




Health Systems Research Initiative (HSRI) foundation grant

Opportunity status:	Open
Funders:	Medical Research Council (MRC)
Co-funders:	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Wellcome, in collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
Funding type:	Grant
Total fund:	£700,000
Maximum award:	£200,000
Publication date:	29 January 2021
Opening date:	N/A
Closing date:	To be confirmed

Last updated: 12 March 2021

Start application

 This call has temporarily been suspended please refer to: [UKRI required to review Official Development Assistance funding](#) for further information.

Apply for funding for research to improve health systems in low and middle-income countries (LMICs). This can be:

- an exploratory, stand-alone study
- pilot or feasibility work that leads to a large research project in future.

This funding is not for disease-specific research.

You must be based at an eligible research organisation in either the UK or an LMIC.

We'll fund:

- UK research at 74% of the full economic cost
- LMIC research at 100% of the full economic cost.

You can include indirect costs in your proposal.

Your project can be up to two years long.

[Open all](#)

Who can apply

Where the research can take place

Studies funded through this scheme should be based in LMICs, excluding the exceptions listed below.

World Bank definitions of low and middle income economies can be found at [Development Assistance Committee list of official development assistance recipients \(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development website\)](#).

Exceptions: please note that from 2020 to 21 our partnerships with China and India have a renewed focus.

Applications involving China or India must have global or regional development impact as the primary objective, with local or national impacts within China or India as secondary objectives.

Applicants working in India or China who wish to apply are strongly advised to contact the office for guidance as early as possible.

Who can apply

This call is open to and particularly encourages researchers to apply from LMICs as well as the UK.

If an application is UK led, there must be clear partnership with, and scientific leadership from, the countries where the project will take place.

Principal investigators

This scheme is open to principal investigators who are employed by eligible research organisations (ROs) based in LMICs where the work will take place. It is also open to principal investigators who are employed by an eligible UK RO.

Applicants based in China or India are not eligible to be the principal investigator of an application to this call but are welcomed as international co-investigators within proposals.

Eligible UK ROs include UK higher education institutions, research council institutes, and eligible independent research organisations. For further details read [UKRI eligibility](#).

For researchers based in LMICs, eligible ROs include higher education institutions and non-profit research institutions. If the application is submitted by an LMIC RO, the primary headquarters of that RO must be in one of the LMIC countries where the research will take place.

This means that the RO sponsoring a principal investigator must be legally registered in the UK or in a LMIC and the principal investigator must be employed by the RO that is hosting the research.

ROs based outside the UK will be asked to complete additional eligibility and financial checks before an award is offered, and awards will be dependent on satisfactory completion of those checks and ongoing monitoring.

MRC units and institutes can apply to this call. The usual rules for funding grants to MRC units and institutes will apply. If you are based at an MRC unit or institute, please contact your local MRC research support office for further information.

It is not permitted for the same person to be a principal investigator on more than two proposals submitted to this call.

Co-applicants and collaborators

The nature of this scheme means that we would expect applicants to be predominantly based in LMICs.

Funding for co-applicants and collaborators in other regions can be requested, but we would expect that the majority of funds would support the costs in the LMIC where the research will be conducted.

Investigators employed by an institution in China, India or a high-income country outside the UK cannot be a principal investigator on a proposal.

They can be a co-investigator. They are expected to make a significant contribution to their own research costs, including covering their own overheads.

Institutional support

Support will be conditional on all required ethical, legal and regulatory approvals being obtained before the research commences.

Please note that ethics approval should be obtained from a UK ethics committee as well as in any countries hosting the grant.

Resubmissions

We do not typically accept resubmissions of proposals that have already been considered under this scheme. If you have substantially changed a previous proposal and wish to discuss whether it might be eligible, please contact HSRI@mrc.ukri.org.

What we're looking for

Objective

The purpose of this scheme is to provide funding for the best proposals to generate new knowledge to strengthen and improve health systems in LMICs.

The programme's aims are to fund methodologically rigorous, high-quality interdisciplinary research that will:

- generate evidence on:
 - the structure and dynamics of health systems
 - how to strengthen and improve health systems for people living in LMICs through the delivery of evidence-based interventions or structural changes (for example, strengthening governance, management, health workforce or supply chain)
- provide evidence that is of direct relevance to decision makers and practitioners in the field, linking health systems with defined outcomes (for example health, confidence or financial protection)
- demonstrate an appreciation of current theories and frameworks in health systems research or other social or political science theory of relevance to health systems
- where focused on a particular aspect of the health system, proposals must demonstrate how interventions relate to and affect wider elements of the system, such as governance, financing, health workforce, information systems or service delivery.

The HSRI scheme remains primarily a mechanism to support large research projects exploring big, new ideas. However, we recognise that preliminary work is often needed in order for applicants to develop innovative partnerships and proposals.

Foundation grants are smaller and shorter, and can be either:

- exploratory, for example, retrospective, diagnostic analyses looking into existing health systems, investigating the underlying causes beneath perceived problems or

to explore possible health system innovations, under-researched areas or creative approaches that have the potential to be developed further

- small standalone research studies that will generate outputs and impact
- to conduct pilot work to build the necessary knowledge and methodological base to support a future full proposal, which could include work to pilot an intervention, feasibility or preliminary work to conceptualise broader research questions on the health system.

Please note: funding is available for research only. We will not fund the routine delivery of health services.

Foundation grant holders conducting pilot work will not be automatically awarded funds for a full project upon completion of their foundation grant.

If the HSRI partnership is still live by that point, they could submit an outline proposal to the main research grant application route in open competition with all other applicants.

If the partnership is not live any more, potential applicants will need to investigate other potential funding sources, either with the individual funders who fund the HSRI scheme, or elsewhere.

Priorities for this call

The funders welcome:

- multidisciplinary, collaborative and multi-country or multi-site applications
- focused in-depth applications, including those driven by social science questions.

Applicants should also ensure they embed research within relevant theoretical frameworks.

Teams should also ensure engagement of researchers that have:

- strong health systems expertise
- demonstrate knowledge of, and potential contribution to, relevant health systems empirical literature.

For further guidance on the HSRI Committee's expectations for successful applications, consult the [notes provided by the committee \(PDF, 111KB\)](#).

Recognising that health systems are complex and multidimensional, this scheme welcomes research that identifies and addresses a range of health systems topics. These include but are not limited to questions of:

- governance
- structure
- institutions
- social policy
- health workforce

- financing or trade
- private sector
- civil society
- information systems
- products and technologies
- supply chains
- service delivery and so on.

Research funded through this call could:

- engage with the contextual dynamics that shape or undermine effective health systems in developing countries
- offer practical solutions to implement health care improvements
- evaluate the health system at scale
- illustrate how the research findings can contribute to increasing knowledge and to the discourse for addressing other health challenges.

Typically, this scheme does not fund disease specific research. If you wish to discuss whether your research plans fit the call remit, please contact HSRI@mrc.ukri.org. See details of [previously funded applications \(PDF, 111KB\)](#).

Research impact

Where relevant, applicants must identify the potential impacts of their research on policy and practice and outline clear relevance to decision makers and practitioners.

Projects should identify and address the key barriers to implementation and uptake of evidence-based interventions at local and national levels. This will pave the way for their sustainable adoption into routine practice with improved access and use by the populations in need.

A central component of this research programme is to build evidence on and within health systems.

However, we also encourage the exploration of assumptions, and of broader conceptual and structural matters, such as power and economic organisation, which have longer term impact.

Solutions to strengthening health systems in developing countries must be rooted in, and acceptable to, the institutions, communities and societies where they will operate.

As such, non-academic stakeholders, including potential users of the research, are expected to be included and involved in the design and delivery of projects.

Indeed, proposals should:

- demonstrate strong engagement with in-country stakeholders and decision makers from the project inception stage
- include appropriate budget for such activities.

Researchers are encouraged to be innovative in the kinds of user engagement, knowledge exchange, communications and research uptake activities they plan to undertake during and beyond the period of research funding.

It is important that applicants appreciate that outreach and engagement activities in themselves do not constitute impact.

Applicants may find it helpful to refer to the:

- [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's \(FCDO\) research uptake guidance \(GOV.UK website\)](#).

Geographical scope

Priority will be given to research that benefits the most vulnerable populations or those in poorly resourced settings.

Whilst the funders recognise that many of the world's poor live in middle-income countries, it is a specific objective of this programme to increase the body of research that is specifically relevant to low-income countries.

Whether this is through research in those countries or the ability to demonstrate the relevance of experience from middle-income countries to low-income countries.

Applicants must illustrate how the proposed study will contribute to strengthening low-income country health systems.

All countries of focus need to be adequately justified and a local need identified.

Research capacity building

All funders are committed to strengthening research capacity within LMICs and the UK.

Grants funded through this scheme are expected to contribute to the development of equitable and sustainable global research systems.

Applicants are encouraged to start discussing priorities as early as possible, in consultation with key stakeholders within and outside of the project team. This might include researchers, data collectors, managers, practitioners, grass roots organisations, policymakers and research management offices.

The proposed approach to capacity building will be assessed as part of the review process and will help to demonstrate the equity of the partnership. Examples of capacity building include, but are not limited to:

- building leadership skills amongst early career researchers
- opportunities for mutual learning across the project team (such as through staff exchanges), for example, in the subject of the research, the context where it is being conducted, engagement with policymakers and research management

- building capacity to working collaboratively, across disciplines and across practice-research boundaries (for example with policymakers, managers and practitioners in the system)
- providing mentoring to improve the capacity of less experienced researchers to generate new knowledge and attain policy impact
- team members attending training courses to develop specific expertise or obtain relevant qualifications (excluding Masters and PhDs)
- opportunities for staff and associated health managers to author or co-author journal and conference papers and participate in national and international conferences
- building organisational capacity, (for example in management, finance or communications)
- formation of LMIC research networks.

UK investigators should demonstrate an understanding of the national and local health system context and work harmoniously and effectively with local stakeholders to ensure the research programme does not undermine local research capacity.

These factors will be taken into account by the commissioning panel.

COVID-19

In recognition of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the funders welcome proposals to research the impact of the pandemic on health systems and examine ways to enable health systems to respond to this or future pandemics more effectively.

This does not need to focus directly on COVID-19. It could explore wider health systems research beyond containing the infection, for example knock on effects on health systems provision.

Please note, COVID-19 related proposals will be assessed according to the scheme specific assessment criteria in a competitive manner with wider non-COVID-19 research proposals. No specific budget is allocated.

All applicants are expected to provide an honest assessment of how the COVID-19 pandemic might affect the research plans.

Funding available

There is an expected £700,000 available for this call from the UK FCDO, the UK MRC and Wellcome, in collaboration with ESRC.

You may request support for all research costs that are attributable to the project. For example:

- appropriate percentages of the investigators' time
- scientific, technical and administrative staff including statisticians, research nurses and so on
- consumables,

- items of equipment
- data or sample handling
- archiving and travel.

UK research will be funded at 74% of the full economic cost (fEC). Research incurred by overseas research organisations and investigators is eligible to be funded at 100% of fEC.

Regulation, ethical review and liability may vary across different countries. Principal investigators and proposed sponsors should ensure that they have adequately understood the feasibility and costs of participation of proposed international centres.

For example, insurance arrangements will vary between countries and the sponsor (usually the host institution) is responsible for ensuring adequate arrangements are in place at each site.

If you would like to discuss whether your research fits the remit, please contact HSRI@mrc.ukri.org.

How to apply

Applications will be submitted to and processed by MRC on behalf of the partner funding agencies.

The foundation grant route requires a single application step (there is no outline stage). Applications must be submitted before the deadline on 26 May 2021 at 16:00 (GMT) with funding decisions expected in October 2021.

For detailed information on how to apply, see the [call specific guidance document \(PDF, 369KB\)](#). Applications which do not follow the guidance set out in this document may be rejected.

When applying select:

- council: MRC
 - document type: Outline proposal
 - scheme: MRC Jointly funded initiatives outline
 - call/type/mode: Joint Health Systems Research Initiative call – foundation May 2021
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How we will assess your application

Applications will be considered by an expert panel convened specifically for this scheme jointly agreed by MRC, FCDO and Wellcome, in collaboration with ESRC.

Additional scientific experts will be invited to provide written comments if the funders or panel chair deem this necessary.

The panel's decision will be final and will not be open to appeal. Please ensure that all necessary information is incorporated in your application as there will not be an opportunity to add additional information after submission.

Contact details

If you have any technical issues with the Je-S system please contact the Je-S help desk at JeSHelp@je-s.ukri.org.

Please contact HSRI@mrc.ukri.org with queries about applying to this funding scheme or scheme eligibility.

Additional info

Funding partners

The FCDO, MRC and Wellcome jointly fund this call, in collaboration with ESRC. All funders are committed to funding world-class research with high potential for impact on policy and practice.

Launched in 2013, this programme will generate world-class and cutting-edge research that addresses key questions on strengthening and improving health systems in LMICs.

Terms and conditions

Funded grants will be managed according to UKRI's standard terms and conditions.

Other funding opportunities open to LMIC applicants:

- [Applied global health research board \(MRC website\)](#)
- [Joint global health trials \(MRC website\)](#)

Supporting documents

- [HSRI 8 – scheme specific guidance for foundation applications \(PDF, 369KB\)](#)
- [HSRI details of funded projects \(PDF, 1096KB\)](#)
- [Joint HSRI notes from the Committee – 2018 \(PDF, 111KB\)](#)
- [HSRI frequently asked questions – 2019 \(PDF, 71KB\)](#)

Timeline

○ **January 2021**
Opening date

○ **To be confirmed**
Funding decisions

Related content

[HSRI 8 – scheme specific guidance for foundation applications \(PDF, 369KB\)](#)

[HSRI \(MRC website\)](#)

NOTE This is the first phase of our new website – let us know if you have [feedback](#) or would like to [help us test new developments](#).