LSTM
CAPACITY RESEARCH UNIT

Strengthening Research Capacity in Low & Middle Income Countries

Capacity Research Unit (CRU) at LSTM: pioneering methods and approaches for RCS

CRU specialises in the science of RCS. We are expanding practical and theoretical knowledge about what works, and does not work, for RCS in LMICs. We focus particularly on strengthening capacity for research and laboratory systems and have developed an innovative and robust approach for designing, tracking and evaluating RCS programmes which works in different settings. This approach includes two pioneering steps, which are often missing in RCS programmes:

• defining the RCS goal and the pathways for change with all partners involved in the RCS programme, and

• describing the 'optimal' capacity needed to achieve the goal, based on best evidence from the literature and consultations with experts. This provides a 'benchmark' and indicators against which to assess baseline capacity and to measure and track change.

By applying this approach to diverse RCS programmes across LMICs, we have identified areas that are important for RCS programmes that target universities or research institutions (see Section 3 above).

We work closely with grant makers and review panels, using qualitative research to help them improve grant making and grant management processes. We feedback research data from site visits and consultations grant makers and RCS implementers so they can adjust and improve their programmes in real-time.

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Lessons and good practice examples for grant makers

Introduction

Strengthening capacity for research in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) is a long-term and complex process that requires regular input at multiple levels (individual, institutional and environmental). This note outlines research capacity strengthening (RCS) lessons and good practice examples emerging from experiences and literature on the science of RCS.

The Capacity Research Unit at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine specialises in the science of RCS. This note is designed to support organisations and individuals involved in the design and awarding of RCS-related grants.

Award design stage

- Ensure one or more participants in the award-design stage have adequate RCS expertise (i.e. they should have detailed knowledge of RCS theory and literature as well as practical experience in RCS implementation in LMICs).

- Shared principles of RCS should be identified and agreed by all stakeholders involved in design stage1.

- The overall RCS goal and objectives should be identified and agreed by all stakeholders involved in design stage and stated in the call for proposals.

- Consider use of an award mechanism that allows RCS goals and objectives to be appropriately aligned with existing capacities of potential LMIC partners (i.e. existing capacity varies widely across LMIC research institutions and flexibility in investment, and expected outcome, may need to be aligned accordingly).

- Ideally, specific awards to support RCS in especially low capacitated LMIC institutions could be considered.

- Maximise opportunities for RCS learning and evaluation and be explicit about how learning and evaluation appropriate to RCS activities (i.e. complex, non-linear interventions) can be built into individual grants or across the award scheme as a whole.

- Develop clear RCS assessment and weighting criteria for reviewers and panel members that take account of the agreed principles, goals and objectives. Requiring applicants to provide evidence of senior management support from partner institutions, as well as a plan for integrating proposed RCS activities within institutional systems, may enhance RCS outcomes and sustainability.

- Ensure consistency about RCS across scheme notes, applicant information and panel guidance documents.

[1] E.g. ESSENCE (2016). Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation framework for Research Capacity Strengthening. ESSENCE Good Practice Document Series.

Information provided for applicants

- Design succinct application form with clear guidelines on how to complete the RCS component of the form and a description of the RCS assessment criteria

- Provide a definition of RCS and outline the RCS principles, goal and objectives of the award

- Provide links to RCS good practice resources

- Ensure any expectations for embedded learning and evaluation, or participation in award-associated learning and evaluation, are clearly communicated in the call for proposals and reporting requirements. This may include exemplars of potential learning and evaluation approaches appropriate to complex, non-linear RCS interventions

Award making stage:

- Ensure all review panel members have a common understanding of the shared RCS principles, goal and objectives, the associated assessment criteria and their weighting (through for instance a briefing before the panel meeting starts)

- Follow a structured format for discussing each application to encourage consistency by panel members and external reviewers in applying (weighted) assessment criteria and in considering the RCS goal and objectives of the grant

- Ensure RCS expertise in panel, as described above

Post award:

- For large grants, with multiple award recipients, consideration could be given to hosting RCS 'good practice' meetings with awardees prior to dispersal of funds. Early-stage awardee meetings may also present an opportunity to facilitate RCS collaboration across award holders and to develop/implement cross cutting RCS learning and evaluation programmes

- Ensure clarity with awardee institutions on the level and uses of overhead payments to support RCS activities. Encourage the use of some overhead funds to support institutional investment in research management and support