but with the authority to also liaise directly with CoIs, where there are communications or engagement difficulties with PIs. Call documentation should acknowledge the planned chain approach.

Recommendation 2.3: Project award documentation should require all funded projects to appoint a specific nominated contact as the impact champion for that project and partnership. The appointee should not be the PI and where practicable would be a single or joint designation from Southern collaborators.

Recommendation 2.4: In parallel, funders should seek bid contact details for all proposed CoIs with this information updated for successful projects, to provide for a key-contact relational data-base across all projects. Support providers should be required to ensure this is kept up to date.

Recommendation 2.5: Programmes which have similar capacity and cohort-building intentions should place an explicit award requirement on PIs – or nominated CoIs - to act as an active conduit to CoIs and (Southern) researchers. This would be supported by active and direct proportionate measures by support providers, in addition to websites, to draw the

attention of grant collaborators to the activities and access opportunities, although engagement would still be expected to be mediated by PIs or their deputies.

Recommendation 2.6: Programmatic support specifications should require providers to work creatively and imaginatively to identify collaborative potential and to initiate targeted opportunities with PIs, CoIs and researchers, for cross-fertilisation within programmes. This might include facilitating collaboratively-orientated spaces such as 'sandpits' and learning labs. This should be appropriately resourced by funders and supplemented by a delegated provider authority to fast track responsiveness funds to cover engagement, transaction and travel costs for grants within these activities.

Recommendation 2.7: Programmatic support specifications should reflect the need for a broad and adaptive spectrum approach to the support offer underpinned also by robust project relationship building, operational management and review to ensure integration across multiple activities. Support user panels or similar arrangements should be built into management and review arrangements to support adaptive management across services.

Recommendation 2.8: Future development of research strategies which anticipate complex, multi-partner and cross-national collaborations should anticipate the need for a formative stage to building, or further developing, effective and equitable partnerships at project-level. This may take the form of either a pre-call development funding (where not all partnerships will subsequently be funded) or a formative stage for successful bids for research funds which is specifically geared at partnership formation. These stages will also be supported through programmatic support, which will include participatory events, advisory support and resources aimed at reflecting past good practice on building more equitable partnership arrangements consistent with delivering quality and impactful research.

Past assessments of other support activities have suggested effective support for impact optimisation, synergies and capacity building requires around 20 per cent of total programme funds to be allocated to programmatic support. This review suggests much has been achieved by both EPG and the Impact Initiative with funding well below that level. Nonetheless, taking forward the proposals set out here will have significant resource implications. Depending on how these are addressed, the review also recommends that funders look at how to optimally resolve the balance between research investment and the support needed for future multi-grant programmes to meet their aspirations, and better provide for programme legacy.