

4 June 2021

## Submission to the Commons International Development Committee inquiry into the future of UK aid

### Key points

- Investing in R&D offers an effective way to maximise the impact of Official Development Assistance in its focus areas, and also supports the government's broader objectives to address global challenges and boost the UK's strategic advantage as a science superpower.
- Building scientific capacity around the world benefits everyone. Science is at the heart of many of the solutions we desperately need right now and global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change can only be addressed by working in global collaboration. Official Development Assistance for R&D plays a valuable role in building scientific capacity and champions for evidence around the globe that are vital to drive such collaboration. In addition, increased R&D capabilities play a key role in driving growth and improving quality of life.
- To realise the Prime Minister's intention for the UK to be a "science superpower" and to sustain strategic advantage through science and technology as outlined in the *Integrated Review*, the UK must build a strong and varied network of international science and technology partnerships with current and future science and technology powers. The long-term relationships built through ODA-supported scientific partnerships will be central to this.
- The recent cuts to ODA have had a considerable impact on ODA funding for international development research and have stopped a number of research collaborations and programmes in their tracks. This damages long-term relationships and sends a message that the UK is not a reliable partner in long-term science advancement – particularly unhelpful when the UK is at the helm of the G7 and COP 26 climate summit. Once lost, research capacity takes time to rebuild, or will be lost as the UK will cede ground to other countries.
- The UK government should give proper recognition to the value of research and development programmes within its overall ODA strategy as a means to both building scientific capacity which benefits all in the face of global challenges and delivering against the ambition of the *Integrated Review* more broadly. In delivering the strategy, the FCDO should manage the allocations process in such a way that gives confidence to international partners that the UK is a reliable and long-term partner.

### Introduction

1. The Royal Society is the National Academy of Science for the UK. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists working across a broad range of disciplines in academia and industry. The Society draws on the expertise of its Fellows and Foreign Members to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to UK, European and international decision makers.

2. The Society's fundamental purpose, reflected in its founding Charters of the 1660s, is to recognise, promote, and support excellence in science and to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity.
3. The Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's inquiry into the future of UK aid. This submission is informed by the Society's experience as a delivery partner in the allocation of ODA spend on R&D, as well as being guided by the Society's purpose to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity. It focuses on the importance of Official Development Assistance supporting investment in R&D capacity around the world in order to achieve its desired outcomes.

### **The value of ODA spend on Research and Development (R&D) activities**

4. Science is at the heart of many of the solutions we desperately need right now and global challenges can only be addressed by working in global collaboration. Our biggest challenges – including climate change, catastrophic biodiversity loss and building resilience for future pandemics – are shared, and to solve them the UK Government needs to work with science talent and champions for evidence around the globe.
5. Increased R&D capabilities are essential to both strengthen the resilience of developing countries and improve their ability to respond to crises, and can also play a key role in driving growth and improving quality of life for their citizens.
6. There is therefore a strong case for the UK to invest in growing scientific capacity around the world to benefit both UK citizens and people around the world. Official Development Assistance spent effectively is a key mechanism by which the UK can do this and investment in R&D is a key route by which Official Development Assistance can maximise its impact and deliver value for UK taxpayers.
7. For example, historical ODA investment to build scientific capacity in South Africa has supported greater research and innovation activity and developed, attracted and retained skilled people. Recent, highly competitive ODA programmes have supported excellent scientists who could choose to develop their career at institutions around the world to build an independent research career in South African institutions and to undertake cutting-edge scientific research<sup>1</sup>. This scientific capacity both benefits the local economy and its citizens, but has also ensured the rapid identification of a new variant of COVID-19 within South Africa, informing responses around the world<sup>2</sup>.
8. The UK government has recognised this in *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, which states an intention to “prioritise supporting health systems and access to new health technologies using our Official Development Assistance (ODA)”.
9. The *Integrated Review* places “sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology” as a central pillar of its strategic framework. This recognises the importance of building a strong

---

<sup>1</sup> Future Leaders – African Independent Research (FLAIR) Fellowships are delivered through a partnership between the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and the Royal Society and supported through the GCRF. They currently support 29 researchers in South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Kurt Wibmer is a FLAIR Fellow at the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, South Africa. Kurt's FLAIR research involves isolating and redesigning monoclonal antibodies for use in snakebite antivenoms. Kurt has been involved in identifying the South African Covid variant and work surrounding its properties with regards to how current therapeutics will interact with new variants.

and varied network of international science and technology partnerships. These should include both existing science and technology powers, but also those that will be the science and technology powers of the future.

### Process and impact of the changes

10. Following the Government's announcement of its intention to temporarily reduce ODA, from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income in the 2020 Spending Review<sup>i</sup>, on 26 January, the Foreign Secretary confirmed<sup>ii</sup> that the BEIS ODA settlement for 2021/22 is £706m – which includes BEIS ODA spend on both International Climate Finance and R&D - a reduction from £1,038m in 2020-21. The weight of the cuts to the BEIS ODA budget have fallen on R&D. Other government departments supporting R&D through ODA funds are also experiencing cuts<sup>iii</sup> and estimates place the total reduction in ODA funding for international development research between 2020-21 and 2021-22 at above £399m<sup>iv</sup>.
11. The Royal Society is one of several delivery partners for BEIS ODA R&D funding and has suffered cuts to its programmes. Royal Society programmes funded from the BEIS ODA budget are being cut by around 70%. Royal Society Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) funding has gone down from £25.1m to £8.1m (which is 67%).
12. These programmes rest on relationships that have taken many years to build. Stop-start investment is destructive as research projects can span decades or even lifetimes. Such deep and sudden cuts send a message that the UK is not a reliable partner in long-term science advancement across the globe. Such messages do not only impact on Governments but also on the reputation and relationships of organisations acting as delivery partners. The inability of delivery partners to deliver clear messages in a reasonable timeframe as a result of a lack of information from Government can be particularly damaging. This is unhelpful as we battle a once in a generation pandemic, and with the UK at the helm of the G7 and COP 26 climate summit. Global challenges such as these can only be addressed by working in global collaboration.
13. **Case study: Future Leaders – African Independent Research (FLAIR) Fellowships**  
These Fellowships, delivered through a partnership between the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and the Royal Society and supported through the GCRF, are for talented African early career researchers who have the potential to become leaders in their field. They provide the opportunity to build an independent research career in a sub-Saharan African institution and to undertake cutting-edge scientific research that will address global challenges facing developing countries.

Following the cuts to ODA funding, of 90 promising researchers, selected for being future leaders in their fields, only 30 will remain funded for one more year only. These are researchers working on issues such as global health and climate change.

The first 2019 cohort of Flair fellows, who were hoping to have extensions to their awards confirmed at the end of March, will not be issued with renewals. The Society planned to fund these promising scientists' careers for 3 more years and give them a solid foundation from which to grow themselves and their teams into future research leaders in their fields.

The Society is also unable to offer funding to the scheme's new intake for 2021, who have just undergone a rigorous and competitive interview process, and can no longer fund the 2020 cohort beyond this last year of funding.

14. The UK government should give proper recognition to the value of research and development programmes within its overall ODA strategy as a means to both building scientific capacity which benefits all in the face of global challenges and delivering against the ambition of the *Integrated Review* more broadly. In delivering the strategy, the FCDO should manage the allocations process in such a way that gives confidence to international partners that the UK is a reliable and long-term partner.

For further information, please contact [public.affairs@royalsociety.org](mailto:public.affairs@royalsociety.org)

---

<sup>i</sup> The National Academies wrote to the Foreign Secretary in December 2020 to highlight our concern over the potential impact of these cuts on R&D <https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2020/letter-from-presidents-of-the-national-academies-to-foreign-secretary-proposed-cuts-to-oda-funding/> [accessed 31 March 2021]

<sup>ii</sup> HM Government (2021) *Written Ministerial Statement UIN HCWS735* <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2021-01-26/hcws735>

<sup>iii</sup> Research Fortnight (2021) *Budget for NIHR global health schemes drops 28%* [Research Professional - Budget for NIHR global health schemes drops 28%](#) [accessed 31 March 2021]

<sup>iv</sup> Research Fortnight estimates that the total reduction in ODA funding for international development research between 2020-21 and 2021-22 now sits above £399m, Research Fortnight (22 March 2021) *Exclusive: ten more UK R&D funders have aid budgets slashed* <https://www.researchprofessional.com/0/rr/news/uk/politics/2021/3/Exclusive-analysis--ten-more-R-D-funders-have-aid-budgets-slashed.html#sthash.Ja8vwH0l.dpuf> [accessed 1 April 2021]