

AcSS response to UKRI announcement on funding research supported by Official Development Assistance

The Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS)* strongly urges the UK government to reinstate funding for UKRI's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), the Newton Fund and university QR funding for GCRF, to meet its existing commitments. It is vitally important to the UK itself that research and other activities already contractually agreed with underpinning funding from Official Development Assistance (ODA) continue, even before we consider their importance for the wider world.

We believe these cuts undermine the Government objective to seek a new role in global leadership and influence and new international economic partnerships. There is a high risk of loss of international trust and damage to bilateral relations resulting from the cancellation of this funding for agreed projects. Our reputation both as a leader of international science and as a reliable trading partner will suffer, and the losses will greatly outweigh the £125m of UKRI funding cancelled. While cancellation of future projects says something about the UK's priorities, cancellation of existing commitments says something even more profound about our international trustworthiness.

With national and regional governments, the World Bank, various UN Committees, and wider civil societies in the partner countries all involved in various GCRF project partnerships, as well as leading universities across the world, the impact on our reputation will be both extensive and profound. For the UK to be the partner that reneges on its existing funding commitments, when it has required international partner organisations to commit to significant set up costs and partial project funding in many cases, will be shocking to many.

The 'Newton Fund' and other schemes supported by the ODA funds bring hundreds of the research leaders of tomorrow from lower and middle income countries (LMICs) to the UK, at all levels of research and in all disciplines. These placements, also already agreed, are now at risk too. All those concerned about the UK's 'soft power' around the world should be deeply worried about this.

The GCRF projects also matter to the 'real world'. They address matters of global importance and many of the existing grants at risk of cancellation are notable because they bring STEM and the social sciences together to tackle issues linked to new technologies, climate change, sustainability and resilience. For example, such GCRF projects potentially at risk include: [stemming wildfires in Indonesia](#) with their impact on local health and global carbon emissions; [managing climate change in river deltas](#) where half a billion people currently live; [sustainable use of the ocean eco-system on which fishing communities around the world depend](#); and [poultry production in south and southeast Asia](#), with its profound effects on world health.

Other GCRF projects tackle societal issues of benefit both to (LMICs) and to the UK itself. For example, GCRF projects potentially at risk include: [research and evidence on security threats](#); [links between trade, development, and biodiversity](#); [water security and sustainable development](#); [preparedness for humanitarian crises and epidemics](#); [interventions to support African adolescents](#); and [better understanding and management of south-south migration](#).

For the UK and the international partners involved, the funding cancellation will affect thousands of jobs and thousands of careers – many of them early career scholars who are the life blood of the next generation of researchers, leaders and innovators. At a time when UK universities' international student intakes are responsible for [most of the £21 billion the UK gains in education-related exports](#), and when overseas students are actively being sought to replace declining numbers of EU students, the effect on the UK's global reputation in higher education is arguably another own-goal, both in narrow economic terms, and in longer-term reputational damage.

Finally, the cancellation of funding raises a question of trust *within* the UK. How can UK higher education institutions engage in future in good faith with government's medium and long-term strategies, some involving financial commitment and risks, when government has now decided that it can withdraw funding that has already been granted? This is a deeply disturbing precedent.

The Academy of Social Sciences therefore urges all the government departments involved – primarily the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Treasury, and BEIS – to reinstate ODA funding support for grant decisions already made. We believe they should also consider the issue of future ODA-subsidised funding. But avoiding immediate global reputational and real economic damage to the UK should be even more of a pressing concern to UK policy-makers.



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* The Academy of Social Sciences is the national academy of academics, learned societies and practitioners in the social sciences. Its mission is to promote social science in the United Kingdom for public benefit. The Academy is composed of approximately 1400 individual Fellows, 46 Member Learned Societies, and a number of affiliates. Academy Fellows are leading professional social scientists from academia and the public and private sectors.