
ACBI Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning Bulletin

Strengthening institutional capacity

Design and management of consortia-based research programmes

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The Royal Society-FCDO Africa Capacity Building Initiative (ACBI) ran for 10 years and was conceived and designed with the dual purpose of generating world-class research in natural sciences and strengthening research capacity¹. To facilitate monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) of the capacity strengthening aspects of ACBI, a dedicated research team from the Centre for Capacity Research (CCR) at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine² was embedded across the programme at the interface between, but independent of, the consortia and the Royal Society management team. Having four institutions involved in each ACBI consortium meant that each was administratively manageable without being unwieldy. In this bulletin we present the lessons from ACBI about the design and management of consortia-based research programmes.

Strengthening institutional research systems is essential for development and positively impacts on the research environment and culture for all research within an institution. Research consortia are increasingly led by low- and middle-income country institutions and are a common mechanism for simultaneously conducting research and strengthening institutional research capacity. Consortia can plug gaps in their member institutions' research systems, and they provide opportunities for training, for sharing and enhancing access to resources, and for fostering new networks and collaborations.

Programme design and start up

Provide networking grants prior to the main programme call

Prior to the ACBI programme the Royal Society provided competitive 'networking grants'. These enabled researchers and institutions to establish new and strong partnerships in preparation for applying to the ACBI scheme. These were highly valued and were frequently recommended to be included in future capacity strengthening programmes.

Make expectations about the institutional research capacity strengthening component explicit

Research by CCR revealed that the panel members did not have a consistent understanding about the concept of research capacity strengthening and lacked guidance about the weighting and criteria to be used for assessing the research capacity strengthening component of applications especially in relation to institutions' research systems³. It is important for such panels, and for those applying for funding, to have clear criteria against which the research capacity strengthening components of applications will be assessed.

Initially there was also misunderstanding among some consortium leaders about what research capacity strengthening meant and entailed. Some thought it was about providing PhD scholarships and training workshops, and several consortium leaders were unaware of the expectations to also strengthen institutions' research systems and cultures. Communicating to applicants, selection panels and awardees that research capacity strengthening is a priority and emphasising the importance of focussing on institutional systems, is therefore important to avoid misaligned expectations.



The research capacity strengthening component of the programme and its relative importance compared to the research activities, needs to be made explicit from the start to everyone involved. This includes in the call for applications, to panel members selecting applications for funding, to those applying for the scheme and to all those involved in the successful consortia.

¹<https://royalsociety.org/grants-schemes-awards/grants/africa-capacity-building/>

²<https://www.lstmed.ac.uk/projects/africa-capacity-building-initiative-acbi-monitoring-evaluation-and-learning>

³Gregorius S, Dean L, Cole DC and Bates I. The peer review process for awarding funds to international science research consortia: a qualitative developmental evaluation [version 3; peer review: 2 approved]. F1000Research 2018, 6:1808. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.12496.3>

If consortia are to undertake activities to strengthen their institution's research systems it is important to involve, alongside researchers and laboratory scientists, senior 'influencers' from their institutions (e.g. vice chancellor, research managers) and keep them updated about progress. These individuals are able to mobilise additional resources, to advocate for change at multiple levels and can be instrumental in maximising the impact and ensuring the sustainability of any capacity gains.



Good practice

Involve 'influencers' from consortia's member institutions closely in the programme since they can facilitate and sustain capacity gains.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Consortium leaders, while having expertise in their research areas, do not generally also have the knowledge, skills or time to systematically assess the strengths and weaknesses of institutions' research systems, to develop and implement action plans to address any gaps, and to track progress. To maximise learning programmes need to ensure that such expertise is budgeted for and included at the programme level.



Good practice

Ensure that each consortium has a plan for strengthening research capacity of institutions as well as individuals which is based on a systematic assessment, and that progress is measured and reported against meaningful indicators.

It took around 18 months for consortium leaders to fully understand the roles and responsibilities of the funders (i.e. FCDO), the programme management team (i.e. the Royal Society) and the MEL team (i.e. CCR) and their relationships to each other. Better communication from the start about everyone's roles and responsibilities, and their contributions to achieving the programme's goals, could reduce this time.



Good practice

Clearly communicate the responsibilities and relationships of all the key players, and the programme's monitoring, evaluation and learning plan from the onset so consortia are aware of what to expect in terms of data collection, its purpose, and how these data will be used.

The role of CCR in leading the embedded monitoring, evaluation and learning project within ACBI, and the regular feedback loops to managers and consortium leaders, was described as 'invaluable' by the Royal Society programme management team and is recommended as a model for similar programmes in the future. CCR's research was planned in two phases: phase one focused on understanding the priority capacity gaps and phase two explored the under-researched aspects of research capacity strengthening of the PhD student's experiences and how to enhance laboratory capacity for research. This phased approach enabled the programme to be responsive since the phase two topics were based on data and needs identified during phase one. CCR's role also involved bringing relevant lessons from its involvement in other large research programmes to improve ACBI and visa versa.



Good practice

Programmes will benefit from embedding a team with expertise in strengthening research capacity - especially institutions' research systems - from the outset. Such teams can provide evidence-based advice to consortia, provide anonymised feedback to programme managers, share good practices and learning across and beyond the consortia, and guide adjustments to optimise the programme's capacity strengthening components.

Programme and consortium management

Dealing with tensions is key to managing consortia and trade-offs may be made which are detrimental to capacity strengthening aims. A recent in-depth study of these tensions⁴, which drew data from three large Africa-based consortia, has developed an evidence-informed framework to support decision-making in consortia to help optimise research capacity gains. The study proposes that all management processes (at consortium and programme level) should be orientated towards capacity strengthening, because engaging in these processes can be capacity strengthening mechanisms for the individuals and institutions within consortia. Knowing that capacity strengthening is a priority, and will be evaluated, will help consortium leaders decision-making when managing the tensions that inevitably arise.

⁴Tagoe, N., Molyneux, S., Pulford, J. and Kinyanjui, S., 2022. Consortium management structures, processes, and approaches: The DELTAS Africa example. Wellcome Open Research, 7(139), p.139. <https://wellcomeopenresearch.org/articles/7-139>



Orientate all management processes (at consortium and programme level) towards capacity strengthening and provide opportunities for consortia members to engage in these processes.

Manage power relations and build trust

Unequal power dynamics were an ongoing tension for ACBI and occurred between UK and African partners, and also among African partners. They were particularly apparent in relation to financial issues. In ACBI, funds were assigned to the UK institutions who then transferred them to African institutions. While some African institutions thought this demonstrated a lack of trust in their capabilities, others preferred this model because it could be more efficient than their own institution's systems. The Royal Society management team provided substantial individualised support to institutions, including through on-site visits, to help them meet the financial requirements of the grant.



Tailor financial arrangements according to the needs and capabilities of the recipient institutions and invest in strengthening the financial management systems of weaker institutions. Enhance trust by ensuring that all partners have equitable opportunities to manage finances, recognising that for some African partners meeting 'due diligence' requirements will require flexibility and provision of additional support and capacity strengthening.



ACBI award holders' meeting in Senegal, 2018

Photo credit: Royal Society

The site visits, regular calls and discussions by the ACBI programme management team helped enhance communication with consortia's institutions, resolve issues and establish trust. The Royal Society, FCDO and CCR coordinated their visits to ACBI's African institutions to make them as equitable as possible. These visits were highly valued by all those involved because they helped to solve problems, enhanced understanding about what worked well (or not) and the challenges faced by institutions, and helped build connections and trust with the consortia members and institutions. Feedback from the institutions also resulted in programme adaptations.



Face-to-face visits, regular communications, appreciation of different contexts and challenges, and responsiveness to feedback are all important ways for management to engender trust and resolve tensions, and make the programme more effective.

Promote multi-disciplinarity

Consortia are an effective mechanism for exposing research teams to other disciplines which is important for promoting appreciation and respect, and for fostering more innovative, effective collaborations in the future. Enhancing cross-disciplinary research relationships takes time and effort especially at start up; strategies on how to do this have been published⁵. Though all the ACBI consortia were doing natural sciences research, the breadth of topics made it challenging for the programme managers to find cross-consortia scientific connections, but everyone could engage in discussions about research processes, environments and culture.



Plan strategies, and adequate time and budget, to provide opportunities for interacting with other research disciplines within and among consortia.

⁵Ding, Yan; Pulford, Justin and Bates, Imelda (2020) 'Practical actions for fostering cross-disciplinary global health research: lessons from a narrative literature review'. *BMJ Global Health*, Vol 5, Issue 4, e002293.

Plan for sustainability

Studies have shown that it can take 5-10 years to embed and sustain successful project-related improvements⁶. Since ACBI was a 10-year programme, the funders and programme managers needed to be flexible. The programme needed to evolve in response to changes in context, including the COVID pandemic, to political and financial perturbations in the UK and consortia's countries, and to feedback from consortium members and CCR. Some consortia members perceived this flexibility and the resulting changes, as deviating from the programme's initial goal and objectives. The long timescale and CCR's embedded MEL activities – which were unusual and experimental – enabled ACBI managers to not only strengthen research capacity across the consortia but also to put in place plans and tools to sustain these changes. These included support for identifying gaps and skills needed, creating 'communities' across and beyond consortia (e.g. for laboratory technicians) and novel agreements about hosting and maintaining equipment within African institutions.



It takes 5-10 years for projects to embed and sustain improvements but very little research is available on strategies to achieve this in relation to research capacity. More investment is needed for research on strengthening the research capacity of institutions and how to sustain any capacity gains.

⁶Bates I, Taegtmeier M, Squire SB, Ansong D, Nhlema-Simwaka B, Baba A, Theobald S. (2011) Indicators of sustainable capacity building for health research: analysis of four African case studies. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 9(1), 14



Researcher Profile

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About the Centre for Capacity Research

The Centre for Capacity Research specialises in the science of research capacity strengthening – a process of individual and institutional development leading to higher levels of skills and greater ability to perform useful research. The centre is a global leader in advancing evidence-informed capacity strengthening practice in low- and middle-income countries, through:

- Conducting high quality, implementation focused capacity strengthening research
- Fostering a global community of capacity strengthening scientists with equitable low- and middle-income country participation
- Sharing learning and advocating for evidence-informed capacity strengthening practice

The Centre for Capacity Research retains a broad interest in capacity strengthening initiatives of all types within a low- and middle-income country contexts, including a speciality in laboratory strengthening.

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