NIRAS LTS INTERNATIONAL

Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO) Phase 1 Programme Evaluation

Final Report

ESRC-FCDO

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Contents

Acronyms

DFID	Department for International Development
ESPA	Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office
FoF	Follow-on Funding
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
GEC	Girls' Education Challenge
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
II	Impact Initiative
ITQ	Invitation To Quote
JF	Joint Fund
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
PRL	Programme Research Lead
R4D	Research for Development
REAL	Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre
RLO	Raising Learning Outcomes
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TESSA	Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa
ToC	Theory of Change

Executive Summary

The Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems (RLO) Research Programme was established in 2014 as a joint initiative of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO; formerly Department for International Development, DFID) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The purpose of the programme was to build evidence on how education systems can work better to overcome the global learning crisis, thereby supporting efforts to raise learning outcomes at scale in developing countries.

NIRAS-LTS was commissioned to conduct a final evaluation of the RLO, with the aim to present independent, fair, and balanced appraisal consideration of the Programme, to provide accountability to ESRC and FCDO for their investment in RLO, and to generate learning to inform future investments. The evaluation took place from June 2021 to April 2022, and adopted a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative methods (online survey, data science analysis of publications and citations) with qualitative methods (literature and document review, Key Informants Interviews, and online qualitative discussion). Three case-studies were conducted – one with a thematic focus (Disability in education) and two focusing of specific RLO projects in Honduras and Malawi.

EQ1: Has a Community of Practice been established which produces high quality, policy relevant evidence on raising learning outcomes?

Through its support services, the RLO fostered connections and collaborations among grantholders. Opportunities for networking and reflection – mostly through the Annual Workshops – were greatly appreciated by grantholders. However, on the whole these engagements did not lead to the sustained engagement needed for a Community of Practice. Engagement remained mostly limited to PIs - who, in turn, were primarily based in the Global North. Lack of time was identified as the main constraint for grantholders not to engage more with the support services and with each other. Feedback about North/South partnerships was generally positive, though the degree of specific attention given to fairness and equity varies across projects.

EQ2: Has the programme generated evidence which adds to and informs the relevant body of research?

Through a well-structured and rigorous commissioning process, the RLO produced a rich and relevant research portfolio that has already influenced academic debates in several areas, and has the potential to continue to do so in the coming years.

Our analysis has shown significant variation in terms of how much RLO projects have published. In particular, the degree of authorship and co-authorship by RLO Southern researchers is uneven across projects, and largely concentrated in well-established research institutions in middle-income countries (particularly South Africa and India). The high cost of publication was a key challenge for Southern authorship, along with the compressed timeframe of research projects.

When compared to other R4D programmes with a broader thematic focus, such as the Joint Fund, the RLO seemed an ideal candidate for producing synthesis across different projects – an objective reinforced by the appointment of a dedicated position to build academic synergies across the portfolio (the Programme Research Lead – PRL - at the University of Oxford). For a number of reasons, the plans for the PRL did not pan out as expected, and in the latter part of the programme the RLO resorted primarily to a model of 'synthesis by collaboration'. However, there was a sense among many grantholders that the RLO portfolio was still too diverse – in terms of themes, geographical focus, and methods – to make collaborative synthesis an interesting and meaningful pursuit.

EQ3: Has evidence contributed to policy and practice debate on education systems and how they can deliver learning at scale? Has this contribution (if any) had a tangible impact on policy and practice, and – if so – how significant is this impact?

RLO projects have explored a number of different pathways for impact. In relation to policy processes on education, RLO project teams have worked with government counterparts and other key stakeholders to strengthen their capacity to use data for policy and planning; have provided targeted evidence and tools to implement policy decisions; and have helped bringing new voices and different perspectives into the policy processes.

As seen in other R4D programmes, there has not been a linear process towards direct, tangible, and demonstrable impact of research to policy through uptake of 'packaged' research findings. Rather, RLO projects have broadened the scope of what is meant by 'policy impact', through continued engagement and relationship-building with policymakers. Projects often chose to focus on impact in practice, which may, with time, also influence policy. In this regard, RLO projects have been very active to influence and strengthen education practice, engaging directly with students, teachers, parents, school managers and broader school communities, to create spaces for participation, open exchanges about 'what works' and 'why', and opportunities for trying new things, documenting the results so that they can be scaled up. A significant portion of RLO projects have used RCTs to assess the effectiveness (and potential scalability) of specific interventions.

The Covid-19 pandemic and related containment measures have posed significant challenges particularly for the more recent RLO projects. In-country political instability also posed challenges for many projects. The funders' flexible and supportive approach, allowing for adaptive management, was considered by many as a key enabling factor in the face of these barriers.

The primary example of RLO 'aggregate impact' is given by the programme's contribution to the 2018 Global Disability Summit, led by the Impact Initiative. This was made possible by a convergence of factors, related to both 'demand' and 'offer' of evidence. The experience confirms the importance of bringing researchers, policymakers and practitioners together around theme of common interest, and being able to 'act quickly' in response to windows of policy influence.

Conclusions

Through its commissioning process, the RLO has funded a portfolio of projects that appear relevant with respect to both the overall research and policy context on global education, and the specific national and local contexts where the research took place. Overall, the RLO research scores well against both standard metrics of research quality (as indicated by publication and citation rates) and more holistic research assessment frameworks such as the RQ+. While primarily focused on research integrity, the RLO commissioning process has given weight to dimensions of research legitimacy, research importance, and positioning for use.

RLO projects have engaged with a variety of non-academic stakeholders to promote research uptake, and several promising examples of impact can already be seen, in relation to both policy and practice. The degree to which the Impact Initiative has played a role in relation to individual projects' pathways to impact varied. Several grantholders praised the importance of the support received by the Impact Initiative around communicating research beyond academia.

Long-term partnerships were a key enabling factor for impact in RLO. The strength of partnership was crucial in allowing RLO projects to overcome contextual challenges, including adapting to the new reality brought about

by Covid-19. Yet the RLO – like the Joint Fund and other R4D programmes – had limited success in promoting Southern-led research projects – an area for further reflection for any potential second phase of the programme.

On the face of it, several characteristics of the RLO made it an ideal candidate for a programme approach, in particular when compared to other larger R4D investments with a wider thematic focus, such as the Joint Fund. Yet the RLO experience shows that operating within a relatively small, close-knit research community comes with its own challenges. The RLO cohort of projects appears closer to a 'network' rather than 'Community of Practice', and programme level interaction remained largely limited to PIs in the Global North.

Research synthesis in the RLO has remained below expectations, largely due to the Programme Research Lead function not performing as expected. The RLO shows interesting examples of 'aggregate impact' through avenues other than synthesis (notably around the theme of disability in education, where the Impact Initiative played a crucial role). Overall, aggregate impact emerges as an area where there is significant scope for improvement in the second phase of the programme, building on the lessons of Phase 1.

Recommendations
The evaluation has identified a number of key strengths of the RLO model, which we recommend retaining for future RLO phases:

- **A well-structured and rigorous commissioning process**, with selection criteria that map well against the four RQ+ criteria for research quality.

- The **Impact Initiative** as a dedicated impact support function. The **Annual Workshops, in particular,** were greatly appreciated as opportunities of networking and reflection.[1] Grantholders particularly valued the role played by the Impact Initiative in helping them better communicate their research findings to policy-makers and other key stakeholders.

- An **academic synthesis function.** While the PRL function did not perform as it was originally expected, the idea of having a dedicated role for academic synthesis was an innovative and interesting aspect of the RLO, which should be considered again for future phases of the programme.

- **Follow-on Funding.** Having a portion of the overall funding allocated to follow-on calls worked well for the RLO, allowing projects to test ideas, expand on successful approaches, and develop long-term, sustainable collaborations.

- **Eligibility of non-UK lead applicants.** RLO funding calls were opened to applicants from all over the world, including the Global South. While only three Southern institutions were funded in Phase 1, a number of important lessons open the way for more substantial engagement of Southern institutions in the future.

- **Flexibility and supportive attitude of funders and programme managers.** The flexibility and adaptive management of the programme were repeatedly flagged by grantholders as enabling factors for imapct, helping to overcome the challenges posed by Covid-19, political instability, and other contextual challenges.

The evaluation advances five **key recommendations**:
R.1 Set clear and realistic expectations for grantholders' participation in a Community of Practice; ensure that these expectations are consistently communicated and reflected in the commissioning process, programme management and support services.

[1] For a comprehensive review of ESRC-DFID Impact Support, Synthesis and Cohort-building services for ESRC-DFID joint research programmes, see Parsons (2020).

R.2 Promote fairness in research partnerships – considering not only 'who participates' but also 'who is left out'.

R.3 Promote Southern-led research, addressing known challenges and bottlenecks at every stage of the process.

R.4 Clarify expectations in terms of degree and modes of research synthesis, and ensure that adequate resources are in place for meeting such expectations.

R5. Support a variety of pathways to impact, encouraging projects to connect 'practice' and 'policy' pathways in education.

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We would like to express our appreciation to the many RLO researchers and partners who contributed to the evaluation by participating in our online survey, online discussion, and/or interviews, as well as those who worked with us in developing the case-studies. We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the teachers, parents, school managers and community members who participated in the case-studies in Honduras and Malawi.

1. Introduction

The Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems (RLO) Research Programme was established in 2014 as a joint initiative of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO - formerly Department for International Development, DFID) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The purpose of the programme was to build evidence on how education systems can work better to overcome the global learning crisis, thereby supporting efforts to raise learning outcomes at scale in developing countries.

About the evaluation

NIRAS-LTS was commissioned in April 2021 to conduct a final evaluation of the RLO. The aim of the evaluation is to present an independent, fair, and balanced appraisal consideration of the Programme, to provide accountability to ESRC and FCDO for their investment in RLO, and to generate learning to inform future investments.

Three key Evaluation Questions (EQs) were identified by the funders:

- EQ1: Has a Community of Practice been established which produces high quality, policy relevant evidence on raising learning outcomes?
- EQ2: Has the programme generated evidence which adds to and informs the relevant body of research?
- EQ3: Has evidence contributed to policy and practice debate on education systems and how they can deliver learning at scale? Has this contribution (if any) had a tangible impact on policy and practice, and – if so – how significant is this impact?

Our approach was informed by the following guiding principles:

- *Learning focus* (evaluation 'to prove and improve'). The evaluation aimed to facilitate reflection, distil lessons, and produce implementable recommendations for a possible second phase of the RLO, as well as future Research for Development (R4D) programmes of similar scope and ambition. In so doing, the evaluation also built on the learning that emerged from the evaluation of the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, which was conducted by NIRAS-LTS and Cloud Chamber in 2020.[2]
- *Inclusion and equity in engagement.* Embedded in our approach was the recognition of the importance of capturing a plurality of voices, and representing the views of a variety of individuals who have been involved in RLO activities in different capacity. In particular, we took a proactive approach in reaching out to Southern researchers, partners and stakeholders, offering a range of channels for engagement. We also ensured gender balance in our sample of interviewees, as well as representation of different levels of academic seniority.
- *Programme approach.* There is an increasing awareness in the R4D community that a 'programme approach' can enable large, multi-year investments – such as the RLO – to overcome the research-to-impact disconnects that emerge at the level of individual projects. We focused our reflection on the achievements and the challenges of the RLO in becoming 'greater as a whole than the sum of its parts'.[3]

Evaluation framework

During the inception phase, a detailed evaluation framework was produced, including sub-questions for each of the EQs, as well as cross-cutting questions that apply to all EQs – as shown in Table 1.

[2] The evaluation report is available at: https://esrc.ukri.org/files/research/joint-fund-evaluation/.

[3] In doing so, we built on the *Framework for conceptualising a 'Research for Development' programme approach*, developed as part of the Joint Fund evaluation. We also draw extensively on the reflections in Georgalakis & Rose (2021).

Table 1: Evaluation framework

EQ1: Has a community of practice been established which produces high quality, policy relevant evidence on raising learning outcomes?
1.1 To what extent has the RLO led to new or strengthened connections and collaborations among researchers, and the emergence of community(-ies) of practice? 1.2 To what extent has the RLO built the capacity of researchers for impactful R4D? 1.3 To what extent has the RLO succeeded in engaging Southern researchers and institutions? 1.3 To what extent has the RLO contributed to the emergence / strengthening of sustainable, fair and equitable North/South partnerships? 1.4 To what extent has the RLO left a legacy in terms of new ways of doing impactful research in education?
EQ2: Has the programme generated evidence which adds to and informs the relevant body of research?
2.1 Has the RLO commissioning process led to the selection of a portfolio of projects of high quality, relevance, and potential for impact? 2.2 How successful have RLO projects been in producing high quality academic research? 2.3 To what extent has the RLO been successful in synthesising research findings and implications across different outputs? 2.4 How effective has RLO research been in influencing academic debates?
EQ3: Has evidence contributed to policy and practice debate on education systems and how they can deliver learning at scale? Has this contribution (if any) had a tangible impact on policy and practice, and – if so – how significant is this impact?
3.1 How successful has RLO research been in influencing policy and practice? 3.2 Has the RLO as a programme led to sustained impact that goes beyond its funded projects?
Cross-cutting questions: ▪ How were gender and other equity considerations taken into account by RLO projects and by the programme as a whole? ▪ Did the RLO programme lead to *unintended consequences* (positive and/or negative) for each evaluation questions? ▪ What were the *enablers* and *barriers* for each evaluation question? From a learning perspective, we are interested to explore not only whether RLO projects have been 'successful', but also what made the difference for successful projects, and what lessons can be drawn and applied to similar R4D investments.

Analytical approach

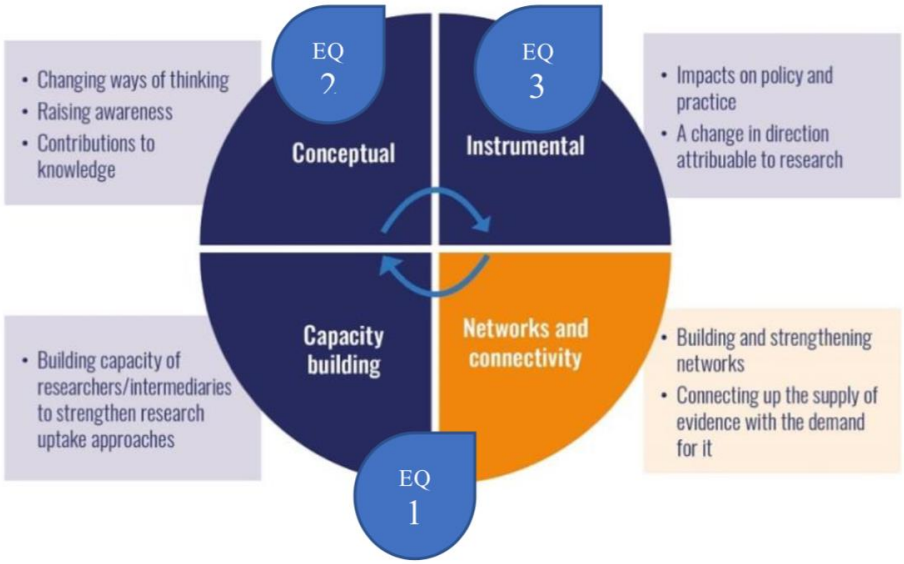
It is now widely acknowledged that traditional notions and indicators of 'research quality' are ill-suited, or at least insufficient, to measure the strength and usefulness of evidence for policy and practice. As with the Joint Fund evaluation, our approach draws extensively on the Research Quality Plus (RQ+) framework, developed by the International Development Research Centre (Ofir et al., 2016). The RQ+ framework defines research quality as encompassing four key dimensions:

- *Integrity* - the most traditional measure of academic research quality, which involves technical quality, appropriateness, and rigor of design and execution.
- *Legitimacy* - which focuses on the inclusiveness and gender responsiveness of the research process, the extent to which it engages with local priorities, its ethical implications and 'do no harm'.
- *Importance* - originality of the research and its relevance to local priorities.

- *Positioning for use* - extent to which research teams have made a conscious effort to design, manage and disseminate research in such a way that the probability of use, influence, and impact is enhanced.

In our assessment, we make use of the Wheel of Impact, developed by the Impact Initiative to map the typologies of impact pathways undertaken by RLO projects. Figure 1 maps the evaluation questions against the wheel of impact. EQ1 talks to 'capacity building' and 'network and connectivity' types of impact; EQ2 relates directly to 'conceptual' impact, while EQ3 interrogates the extent to which RLO research has been able to influence policy and practice ('instrumental impact').

Figure 1: EQs as they relate to the Wheel of Impact (Impact Initiative, 2021).



About this report

This report represents the final deliverable of the evaluation. **Section 2** describes the methodology adopted by the evaluation, highlighting its strengths and limitations. **Section 3** places the RLO in the broader context of policies and ongoing debates on global education, focusing in particular on how the Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated many pre-existing issues and given new urgency to old questions. **Section 4** provides a descriptive overview of the RLO, its commissioning process and resulting project portfolio, and the support services put in place to promote cohort-building, impact and synthesis.

The subsequent sections summarise the key findings for each Evaluation Question. **Section 5** addresses EQ1 (*Community of Practice*), and the related issues of capacity-development, North-South partnership, Southern engagement and programme legacy. **Section 6** focuses on EQ2 (*Evidence generation*), and includes an analysis of the RLO commissioning process, as well as findings from data science complemented by qualitative analysis. **Section 7** looks at EQ3 (*Impact on policy and practice*), discussing different pathways to impact as well as challenges, barriers and enablers. **Section 8** reflects on gender and equity as a cross-cutting questions. **Section 9** focuses on lessons and recommendations for future investments.

2. Methodology and process

The evaluation was conducted from June 2021 to April 2022, and was structured around three phases:

- The **inception phase** (June-August 2021) focused on the refinement of the evaluation framework, methodology and associated processes. This phase included an in-depth literature review, a desk review of key programme-level documentation, and sense-checking interviews to confirm the evaluation team's initial understanding of the RLO programme. The submission of a Design Specification Report concluded the inception phase.
- The **implementation phase** (September-December 2021) included the bulk of the data collection for the evaluation, through a combination of quantitative methods (online surveys, bibliometric analysis) and qualitative methods (desk review, award-level interviews). This phase was concluded by the submission of an Interim Report, which included preliminary findings and highlighted areas for further analysis.
- The final **'deep dive' and analysis phase** built on the findings of the Interim Report and deepened the qualitative analysis through a thematic case study (focusing on disability and education), two project-level case studies (conducted through in-country fieldwork in Honduras and Malawi) and an online qualitative discussion with RLO researchers from the Global South. Some concluding programme-level interviews were also conducted in this phase.

This section provides an overview of the processes of data collection and analysis, highlighting the strengths and limitations of the process.

2.1. Data collection

2.1.1 Literature review

A review of academic and technical literature was conducted in the inception phase, to situate RLO in the context of current debates on education, and to inform the development of our analytical approach, evaluation framework, and research tools. Over 130 resources (articles, book chapters, reports, and blogs) were reviewed, with an intentional focus on non-RLO resources. The resulting review was included as an annex in the Design Specification Report, and its findings served to shape the evaluation approach and tools. A summary can be found in Section 3 in this report.

2.1.2 Desk review of documentation

An extensive desk review of programme- and award-level of documentation was carried out throughout the evaluation. This included in particular:

- RLO programme-level documents (logframe, Theory of Change, ESRC Annual Reports, DFID/FCDO Annual Reviews);
- Documentation related to the commissioning process: funding calls, minutes of commissioning panel meetings; panel Terms of Reference and Codes of Practice; statistics on call applicants; guidance for panels and grading scale;
- Documentation related to the impact support services, including previous reviews and external evaluations (Parsons & Walsch, 2017; Parsons et al., 2020) and reports;
- Documentation related to the Annual Workshops and other events, including participants' feedback.

We then carried out a desk review of project-level documentation for the entire RLO portfolio – including project proposals; Pathway to Impact documents; reports; Gateway to Research project pages; project-specific resources on the Impact Initiative website and YouTube channel.

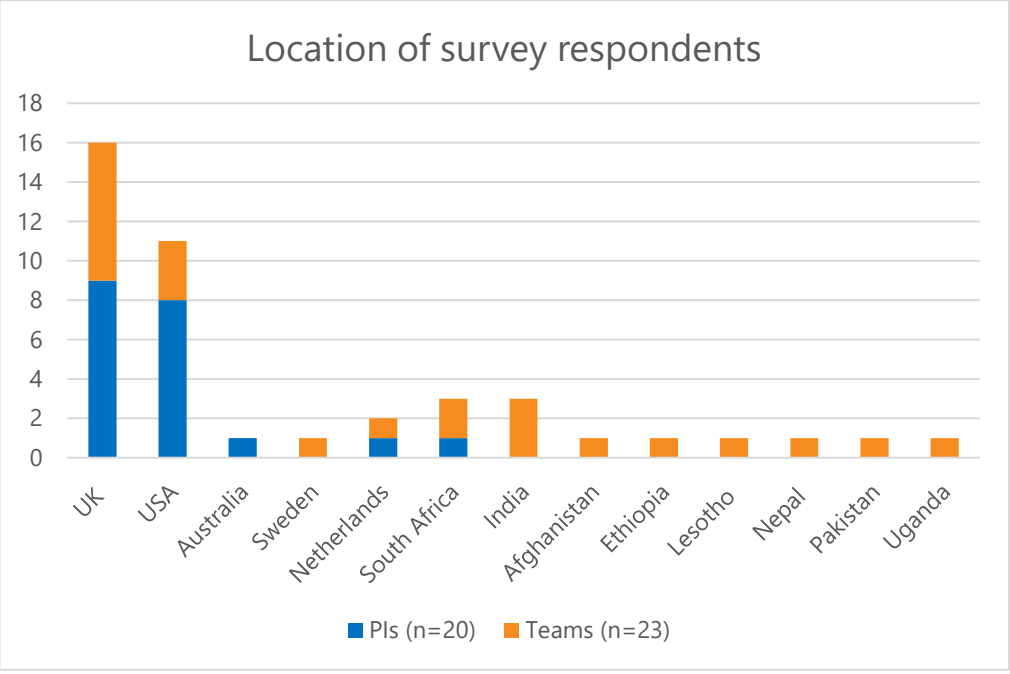
2.1.3 Online surveys

Two online surveys – targeting RLO Principal Investigators (PIs) and research teams, respectively – were conducted using the online platform Survey Monkey, and represented the first port of call for engagement with granthold-ers.[4] The online surveys included a combination of closed questions, multiple choice/ checklist questions, slider scale questions, and open-ended questions. [5] Confidentiality of responses was assured.

The PI survey obtained 20 responses (71% of all PIs contacted). The rate of response was much lower for the teams survey, in spite of several reminders. 24 responses were received (approximately 20% of the total number invited to respond).[6] In terms of strength of evidence, the representativeness of the sample in the research teams survey is low, and probably biased in favour of researchers who had a stronger connection with the RLO. In our analysis, we addressed this limitation by paying particular attention to triangulating survey findings with those from interviews, the online qualitative discussion, and in-country fieldwork.

While most respondents were affiliated with institutions in the United Kingdom (16) and United States (11), several countries in the Global South were represented (India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, South Africa, Ethiopia, Leso-tho, Uganda), as show in Figure 2. There was an equal gender split across the two surveys, with 20 respondents self-identifying as male, and 21 as female.[7]

Figure 2: Number of online survey respondents, by location



[4] The survey for PIs was launched on September 23rd, and stayed open until Friday October 8th. The survey for research teams was launched on October 5th and stayed open until November 5th.

[5] Most questions were optional and could be skipped if desired. Typical time spent was 17 minutes for the PI survey and 13 minutes for the team's survey.

[6] Most respondents of the team survey (20) identified as Co-Investigators (Co-Is). Three identified as researchers, and one as project coordi-nator. Respondents were asked to indicate their age (used as a proxy of seniority). Eight respondents were between the ages of 30 and 45; 11 respondents were between the ages of 46 and 59; four respondents were over the age of 60. One respondent opted not to answer this question. There were no respondents under the age of 30.

[7] One respondent chose not to answer this question.

2.1.4 Key Informant Interviews

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted throughout the evaluation at programme and project levels. At the programme level, informants included representatives of funders (ESRC and FCDO); representatives of impact support services (Impact Initiative and Programme Research Lead); and individuals involved in the selection process (as panel chairs or panellists). A full list of programme-level KIIs can be seen in Table 3. A final category of informants (unsuccessful applicants from the Global South) was added during the implementation, as part of our focus on unpacking challenges and barriers to Southern engagement and Southern-led research.

Table 2 below summarises all programme-level interviews (i.e. not related to an individual award). The numbers refer to individual informants, some of whom have been interviewed more than once. The table does not cover the interviews conducted as part of the case-studies, which are counted separately.

Table 2: Programme-level KIIs

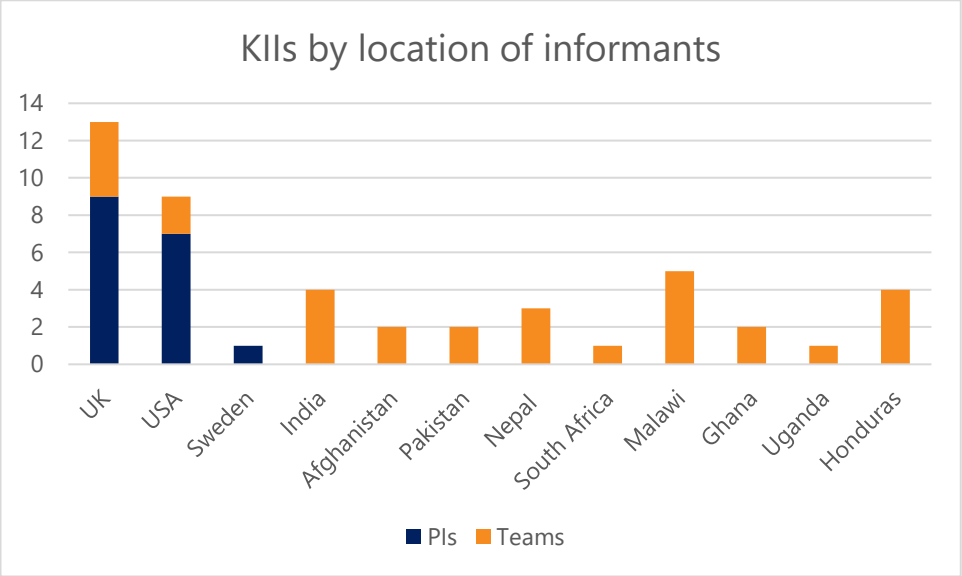
Funders	ESRC	3
	FCDO	2
Support services	Impact Initiative (REAL)	2
	Impact Initiative (IDS)	2
	Programme Research Lead Team	1
Panel chairs and members		4
External observers		1
Unsuccessful applicants		2
Total		**17** Female: 13 Male: 4

With regard to our engagement with RLO projects, we decided against pre-selecting a sample of projects, but rather offered the possibility of engaging with the evaluation to all RLO Principal Investigators (PIs). We then reached out to the teams where the PIs had volunteered to participate. This decision was motivated by our experience in past evaluations, where the varying level of responsiveness by project PIs jeopardised attempts at representative sampling. While we acknowledge that our approach did not produce a randomised or stratified sample, we maintain that the large number of teams interviewed, along with the desk review conducted for all projects and other avenues of project-level engagement (online survey, online qualitative discussion) enabled us to gain a good understanding of the RLO portfolio as a whole. We also believe that, from a learning perspective, there is much value in engaging with grantholders who voluntarily choose to share their experience and insights with the evaluators.

Overall, we conducted interviews covering 17 RLO project teams (out of a total of 28), with a total of 47 informants interviewed (17 PIs and 30 Co-Investigators and other team members and partners). The gender split for project-level interview was 22 (female) to 25 (male). 12 countries were represented, as shown in Figure 3.

Interviews took place through Teams or Zoom following a semi-structured format, and on average lasted 45 minutes. With the informant's consent, interviews were recorded, and an automated transcription service (TEMI) was used to minimise bias associated with note-taking. Transcripts were then checked by interviewers for accuracy and edits made where needed. Two interviews took place with the use of an English-Spanish translator, and one with the use of a sign language interpreter.

Figure 3: KIIs informants (project-level), by location



2.1.5 Bibliometric analysis

An analysis of RLO publication outputs was completed, with support from Digital Science Consultancy[8], using a protocol tested and refined in past similar programme evaluations (Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research; Global Challenges Research Fund). This analysis looked at:

- *Academic and non-academic publications* produced by RLO projects [EQ2]. We generated a list of all publications associated with RLO projects, determining the average number of publications by categories such as subject, theme and location, and use this information to reflect on related trends and correlations.
- *Academic citations* [EQ2]. In line with the RLO logframe, we looked at academic citation analysis as one proxy for conceptual impact. A list of all citations for each RLO publication was generated and used to carry out quantitative analysis (e.g. publications with the highest number of academic citations; average number of citations per publication/ per grant; variance of citations per publication/ per grant).
- *Analysis of citing publications* [EQ1, 2]: we used the Dimensions database to generate a list of academic publications citing RLO research. This provided insights as to the types of publications, disciplines, themes and geographical areas where the RLO research has been most influential.

We compared the initial list of publications generated by Digital Science Consultancy using the Dimensions platform with three existing datasets of RLO Publications – namely, (1) the analysis undertaken by the Impact Initiative, which used Google Scholar and Overton (Higdon et al, 2021); (2) the 2020-21 FCDO Annual Review, primarily based on self-reported data; and (3) the publications listed on Gateway to Research.

This comparison highlighted a significant number of discrepancies, for which we identified several explanations. The first was that outputs listed in Gateway to Research were inconsistent, with some projects listing the same

[8] Digital Science Consultancy specialises in bibliometric analyses to support research management and research evaluation. It is part of Digital Science, a technology company that developed Dimensions, a commercial scholarly search platform that allows to search publications, datasets, research grants, patents, clinical trials and policy documents. See https://www.digital-science.com/.

output multiple times under slightly different titles (a problem also remarked in Higdon et al., 2021: 4). Gateway to Research also listed a broader range of outputs, beyond journal articles, books and book chapters – for example, conference papers, PhD dissertations, policy reports, blogs. In addition, a significant number of self-reported publications did not include a formal acknowledgement of the grant number, and as such could not be detected by Dimensions as associated with a given RLO grant. Finally, consistently with the logframe formulation, the FCDO Annual Review counts outputs that were accepted for publication but not yet published – and again, these outputs could not be identified by Dimensions.

After a thorough manual process of consolidation and data cleaning, we generated a list of 81 academic publications (journal articles, books and book chapters), on which our analysis in Section 5 is based. Using Dimensions, a list of 438 citing publications was generated.

2.1.6 Case studies

Three case studies were conducted in February-March 2022 as part of the 'deep dive' phase of the evaluation. One was a thematic case study (focusing on disability in education); the other two were in-country case studies, focusing on specific RLO projects in Malawi and Honduras respectively, carried out by consultants based in the two countries. The disability case-study is incorporated in Section 7; the two country case-studies are included in Appendixes 1 and 2.

Thematic case study (Disability in Education)

The case study focused specifically on the role played by RLO researchers and the Impact Initiative in the 2018 Global Disability Summit (GDS) – an event that was repeatedly singled out by informants and in reviewed documentation as the most prominent example of RLO aggregate policy impact.

The case study involved an initial desk review of relevant documentation (Impact Initiative reports, ESRC reports and DFID reviews relevant to that period; formal documents related to the GDS) and other sources (Impact Initiative website and YouTube channel; video-footage of the GDS). The author also attended the virtual 2022 Global Disability Summit (16-17 February). Based on this, interviews were conducted with nine informants (researchers, former Impact Initiative staff, FCDO representatives and representatives of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities). Of the interviewees, seven were based in the UK, one in Kenya and one in Malawi. Four were female and five were male.[9] Three were individuals with disabilities.[10]

Malawi case study

The case study focused on the RLO award *Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi* (ES/M005453/1, PI: Paul Lynch, University of Birmingham).

Prior to the selection of this project as a case study, interviews were conducted with the PI, Research Assistant and a Sightsavers staff member. This formed the basis of the decision to explore the project in more depth. Aspects of interest leading to the selection of this case study were:

- focus on children with disabilities, a topic of particular relevance for RLO;
- strong and well-established partnerships with academic institutions (University of Malawi and the Catholic University of Malawi) as well as non-academic stakeholders (particularly Sightsavers Malawi) – also evidenced by the fact that the project had a higher level of Southern authorship compared to the RLO average (see Section 6 for details)
- diverse routes to impact including both practitioners and policy makers.

[9]Gender is assumed.
[10] This is based on self-identification.

Fieldwork to inform this case study was conducted in February and March 2022. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in person.

A Malawi-based evaluator led the case study fieldwork and began with a desk review of project documentation including project proposal, pathways to impact statement, annual reporting from 2016-2020, and the list of partners. In person fieldwork was conducted in the Thyolo district of Malawi, covering five Community Based Care Centres (CBCCs). Data collection included interviews with four parents, five caregivers, two data collectors, one research assistant and one lead researcher. Focus groups were also conducted with five groups of parents (29 parents in total). Of those interviewed, 33 were female and four were male.[11]

Honduras case study

This case study focused primarily on the work undertaken by the project *Examining Effective Teaching in Rural Honduran Secondary Schools* (ES/M004864/1), led by Erin Murphy-Graham (University of California, Berkeley), in relation to the Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial program (Tutorial Learning System or SAT). The case study also looked at the follow-up projects *Application of the TIPPS Observation Tool in Rural Honduran Secondary Schools* (ES/T000422/1 – PI: Erin Murphy-Graham) and *Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System (TIPPS): Cultural extension and testing as a feedback tool to improve pedagogical practices* (ES/T000406/1 – PI: Edward Seidman).

Prior to the selection of this project as a case study, interviews were conducted with the PI, research assistant, local NGO partner, and local university partner. This formed the basis of the decision to explore the project in more depth. The case study was selected for presenting several aspects of interest for the evaluation:

- It provided a unique case of close collaboration among two RLO PIs from different Universities, with high potential for future synthesis of findings on the use of the TIPPS Observation Tool in different contexts;
- There were promising signs of impact on the education system in Honduras, and interesting examples of adaptation to the challenges of Covid-19, as recognised in the FCDO 2020-21 Annual Review;
- There was well-established in-country presence (where PI Erin Murphy-Graham has been working since 2008) and positive example of fair and equitable partnership, with high potential for transferable learning;
- The project relied on strong in-country network of local stakeholders (policymakers, educators, and community members), which the evaluation would be able to engage with;
- The project had a strong gender dimension, which has led to further funding.

This case study was conducted from January to March 2021. A Honduras-based evaluator led the case study fieldwork, and began with a review of project documentation, including annual reporting and publications, as well as broader literature on SAT and TIPPS. The case study also consulted project stakeholders, including 10 semi-structured interviews with representatives from University of California, Berkeley; New York University; FUNDAEC; Bayan; Ministry of Education; and UNICEF. A focus group discussion was also held with coaches (*asesores)*. Of those interviewed, four were based in the UK and thirteen in Honduras. Ten were female and seven were male.[12] All interviews except one were conducted remotely.

Risk management and safeguarding of case studies

In order to ensure safe and secure management of case-studies, consultants were required to follow NIRAS-LTS policies on data protection[13] and safeguarding[14]. All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and included consent statements for participants to be interviewed, as well as consent statements to be recorded. Recordings

[11] Gender is assumed.
[12] Gender is assumed
[13] https://ltsi.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/International-Data-Protection-Policy-Nov2020.pdf
[14] https://ltsi.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Safeguarding-Nov2020.pdf

and transcripts were stored securely and in accordance with GDPR principles. No children were directly involved in the case studies.

In addition, the project risk register was reviewed and updated to include any country risks associated with the case studies, following guidance from the company Risk Management Policy.[15] The main risk identified was Covid-19 and associated impacts, with other contextual risks including potential political unrest in Honduras, and flooding in Southern Malawi, near the case study site. Efforts were made to ensure safety of consultants during fieldwork, including allowances for vehicle rental and overnight stays in suitable and safe accommodation. Consultants were also covered under NIRAS-LTS's travel insurance and given contact information for the emergency assistance company Falck in case of need.

2.1.7 Online qualitative discussion

From the outset, the envisaged process for the evaluation included an online qualitative discussion, a method that the team had already used in the previous evaluation for the ESRC/FCDO Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation as a way to increase opportunity for grantholders to participate in the evaluation beyond interviews alone. In the course of the evaluation, it was decided to use the online discussion to provide a dedicated space for Southern-based researchers to reflect on their experience and provide recommendations for future programmes.

The discussion was titled *Southern-led research in education: how can funders walk the talk?*. It took place over four days between 1st February – 4th February 2022, using the bespoke research platform LiveMinds. Eight respondents engaged in the three-day online discussion. Participants were based in Ghana (2), Malawi (2), India (2), and Afghanistan (2). Four participants identity as female, three as male and one chose not to identify.

Questions and tasks were posted each day for three days (with a fourth day for participants to catch up and add more detail if they wished) to encourage participants to both reflect on their RLO experience and consider implications or suggestions for subsequent funding programmes. The discussion was moderated by two members of our evaluation team, one based in the UK and one in Malawi. Moderators asked follow-up prompt questions (e.g. "tell me more about that", "why is this important to you?" or "could you share an example?") to invite depth and richness to the responses. Members were also encouraged to interact with each other on the platform.

2.2. Data analysis

We used a thematic qualitative analysis approach, identifying common themes in the qualitative analysis through coding. Interview transcripts were coded using the software programme MAXQDA[16], using a combination of inductive and deductive coding.

In parallel with the coding in MAXQDA, we have consistently summarised each RLO main award and related Follow-On Funding grants in a project write-up informed by project documentation and fieldwork (interviews) The write-ups include a rubric assessment on key dimensions (interdisciplinarity; fairness of partnership; engagement of non-academic stakeholders; gender and equity considerations; and positioning for use), as well as an assessment on the strength of evidence.

Once the coding and award-level write-ups were completed and grouped, the evaluation team came together to identify the narrative against the outcomes within the core evaluation questions. This included the following steps:

- *Validity:* Understand the extent to which the finding is secure or mixed (e.g. is there a clear consensus between respondents or a "scattergun" of views relating to the code?);

[15] https://ltsi.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Risk-Management-Policy-2021.pdf

[16] MAXQDA is a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data, text and multimedia analysis in academic, scientific, and business institutions. https://www.maxqda.com/

- *Robustness:* The extent to which the evidence base is strong or robust (e.g. based on similar views of a large number of respondents, and/or strongly-held views by a smaller number of respondents);
- *Integrity:* Acknowledge any gaps or bias in the data set in relation to the story (e.g. acknowledge if most respondents talking about a particular issue are based in a particular region);
- *Narrative proposition*: articulating a finding (or a structural hypothesis) that makes best sense of the data as suggested in the previous steps of analysis. The narrative proposition represents the main evaluation findings contained within this report.

2.3. Strengths and limitations

Overall, the approach has worked well in relation to the objectives of the evaluation. Strengths include:

- *Good engagement across the RLO portfolio.* Overall, 26 out of 28 RLO project teams got at least one response through the online survey. 17 awards were covered by at least one interview. Only two awards were not covered by survey responses or interviews.
- *Good representation in terms of different roles, levels of seniority, location, and gender*. The evaluation team was able to benefit from a rich mix of views and perspectives in the RLO portfolio. Overall, we reached out to informants in 18 countries, encompassing PIs, CoIs, implementation partners, key stakeholders, panellists and unsuccessful applicants.
- *Different modes of engagement, allowing for triangulation of findings and high confidence in resulting evidence*. In particular, we were able to reach a good combination between 'width' (through online survey, desk review and interviews) and 'depth' (through in-country case studies and online qualitative discussion).

Some challenges and limitations should also be noted:

1. *Varying levels of project teams' engagement with the evaluation, leading to probable 'positivity bias'*. While the evaluation managed to include, in some way, almost all the RLO projects, the degree of engagement varied significantly, with some awards only having one survey response or one single interview, and others having multiple channels of engagement. While in our initial risk assessment we had anticipated a particular challenge in engaging 'older' projects (i.e. project funded in the initial stages of the RLO), in practice the differing levels of engagement did not follow any obvious pattern, and had probably to do mostly with the experience and degree of engagement of the individual PIs. We are conscious that the Southern team members reached through interviews – identified largely through consultation with the PIs – are likely to over-represent cases of positive partnership experiences.
2. *Limited representation of external views on the RLO.* From the outset, our intention was to interview education experts (academics and practitioners) who were not directly involved with the RLO, in order to assess the programme's influence, name recognition and legacy. Doing this, however, proved more difficult than anticipated, as identified experts had either been involved with the RLO in some form (e.g. as reviewers or panellists), or, conversely, did not feel familiar enough with the programme to express an opinion about it. Only one such 'external' observer was interviewed in the end.
3. *Limited institutional memory when it comes to the early days of the programme.* It was comparatively more difficult to investigate issues related of the earlier stages of the RLO programme (for example, the original rationale for separating impact support functions and synthesis functions), as informants had either not been in post at the time, or could not recall the details after so many years.
4. *Policy citation analysis*. The one logframe indicator where the RLO had been consistently under-performing regarded the number of citations in policy documents as a percentage of the overall number of citations. The evaluation was mandated to look into this aspect more closely, through data science as

well as qualitative analysis techniques. However, the database used for this evaluation (Dimension) proved to be better suited to academic citations rather than policy and practice ones, and did not manage to significantly expand on the previous analysis carried out by the Impact Initiative (see Section 7).

As the evaluation was commissioned during Covid-19, the challenges related to the pandemic and related restrictions could be anticipated and factored in the planning and risk assessment. All of the interaction happened remotely with the exception of the Malawi case-study (and one interview in the Honduras case-study). All key team members were sick with Covid at some point in the process (and/or caring for children with Covid), leading to some limited delays in the schedule, which did not however affect the overall timeline.

3. The RLO in context

The RLO research programme was established to build evidence on critical policy areas that constrain learning systems in developing countries. It was aimed at enabling more effective policies and interventions, "by providing policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning for all and an understanding on how these ideas will translate into their specific contexts and institutions" (Magrath et al., 2019: 13).

This section aims to place the RLO in the broader context of 'what else' has been happening in the policy and practice of education, in the UK and globally, over the lifespan of the programme. We do this by first outlining the UK's pivotal role in global education research and evidence generation, followed by a description of the emergence of "systems thinking" in education. As this analysis cannot possibly be comprehensive, we instead then provide a narrative framing around key themes facing global education and global education research today, These reflections provide the backdrop against which the relevance and coherence of the RLO programme can be assessed.

3.1. UK Policy and Investments in Education

The UK is one of the world's main donors on education. In 2018, the then-DFID Education Policy "Get Children Learning" set out three key pillars guiding the UK ODA investment in education: (1) invest in good teaching, (2) back system reform that delivers results in the classroom, and (3) step up targeted support to the most marginalised.

In addition to the RLO, over the last decade the UK government has launched several other important initiatives to strengthen the evidence base of education policy and practice in international development, as well as being part of global initiatives to strengthen education systems in lower-income countries. These are listed, in chronological order, in Box 1.

Box 1: Key global and UK investments and other initiatives for research in development

The **Global Partnership for Education** (GPE), the largest global fund for education with a mission to mobilise partnerships and investments that transform education systems in lower-income countries, with the aim of leaving no one behind. The World Bank acts as the secretariat for the GPE and administers its funds, which come largely from bilateral donors but also private foundations. The GPE has existed since 2002, when it was set up to accelerate progress toward the Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3 and to the Education For All goals agreed in Dakar in 2000. The UK has played a leading role in the GPE, and was previously its largest donor. [17]

The **Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA)** network was launched in 2005, with the aim of improving the quality of classroom practice and access to teacher education resources across Sub-Saharan Africa. The network received over GBP 1m in investment from FCDO.[18]

The **Girls' Education Challenge** (GEC) is the largest global fund dedicated to girls' education. It was launched by then-DFID in 2012, as a 12-year commitment to reach the most marginalised girls in the world. The first phase of the GEC (2012 - 2017) directly provided quality education for over a million marginalised girls. The current second phase (2017-2025) is enabling existing GEC beneficiary girls to complete primary school, transition to secondary education, and progress on to technical vocational training or employment. Within the second phase, a second cohort of girls are also being supported through the Leave No Girl Behind funding window, which consists of interventions for highly marginalised, adolescent girls who are out of school - either because they have never attended school or have dropped out without gaining a basic education.[19]

The **Research on Improving Systems in Education (RISE)** programme was launched in 2014, the same year as RLO. Running until 2025, RISE is a global research programme, co-funded by the UK along with the Australian Government and the Gates Foundation, which seeks to understand how education systems in developing countries can overcome the learning crisis. Compared to the RLO, it has a more defined geographic scope, focusing on seven countries: Ethiopia, Tanzania, Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Unlike RLO, it is not funded on a competitive basis and is instead guided by a core team of researchers based in the UK, U.S, and focus countries.[20]

Education Cannot Wait (ECW) is a global fund designed to address education in emergencies and protracted crises. It was established during the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 to address a USD 8.5 billion gap in emergency education financing, bringing together public and private sector partners to mobilise the required funding to ensure quality learning is accessible to children affected by conflicts, natural disasters and displacement. The UK has been a lead proponent of the initiative, and to date has committed over USD160 million, the bulk of which was pledged during the 2019 G7 Summit.[21]

The **EdTech Hub** is a global research partnership focusing on the role of technology in education. FCDO has committed GBP 35m to the Ed Tech Hub over a period of ten years, commencing in 2017.[22]

[17] https://www.globalpartnership.org/
[18] https://www.tessafrica.net/
[19] https://girlseducationchallenge.org/
[20] https://riseprogramme.org/
[21] https://www.educationcannotwait.org/
[22] https://edtechhub.org/

3.2. Education and the SDGs

The period covered by the RLO coincided with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the global framework for development. Crucial dimensions of the SDG framework are the notion that the social, environmental, and economic dimensions are interconnected (Stafford-Smith et al., 2017), and the principle of 'Leave No One Behind' (Mangubhai & Capraro, 2015; Stuart & Woodroffe, 2016). The intellectual debate surrounding the SDGs has been placing increased attention on the need to address the way in which structural inequalities overlap: *intersectionality* has emerged as a theoretical framework to understand how various sources of inequality (based on gender, age, income, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, and other factors) come together to compound the disadvantage experienced by individuals and groups (Mathews & Nunn, 2019: 32-33). SDG4 places education quality at the centre of international education efforts, with a shift away from measuring 'footfall' (school enrolment and attendance), focusing instead on the quality of the education being gained, how equitably this is distributed, and how young people transition through the system.

3.3. Systems-based approaches to education reform

Having first embraced systems thinking early this century when promoting the "open systems model" of understanding how an organisation is heavily influenced by external context rather than in a vacuum (DFID, 2003), FCDO's (then DFID's) education policies in the last decade have explicitly framed the policy issues at stake in terms of education systems. This builds on a growing consensus within the global education field about the need to consider education reform not from a "symptoms" perspective (e.g., a lack of textbooks in schools) but systemic causes - the proverbial "leaky pipes" described by Spivack (2021) in the RISE programme's framework. Like RISE, the RLO programme is a key example of this emerging focus on systems, moving away from piecemeal attention on discrete dimensions and actors, and instead covering "the full span of education provision including a range of actors and with a clear focus on inputs, processes, people and politics which…determine whether and how much children learn" (Magrath et al, 2019), and embracing the complexity of how interdependent components of a "system" work together (Ndarahutse et al, 2019).

3.4. The global Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic and related containment measures severely affected learning outcomes around the world, stalling or even reversing what was arguably a positive trajectory of progress towards SDG4. According to UNESCO estimates, Covid-related school closures have affected over 1.5 billion children and young people around the globe. Most Low-Income Countries have cut their public education budgets since the onset of the pandemic (World Bank & UNESCO, 2021)20, widening education inequality and hurting vulnerable students disproportionately.

At the peak of the pandemic, an average of 91 percent (1.6 billion) of students were affected by school closures across 191 countries from the middle of March to the end of May, in addition to the 258 million children who were already out of school (World Bank, 2021). Huge learning losses are forecast (UNESCO, 2021; Moscoviz and Evans, 2022).[23] The pandemic has placed further pressure on households, who are now responsible for children's "survival, care, and learning…[which] places a burden on all families, and especially the most vulnerable" (World Bank, 2021). Girls are particularly affected: UNESCO estimates suggest that 11 million girls may not return to school, with those with disabilities or from rural or fragile and conflict-affected at the most risk of being permanently excluded from education (UNESCO, 2021).

[23] Using early evidence of learning losses in high-income countries, simulations by researchers at the University of Oxford have indicated that in a post-Covid-19 scenario of no remediation and low mitigation effectiveness for the effects of school closures, learning poverty could increase from 53 percent of primary school-age children to 63 percent globally, with Sub-Saharan Africa disproportionately affected (Azevado, 2020). Modelling of likely learning losses in Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Tanzania and Uganda suggests there could be up to a year's worth of learning loss in the short run, and up to 2.8 years of lost learning in the long run (Angrist, 2021). Within low- and middle-income countries, effects are not distributed evenly: it is the poorest children who face the greatest learning losses (Moscoviz and Evans, 2022).

The impact of Covid-19 on financing SDG4 has been significant. Even pre-Covid, financing was pegged as one of the greatest challenges in achieving SDG 4. The fallout from Covid has increased the financial gap (UNESCO, 2020), but also deepened the challenges many low-and-middle-income countries face in raising adequate resources, including poor financial management and conflict and protracted crisis. These challenges include inadequate resources to support the continuity of learning during school closures, as well as reduced domestic resource mobilisation (and domestic reallocation of funds to public health), leading to over-reliance on external funding (ADEA, 2021b).

3.5. Key issues in global education today

A number issues have emerged as particularly critical for education in recent years, and the global pandemic has provided a renewed impetus for their examination. These key issues are briefly outlined here, and we will return to them in Section 6 to assess the relevance of RLO research and its contribution to ongoing academic and policy debates.

Learner wellbeing and mental health

The relationship between wellbeing, mental health and learning outcomes has been a burgeoning area of interest in both crisis situations and high-income countries, and the Covid-19 pandemic has placed it in the mainstream. Mental health is thought to be positively associated with learning outcomes, and more specifically, efforts to integrate Socio and Emotional Learning (SEL) into the regular curriculum have been shown to have a positive relationship to students' learning outcomes in high income contexts (Yorke et al, 2021). There is growing support for SEL approaches to be mainstreamed into the Covid-19 education response, to support young people in their transition back into regular schooling and to cope with the various upheavals the pandemic has brought. There is a need for greater evidence on the wider links between SEL and learning outcomes in Global South contexts, as well as on how school systems can support wellbeing and mental health in resource-poor environments (Yorke et al, 2021).

The acceleration of education technology

Even prior to Covid-19, education technology (edtech) was enjoying high growth and adoption, with global edtech investments reaching USD 18.66 billion in 2019 and the overall market for online education projected to reach USD 350 billion by 2025 (Li, 2020). The crisis has highlighted the growing importance of education technology to facilitate remote learning, while also placing into sharp focus huge global digital inequalities between those with access to technology and those without – both across and within countries (ITU, 2019; UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database, 2020; Crompton et al., 2021).

Along with concerns related the effects of edtech on inequality, there are concerns related to the lack of robust evidence on the impact of edtech solutions. The sector is still relatively nascent and is arguably playing catch up in terms of building a body of evidence, though it is hoped that FCDO's EdTech Hub will go some way in driving this work (Crawfurd & Hares, 2020). Even before Covid-19, Escuela et al (2017) highlighted how the "rapid proliferation of new technologies within education has proved to be a double-edged sword", with the speed at which new technologies and intervention models are reaching the market far outpacing the ability of policy researchers to keep up with evaluating them (see Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2020; Newman, 2021).

Education in crisis situations

Covid-19 created a 'pile-on effect' in crisis contexts, including armed conflicts, forced displacement, climate change-induced disasters and protracted crisis situations which affect over 75 million children and youth globally. Although just 29% of the world's primary and secondary school-age population lived in crisis-affected countries, these countries were home to 49% of the world's out-of-school primary and secondary school-age children and young people (INEE, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, there were signs of progress in education amongst this disparate target group following concerted efforts by international donors to prioritise their educational needs through initiatives such as Education Cannot Wait and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). Data from 2010 to 2018 show that the gender gap in access to primary and secondary education in crisis-affected countries was closing, particularly at the secondary level (INEE, 2021). The pandemic and the resulting school closures heralded risks and impacts which were magnified amongst this vulnerable group of learners, where access to and knowledge of digital technology for remote learning is a huge challenge in crisis-affected contexts.

Non-state education provision

The Education for All (EFA) policy agenda led to pressure on those countries where the education system could not respond to the dramatic increase of enrolment in basic education, and re-ignited the debate on the relative merits of public vs. private education provision, and the potential and risks of low-cost private schools (Aung & Straubhaar, 2021). Even before Covid-19, a large and growing share of children globally were educated outside of government schools, with the non-state sector increasingly catering to low-income communities. The pandemic has further exacerbated the enrolment and quality gap that needs to be bridged in order to achieve the EFA commitments and SDG4 targets. Throughout the world, non-state actors have been serving a growing share of student learning needs during school closures (Global School Forum, 2020), but budget cuts and funding diversion are placing the survival of many of these education providers at risk (Ul Abidin, 2021). Cuts in aid budgets, to compensate for the costs of managing the pandemic, further compound these challenges. As a result of these interlinking challenges, there is a huge opportunity (and demand for) non-state actors to help fill the funding void, including private sector actors (e.g., Jaffrey, 2021; World Bank, 2020). At the same time, however, the severe market disruptions school closures have caused low-cost private school providers, who might have provided one source of finance (Alam & Tiwari, 2021).

Teaching quality

There was a growing recognition and appreciation for the role that teachers played in driving learning outcomes. The role of teachers in student learning is acknowledged by African leaders in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025, with the first objective being to 'Revitalize the teaching profession to ensure quality and relevance at all levels of education'. International policy and funding priorities included the increase of the global teaching workforce following UNESCO's projected gap of 65 million teachers at primary and secondary level (UNESCO, 2016), and developing adequate pre-service and in-service training models to ensure that teaching staff were equipped to facilitate learning (Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2020).

Covid-19 posed an additional burden on teachers who are shouldering new responsibilities, such as ensuring Covid-safe school spaces, providing socio-emotional support, and adjusting to blended or remote ways of working, while in many cases contract teachers face a loss of earnings as a result of suspended payments (Teacher Taskforce, 2021). What is expected of teachers is unprecedented and lacks a firm evidence base (Popova et al, 2021).

Girls' education

Girls' education has enjoyed significant policy focus and investment in the last decade, with efforts targeted towards improving access to primary and secondary education, ensuring effective transitions from primary to secondary schooling, making learning spaces safe and equitable, and girls' socio-emotional health and wellbeing. It is widely recognised that huge strides have been made in promoting and securing more equitable participation in education between genders, and that the evidence on the case for investing in girls' education is overwhelming. However, challenges remain in identifying, understanding, and scaling the specific pathways that enable girls to realise their educational potential (Sperling & Winthrop, 2015). Further, interventions targeting girls often find it

difficult to access the most marginalised, as the evidence base explaining how and why sub-groups of girls were marginalised is often weak (Coffey, 2015).

Existing evidence on "what works" in girls' education is patchy and largely context-specific (Evans & Popova, 2016). General principles for supporting girls' education moving forward includes the need to be more rigorous and standardised in assessing what we mean by 'learning' in school, and investing in foundational skills early on, in order to better illustrate the gains to be made from investing in school completion (Spivack, 2020). Generally, better data now exists on the on the mechanisms that promote or prevent girls' successful transition from school into the workforce (ILO and UNICEF 2018), yet other areas remain under-explored, such as data on digital literacy, gender-responsive education infrastructure and facilities, the subjective dimensions of girls' education (Data2X, 2020), and the relative value of targeted vs. non-targeted interventions (Coffey, 2017; Evans & Yuan, 2021).

The Covid pandemic has compounded these challenges. Drawing on data from the Ebola outbreak, Malala Fund calculated the potential impact of the current school closures on girls' dropout numbers in low- and lower-middle-income countries to be about 20 million additional secondary school-aged girls out of school (Malala Fund, 2020). Concerted monitoring and in-depth research efforts are required to explore the full impacts of school closures. Strong concerns have been expressed on how cuts in UK aid in 2020 and 2021 – along with a "growing uncertainty regarding the place of education within the reconceptualisation of UK aid policy and practice" (Packer, 2021) - can further worsen education inequality worldwide, with girls' education being flagged as an area of particular concern.

Education and disability

It is estimated that 93 million children under age 14, or 5.1% of the world's children, are living with a 'moderate or severe disability' – and of these, 80% are children in developing countries, with levels highest in Sub-Saharan Africa (GMR, 2013/14). The scale of the problem, and the subsequent impacts of an education that does not serve all children equitably, is gaining increased visibility. The availability of data does not yet match the global profile of the issue, however. The research on inclusive education is characterised by difficulties in defining disability in different contexts, and accurately diagnosing disabilities. There is therefore a major lack of data on the extent of children with disabilities within education systems globally, the challenges they face, and how this links to educational - and other future – outcomes (GEM, 2020). It is generally accepted that having a disability affects a child's chance of enrolling, attending, and completing school (Wodon et al, 2018), and that even a child with a disability participates in education they are less likely to obtain basic literacy skills than their peers. (GEM, 2020).

Once again, the pandemic has added significantly to these challenges. Ensuring inclusive, equitable education for all children regardless of ability is a central pillar of the FCDO's recent Disability Inclusion and Rights Strategy 2022-2030 (FCDO, 2022), which recognises the disproportionate impact Covid-19 has had on educational opportunities for children with disabilities globally. Inclusive education is a core focus area for the GEC, and the FCDO has become something of a global leader in this area.

Conclusions

In presenting this brief contextual summary, several key points emerge. The RLO programme was poised to contribute to pertinent – and significant – evidence from both an academic and policy perspective, and that these gaps were relatively well established at the programme's inception. The programme reflected global academic, policy, and practice trends in terms of sub-sectoral focus areas, and could therefore reasonably expect that the wider (non-RLO) evidence base would grow – and more nuanced questions emerge – as the programme progressed.

The RLO programme is coming to an end in a very different global education context than when it began in 2014. While this could be said for any research programme which spans several years, the Covid-19 pandemic led to unprecedented changes. The task for global education researchers shifted in terms of both trying to meet the immediate information needs of the education sector and maintaining some level of operation in a context where education settings were closing as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic, and projects and the overall programme have had to consider how to adapt plans for influencing policy within the context of the pandemic and its after effects (Rose, 2020), the full extent of which are yet to be fully realised.

This has meant that intended impact pathways were disrupted and, while opportunities for influence no doubt emerged, the RLO's contribution to the global education sector will be a very different one than planned. Against this backdrop of crisis and uncertainty, the research funded by the RLO, and the learning emerging from the programme, assume even greater relevance to inform future policy and programmatic decisions in global education.

4. Programme Overview

The RLO Programme began in January 2014 to commission world-class and cutting-edge social science research that addresses key questions on learning outcomes within education systems in developing countries. The programme was managed by a partnership between ESRC and FCDO, with a designated grantee point of contact housed at ESRC. RLO had a total maximum value of £20m, with FCDO contributing 75% of the total cost of the programme, or £15m, and ESRC contributing the remaining £5m.

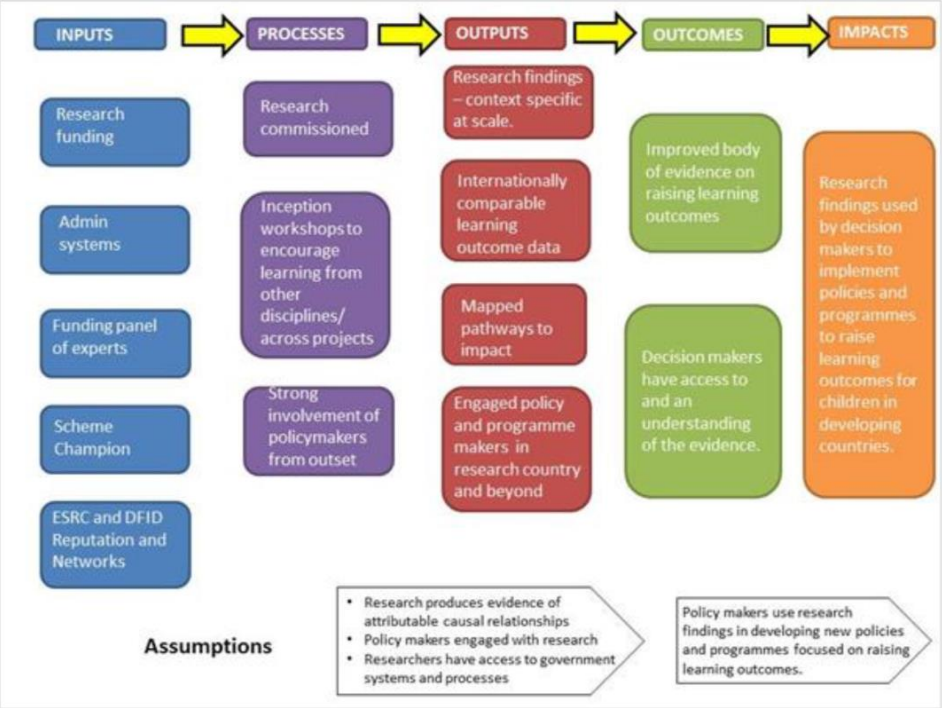
The RLO was set up as part of a broader strategic partnership between FCDO and ESRC, which also included the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research (2004-2020), a research programme with a broader focus on a range of themes related to poverty alleviation. The Joint Fund and RLO have many common features in terms of their aim, vision, and funding modalities, and shared the support provided by the Impact Initiative. The RLO is however unique in terms of its thematic focus, being the first ESRC-FCDO joint research initiative focused specifically on education.

This section provides a descriptive overview of the RLO Theory of Change and logframe (section 4.1), commissioning process (section 4.2), resulting project portfolio (section 4.3), and support services (section 4.4).

4.1. RLO Theory of Change and logframe

A Theory of Change (ToC) for the RLO was developed in advance of the programme launch (Figure 4). The intended impact of the RLO was seen as evidence-informed decision-making on education in developing countries. This was to be achieved through two key outcomes: first, an improved body of evidence; and second, improved accessibility and understanding by decision-makers of this body of evidence. If we refer back to the Wheel of Impact (section 1, Figure 1), we observe that the ToC centres on 'instrumental' impact (changes in policy and practice that are attributable to research), by means of 'conceptual' impact (new knowledge that changes ways of thinking and contributed to raising awareness), while there is no explicit focus on 'capacity-building' or 'network and connectivity' type of impact in the ToC.

Figure 4: RLO Theory of Change



As it is common practice with FCDO investments, a logical framework ('logframe') guided the implementation of the RLO programme. The impact of the programme is expressed in the logframe as "*Policy and programme decisions to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of education systems to deliver learning outcomes at scale in developing countries are demonstrably informed by the programme-generated evidence base*". Three outcomes leading to this impact are defined as follows:

- *Outcome 1:* A community of practice is established and supported to produce high-quality, policy-relevant evidence on how learning outcomes can be raised within education systems in low-income countries.
- *Outcome 2:* Evidence generated through the programme adds to and informs the body of research knowledge relevant to how education systems can raise learning outcomes in developing countries.
- *Outcome 3:* Evidence generated through the programme contributes to debates amongst policymakers and practitioners on education systems and how they can deliver learning at scale.

The three logframe outcomes have a clear correspondence in the Impact Initiative's Wheel of Impact, introduced above in Section 1. Outcome 1 focuses specifically on strengthening networks and connectivity across projects, and building capacity for impactful research. Outcome 2 focuses on conceptual impact, through the production of relevant research that can shape debates and change ways of thinking. Finally, Outcome 3 squarely corresponds to instrumental impact, by focusing on the impact on policy and practice.

Four outputs are identified in the RLO logframe, with different weights:

- The first output (*A portfolio of high quality, policy-relevant research on what works to deliver learning outcomes through effective, equitable education systems in low income countries is delivered*) refers to research

production (and more specifically to the *research integrity* and *research importance* dimensions in RQ+) and is attributed the greatest weight (40%).

- The second output (*Research funded through the programme draws on diverse disciplines and methodologies, appropriately addresses core cross-cutting issues, and actively involves non-academic stakeholders*) concerns mostly the processes through which research is produced (*research legitimacy* in RQ+ terms) and is given a weight of 20%.
- The third output (*Programme funding is accessible to Southern researchers, and supports individual and institutional capacity to design, conduct and disseminate high quality social science research on learning outcomes and education systems*) concerns Southern engagement and can be seen as being at the crossroad between *research legitimacy* and *positioning for use*. This output is given a weight of 15%.
- The fourth output (*Research findings are accessibly communicated and synthesised for broad audiences including potential policy and practice research users with an interest in raising learning outcomes in education systems in low income countries*) relates to *positioning for use*, and is given a weight of 25%.

4.2. RLO commissioning process

The RLO commissioning process included two types of funding calls: Open Calls, which could be applied to by eligible institutions based in any country, and Follow-On Funding Calls, which were by invitation only for existing grantees, or a subset thereof (see Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of RLO Funding Calls

Type of call	Calls	Funding range (fEC)	Number of grants funded
Open Calls	Call 1 (2014)	Small grants: £50,000 - £150,000 Medium grants: £200,000 - £500,000 Large grants: up to £1,000,000	10
	Call 2 (2015)	£200,000-£700,000	8
	Call 3 (2016)	£200,000-£700,000	10
Follow-on Funding Calls (by invitation only)	FoF 1	£200,000 - £500,000	2
	FOF 4 (3 tranches)	£25,000 - £100,000	10[24]

Open Calls

Three Open Calls for research projects were launched by RLO, each with a specific thematic focus. Call 1 (2014) focused on system elements, and specifically on *effective teaching*. Call 2 (2015) focused on contextual factors, and particularly on three challenging contexts: *urban slums, remote rural, and border cities*. Call 3 (2016) focused on *accountability in education*. Together, the three calls built up the 'system framework' that underpins RLO (see figure 5), reflecting the increasing focus on system-based approaches to education reform, discussed above in Section 3.3. In this framework, learning outcomes are envisaged as being influenced by three overlapping and mutually constitutive inputs – system elements, context, and the dynamics of governance (Magrath et al., 2019: 14). The three calls led to a portfolio of 28 research grants: ten for Call 1[25], eight for Call 2, and ten for Call 3.

[24] Contracting of an eleventh FoF grant (ES/V001086/1), PI Elaine Unterhalter was completed in April 2022, after being significantly delayed for a number of reasons. As the grant was contracted after the analysis for the evaluation was concluded, it is not covered by this report.

[25] One additional grant for this Call was cancelled before its start.

Figure 5: RLO System Approach (Magrath et al., 2019)

The commissioning process was very similar for the three calls. The only difference was that Call 1 had three distinct funding streams, distinguished by size (small, medium and large grants), a distinction that was not repeated in subsequent calls.[26]

Successful proposals were expected to be of high academic quality, have clear relevance for policymakers and practitioners, and fit with the call specifications. All proposals had to be guided by social science driven questions of broad relevance and applicability, and be at least 50% social science. Interdisciplinarity and a mixed method approach were strongly encouraged, but not required. In terms of geographical focus, the programme calls focused particularly on Low-Income Countries (LICs) and a limited number of other priority countries. Proposals focusing on other Middle Income Countries were required to explicitly detail their relevance to one or more LICs.

Follow-On Funding

RLO provided **Follow-On Funding** through dedicated calls, by invitation only, to enable existing RLO grantholders to expand on their research and respond to opportunities identified though their projects.

The first Follow-on-Funding call was launched in 2017 and was limited to small grants under the first Call – to "directly and specifically build upon the outcomes / finding of the original [...] small grant".[27] All four Call 1 Small Grants applied, and two were funded. In both cases, it was a significant scaling up of the original grant, with the budget more than tripling (see Table 4)

[26] Call 1 had a total budget of £5m. Small grants (pilot projects) were funded with a budget ranging between £50,000 and £150,000 at full Economic Cost (fEC), and one year duration. The theme of effective teaching was optional for those pilot grants. Medium grants ranged between £200,000 and £500,000 (fEC), with a duration of two to three years. The theme of effective teaching was required for those grants. Large grants had a budget up to £1,000,000, and up to five years duration. These grants were required to address the theme of effective teaching but, given their size, it was also expected the they would include an analysis of other system dynamics that influence teaching practices and learning outcomes. For calls 2 and 3, the funding range was £200,000-£700,000.

[27] Budgets could range between £200,000 and £500,000 fEC.

Table 4: Follow-on Funding Call 1

	Small grant	***Follow-On Funding***
PI: **John Aber** (New York University)	Promoting Children's Learning Outcomes in Conflict-Affected Countries: Generating, Communicating, and Incorporating Evidence for Impact (£150,918)	Promoting Children's Learning Outcomes in Conflict-Affected Countries: Evidence for Action in Niger (£499,159)
PI: **Ulrike Zeshan** (University of Central Lancashire)	Literacy development with deaf communities using sign language, peer tuition, and learner-generated online content: sustainable educational innovation (£126,173)	Peer to Peer Deaf Multiliteracies: research into a sustainable approach to education of Deaf children and young adults in the Global South (£481,000)

The second Follow-on Funding call, launched in November 2018, was initially intended to comprise of six tranches, opening every six months over three years, and open to all current and former RLO grantholders. The call had four distinct workstreams:

- Workstream 1: *Impact Enhancement*, for activities that build on and further the existing impact work of RLO grants, to develop policy relevance and research user uptake.
- Workstream 2: *Research Augmentation*, for activities that explore any unexpected avenues which may have become apparent through the course of the grant.
- Workstream 3: *Capacity Building*, for activities that develop the capacities of academics and their institutions in the country of research, by building on existing capacity building links and initiatives.
- Workstream 4: *Cross-grant synthesis*, for collaboration between RLO researchers to synthesise research findings around a theme.[28] No application was received for Workstream 4 for the first three tranches – an issue on which we will return in Section 6.2.2.

Ten awards were made through Tranches 1 to 3, but the subsequent tranches were cancelled following the publication of the 2020 UK Government Spending Review and related plans to revaluate the UK's Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget.

The majority of Follow-on Funding (FoF) grants (7 out of 10) focused on research augmentation, followed by impact enhancement (6) and capacity-building (4). No application was received for Workstream 4 for the first three tranches – an issue on which we will return when discussing research synthesis in Section 6.

4.3. Overview of project portfolio

To contextualise our findings, we provide here a brief overview of the portfolio of RLO projects, in terms of their lead institutions, geographical location, and disciplinary, thematic and geographical focus.

Lead institutions

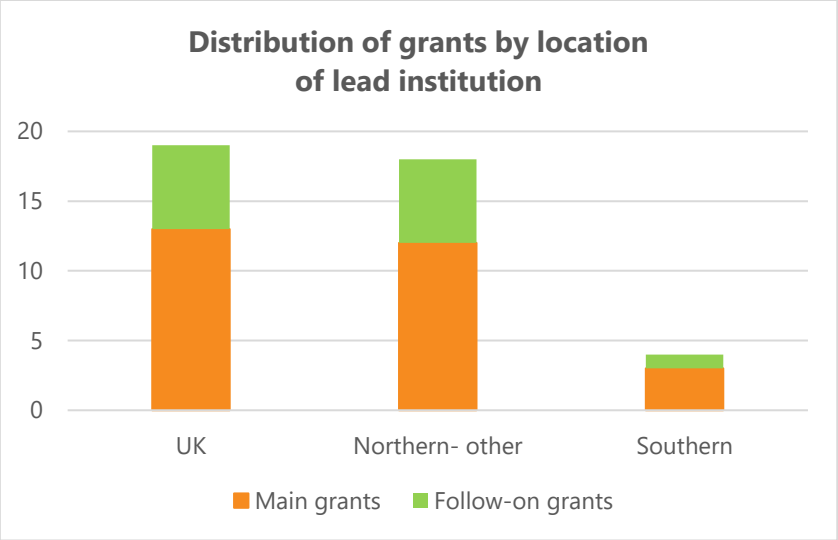
Most RLO grants were led by institutions in the United Kingdom (13 main grants, 6 Follow-on grants) and the United States (10 main grants, 6 Follow-on grants), as seen in Figure 6. The four top institutions in terms of grants received were: University College London (3 main grants, 1 Follow-on grant); New York University (2 main grants,

[28] Amounts ranged from £25,000 to £100,000, for individual workstreams or for a combination among workstreams 1, 2, and 3. Workstream 4 did not count against the allocated maximum of £100,000.

3 Follow-on grants); the University of Cambridge (3 main grants) and the University of Central Lancashire (2 main grants, 1 Follow-on grant). Combined, these four Universities received over one third of the RLO grants.

Only three main grants were led by institutions in the Global South, all of them in Middle Income Countries – namely, the Institute for Financial Management and Research (India), the University of the Free State (South Africa), and Stellenbosch University (South Africa). The latter also received the only Follow-on grant awarded to a Southern institution.

Figure 6: Distribution of RLO grants by location of lead institution

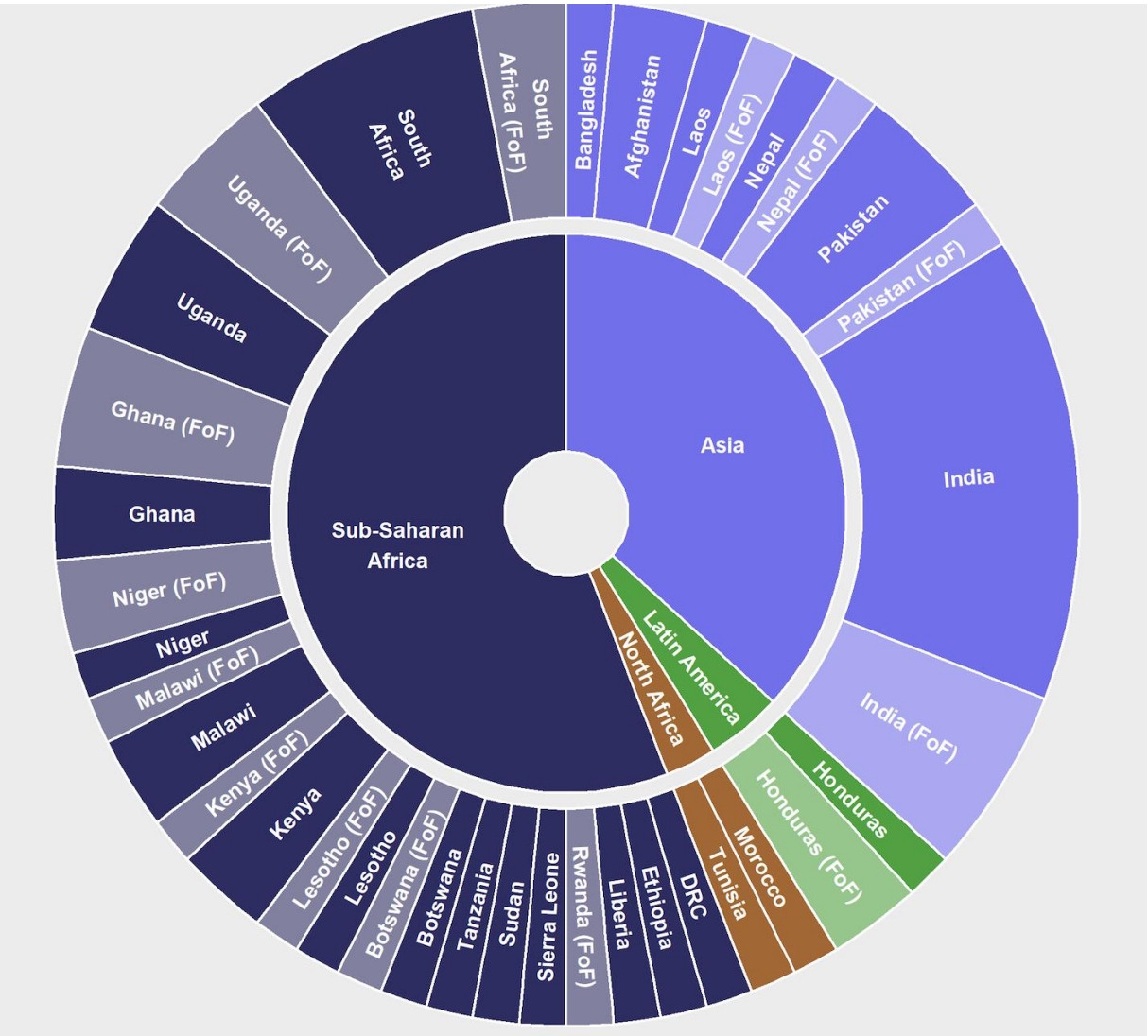


All lead institutions were Universities, with the exception of one grant awarded to Innovations for Policy Action (IPA), a non-profit research and policy organisation based in the United States.

Geographical focus of grants

In terms of countries, the greatest focus of RLO research has been on India (with 10 main grants and three Follow-on grants). About half of the main grants focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, with South Africa and Malawi topping the list (with five and three main grants respectively), as seen in Figure 7.

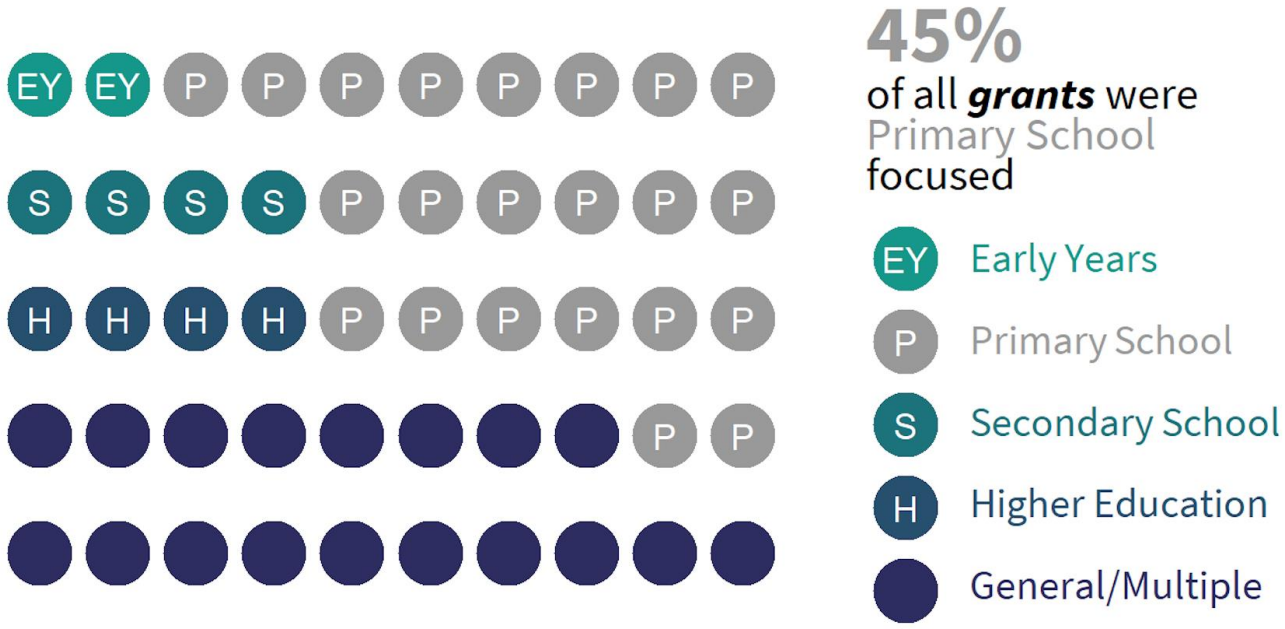
Figure 7: Geographical focus of grants



Thematic focus

The relative majority of RLO main projects focus on primary education (18 awards), with three focusing on secondary education, three on higher education and two on early years education. 14 awards do not have a specific focus, or focus on more than one level (see figure 8).

Figure 8: Focus of RLO projects on different levels of education



Four projects have a focus on disability in education. In addition, one main grant (and two follow-on funding grants) focus specifically on deaf education. This is discussed below in Boxes 2 and 3, and further in section 7.

Box 2: RLO Projects on disability

The project *Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi*, led by Paul Lynch, then at the University of Birmingham (ES/M005453/1), aimed at providing the Malawian Government and its development partners with a better understanding of the complex dynamics that can support or hamper early childhood development and education for children with disabilities. The research adopted a socio-cultural model that situates learning within a cultural context in which family and peers play a key role alongside formal schooling. In particular, the project explored how community-based childcare centres (CBCCs) can provide 'institutional' support to help meet family goals that support children as well as carers.

The project *Learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness for children facing multiple disadvantages, including those with disabilities: India and Pakistan* (also known under the title *Teaching Effectively All Children (TEACh) in India and Pakistan* - ES/M005445/1), led by Pauline Rose at the University of Cambridge, aimed at identifying which aspects of teaching are most important for improving all children's learning, and so inform governments on the strategies needed to support children who face multiple disadvantages.

The project *Constructing a Global Framework for Analysis of Social Exclusion From and Within Learning Systems*, led by Parul Bakhshi at Washington University in St. Louis (ES/M005011/1), aimed at filling a gap between the definition of equity as a policy objective in education, and assessment of progress that remains focussed on isolated indicators of equity in access to structures. To achieve this, the project set out to produce a theoretical

and methodological framework that deciphers processes of social exclusion not just from, but also within learning systems.

The project *Strengthening schools accountability mechanisms through participation: Addressing education quality and equity in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, led by Jean-François Trani also a Washington University in St. Louis (ES/P005799/1), built on the above project by Bakhshi to apply its analytical framework to remote rural contexts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The project aimed to test the hypothesis that strengthening existing social horizontal accountability mechanisms can enhance inclusion and the learning experience of disadvantaged children (including children with disability). To this aim, the project uses Community Based System Dynamics (CBSD) - a participatory approach promoting local ownership in the process of deciphering and changing complex systems from the feedback perspective of system dynamics.

Box 3: Project example: RLO research on literacy development with Deaf communities

The research on literacy development with deaf communities, led by Ulrike Zeshan at the University of Central Lancashire, is the only case of a PI receiving three different RLO grants. The starting point for the research is the recognition that, in much of the world, English instruction is delivered to deaf signers by teachers who cannot sign themselves – making English acquisition virtually impossible. The first pilot grant (*Literacy development with deaf communities using sign language, peer tuition, and learner-generated online content: sustainable educational innovation* - ES/M005186/1), financed through Call 1, aimed at providing English-language teaching for deaf learners in India through the development of a virtual / mobile learning platform (Sign Language to English by the Deaf - SLEND) combined with support from Deaf peer tutors. The project also had smaller case studies in Uganda and Ghana. The Follow-On Funding (provided through FoF Call 1 - *Peer to Peer Deaf Multiliteracies: research into a sustainable approach to education of Deaf children and young adults in the Global South,* ES/P008623/1) extended the work of the pilot to reach wider groups of learners in India, Uganda, Ghana, Rwanda and Nepal, both in primary schools and with young adult learners.

Finally, a project funded through FoF Call 4 (*South-South collaboration in realising the impacts of Peer-to-Peer Deaf Multiliteracies research in India, Uganda, and Nepal* - ES/T008199/1) goes a step further towards introducing key elements from Peer to Peer Deaf Multiliteracies research into concrete educational contexts, working with partners in India, Uganda, and Nepal. To this effect, the project created a range of materials (curricula, teachers' handbook materials, teaching/learning materials, and best practice examples) underpinning newly arising roles for deaf professionals for use in each partner country.

The thematic focus of RLO grants is further analysed in Section 6, as part of our assessment of EQ2.

4.4. Support services

Support for RLO has been provided through two distinct services: the Impact Initiative (2015-2021), to increase the uptake and impact of funded research, and the Programme Research Lead (2017-2019), to help maximise the scientific value of the programme by identifying, promoting, and supporting opportunities for research collaboration and synergy across the portfolio of projects.

The **Impact Initiative** for International Development Research, which started in 2015, was operated jointly by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), based at the University of Sussex, and Research for Equitable Access and

Learning Centre (REAL), based at the University of Cambridge. It worked across both the Joint Fund and RLO to cover impact maximisation, evidence synthesis and aspects of cohort and capacity building, and to support profile-building across stakeholders. The Impact Initiative's contract came to an end in March 2021; a time-only extension was agreed until mid-June 2021 in order to allow for additional time to secure the long-term sustainability of their website and legacy resources, undertake additional citation analysis for both programmes, and extend the reach of their final learning report.

The **Programme Research Lead (PRL)** was appointed in January 2017 to deliver three aims: (1) support and provide evidence of the scientific, conceptual, and methodological contributions of the programme; (2) maximise scientific quality and best practice between RLO grants across calls and around cross-cutting themes; and (3) implement and strengthen cohort-building opportunities and activities within the RLO programme.[29] Following a Call for Proposals, the PRL role was awarded to David Johnson at the University of Oxford for a period of 26 months, supported by a small team of two Research Fellows. The PRL contract ended in March 2019. It was intended that a Synthesis Initiative support function be appointed in 2019 to replace the PRL, but no successful bids were identified by the Evaluation Panel in response to a dedicated call, and an appointment was therefore not made.

Since the beginning of the programme, two external reviews have looked at the effectiveness of the services that supported the RLO. Specifically, these were:

- **Impact Initiative Mid-Term Review** (2017), conducted by P&A Research and Consulting. The objectives of the review were "to provide an independent and interim assessment of the state of play of the Impact Initiative against expectations, and to inform ESRC and DFID on progression and priorities for the remaining period of the contract" (Parsons & Walsh, 2017: 8). The review noted that the Impact Initiative had made important achievements with a workable delivery infrastructure in place. It recommended a refocus in strategy to avoid a shortfall in achievements, specifically in providing more project-level support and emphasising collaborative opportunities and joint events, with a focus on policy-relevant collaborators and events in Southern locations. The Impact Initiative responded in a comprehensive manner to the review findings. It reviewed its logframe, established a new Strategy and Planning Group and external Advisory Group, and enhanced its focus on early engagement with new grants and a spotlight on impact stories.

- **Review of ESRC-FCDO Support Services (2019),** conducted by Leeds Beckett University. The independent review covered the Impact Initiative (with regard to its support to both the Joint Fund and the RLO), the PRL, as well as the Evidence and Policy Group (EPG), which provided support to the Growth Research Programme (DEGRP), another ESRC/DFID collaboration. The review found that support services were helpful in supporting communication of research and improving knowledge to policymakers, as well as one-to-one support and guidance for PI and Co-Is. Engagement was found to be strongest at participatory events and activities (Parsons et al., 2020). However, the Review found that the PRL had "seriously under-delivered on publications and its wider knowledge-sharing potential" (Parsons et al., 2020: 35), and that this investment "although well intentioned" had probably "not provided added value to funders" (Parsons et al., 2020: 85).

In addition, an internal Mid-Term review was conducted by the PRL in 2018, reporting strong progress on cohort building and knowledge building, with a plan to expand knowledge exchange and knowledge transformation. In their response, the funders expressed concern about the perceived lack of clarity on the PRL part on how objectives of cohort-building and synthesis could be met, and how PRL activities could contribute to the testing the RLO system framework. The funders agreed that the PRL function should continue beyond the mid-point review, but called upon the PRL team to complete a number of required actions and to be more creative, reflective and ambitious to fully meet its objectives.

[29] See https://esrc.ukri.org/research/international-research/international-development/esrc-fcdo-raising-learning-outcomes-in-education-systems-research-programme/

Conclusions

The RLO programme aimed to fund projects that supported evidence-informed decision-making on education in developing countries. Its commissioning process – consisting in three main Open Calls as well as a Follow On Funding calls – led to a thematically and geographically diverse and wide-ranging portfolio, which will be examined in more detail in Section 6. Support for RLO has been provided through two distinct services: the Impact Initiative (2015-2021), to increase the uptake and impact of funded research, and the Programme Research Lead (2017-2019), to help maximise the scientific value of the programme by identifying, promoting, and supporting opportunities for research collaboration and synergy across the portfolio of projects.

5. RLO Community of Practice (EQ1)

EQ1 asks "Has a Community of Practice been established which produces high quality, policy relevant evidence on raising learning outcomes?". This question mirrors the first outcome of the RLO logframe: *"A community of practice will be established and supported to produce high-quality, policy-relevant evidence on how learning outcomes can be raised within education systems in low-income countries"*. In this section, we discuss the definition of a 'Community of Practice', as well as feedback from grantees on RLO's Community of Practice (5.1), and explore the sub-evaluation questions around connections and collaboration (section 5.2); capacity development (section 5.3); Southern engagement (section 5.4); North-South research partnerships (section 5.5); and legacy (section 5.6). Preliminary conclusions are drawn in Section 5.7.

5.1. Defining the RLO Community of Practice

The notion of 'Community of Practice' is not defined in the reviewed RLO documentation. In the ESRC Annual Reports and FCDO Annual Reviews, the expression is only found when referring to Outcome 1 of the logframe. The term is also not found in the Impact Initiative *Year 1 Review Point Report* (2015) or *Mid-term Review* (Parsons et al., 2017), nor is it used in the *Review of Support Services* (Parsons et al., 2020), which instead speaks of 'cohort building' alongside capacity-building and synthesis functions.

Consequently, the first task for the evaluation team with reference to EQ1 was to define with some precision what was meant by 'Community of Practice' for the purpose of this analysis, and what specific dimensions fell within (and outside) the term (see Box 4). To do so, we started with the classic definition provided by educational theorist Etienne Wegner, which sees Community of Practice (CoP) as a group of people (in this case, researchers and practitioners) who share a common interest (in this case, raising learning outcomes in education system) and interact regularly (in this case, though events and other opportunities organised or facilitated through the RLO programme) in order to learn from each other and improve (Wegner, 1998).[30]

Box 4 : What is a Community of Practice?

In its classical definition, a 'Community of Practice' is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 1998). A Community of Practice is thus characterised by a combination of three elements:

1. *The domain:* A Community of Practice is not merely a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest – in this case, education.
2. *The community:* In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. So, researchers in education are not automatically a Community of Practice unless they regularly interact and learn together.
3. *The practice:* Members of a Community of Practice develop a shared repertoire of resources, experiences, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems—in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

[30] This definition also resonates with the description of the RISE Community of Practice offered on the programme's website ("*a group of practitioners all working to create systematic change to raise learning levels. Run on an invited basis, the group provides a space for sharing lessons from implementation in order to overcome challenges and drive learning improvements together*"). See https://riseprogramme.org/rise-community-of-practice.

The implication is that a Community of Practice is not simply a network, or a web of interactions. Rather,

> "a successful community of practice should be based on mutual engagement (the way members engage with and respond to each others' actions and establish relationships based on this engagement); joint enterprise (how participants in the community understand, contribute to and take responsibility for the development of the community of practice); and a shared repertoire (the ability to make the range of resources employed into something that is used and engaged in). This requires participation and the ability to make practices meaningful" (Bolander Laksov et al., 2008: 123).

Assessing the establishment of a Community of Practice poses higher demands that simply assessing the existence of a 'network' or 'cohort' of researchers who have come to know each other (or know each other better) through the programme. We used three main parameters to guide our analysis on RLO:

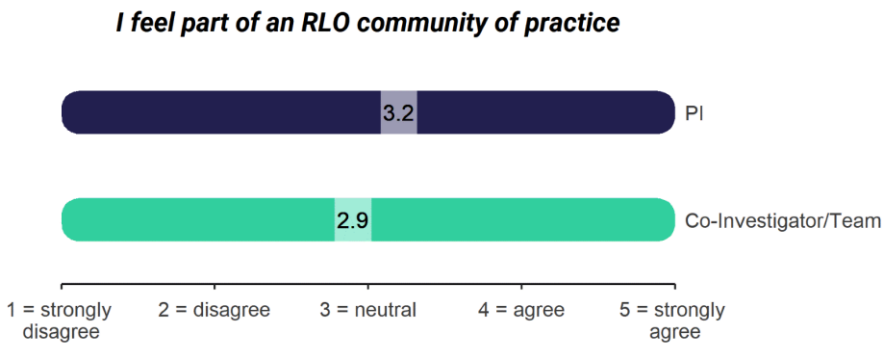
- A Community of Practice implies *cross-project interaction*. In other words, interaction of researchers within the confines of the same RLO project, even if across different countries and institutions, would not be counted, *per se*, as contributing to the RLO CoP. We instead see this type of interaction under the more specific rubric of 'North-South project partnerships'.
- Being part of a Community of Practice involves a *deeper and more sustained engagement* than simply knowing each other and interacting during events. Networking can be seen as a first step in the establishment of a CoP but it is not, in itself, sufficient. This interaction can take different shapes, beyond the classic modes of academic collaborations such as co-authored papers or joint panels at conferences.
- To address EQ1 we need to prove, to some extent, the *value added of RLO* as a programme. There is a clear attribution challenge here, particularly in a programme as thematically focused as the RLO: because of their shared research interest, most grantholders knew each other independently from the programme, and have had previous opportunities to meet each other at conference or other events. The question, therefore, is what difference the RLO programme made, and whether the fact of having been part of the RLO gave researchers a greater sense of 'belonging together' compared to simply having shared research interests.

Feedback from grantholders on involvement in the RLO Community of Practice

In the online survey, respondents were asked to rate the statement "I feel part of a RLO Community of Practice" using a slider scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). As shown in Figure 9, the average was 3.2 for PIs, and 2.9 for teams, i.e. slightly above and slightly below 'neutral', respectively. In both cases, the range of responses span the whole gamut, showing great variability in the experience (and possibly expectations) of respondents.[31]

[31] Further disaggregation within the 'teams' category shows the interesting trend (which is recurrent for all glider scale questions) of Northern team members giving a lower rating that their Southern counterparts (the average in this case being 3.5 for Southern team members and 2.2 for Northern team members). Gender does not appear to be a significant factor here, with very similar figures for male respondents (average 2.9) and female respondents (average 3.1).

Figure 9: Feedback on Community of Practice from the online survey for PIs (n=20) and Co-Is (n=24).



The meaning of 'Community of Practice' was purposively left unspecified in this question, as we were interested in getting respondents' instinctive reaction to the term. We then cross-checked these responses with those given to related survey questions (e.g. around clarity of aim and scope of the RLO[32], and familiarity with other projects – two elements that represent essential components of a Community of Practice according to our definition). We also further explored this question through interviews and the online qualitative discussion.

From this triangulation of findings, it emerged that the 'sense of belonging' to an RLO community is significantly higher across PIs compared to the teams at large. Even among PIs, this varied considerably depending on several factors, such as the level of involvement with the impact support services, or the degree of overlay between an individual project and the broader RLO portfolio. PIs working in 'niche' topics found that the RLO community did not offer many opportunities for collaboration in their own themes of interest – a point on which we will return when discussing synthesis in Section 6.2.

Levels of programme-level awareness and cross-project interaction were significantly lower across team members, particularly those in the Global South. When asked about Community of Practice in interviews, Southern team members referred primarily to the exchanges and connections happening *within* the project rather than *between* projects.

5.2. Connections and collaboration (EQ1.1)

The primary way in which the RLO support services (Impact Initiative and PRL) worked to establish and nurture cross-project interaction was through the Annual Grantholders Workshops (in later years renamed Annual Researchers Workshops, as part of an effort to emphasize inclusion to team members beyond the PI). These events were highly appreciated by RLO researchers, and valued as an opportunity for networking and reflection.[33] Although many RLO researchers knew each other independently of the project, they generally cherished the opportunities to meet up, discuss, learn about each other's research and exchange ideas.

Participation of Southern team members in RLO annual events was quite low in the initial years, and significant efforts were made to increase it over time, particularly through the provision of ring-fenced funding. In the 2019

[32] When asked whether the scope and goals of the RLO were clear, PIs generally agreed (with an average of 4.2 and a range of 3 to 5, i.e. no respondent disagreed with the statement). The average for teams was slightly lower (3.9, ranging from 2 to 5).

[33] This finding emerges from a review of the Annual Workshop reports (based on participants' feedback forms) and confirmed by our own analysis. The feedback on the events received through the survey and interviews was generally very positive. When asked to rate the statement "The events organised by the Impact Initiative were relevant for my team", PIs gave an average rating of 4.2 out of 5 (with responses ranging from 2 to 5). The average rating for team members was 3.6 (with responses covering the full spectrum from 1 to 5).

Annual Workshop, over half of the participants (29 out of 53) came from the Global South (Ethiopia, India, Malawi, Lesotho, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, Uganda and South Africa). Despite these efforts of the funders' and organisers' side, UK visa requirements continued to pose a particular obstacle for Southern participation. The 2020 Annual Workshop was planned to take place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, precisely to enable greater Southern participation, but unfortunately it had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the Annual Workshops, some effort was made to pilot creative, non-traditional techniques to facilitated collaboration across projects. Two such examples are the Cross-sectoral collaboration boardgame at the 2016 Conference in Pretoria (see Box 5) and the Dragons Den format for collaborative pitches at the 2019 RLO Workshop (see Box 6).

Box 5: Cross-sectoral collaboration board game at the 2016 Conference in Pretoria

The **Cross-sectoral Collaboration board game** was initially invented for the conference '10 Years of Poverty Alleviation Research', held in March 2016 in Pretoria, South Africa, bringing together researchers from RLO and the Joint Fund. In advance of the conference, participants were requested to send in ideas for sessions and effectively co-design the conference. RLO PI Ulrike Zeshan invented a collaboration game based on the World of Publishing game template. The game board was organized into four sections, corresponding to project phases from design to dissemination of findings. Players had to play as different societal actors, i.e. academic (A), business (B), civil society (C), and public service (P). (Zeshan, 2020).

Box 6: Using the Dragons' Den model to support inter-project collaboration

The Dragons' Den was a participatory methodology piloted by the Impact Initiative at the Joint Fund Conference 'Power of Partnership', which took place in New Delhi in December 2018. Named after the BBC TV reality show, the Dragons' Den was a way to encourage and support participants to collaborate around joint research uptake activities. Researchers were explicitly asked to pitch for support to a joint policy engagement activity rather than more research (Shephard, 2020).

"Unlike the TV show our Dragons did not have a pile of cash next to them to directly fund the projects they liked. Instead, the prize on offer was bespoke support from the Impact Initiative to take ideas forward - including resources for events and publications. Our pitchers had just 5 minutes with a bag of optional props and absolutely no PowerPoint." (Georgalakis, 2018).

The same method was used at the 2019 RLO Annual Workshop. Like in the New Delhi conference, research teams were asked to connect with at least one other project over the course of the workshop to form a pitch for support for a policy engagement activity (and not for more research). The 'Dragons' were DFID Education Advisors who discussed which idea they wished to take forward and allocate real Impact Initiative resources to make things happen. In total three teams pitched, representing 10 grants.

One successful pitch was made by the SCAFFOLD (Stakeholder Convergence for Focus on Learner Disadvantage) team – a collaboration that culminated in a national networking event in December 2019 in New Delhi. Participants included 24 southern project members from 7 RLO projects, 2 PIs (from UK) and 39 policy makers and key stakeholders including government, NGOs and journalists.

Call 3 grantholders were the most affected by Covid-19 and related restrictions, and regretted having less of an opportunity to interact with others compared to their colleagues in earlier projects. They however recognised that this was a clear case of *force majeure* and that the funders and the Impact Initiative did what they could to keep the community going. Specifically, the Impact Initiative organised several online events, including two webinars specifically designed to bring RLO grantholders together, share learning and explore opportunities for collaboration. A webinar conducted in June 2020 focused specifically on the effects of the pandemic on education ("*Covid-19: Thinking differently about education research impact*"), and was attended by representatives of 14 RLO grants.

While the feedback on RLO events was highly positive, a common remark was that – even pre-Covid - momentum was not kept between events. There seems to be high variation in terms of what PIs see as the 'Goldilocks' level of programme engagement: while some recommended more consistent follow-up, most grantholders admitted that they would not have been able to sustain such engagement anyway, given time constraints and the pressure of other academic commitments. [34] This aligns with the findings of the Review of Support Services, which highlights 'temporal constraints' as a key obstacle to grantholders engagement with support services:

> **"Temporal constraints** mainly relate to PI and project team time pressures and their prioritisation of engagement over project activities or other responsibilities. In particular interviewees often highlighted pressures of delivering the grants alongside other duties which limited the time available for impact-related activities, especially when the work required extensive travelling and fieldwork. Projects also discussed that support service events sometimes needed to be planned or communicated further in advance, to enable more in-country partners to attend. This was notably the case where travel restriction from LICs or visa requirements were involved." (Parsons, 2020: 34).

In some cases, the events did lead to sustained and fruitful collaborations among RLO projects. An interesting example is the collaboration between the projects led by Erin Murphy-Graham, at University of California Berkeley, and Edward Seidman, at New York University, around the testing of the Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System (TIPPS) in Honduras (see Box 7). Relatedly, PI Seidman and PI John Aber (both at New York University) co-authored a journal article about using TIPPS to measure and predict the quality of teacher-child interaction in Ghanaian pre-school classrooms (Wolf et al, 2018).[35]

"The Impact Initiative team [has] been really dedicated. I can't say enough good things about them. I do see some of the challenges that they had to work with. I'm sure 'herding cats' is a good analogy here... the bringing people together from different parts of the world and literally sitting us down in the same room was really valuable [...]. When you sit and listen to someone who is working somewhere else and who is talking about a program that is somewhat similar to yours, in a different context, [it is] a great learning opportunity - and even if we don't end up collaborating, we get that knowledge transfer". (CoI, Interview)

[34] In the online survey, respondents were asked to rate the statement "I have collaborated with colleagues in other RLO projects and/or plan to collaborate in the future". PIs' responses averaged 3.5. Teams responses averaged 2.9, but also in this case we can see a significantly lower (reported) engagement from Northern team members (with an average of 2.1), as opposed to Southern team members (with an average of 3.7). When asked to indicate the types of collaboration undertaken and/or planned, PIs mostly named joint events (12 out of 19), followed by joint grant application and joint efforts to influence policy or practice (7 each), and joint publications (5). Four PIs had not undertaken any collaboration and had no plans in this sense.

[35] This publication exemplifies the problems related to bibliometric analysis discussed in Section 1. While this is referenced in the DFID Annual Review 2016-2017 as a collaboration emerging from a RLO event, the article itself does not reference either of the grants, and is therefore not picked up by Dimensions.

Box 7: Example of inter-project collaboration around TIPPS tool

The award *Examining Effective Teaching in Rural Honduran Secondary Schools* (ES/M004864/1), led by Erin Murphy-Graham at UC Berkeley, was funded in Call 1, and built on previous work around a learning tool called *Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial* (Tutorial Learning System or SAT). One key aspect of this model was a method of teacher professional development that used an 'asesor' (roughly translated as 'coach'). There was a desire to do in-depth classroom observation, but at the time the project struggled to locate the right observation tool for developing country contexts.

During the first RLO conference in London, PI Murphy-Graham met the team from the award *Toward the Development of a Rigorous and Practical Classroom Observation Tool: The Uganda secondary school project* (ES/M004740/1), led by Edward Seidman (New York University), who were working on a tool called TIPPS (Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System) that facilitated classroom observation in an international development context. Both teams felt there was a strong case for partnership, and spent the next few years sharing knowledge about their projects and working to identify opportunities for collaboration.

When the Call 4 opportunity for Follow-on Funding opened, the two PIs applied separately and they both received funding (ES/T000422/1 and ES/T000406/1). This provided the Berkeley team the opportunity to apply the TIPPS tool to their SAT training, and for the NYU team to test their tool in a new country context (Honduras). The two teams now work together in the Honduran context and although they hold two separate Follow-on Funding grants, they work quite closely and essentially as one project. The PIs had planned to apply for further cross-grant synthesis funding (Workstream 4 of the Follow-on Fund) once they had some findings from their initial collaboration, but this opportunity has since been cancelled due to the effects of the ODA cuts.

Although there have been delays in project implementation due to school closure from Covid-19, project partners have been trained in TIPPS and some data collection had started prior to the pandemic. The partners also were awarded funding from the Impact Initiative, which was used to host a webinar to share their work. The webinar was titled *Rethinking teacher professional development in Honduras*, and was presented in collaboration with all partners. The webinar specifically targeted Honduran participants, and greater accessibility was ensured through provision of simultaneous translation between English and Spanish. Over 500 participants, who were mainly Honduran and included teachers, researchers, NGOs, and government officials, attended the webinar. Some international organisations such as USAID and UNICEF attended as well. There are plans for continued stakeholder engagement once activities can resume.[36]

The use of TIPPS in relation to SAT in Honduras is further explored in the case-study in Appendix 1.

5.3. Capacity development (EQ1.2)

As part of the overall analysis of the RLO Community of Practice, we examine the extent to which the RLO has provided researchers and partners with new tools, resources and approaches, and built their knowledge and skills.

In the Calls for Proposals of the main grants, it was specified that capacity development was not a primary

[36] For further information about this webinar, see the Impact Initiative blog post here: https://www.theimpactinitiative.net/news/reconceptualising-teacher-professional-development-honduras

objective of the RLO, as both funders had specific funding streams for this purpose.[37] It was expected, however, that the proposals would identify capacity-building activities as part of the stated research approach. The specification for the three Open Calls stated in identical terms that:

> "capacity-building elements should be set out in relation to the core intellectual agenda of the research proposal and not treated separately; the focus should be on the quality and impact of the research, and how increasing research capacity contributes to this. Good examples of capacity-building include co-design of research and implementation, field-based research methods training for developing country partner staff, and opportunities for developing country partner staff to author/co-author journal and conference papers and participate in national and international conferences. Support and mentoring for more junior team members may also contribute importantly to building future research capacity".

In the call, capacity development is articulated at three levels: capacity of individual researchers; organisational capacity (e.g. management, financial, communications); and institutional capacity-building (e.g. the incentive structures, the political and regulatory context and the resource base in which research is undertaken and used by policymakers). The Calls further noted that successful proposals had to demonstrate a strong understanding of the local research context and ensure that the project did not undermine local research capacity.

Capacity building in the RLO logframe

The RLO logframe tracks the contribution of the programme to support individual and institutional capacity in the Global South to design, conduct and disseminate high quality social science research on learning outcomes and education systems (Output 3). A specific indicator tracks the capacity-development activities for Southern researchers (1.3: *Number of grants reporting undertaking capacity building activities benefiting Southern researchers, by type of activity*). In the 2020-2021 FCDO Annual Review, the target is reported as exceeded, with 90% of the live and completed grants reporting capacity-building activities benefitting Southern researchers in 2019, against a target of 30%. As for most logframe indicators, alongside the quantitative targets, qualitative examples are provided by grantholders in annual progress reports, analysed by the funders and included in annual funder reporting.

Capacity building was a dedicated funding stream of Call 4 (Follow On Funding), under which four projects were funded (all of them in conjunction with research augmentation and/or impact building).
Our analysis shows that the emphasis on capacity development varies significantly across projects. The following are just a few examples of projects training junior researchers and/or research assistants include:

- The three projects led by PI Ulrike Zeshan at the University of Central Lancashire (ES/M005186/1, ES/P008623/1, and ES/T008199/1) all had a strong focus on training deaf project staff in India, Ghana, and Uganda, to prepare them for professional roles in deaf education. The training was co-created with trainees, who gained a varied range of skills (from delivering lectures to video filming and editing) and were mentored in undertaking and publishing their own research.
- Projects focusing on the TIPPS tool have given considerable attention to training Research Assistants not only in the use of the tool but also more broadly in data collection and analysis, and other key research skills (see Box 7 and case-study in Appendix 1).

[37] Accordingly, the programme did not provide support to standalone PhD or Master students. However, funding for project-linked doctoral students could be included in proposals, provided the research project duration was three years or more and the student was based at an ESRC-accredited Doctoral Training Centre (DTC).

- In the RAISE project (*Researching Accountability in the Indian System of Education*, led by Caroline Dyer at the University of Leeds, ES/P005802/1), the Co-Is and India-based field researchers and Co-Is were provided with regular training programmes on methodological approaches and analysis. They also participated in reading groups and writing workshops held regularly by the project team. The PI and the UK-based Co-I, in addition to visiting field sites and leading workshops on qualitative methods (interviews, Focus Group Discussions, school and class-based observation) and data recording and management, also led workshops on preliminary findings and case studies via Skype and Zoom. Each researcher was also allocated a mentor (one of the four PI/Co-Is) who provided regular feedback on their field notes and methodological journals.

While there are many such examples of capacity-development, other project teams admitted that the focus on Early Career Researchers and research assistants was not strong, and their involvement happened mostly by default, due to the need of having 'hands on deck' to deliver the project.

Irrespectively of whether capacity development happened by design or by default, team members consulted for this evaluation provided largely positive feedback.[38] Several benefits from participating in RLO were reported, including presenting at academic conference; publishing in academic journals; being involved in public outreach; being exposed to new approaches, tools and methodologies; and successful applications for further funding. Access to networks and exposure to different methods and tools were also frequently mentioned. An increased ability to communicate research findings outside academia, and to tailor and package them for different audiences, was mentioned by both Northern and Southern respondents, and the Impact Initiative was credited for playing an important role in this regard.

5.4. Southern engagement (EQ 1.3)

The question of Southern engagement (*to what extent has the RLO succeeded in engaging Southern researchers and institutions?)* is a broad one and it overlaps with a range of other questions, explored in this section and elsewhere in the report – particularly network and connectivity (EQ1.1), capacity-building (EQ1.2), the fairness of North-South partnerships (EQ1.4), and the analysis of Southern authorship of RLO publications (EQ2.2). Here, we look at whether the RLO has enabled Southern-led research, as indicated primarily by the involvement of researchers and research institutions in the Global South in leading positions in RLO projects, and in shaping the RLO vision at the programme level.[39]

The RLO Open Calls were accessible to PIs in any part of the world, provided that they were "based at an authentic organisation with the capacity to undertake high-quality research". This is in line with other ESRC/FCDO R4D collaborations (such as the Joint Fund and ESPA), but still an exception in the broader context of UK-funded research schemes. [40] As in previous ESRC/FCDO collaborations, applications from non-UK institutions were encouraged through a 100% fEC (as opposed to 80% for UK institutions), meaning that no cost-sharing was required by the host institution; as well as a higher level of overhead (50%, against 20% for UK-based institutions.

[38] In the online survey, we asked respondents to rate the statement "My ability to lead/conduct impact-oriented research had improved as a result of RLO". PIs responses averaged 4.15 (range 2-5). Teams averaged 3.7 (range 1-5), with no significant differences related to age, gender, or location.

[39] For this report, we consider main institutional affiliation as the determinant factor to identify researchers as Northern or Southern. We are aware that this is a problematic definition – a point that was strongly made by one of the PIs in our sample – as Southern researchers may be based in Northern institutions, and vice versa. Yet we believe that institutional affiliation acts as a better qualifier compared to, for example, nationality of the researchers, both for practical reasons (data about nationality are not publicly available, and individuals may hold multiple citizenships), and as a matter of principle, as Southern engagement goes beyond individuals to encompass their institutions and overall contexts. In other words, it can be assumed that a project led by a PI based in a Southern institution would have had a stronger impact on that country's research capacity compared to a project led by a PI who is a national of that country, but based in an institution in the Global North (although, of course, this assumption may not prove true in all cases).

[40] For example, only a minority of the funding calls reviewed by the GCRF evaluation were open to Southern applicants as lead institutions. See Vogel et al. (2022). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1055522/gcrf-evaluation-1a-synthesis-report.pdf.

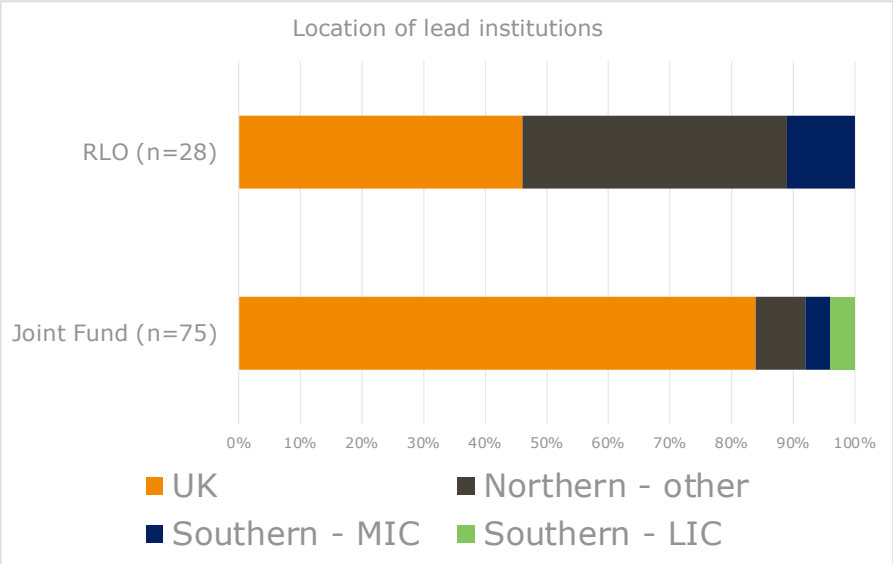
To be eligible, institutions had to "possess[...] an existing in-house capacity to host a grant and to carry out research that materially extends and enhances the national or international research base" and be able to demonstrate "an independent capability to undertake and lead research programmes." Most non-UK research institutions are not automatically recognised to hold UK Research Council grants. They can still apply for RLO funding, but any grant allocation would be conditioned to the process of obtaining Research Council recognition. In addition, all applicants and their organisations were required to register to use the Research Councils' Joint Electronic Submission (Je-S) system before submitting an application.

Southern engagement in the RLO logframe

The RLO logframe tracked the number of grants with PIs or Co-Is in Southern institutions (Output Indicator 3.1), along with the proportion of research funding allocated to Southern institutions (Output Indicator 3.2). The set targets were exceeded for both these indicators, with over half of research grants (53%) involving Southern PIs or Co-Is, against a target of 40%,[41] and 41% of funding going to Southern institutions (against a target of 35%). (FCDO, 2021). However, the aggregate nature of Indicator 3.1 (counting PIs and Co-Is together) hides the fact that the number of RLO PIs based in Southern institutions has been very low (only three out of 28).

Only three projects (all funded in the second Call) were led by institutions in the Global South (two in South Africa and one in India); only one of those (based in South Africa) went on to receive Follow-On Funding. This low proportion of Southern-led grants (three out of 28 main grants, or just below 11%) is not unique to the RLO: the Joint Fund had seven Southern-led grants out of a portfolio of 75 main grants (or just below 9%), while ESPA had 10 out of 125 (or 8%). Figure 10 compares the breakdown of grants based on location of lead institution for the RLO and the Joint Fund: notably, the RLO has a much higher percentage of non-UK institutions in the Global North (particularly in the United States).

Figure 10: Comparison between RLO and Joint Fund in terms of location of projects' lead institutions



The evaluation put specific steps in place to investigate the question of Southern engagement, which included: (1) review of the commissioning process from this perspective (including interviews with panel chairs and panellists); (2) interviews with two unsuccessful Southern candidates (whose application had progressed to the final

[41] Based on the interviews conducted, we believe that this proportion is actually higher, and that in some cases Southern Co-Is were not named in the original proposal but were included later.

stages of selection) to have their feedback and recommendations on how to make the selection process better suited for Southern applicants; and (3) the online qualitative discussion, which was a dedicated space for Southern researchers. Two main barriers were highlighted:

- *Low awareness of funding calls among Southern researchers and institutions.* Most Southern participants declared to have been made aware of the RLO funding opportunity through their collaborators in the UK, and would not have found it otherwise. This led to most RLO partnerships resulting from previous relations rather than new collaboration (as further explored below), and also arguably significantly reduced the number of applications led by Southern institutions. There was also an incorrect perception among some respondents that a UK PI was a requirement for applying.
- *Limited time at the application stage.* Some respondents reported that they would have liked to lead the proposal, but lack of timely awareness of the opportunity combined with a complex application process made it not feasible. It was also noted that Southern researchers are at a structural disadvantage when it comes to writing proposals, compared to their colleagues in the Global North, as they do not receive support from dedicated research offices, and have to prepare the entire proposal, including the budget.

5.5. North-South research partnerships (EQ 1.4).

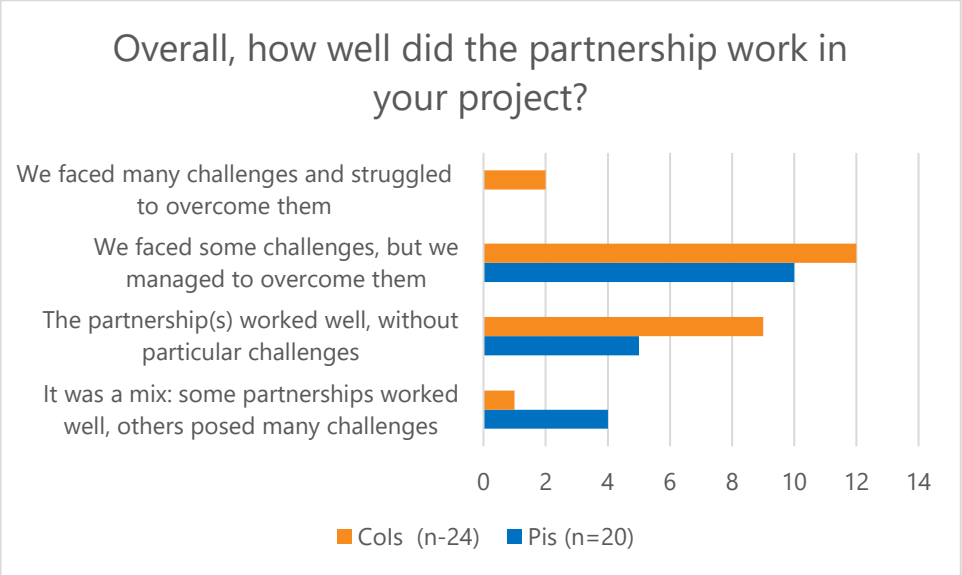
As part of the analysis of RLO promotion of Community of Practice, we investigated to which extent the programme, and its constituent projects, have facilitated the emergence and strengthening of sustainable, fair and equitable partnerships between researchers and practitioners in the Global North and the Global South. While we define the notion of Community of Practice as inherently cross-project, we posit that there is strong correlation between the quality of North-South partnerships within each project and the overall strength of the Community of Practice across projects.

We asked respondents of the online survey to tell us about their project partnerships, intentionally leaving the meaning of 'partnership' open. It appears that the RLO has featured a mix of existing and new partnerships – within academia as well as with a range of other partners, from governments to NGOs. In most cases, partnerships emerged from existing networks and collaborations.[42]

Overall, both new and existing partnerships are perceived by both PIs and Co-Is to have worked well in the RLO, despite some challenges, which often had to do with administration and finance (see figure 11).

[42] Out of 19 projects represented in the PI online survey, in 9 cases the partners knew each other but had not formally collaborated, in 5 cases the partners had formally collaborated before; in 3 cases it was a mix (some partners had collaborated before, for others it was the first time) and in two cases partners did not know each other before the project.

Figure 11: Feedback on partnerships from online surveys



Qualitative feedback received through the open questions of the online survey and the interviews was overwhelmingly positive, with Southern partners appreciating, in particular, the open and regular communication, and opportunities for networking, publications, and conference presentation. Reporting requirements seemed proportionate and not overly burdensome.

There is however variation as to the extent to which the projects have intentionally focused on fairness and equity in partnerships. The project *Can schools' accountability for learning be strengthened from the grassroots?*, presented in Box 8, represents an interesting example of reflection on how research methods and processes can reflect embedded power inequalities between the Global North and the Global South.

Box 8: Project example: Reflection on decolonisation of research methods through North-South partnership

The project *Can schools' accountability for learning be strengthened from the grassroots? Investigating the potential for community-school partnerships in India*, led by Ricardo Sabates, worked with schools in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, India, in partnership with Pratham Institute and ASER Research Centre. Pratham is a learning organisation that works to improve the quality of education in India, and is one of the largest NGOs in the country. ASER Centre is an autonomous unit within the Pratham network, and focuses on strengthening evidence on outcomes of social sector programmes, including education.

The evaluation found the project to be an example of strong and equitable partnership, with a Southern-led approach to research, analysis, and dissemination. All research partners have expressed enthusiasm and satisfaction with the partnership, noting that it has been extremely collaborative and 'flat'. One mechanism the team has employed during Covid-19 is to do team-based workshops, in which they discuss the research, practice presentations with each other, and learn from each other about achievements and challenges. All team members, including early career researchers, have found these sessions very useful and valuable.

The project has carried out an in-depth reflection on examining research methods. Throughout project

implementation, the partners have reflected on methodology and translation to work on the ground. They found that most methods, both qualitative and quantitative, have been developed in the Global North and are treated as objective and universal, when in fact they are contingent upon a range of contextual assumptions. Whilst there is some reflexivity that exists in qualitative methods, there is much less so in quantitative methods.

The team produced a journal article detailing the need for adaptation of research design to ensure appropriateness for contexts, as well as improvements in quality of data collected in the Global South. The article was co-authored by the PI, Co-Is, and team members, and is currently under review, with potential for publication in the next year or so. The research team from India also came to the UK to teach Master's students in Cambridge about methods and fieldwork in a Southern context.

The project has faced many challenges, including climate shocks, Covid, and political elections, that have impeded their ability to collect data. In all these cases, the PI has followed the lead of the Indian partners. Pratham Institute is regarded in India as a leader on education research, and has a strong network with local communities, practitioners and policymakers. Emerging learnings from key informant interviews are of greater consideration of the realities of translating research into impact in a Southern context.

PI: Ricardo Sabates (University of Cambridge)
Budget: 657,264.79
Dates: 2017 - 2022
Grant reference: ES/P005349/1

Interestingly, one of the highlighted benefits of RLO funding has been to facilitate collaboration among researchers in India and Pakistan, which are difficult to fund at the national level given the current political situation.

While the feedback on partnership in individual projects was generally positive, a number of structural challenges were highlighted in particular in the online qualitative discussion. As discussed above, the lack of timely awareness of calls and onerous application processes often mean that the Northern partner played a leading role in the design process, and this resulted in internal dynamics that are difficult to reverse once the project is up and running. This is compounded by the limited time available in the inception phase for partnership building: the need to 'get going' with the research right away limits the degree to which the research can be meaningfully informed by the views and perspectives of partners who have not been in the driver's seat at the application stage. Participants consistently stressed how a longer inception phase would play an important role in addressing this issue.

Research partnership with non-academic stakeholders

All RLO projects were led by academic institutions, with the exception of one - *Partnership Schools for Liberia: Impact on Accountability Mechanisms and Education Outcomes* (ES/P006043/1), which was led by Innovations for Poverty Action, a US-based non-profit research and policy organisation. In most cases, research partnerships were established with academic institutions, although most projects involved non-academic stakeholders in different roles. There are however several cases of projects with named CoIs from non-academic institutions – in particular international, national and local NGOs.

The projects *Promoting Children's Learning Outcomes in Conflict-Affected Countries: Generating, Communicating, and Incorporating Evidence for Impact* (ES/M004732/1), and its follow-up project *Promoting children's learning outcomes in conflict-affected countries: evidence for action in Niger* (ES/P008607/1), both led by John Aber at New

York University, provide an example of research collaboration between a lead academic institution and a large international NGO, namely the International Rescue Committee (IRC). New York University partnered with IRC to assess the impact of the "Healing Classrooms" model, a Socio-Emotional Learning approach that had been developed by IRC following a decade of research and field testing. The IRC also contributed approximately £23k to the project (the largest share of co-financing the RLO portfolio). Being strongly embedded in the existing practice of a large NGO meant that the project had a clear and straightforward pathway to impact. It was reported that the findings from the project fed into the development of the IRC initiative *Education in Emergencies: Evidence in Action*, which works in Lebanon, Sierra Leone and Niger.

In the project *Strengthening schools accountability mechanisms through participation: Addressing education quality and equity in Afghanistan and Pakistan (*led by Jean-Francois Trani at the Washington University in St. Louis - ES/P005799/1), CoIs from the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) in Pakistan, the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan led the research in their respective countries. The methodology introduced by the project – Community Based System Dynamics – was embraced by partner organisations and will continue to be used after the end of the project: for example, the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee plans to expand the use of the methodology to other sectors of work beyond education. The partnerships with these NGOs also allowed for the financing of 'action ideas' emerging from the research, as discussed in Section 7.

Other examples are the project *Can school accountability for learning be strengthened from the grassroots?,* led by Ricardo Sabates at the University of Cambridge, in collaboration with the Indian education foundation Pratham (discussed above in Box 8 and further below in Box 11) and the project *Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi* (led by Paul Lynch at the University of Birmingham, ES/M005453/1), which had the International NGO Sightsavers as a key partners, with 4 named CoIs (discussed in the case-study in Appendix 2).

A number of considerations emerge from the analysis of these examples:

- *Inclusion of non-academic stakeholders as full research partners strengthens both impact and sustainability.* It was often remarked that these NGOs are incredibly well-positioned to pursue impact: they have knowledge and understanding of the context, are tapped into relevant networks, and have access to effective communication channels. As the partners themselves are key actors in their education contexts, research findings can be seamlessly incorporated into their practice. These collaborations also allow the project to become part of a longer-term process of change, strengthening sustainability of results.

- *From the perspective of non-academic partners, research collaborations provide much-needed opportunities for capacity-strengthening, exposure to new approaches, and systematisation of knowledge.* Knowledge and skills acquired by Co-Investigators in the process directly led to strengthening the organisation's capacity and practice. A similar point was made in several interviews that while these organisations have significant experience, collaborating with academic partners has given them a rare opportunity for systematic reflection, and a chance to consider different options and methods.

- *Non-academic partners have different interests and systems of incentives compared to academic actors.* Research collaboration with non-academic actors is best suited to research teams that are ready to 'do research differently'. These collaborations appear well-suited to research work that is contextually relevant and impact-oriented. Consulted non-academic partners tended to prioritise pathways to impact that directly influenced education practice over policy change – a point on which we will return in Section 7.

5.6. Legacy (EQ1.5)

The final sub-question related to Community of Practice asks us to examine the extent to which RLO has left a sustainable legacy of new ways of doing research. This question is closely related to research synthesis (EQ2.3) and aggregate impact (EQ3.2), but it is broader than those, as it concerns not only the evidence generated to RLO and its impact, but also the modes of knowledge generation as well as ideas of research quality and "good evidence".

Overall, we can conclude that several RLO projects made important contributions to the field of research in global education, including through the development, testing and validation of new tools and approaches – several examples of which are highlighted throughout the report. These are, in themselves, a legacy of RLO that will continue to bear fruit after the end of the programme. It appears, however, that there is overall limited 'name recognition' for the RLO (a finding that emerged consistently from our interaction with informants not directly affiliated with the programme) and therefore these important contributions are unlikely to be seen as associated with RLO as a programme.

5.7. Conclusions

The answer to the question as to whether RLO has contributed to the establishment of a Community of Practice depends on the meaning given to the term. If this is intended as a network of researchers who got to know each other (or know each other better) and, in several cases, collaborated in pairs or small groups, then the answer is certainly affirmative, at least as far as the PIs are concerned. However, we found no evidence that RLO PIs have a particularly strong and distinctive sense of RLO affiliation, or a commitment to continue to nurture the community as a whole, and build a common practice – all elements that would qualify a Community of Practice in a more technical sense.

"I think it was more of a network than a Community of Practice" (PI, interview)

Even in this looser sense, the RLO Community of Practice concerns mostly PIs, and the degree to which the majority of Co-Is and other team members have managed to interact with each other has been rather low. This was for a variety of reasons, not all within the control of the programme. In spite of limited inter-project collaboration, Southern Co-Is and researchers have expressed a high level of satisfaction with their RLO experience – albeit we recognise that there is a probable positivity bias in the self-selected sample we consulted.

While the RLO Open Calls were open, in principle, to applicants from all over the world, only three RLO project teams were led by PIs in the Global South – two in South Africa and one in India. Challenges to Southern-led research had to do with low levels of dissemination of call information as well as limited time to put together the application, particularly for institutions without previous experience with UK funding calls. In the next section, we will discuss these challenges in relation to the commissioning process.

North/South partnerships were generally considered to be equitable, although the specific attention given to promoting equity (and overcoming structural unequal power dynamics) varies greatly across projects. Capacity-development of Early Career Researchers and research assistants was a feature of many projects, although again with great variation across the portfolio.

Overall, while several individual RLO projects have left a significant footprint in terms of both knowledge generation and policy and practice impact, these innovations are unlikely to be seen as associated with the RLO as a programme – a combination of limited 'name recognition' of the programme and the limited degree to which research synthesis was achieved (a point that we will further explore in the next section).

6. Evidence generation (EQ2)

EQ2 ["Has the programme generated evidence which adds to and informs the relevant body of research?"] relates to the second outcome of the RLO logframe ("*Evidence generated through the programme adds to and informs the body of research knowledge relevant to how education systems can raise learning outcomes in developing countries*"). In this section, we look at whether the RLO commissioning has led to the selection of a portfolio of projects of high quality, relevance, and potential for impact (section 6.1). We then look at academic publications produced by individual projects (section 6.2), and at the extent to which the RLO attempted, and succeeded in, cross-project research synthesis (section 6.3). Next, we look at academic citations as a proxy for RLO influence on academic debates (section 6.4). Using this quantitative analysis, we circle back to the analysis of current trends in education research, presented in Section 3, to draw some reflections on the relevance and value added of RLO research (section 6.5). Finally, we offer some preliminary conclusions (section 6.6).

6.1. Commissioning process (EQ2.1)

As discussed in Section 4, the RLO launched three Open Calls for grants. These calls differed in terms of their thematic focus (each looking at one dimension of the system approach) but otherwise, they were formulated in very similar terms. The assessment criteria around research agenda and impact, formulated in the calls (and reflected in the guidance for reviewers and assessors) can be easily mapped against the four dimensions of the RQ+ framework (Ofir et al., 2016). As shown in Table 5, the majority of these criteria refer to *research integrity* (the traditional interpretation of research quality in academia); however, the other three dimensions (*research legitimacy, research importance*, and *positioning for use*) are also given attention.

Table 5: Assessment criteria mapped against the RQ+ key dimensions of research quality

Is there a clear understanding of the issue to be addressed through this research, and is a strong case made for its relevance to the scope of the call? In particular, is a strong link made between the issue to be addressed and learning outcomes?	Research integrity
Is the conceptual framework of the proposed research appropriate to address the issue?	Research integrity
Does the proposed research embed consideration of equity as well as quality dimensions of education?	Research legitimacy
Is there clarity and coherence in the research design between research questions, research methods and anticipated intellectual outcomes?	Research integrity
Are the research questions clearly set out?	Research integrity
Are the research methods clearly specified, appropriate to the questions set, and robust? Where mixed methods are used, are quantitative and qualitative methodologies effectively, rigorously and appropriately combined? Are issues of validity and reliability of data appropriately addressed?	Research integrity
Does the proposal integrate adequate and appropriate analysis of gender and other structural inequalities?	Research legitimacy
Do data management plans follow best practice, and adhere to ESRC data policy?	Research integrity / legitimacy
Have appropriate ethical considerations been addressed in the proposal?	Research legitimacy
Does the 'Pathways to Impact' statement present a set of clear, well-funded activities for genuine collaboration with a variety of stakeholders throughout the life of the project?	Research legitimacy
Does the application appropriately address demand for research, either by demonstrating effective demand for the research from policymakers and other stakeholders beyond the academic community, or by setting out a feasible strategy to raise awareness of the significance of the research among relevant stakeholders?	Research importance / Positioning for use
Is the analysis of who the stakeholders/potential users of research outputs are and the processes and means for engaging with them appropriate, at all stages of the research process?	Research importance/ Positioning for use
Are there clear plans to make findings available to target audiences and to maximise research uptake?	Positioning for use

All calls have an emphasis on equitable research partnerships and gender, which are key dimensions of *research legitimacy*. The importance of understanding the local research context is also stressed, along with an acknowledgement of the risk of 'doing harm' by undermining local research capacity.

Composition of peer-review and selection panels

The selection process was very similar across the three Open Calls, and included three key steps: (1) a screening for eligibility and conformity to call requirements; (2) a peer review by an Academic Assessor Group, leading to a shortlist; and (3) a final selection by a Commissioning Panel, which met in person (with some members joining remotely on occasion).

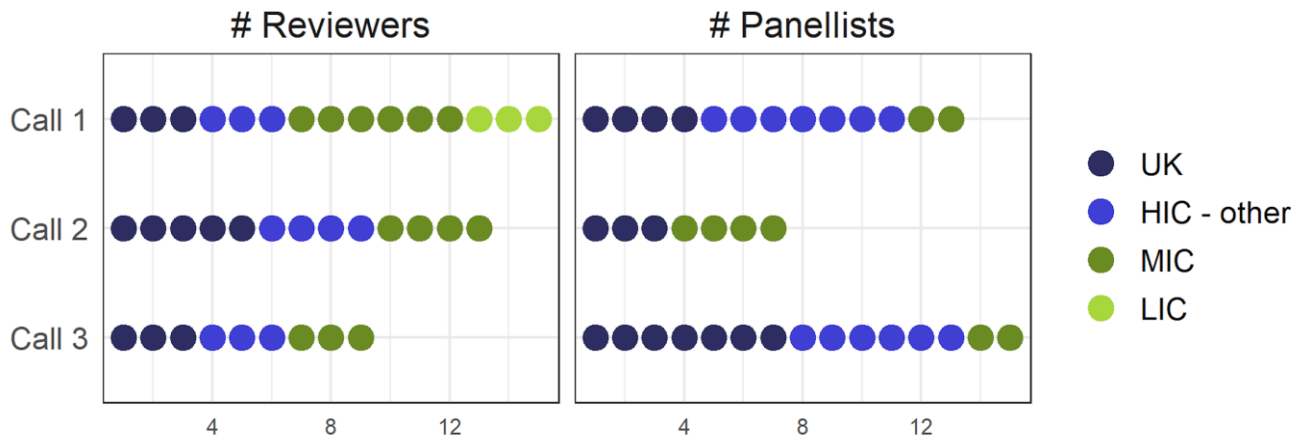
Peer reviewers were predominantly associated with academic institutions.[43] Panels were also predominantly made up of academics, but also included representatives from UN agencies (UNESCO, UNICEF), NGOs and other not-

[43] In Call 1, 83% (59 out of 71) of invited reviewers were from academia and research institutions; in Call 2 and 3, the percentages were 70% (24 out of 34) and 81% (31 out of 38) respectively.

for-profit organisations (Save the Children, VSO, RTI International, ARK, The Children Investment Fund's Foundation).

Throughout the process, funders made an effort to include reviewers and panellists from the Global South. Looking at the reviews that were actually used,[44] Call 1 had nine Southern reviewers (6 from MIC and 3 from LIC), Call 2 had four Southern reviewers (all from MICs) and Call 3 had three Southern reviewers (also all from MIC). Overall, seven panellists from the Global South participated in the commissioning process for the RLO main grants: two in Call 1, four in Call 2, and two in Call 3 - with one person being part of the panels for both Call 2 and Call 3 (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Composition of peer-review and selection panels



Analysis of selection process

The Evaluation Team spoke to four individuals who had been part of the RLO selection panels at different times – of these, one was from the Global South, and one was associated with a non-academic institution. Overall, the feedback on the RLO commissioning process has been overwhelmingly positive. The panellists we have interviewed highly praised the efficient organisation of the process, the guidance and support received by ESRC, and the high level of academic expertise and engagement in the Panel. The main recommendations expressed by former panellists had to do with increasing the share and diversity of members from the Global South, as well as including more members representing 'practice' institutions and potential users of research.

Panellists were provided with guidance for shortlisting, as well as a grading scale, ranging from 1 ('Poor') to 10 ('Exceptional').[45] A review of the commissioning panel minutes shows that the criteria related to *research integrity* have been primary considerations ('essential conditions' – or criteria on which funding has been withheld if not met) –which is not surprising considering both the guidance and the composition of the panels. However, considerations related to research legitimacy, research importance, and positioning for use have also been reviewed to a significant degree.

The review of minutes shows that panels typically remarked positively on the methodological rigour of proposals (with mixed methods design being particularly welcome); the appropriateness of sampling methods; consideration of gender and equity; strong partnerships (as demonstrated by Memoranda of Understanding or similar instruments); collaboration with non-academic stakeholders; and clear plans for dissemination and uptake.

[44] This eliminates the requests that were cancelled (e.g. because the contacted reviewer did not respond in a reasonable period of time), declined (because the reviewer was not available), deemed unusable (e.g. because of a conflict of interest) or not used for other reasons.

[45] Any proposal above 7 would quality for funding, although the ultimate funding decision would be taken based on available funding (thus potentially leaving proposals ranked 7 or above unfunded).

Conversely, a common concern (typically leading to the decision not to fund the proposal) was excessive ambition vis-à-vis the timeframe and resources allocated. Panels also raised concerns about lack of clarity on equity issues, risk of 'doing harm', insufficient elaboration of policy/practice relevance, and weak dissemination plans. When these concerns were not major, it was possible for the panel to condition funding to a revision of the proposal addressing specific comments.

Geographical distribution of applications

As discussed in Section 5, while in principle the RLO was open to eligible applicants all over the world, in practice only three project teams were led by institutions based in the Global South (two in South Africa, and one in India). As part of our analysis of the selection process, we have looked at the geographical distribution of applications at various stages, to identify 'where' in the process this under-representation of Southern institutions manifests itself.

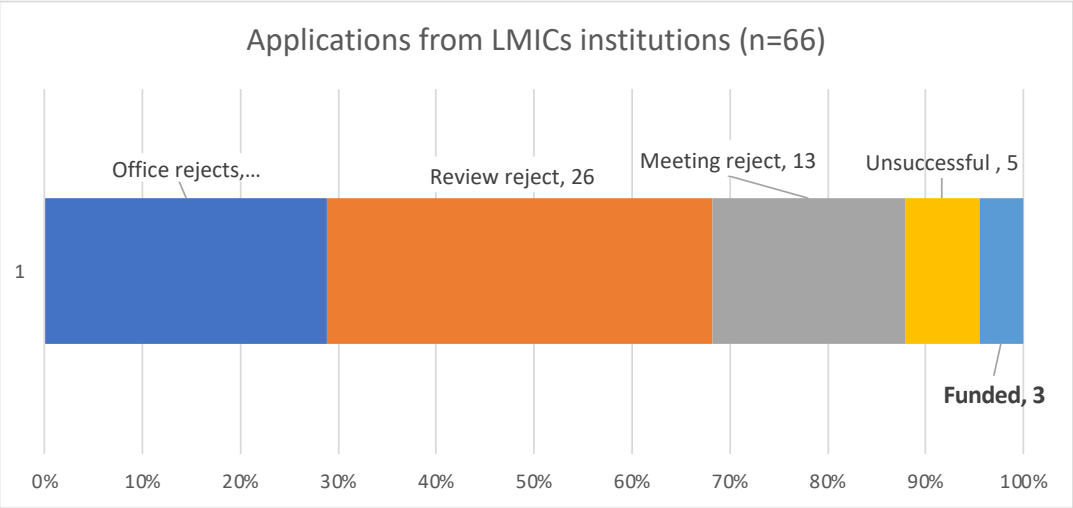
In total, 66 applications from lead institutions in Middle and Low Income Countries have been received across the three calls – out of a total of 220 (i.e. 30% of the total). As indicated in Table 6, the majority of these applications come from Middle-Income Countries. Only four Low Income Countries are represented (Bhutan, Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda), with a total of 10 applications received. 29% of proposals received were rejected prior to peer review, suggesting a lack of familiarity on the applicants' part with UK funding requirements (a challenge that could be addressed through more targeted support at the application stage, as further discussed in Section 9.

Figure 13 shows the application process for applications from LMIC institutions.

Table 6: Applications from lead institutions in Middle and Low Income Countries

Country	Income level	Office Reject	Review Reject	Meeting Reject	Unsuccessful	Funded	Grand Total
Armenia	MIC		1				**1**
Bhutan	LIC				1		**1**
Fiji	MIC			1			**1**
Ghana	MIC		5	1	1		**7**
India	MIC	4	3			1	**8**
Indonesia	MIC	1					**1**
Kenya	MIC	2	4	2			**8**
Kyrgyzstan	MIC		1				**1**
Malawi	LIC			1			**1**
Mongolia	MIC		1				**1**
Nigeria	MIC	2	1				**3**
Pakistan	MIC	2	3	3			**8**
South Africa	MIC	3	5	5	2	2	**17**
Tanzania	LIC	1	1		1		**3**
Uganda	LIC	4	1				**5**
Grand Total		**19**	**26**	**13**	**5**	**3**	**66**

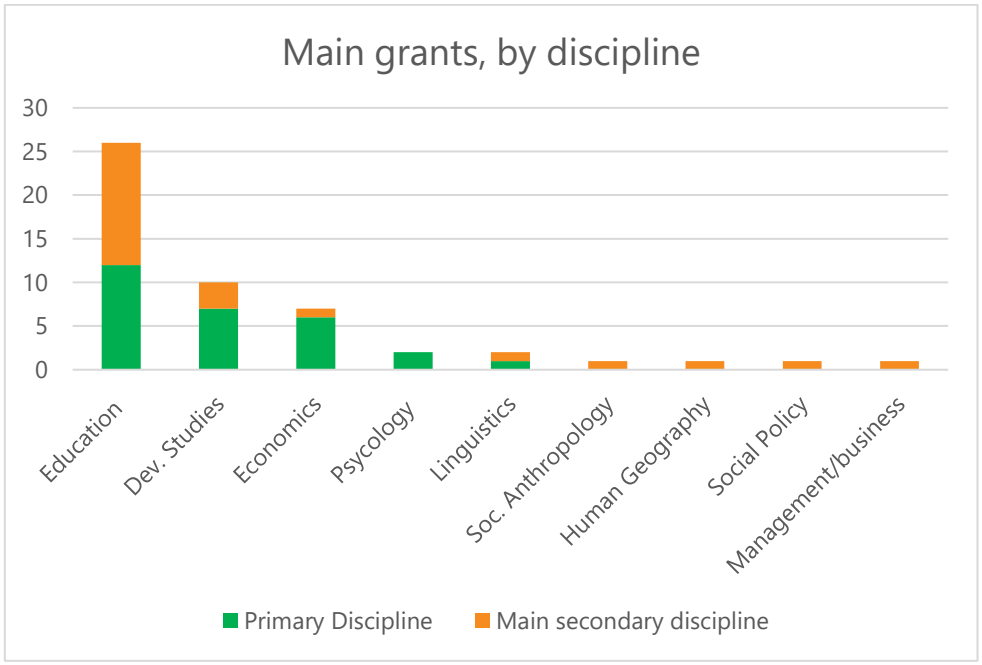
Figure 13: Applications from LMIC institutions



6.1.1. Interdisciplinarity and mixed methods

In terms of primary discipline, education is not surprisingly associated with the highest number of RLO grants (12), followed by Development Studies (7), Economics (6), Psychology (2) and Linguistics (1). Education was also the most frequently reported main secondary discipline (see figure 14).

Figure 14: Primary and secondary disciplines



Interdisciplinarity in the RLO logframe

The RLO logframe includes one specific output that brings together interdisciplinarity, methods, cross-cutting issues and involvement of non-academic stakeholders (Output 2: *Research funded through the programme draws on diverse disciplines and methodologies, appropriately addresses core cross-cutting issues, and actively involves non-academic stakeholders*).

Indicator 2.1 and 2.2 relate to interdisciplinarity (Number of research grants that involve more than one academic discipline) and mixed methods (Number of research grants that include a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methodological research designs and/or methods), respectively. The targets for both indicators have been exceeded: 63% of the grants reported more than one discipline (against a target of 50%) and 77% of the grants declared the use of mixed methods (against a target of 50%).

The RLO – like the Joint Fund – was careful not to 'push' interdisciplinarity and mixed methods for their own sake. When it comes to the commissioning process, the only disciplinary requirement was that proposals must be at least 50 percent social science. It was recognised that "Not all research questions are suited to mixed methodologies" and that interdisciplinarity and mixed methods approaches should only be included if they make sense for the specific project ("superficial or token inclusion of either quantitative or qualitative elements in a research project is inadequate"[46].)

An analysis of the RLO portfolio shows that most projects have adopted some degree of interdisciplinarity, albeit generally within the field of social sciences (see example in Box 9). In addition to education studies, social sciences disciplines included development studies, sociology, economics, political science, geography, as well as disciplines at the crossroad with humanities (linguistics, history, philosophy) and with natural sciences (psychology). Approaches drawing on psychology are particularly evident in projects studying younger children (e.g. *Investing in our Future: The Early Childhood Intervention and Parental Involvement in Bangladesh,* ES/N010221/1). From the point of view of methods, a defining characteristic of the RLO is the high prevalence of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), as discussed in more detail in Section 7.

[46] Funding call.

Box 9: Project example: Investigating epistemic justice through interdisciplinary research

The project *Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based higher education index* sought to build a model to improve equity and quality of higher education, using South Africa as a model. The project demonstrates a high level of interdisciplinarity in its project design and implementation. It utilises the capability approach, developed by Sen and Nussbaum, which draws on the disciplines of development economics and philosophy. It also draws on philosophical approaches to understand poverty and disadvantage, explored in the publication *Recognising poor black youth from rural communities in South Africa as epistemic contributors* (Mathebula, 2019). In addition, the study uses key themes from the disciplines of sociology and development studies to integrate decolonisation and decoloniality theoretically and methodologically into the work, as seen in a project working paper (Vargas, 2017).

Using these disciplines, the project produced the Miratho Capabilities Matrix to 'bring together all aspects shaping students' higher education opportunities, valued outcomes, and obstacles and enablers.'[47]. It has since presented its findings at a variety of conferences and seminars, including with local universities, NGOs, and policymakers.

PI: Melanie Walker (University of the Free State)
Budget: £670,903.5
Dates: 2016-2021
Grant reference: ES/N010094/1

6.1.2. Research production (EQ2.2)

Research production in the RLO logframe

Output 1 of the RLO logframe concerns the delivery of "[a] portfolio of high-quality, policy-relevant research on what works to deliver learning outcomes through effective, equitable education systems in low income countries". A key indicator for Output 1 concerns the number of publications ("scheme-funded journal articles, books, or book chapters reported as published or accepted for publication"). The FCDO 2020-21 Review reports the programme to be performing well against this indicator, with the milestone set for March 2021 (73 journal articles, books or book chapter) significantly exceeded (with 125 titles reported by grantholders).[48]

While indicator 1.4 focuses on the aggregate number of outputs produced across the RLO portfolio, there is a substantial diversity among projects, in terms of outputs produced. It would be useful for a MEL system to be able to pick up this variation to inform management and learning. Examples of such indicators may include "Number of projects with at least one academic publication".

In practical terms, it was difficult to determine "scheme-funded" outputs because many of the outputs that were reported by grantholders as part of RLO-funded projects did not include a grant reference. This also significantly complicates the analysis of citations. Future guidance for grantholders could stress the need to always include the grant reference as an essential condition for an output to be 'counted' as scheme-funded. It may also be more practical to only count published outputs rather than also outputs accepted for publication.

[47] See https://www.ufs.ac.za/miratho/miratho-Matrix-grp/the-miratho-matrix

[48] The figure of 125 is based on grantholder self-reported data and that there is a recognition on the part of ESRC and FCDO that this is likely to contain some duplication (e.g. between publication reported as 'published' and those previously reported as 'accepted').

Our consolidated list of publications (derived, as explained in the methodology sections, from a cross-reference of the findings from the Dimensions platform, with Gateway to Research data and self-reported data) identified 81 academic publications (journal articles, books, book chapters).[49] All publications are in English with the exception of one in French (Trani et al., 2017). Almost half of the RLO academic publications (36) are Open Access. 20 out of 28 project teams have associated publications found in Dimensions, while the remaining eight do not. Not surprisingly, most of the publications (40) are associated with grants in Call 1, followed by Call 2 (29) and Call 3 (9). The remaining three publications are associated with Follow-on Funding grants.

There is great variability in terms of how much RLO projects published. One award (ES/M005445/1, led by Pauline Rose at the University of Cambridge) is associated with 15 publications, or one-fifth of the total in our list. Together, the five-top publishing projects account for about two-thirds (64%) of the total outputs. Table 7 shows the publications for the six top publishing projects.

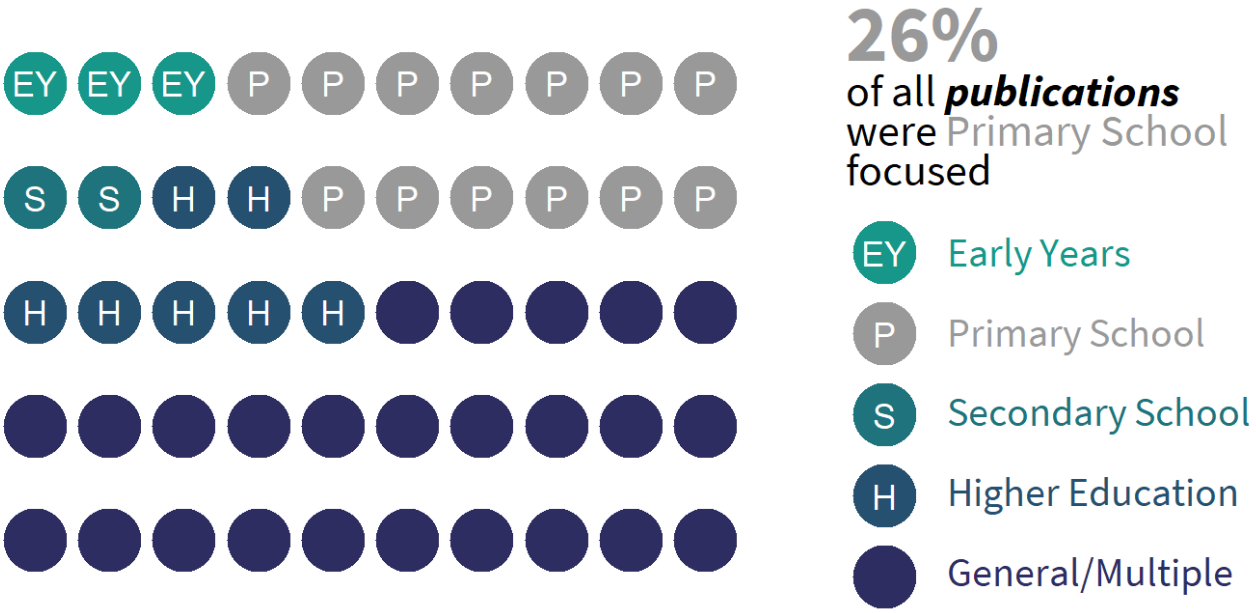
Table 7: Publications for six top publishing projects

Learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness for children facing multiple disadvantages, including those with disabilities: India and Pakistan *ES/M005445/1* - PI: Pauline Rose (University of Cambridge)	Call 1	15
Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth: developing a multi-dimensional capabilities-based higher education index *ES/N010094/1* - PI: Melanie Walker (University of the Free State)	Call 2	12
Succeeding Against the Odds: Understanding resilience and exceptionalism in high-functioning township and rural primary schools in South Africa *ES/N01023X/1* - PI: Servas van der Berg (Stellenbosch University)	Call 2	8
Constructing a Global Framework for Analysis of Social Exclusion From and Within Learning Systems *ES/M005011/1* - PI: Parul Bakhshi. (Washington University in St. Louis)	Call 1	7
Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings *ES/N01037X/1* - PI: Nicola Ansell (Brunel University)	Call 2	5
Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi ES/M005453/1 - PI: Paul Lynch (University of Birmingham)	Call 1	5
Total publications for 6 to- publishing projects		**52**

Most RLO publications do not have a specific focus on one level of education – but among those that do, the majority focused on primary education (see Figure 15). If we compare this with the percentage of projects working on primary education (as discussed in Section 4 – these were 45% of the total) we note that projects focusing on Early Years education and Higher Education have been particularly prolific when it comes to publications (with a share of published outputs much higher than the share of projects). As we will see below in section 6.3., this is also reflected in a high share of citations.

[49] The lower number, compared to the FCDO Review, is to be explained by the more limited typology of publications considered, as well as the fact of only counting outputs already published (rather than also those 'accepted for publications'). An additional 21 outputs not falling into the categories of journal articles, books and book chapters are discussed in Section 6.1.4, bringing the total number to 102.

Figure 15: Level of education on which RLO publications focus



The majority of identified publications (73 out of 81) were journal articles. There is a great variety of journals where RLO outputs have been published – 45 titles in total. Over half of those (28) are specialist education journals. The journals with most RLO publications are the *International Journal of Education Development* (7) and the *Compare: a Journal of Comparative and International Education* (5), in addition to *Research in Comparative and International Education* which ran a special RLO issue (see section 6.2.2).

Over two thirds of the RLO publications (71%, or 58 out of 81) are authored by the PI of the associated project. Co-authorship with other PIs is rare, and limited to PIs from the same institutions (Pauline Rose and Ricardo Sabates at the University of Cambridge; Parul Bakhshi and Jean-Francois Trani at Washington University in St. Louis; and Edward Seidman and John Aber at New York University).

Reflections on Southern authorships

Publications of journal articles are widely identified as one of the key areas in which Southern researchers are under-represented in development research. Amarante et al., 2021 examines the rate of acceptance of submitted papers in four development journals, and finds that ratio acceptance over total submission is between twice and three times higher for Northern authors. The article concludes:

> "it is [...] likely it that the underrepresentation is the result of a culture of exclusivity [...]. Practices and paradigms that exclude Southern researchers from academic dialogues about development in the South inhibit the plurality and richness of such dialogues. They promote an unhealthy and unsustainable dominance of Northern researchers in a field of research where Southern researchers have the advantage of first-hand knowledge. As development policy in Southern countries affects Southern researchers directly and sometimes severely, they have an additional claim to fair representation in debates that affect their own future. Ideas are needed on how to create a more inclusive environment for researchers working on development in the South. The role of

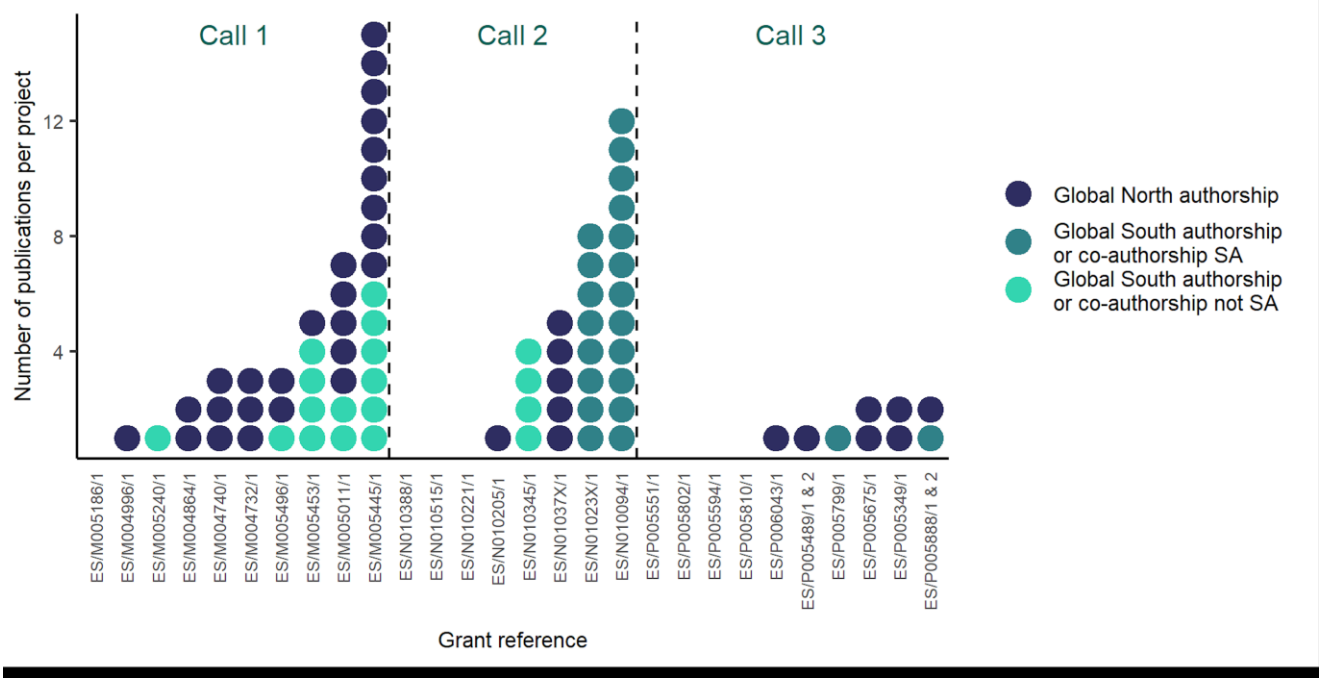
proficiency in English needs more investigation. Our findings suggest that South-North collaborations could be an avenue for change". (Almarante et al., 4-5).

A key question for the evaluation was to what extent the RLO partnerships have been an avenue for change in this respect. At first sight, the results are encouraging: our bibliometric analysis shows that just over half of the RLO publications (or 42 out of 81) were authored or co-authored by researchers from the Global South. However, a closer look shows that the majority of these publications with Southern authors are authored by South African authors in the context of the two RLO projects led by South African institutions – in other words, they were not the result of North-South research partnerships. Only 19 RLO publications are authored by authors from the Global South other than South Africa, as shown in Table 8. Only three of these countries are Low Income Countries (Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Malawi), corresponding to eleven unique authors. Figure 16 shows the distribution of publications per grant, highlighting the geographic location of authors.

Table 8: Authorship of RLO publications by authors from the Global South other than South Africa

Country	Number of RLO Publications with authors from this country (approximate % of total RLO publications considered)	Number of unique authors
India	9 (11%)	11
Pakistan	4 (5%)	3
Afghanistan	3 (4%)	3
Nepal	1 (1%)	4
Malawi	4 (5%)	4
Ethiopia	1 (1%)	4
Ghana	1 (1%)	1
Botswana	1 (1%)	1
Kenya	1 (1%)	1

Figure 16: Distribution of publications per grant, and geographic location of authors.



While the challenge of promoting Southern authorship in international partnerships is well recognised, assessing 'how well' the RLO did in this regard is hampered by the lack of clear benchmarks or targets on what 'good' looks like. Table 9 compares the percentage of Southern authored publications for RLO and two other ESRC-FCDO collaborations, namely the Joint Fund and the Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA).[50]

Table 9: Southern authorship in three R4D programmes (as a percentage of total publications)

RLO	Joint Fund (Phase 3)	ESPA
52%	42%	62%

Unlike RLO and the Joint Fund, the ESPA logframe included a specific measure of Southern authorship ("*percentages of academic papers attributed to ESPA with developing country authorship*", with a target of 65%, which was just narrowly missed.[51] While it is not possible to determine whether the inclusion of a specific indicator in the logframe had the effect of encouraging Southern authorship in the ESPA case, future programmes may wish to include such a measure to ensure that Southern authorship remains a consistent focus across the lifespan of the project, and more broadly contributes to cross-programme benchmarking and programmatic learning.[52]

We explored the under-representation of Southern authors in RLO publications in interviews as well as in the online qualitative discussion. We were aware of a probable positivity bias: the Southern researchers who had

[50] ESPA was a collaboration that involved the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) in addition to ESRC and FCDO (then DFID). It was a 9-year research programme to explore the links between the environment and human wellbeing. https://www.espa.ac.uk/

[51] The ESPA logframe also included an indicator on Southern lead authorship. However, this created some challenges as the notion of 'lead authorship' varies considerably across disciplines.

[52] Also in the case of the Joint Fund, there was a disproportionate representation of a few middle-income countries (particularly South Africa and India) in Southern authorship (Murray et al., 2021: 26).

published in RLO were also the ones who were more likely to be represented in our interview sample and online discussion. Yet, even researchers who had actually published were acutely awards of the challenges involved. They highlighted in particular the costs of publication in peer-reviewed journals, which are prohibitive for resource-constrained public institutions in the Global South. Participants of the online discussion stressed that Global South researchers are under-represented as consumers of those publications as well, not just as authors: the cost of accessing much of this literature in unaffordable for of them.

The challenges are even stronger for Southern Early Career Researchers (ECRs), who, in international collaborations, are often responsible for most of the data collection but rarely feature as authors in publications. Some PIs admitted that, with hindsight, more could have been done in this regard, but that the timeline of research projects often makes this difficult. Publication in academic journals may take a long time, and happen after the end of the project funding, by which time Southern ECRs may have moved on to other positions.

The project *Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi* (ES/M005453/1), led by Paul Lynch, stands out in our analysis for the specific attention given to Southern authorship, and this is one of the reasons why it has been selected as a case study. As one Malawian Co-I on the project put it, *"to publish here in Malawi is not easy, it is almost impossible. unless you are in partnership with Global North. [...] Some of the conditions put by publishers are prohibitive. [..] we find ourselves not publishing at all. Most publishers are global North based. In local universities we have some journals but they are not peer reviewed to international standards."*. The same researcher noted that it is common in international collaborations to have a division of labour, by which Southern partners do the data collection, and the Northern partners use the data for publication. However, this project was different in that both data collection and publications were collaborative, and UK partners were 'in the field' along with their Malawian colleagues.[53]

6.1.3. Non-academic publications

The term 'non-academic publication' is used here as a short-cut label to indicate a diverse range of publications that are not captured by the parameters of the RLO logframe (articles, books, book chapters), although several of these publications are in fact academic in methods and presentation.

Cross-referencing the 'non-academic publications' detected through Dimensions and those included in the draft synthesis papers, we had a list of 21 publications. These publications are variedly called "working paper", "technical report", 'background paper", "policy report", "policy brief", or similar. These do not include other types of outputs such as blog posts, media interviews, social media activities (which are less likely to be identified in Dimensions).

Non-academic outputs in the RLO logframe

Output Indicator 4.2 captures the 'number of outputs targeting non-academic audiences reported by research grants, by type.' This includes a wide array of outputs – ranging from quasi-academic ones such as technical reports and policy briefings, to media interviews, blog posts, and social media. As of March 2021, the target had been exceeded with 131 non-academic outputs reported against a milestone target of 66. However, the wide definition of 'non-academic outputs' reduces the usefulness of this indicator for analytical purposes.

10 RLO projects had non-academic publications associated to them, mostly as part of Call 1 (11 publications). The RLO project with the highest number of academic publications (ES/M005445/1, PI Pauline Rose) also had the highest number of non-academic publications (7). Five non-academic publications had Southern authors (from India, Pakistan and Malaysia). Geographically, non-academic publications focused on India (5), Pakistan (2) Niger

[53] Interview with Jenipher Mbukwas Ngawira,, 11 November 2021

(2), Afghanistan (1), Ghana (1), Kenya (1), Botswana (1), DR Congo (1), Ethiopia (1). Eight non-academic publications had a more general or global focus.

A number of these papers were specifically commissioned as part of ongoing policy processes led by international organisations. For example:

- Two working papers were commissioned to feed into the 2020 GEM Report (*Inclusion and Education*) and related 2020 GEM Gender Report (*A New Generation: 25 years of efforts for gender equality in education*), respectively. The first paper (Bakhshi, 2020) reviewed the approach to inclusive education in the education system of Afghanistan over time, and way in which this has been pursued in Community Based Schools. The second paper (Unterhalter & Robinson, 2020) discusses different approaches to intersectionality in education.[54]
- The technical paper *Estimating the number of out-of-school children: methodological problems and alternative approaches – India case-study* (De & Mehra, 2016) was commissioned by the UNESCO Institute of Statistic in collaboration with UNICEF. The paper reviews existing datasets to estimate the percentage of 'out of school' children in India, but also discusses conceptual and methodological challenges in defining 'in' and 'out' of school in an India context (e.g. what constitutes 'regular attendance'), and the particular difficulties of assessing attendance of children with disabilities.

6.2. Research synthesis (EQ2.3)

Research synthesis is increasingly recognised as crucial in the research-to-impact pathway. Its benefits are widely praised: rigorous synthesis minimise the biases that are inherent in the use of single-study research for policy and practice, and reduce the risk of 'information overload' for research users (Wyborn et al. 2018). Equally well-known are the multiple challenges that often prevent synthesis from happening - from lack of time to low academic interest in publishing findings that lose detail and nuance by virtue of being stripped to the 'minimum common denominator'.

In a 2016 article in the Guardian, the Impact Initiative director James Georgalakis stressed the need to challenge the notion that the "superstar researchers" and their "ground-breaking studies" will help beat global poverty. Instead, he argued,

> "we must support whole communities where knowledge emerging from different places can be combined, reframed and repackaged to respond to the most urgent humanitarian and development challenges." (Georgalakis, 2016).

Research synthesis emphasises the value of wider bodies of knowledge and the benefit of multiple perspectives to tackle complex problems (Georgalakis, 2021). Yet, while there is wide agreement that synthesis is important in R4D, there is still considerable debate on *what* can be synthesised, how to balance methodological rigour with the imperative to distil key messages that 'hold true' across the synthesised pieces, and how to package those findings to ensure that they are picked by policymakers and other research users.

EQ2.3 asks us to assess to what extent RLO has been successful in synthesising research findings (and policy and practice implications) across different projects. As in the case of the Community of Practice discussed in Section 5, we found that in order to address this question, we first needed to establish an understanding of what 'synthesis' meant for the purpose of this evaluation. Tellingly, when asked about synthesis, informants tended to refer to slightly different things, or asked the interviewer to specify what was meant by this term.

[54] It should be noted that, while the two papers are reported as associated with grants ES/M005011/1 and ES/P005675/1 respectively, there is no reference to the grants (or to the RLO programme) in the papers themselves.

6.2.1. What is research synthesis?

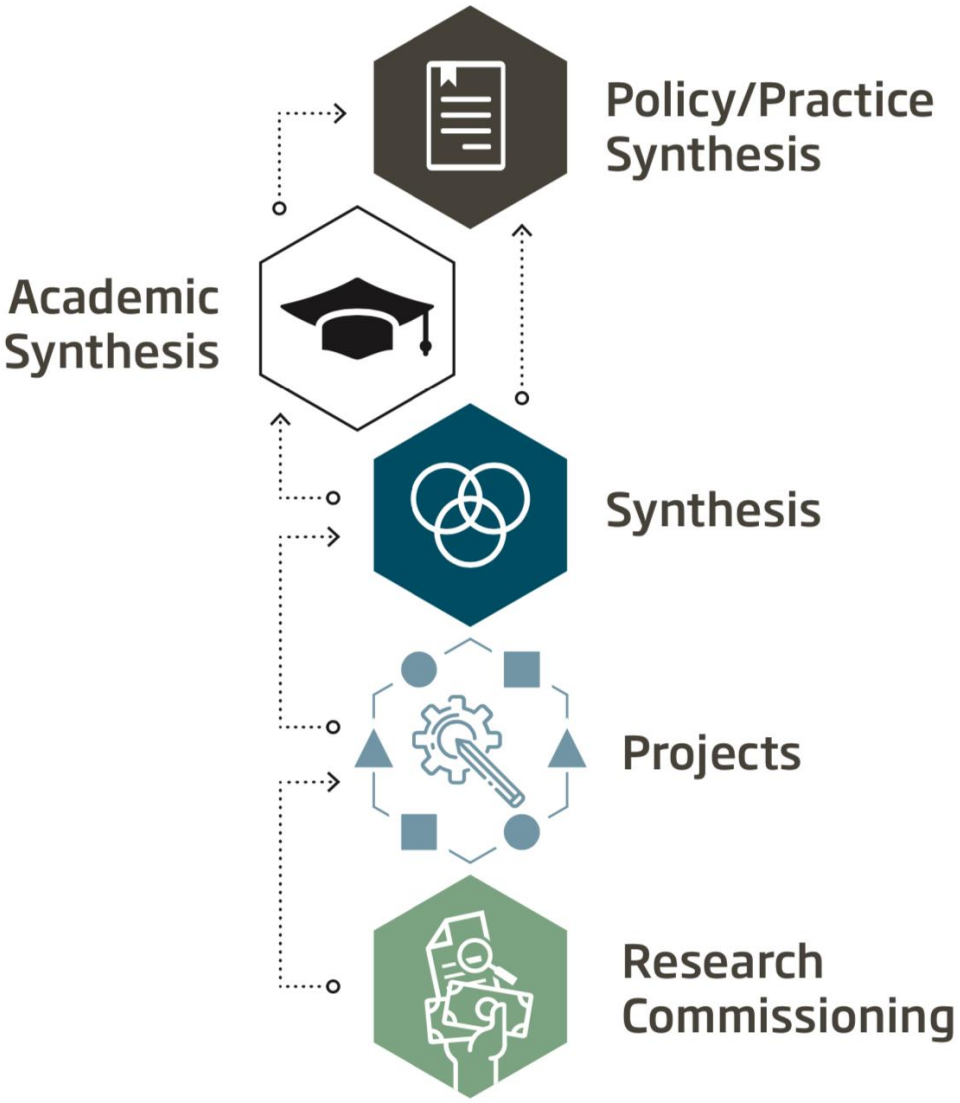
Research synthesis is a broad overarching term to describe the practice of combining, integrating, and synthesising research findings from different studies, in order to draw more reliable conclusions. The aim of synthesis is to increase the generality and applicability of those findings and to develop new knowledge through the process of integration (Schick-Makaroff, 2016; Cooper et al, 2019; Nakagawa et al, 2020). Essentially, synthesis study interrogates a diverse body of evidence to see what these diverse studies have to say about a certain question.

Figure 17 visualises a prototype synthesis process in a R4D programme such as the RLO. According to this model, research is commissioned through calls, that can be 'curated', to different degrees, with synthesis in mind (e.g. across common themes, a specific geo-political focus, or particular methods). Projects are then implemented and lead to findings that are typically published in project-specific outputs. Then, these outputs are reviewed in light of specific questions, and resulting academic outputs distil the collective contribution that these pieces of research provide to broaden and deepen the knowledge in field. These synthesis academic outputs can then be further summarised to distil the key messages for policy and practice. Alternatively, the academic synthesis step can be omitted, and the various outputs can be summarised directly from a policy/ practice perspective.

A few observations can be made about this model:

- *Synthesis happens after individual projects have been concluded.* This point is key, as in practice experience from similar programmes in the past shows that the time at the end of the programme is generally too short for this process to take place, and 'running out of time' is one of the main reasons why synthesis often does not happen, or happens only partially (ESPA, 2018; Murray et al., 2021).
- *Synthesis is not merely a 'summary' or 'compilation' of findings from individual projects:* it involves comparing the findings against each other, highlighting similarities and differences, and drawing conclusions from this expanded evidence base.
- *Synthesis does not (necessarily) involve the same researchers who have carried out the individual studies that are being synthesised.* According to this model, the process needs to be led primarily by the synthesis research questions, which, almost inevitable, means leaving out details that were very important in the original project-based research. Taking this 'bird-eye view' may be easier for researchers who were not closely involved in the original research.
- *Synthesis is (in principle) independent from the establishment of a Community of Practice,* or even from individual research teams getting to know each other and collaborate. While such contacts and collaboration have undoubtedly many other benefits, they are not required for synthesis to take place.

Figure 17: Model of research synthesis process



6.2.2. **Synthesis in the RLO**

There are several ways in which synthesis has been attempted over the lifetime of the RLO. The initial model generally followed the prototype process outlined in Figure 17. The three Open Calls were shaped around the three themes of effective teaching, challenging contexts, and accountability, to promote portfolio coherence and synthesis opportunities within the projects from each call, as well as contributing to a reflection on how these three dimensions come together and interact with each other in a systems framework.

The most evident way in which RLO has pursued synthesis has been through the appointment of a dedicated

academic synthesis role, the **Programme Research Lead** at the University of Oxford. As specified in the call, the role of the PRL was to fulfil three main programmatic objectives:

- *Support and provide evidence of the scientific, conceptual and methodological contributions of the programme:* the PRL was expected to be a 'champion' of RLO research, raising awareness of such research in appropriate national and international fora, and support grantholders to maximise scientific engagement and dissemination of their research.
- *Maximise scientific quality and best practice between RLO grants across calls and around cross-cutting themes*: the PRL was expected to identify thematic and methodological synergies among projects.
- *Implement and strengthen cohort-building opportunities and activities within the RLO project* – in particular by organising regular programme-level workshops as well as other events for specific sub-groups.

This was undeniably an ambitious set of tasks, particularly considering the small team (the PRL himself supported by two research fellows). Over the period 2017-2019, the PRL collaborated closely with the Impact Initiative in organising the RLO Annual Workshops, which was the main cohort-building activity (discussed extensively in Section 5 above). In addition, the PRL team took a number of other steps to bring together sub-sets of RLO researchers around specific themes. In particular:

- The PRL organised the Oxford Seminar Series, which ran from January to March 2018, based at the Centre for Comparative and International Education in the University of Oxford. Seven UK-based RLO grant-holders presented to varied audiences, with the presentations later turned into podcasts (PRL, 2018).[55] In their response to the mid-term internal PRL review, the funders expressed concerns that the format of the series and its attendance (mostly Oxford-based academics and students) did not help meet the aims of the PRL function.
- The PRL facilitated RLO grantholders to come together and organise panels for academic conferences. In particular, a double-panel at the Comparative and International Education Society Annual Conference (CIES), held in Mexico in March 2018, brought together five RLO grant-holders.
- The PRL organised the 'Raising Learning Outcomes' Africa Symposium, which took place in Johannesburg on September 12-14, 2018. The papers presented in the Symposium represented the work of eleven research teams across nine African countries – Botswana, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, South Africa and Uganda. Most presenters were from institutions in those countries.[56] Key issues discussed were the involvement of non-academic stakeholders in research processes, and strategies for research uptake and impact.

There was certainly a sense of disappointment – among grantholders as well as funders – that these cohort-building activities did not lead to published synthesis outputs. In particular, the Review of Support Services noted that "there was enthusiasm for the South African research symposium, which had specific content for RLO Southern participants on academic synergies. However, the intent for a journal special issue or synthesis papers from symposium contributors was not produced" (Parsons et al., 2020: 25).

The single significant achievement in this regard was the publication of an open-access special issue on "methods and innovations to raising learning outcomes in education systems in development countries" in the journal *Research in Comparative and International Education* (Volume 14, Issue 1, 2019). Seven RLO projects are represented in the special issue, with eight authors being based in institutions in the Global South (three in South Africa; three in India; one in Pakistan and one in Afghanistan).

The lead article, co-authored by PRL team members, situates the RLO in the context of the emergence and consolidation of systems thinking in education. The RLO programme systems framework is presented and then tested

[55] Presenters at the series were PIs Ulrike Zeshan, Ricardo Sabates, Paul Lynch, Nicola Ansell, Pauline Rose, Rebecca Schendel, Ianthi Tsimpli.
[56] https://www.theimpactinitiative.net/event/event-%E2%80%98raising-learning-outcomes%E2%80%99-africa-symposium

using a methods lens, drawing from examples from the RLO portfolio. The stated aim of the special issue is "to open a discussion on what kinds of designs, methods and tools are being used by researchers across the RLO programme, how these relate to or support the programme's systems model, and what can be gleaned in terms of shared insights or challenges for systems research in education [...] when we look at the methodological tools and designs used across the programme's 30 grants, we can begin to draw wider, collective learning on how to grapple with the challenges of systems research" (Magrath et al, 2019a: 4-6). The Review of Programme Support Services notes that "the PRL co-produced special issue of the Journal of Comparative Education was cited by several individuals, with one observing that this encapsulated what the role of this part of the support services was expected to achieve" (Parsons et al, 2020: 35).

The Review of Support Services concludes that the added value of the PRL has been "doubtful":

> "There is little evidence of attributable knowledge-sharing on scientific synergies, or of changed thinking from PRL on research methodologies to intensify impacts.... It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, for various reasons, the PRL investment in RLO, although well intentioned, has not provided added value to funders. However, any failure here questions not the need for such support but PRL's procurement and delivery, through a distinct and separate focus for scientific (academic) synergies and its poor integration with mainstream RLO support." (Parsons et al., 2020: 85).

In conclusion, the PRL function did not pan out as initially intended, and consequently the model of synthesis adopted by the RLO ended up diverging significantly from the prototype presented in Figure 15. This 'plan B' had three main elements: first, an increased focus on supporting synthesis through follow-on funding; second, an enhanced *de facto* role of the Impact Initiative in promoting synergy and collaboration; and third, the commissioning of programme level call-specific synthesis pieces in the final phase of the programme.

Follow-on Funding on Synthesis

After the PRL function ended, and the envisaged follow-up Synthesis Initiative could not be appointed due to lack of successful bids, there was an increased focus on supporting synthesis activities through Workstream 4 of the FoF Call 4, which had initially received no applications.

Our interviews with grantholders have highlighted two main reasons for such lack of synthesis proposals in the first FoF tranches– namely:

- *diversity of the RLO portfolio*, in terms of themes, country focus, and methods, which was not seen as conducive to synthesis (a point on which we will elaborate further below).
- '*bad timing' and difficulty to reconcile timelines:* two interviewees recalled being interested in applying and having identified a potential partner project, and discussed the idea with them, but then ultimately foregoing the opportunity because of the time investment needed and the fact that the timing did not work for both partners.

"RLO had specific funding streams for different projects to work together, and we really considered it. In particular, we would have liked to collaborate with others on the gamification of some aspects of multilingual education, and to connect with other RLO projects working in India. It would have been interesting to look at how innovations from the deaf context can interact with a non-deaf context. The problem was that this was such a large time investment, and the timing had to be right for both parties. You need a lot of effort to build a collaboration, so it did not really

work for us in the end. I believe co-creative facilitation techniques can support joint working even in a short timeframe, but you need a different kind of event for doing this." (PI Ulrike Zeshan)

Responding to this absence of applications for the synthesis workstream, the Impact Initiative ran a dedicated cross-grant synthesis and dissemination workshop in July 2020. 37 participants joined the virtual workshop (19 of whom were from the global South). This effort proved successful, and two applications for FoF synthesis funding were received in the fourth tranche, each covering three grants, but the FoF call was terminated (and the fourth tranche not funded) as a result of the ODA cuts.

Impact Initiative

While its terms of reference did not formally change, the Impact Initiative *de facto* took on an enhanced role to promote synergy and collaboration across the RLO portfolio. Several outputs were produced, which aggregated different RLO projects across a 'common denominator', be it geographical or thematic areas. For example, the briefing paper *Raising Learning Outcomes in Diverse Indian contexts* (2019) highlighted the key messages and policy implications from seven ESRC-DFID-funded RLO projects, all working in India but in extremely diverse contexts – from small schools in remote urban areas to crowded ones in urban slums. All the projects found that students' experience of the classroom, and their skills and needs, varied greatly depending not only on the context, but also on a range of intersectional disadvantages based on gender, caste, language, religion, ethnicity, and disability. Common policy implications concerned the complementary roles of teachers and parents, and the need to improve the administrative infrastructure of schools. A subsequent paper looked at education accountability in the relation between schools, communities and government in India. Other papers in the Research for Policy and Practice series tackled issues like gender and disabilities in relation to education – these included an introduction that presented the issues and drew together common strands across the projects, followed by a collection of summaries of individual projects, their main findings and policy implications.

Commissioned synthesis of the thematic calls

Towards the end of the RLO programme, three synthesis pieces were commissioned to summarise the RLO outputs produced under each call. The synthesis pieces were aimed at presenting common and differentiated findings across the RLO projects, situating these findings within the wider literature on education, and highlighting policy lessons (Aslam et al. 2022a; 2022b; 2022c).

6.2.3. Reflections on RLO approach to synthesis

In principle, the thematic focus on education gave the RLO a head-start when it came to synthesis, compared to other R4D programmes with a broader scope, such as the Joint Fund (Parsons et al., 2017: 19-20). Yet, despite the attempts highlighted above, it is generally recognised that the RLO programme has not lived up to its potential when it comes to research synthesis. This was concluded by the Review of Support Services (Parsons et al., 2020: 85), and also the view expressed by informants in the interviews conducted for this evaluation. We offer a few observations as to why this has been the case.

At a most immediate level, it is clear with hindsight that the separation of different support services between the PRL and the Impact Initiative did not provide the value added that was anticipated – leading instead to higher transaction costs and creating some confusion among grantholders. The *Review of Programme Support Services* states in this respect:

> "The review raises questions as to why a distinct "academic synergies" function was needed for RLO and whether the model aimed for was viable, given its deferred start, limited scope for

> methodological reflection in many of the newer projects and its ambitious timeframe." (Parsons et al, 2020: 79).

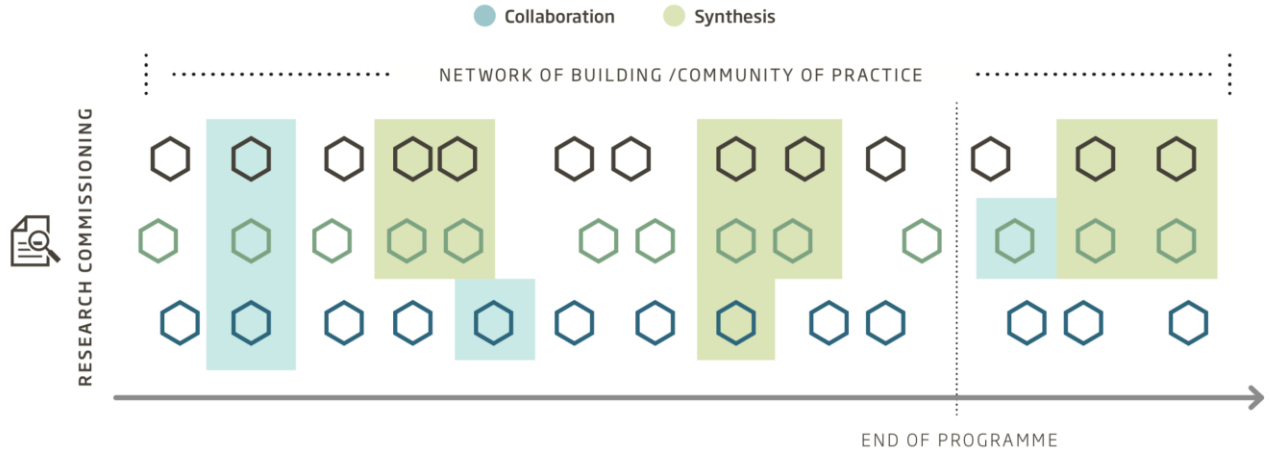
From the interviews with grantholders, it emerges that the distinction between the two functions was not completely clear even to many PIs (as one PI put it "*it was very unclear 'who was who'"*). This point was also noted in the *Review of Programme Support Services*:

> "There was evidence from funded projects of confusion about PRL's offer, in particular set against the wider activities of the Impact Initiative for the RLO programme. In interviews, some PIs referred to Impact Initiative-organised thematic or issues workshops as being run by PRL; at least two referred to attending PRL events in Autumn 2019, six months after the PRL contract and its activities had ended." (Parsons et al. 2020: 15).

A more fundamental question is whether there was enough 'common ground' among RLO projects for synthesis – and, relatedly, enough appetite among grantholders – for synthesis to take place. Our analysis showed a general perception among grantholders that the portfolio of RLO research was too varied to be easily synthesisable. While the Open Call by themes was an attempt in this direction, the themes of 'effective teaching', 'challenging contexts and 'accountability' were still considered too open-ended to be an effective basis for synthesis. The commissioning process selected proposals based on their individual merits, not their potential for synthesis; and the diversity of 'level of focus' in the RLO portfolio – ranging from RCT assessment of very specific interventions to projects that looked at theories and conceptual frameworks – did not help synthesis efforts.

Yet, even with this diversity, the RLO portfolio did offer multiple geographic, thematic, and methodologic entry points for synthesis. After the PRL function ended, the approach to synthesis adopted by the RLO diverged from the prototype illustrated in Figure 15, and towards what could be instead termed 'synthesis through collaboration', emerging from the ongoing support to the Community of Practice: project teams were encouraged to get to know each other's research, with the expectations that this would lead to collaboration, and eventually (possibly) lead to synthesis research (see Figure 18).

Figure 18: Synthesis by collaboration



Along with the question of 'who does the synthesis', there is the equally important question of what synthesis is for. Because of the nature and objectives of the programme, RLO funders were naturally very interested in

synthesis as an avenue for policy and practice impact. As one informant insightfully noted, this expectation does not square with the incentive system for academics. It is, in other words, probably unrealistic to expect senior academic to dedicate considerable time in digging for a 'minimum common denominator' with projects that, at least on the surface, have a different focus and limited points of contact. As noted by James Georgalakis, director of the Impact Initiative at IDS:

> "working across multiple projects in pursuit of impact is not without its risks and challenges. A widely held challenge is that multiple projects, despite sharing some methodological and thematic similarities, may not always add up to more than the sum of their parts. In other words, they may not cohere around an identifiable policy frame or problem. Geographic diversity, the range of research questions, and the focus on particular contexts may make it difficult to identify what they have to offer policymakers. [...] Furthermore, a group of projects cannot claim to be speaking on behalf of the wider literature, and there will inevitably be evidence gaps [...] [S]ome participants were concerned that the desire to join up research can lead to a loss of nuance and that policy-makers may fail to understand the diversity of experiences represented in the body of evidence." (Georgalakis, 2021: 22).

For all these reasons, if synthesis is expected, it should be reflected more explicitly in the commissioning process, in the amount of resources available to the support services, and in the general timeline of the programme. We will return on all these points in Section 9, in the form of recommendations for future programmes.

6.3. Impact on academic debates (EQ2.4)

Under EQ2.4, we look at the extent to which the findings of RLO research were 'picked up' by other researchers, within and beyond the RLO. In line with common practice, reflected in the RLO logframe, we consider academic citations as a meaningful proxy of how much RLO publications have been read and used in the academic community. Our analysis develops as follows. First, we look at the characteristics of *cited RLO publications*, looking at the average and variance of citations per publications and per grant, and trying to identify commonalities and trends across publications with high rates of citations - in other words, we ask whether there are any discernible characteristics of RLO publications that made them more (or less) influential in academic terms. Then, we turn our attention to an analysis of *citing publications*, to identify *where* RLO publications have been most influential, and what kind of thematic areas and disciplines have benefitted from RLO research the most.

Academic citations in the RLO logframe

Academic citations are used in the RLO logframe as the main proxy for the influence of RLO research on academic debates. Outcome 2 (*Evidence generated through the programme adds to and informs the body of research knowledge relevant to how education systems can raise learning outcomes in developing countries*) is measured by Outcome indicator 2 (*Number of programme-funded outputs cited in academic journals, books and book chapters*). It is important to note that the indicator counts the number of cited RLO publications, rather than the number of citing publications – thus giving a good sense of the spread of influence across the RLO portfolio, but not capturing the degree to which publications have been cited (in other words, a publication cited once and one cited one hundred times would both count as '1' in this indicator). As of March 2021, the milestone had been exceeded, with 42% published outputs reported by grantholders to have been cited in academic journal articles, books and book chapters (against a target of 20%).

We base our analysis on a list of 422 academic citations, derived from Dimensions. These are articles (343), chapters (63) and books/monographs (15)[57]. We found 354 unique citing publications (where each publication counts

[57] In addition, Dimensions also identified 15 citations in pre-prints and conference proceedings. These are not included in our count for the sake of consistency.

for '1', irrespective of the number of RLO citations that it contains). 93 citations were defined as 'self-citations' (i.e. at least one common author between citing and cited publication).

Analysis of cited RLO publications

52 out of the 81 RLO publications had citations in Dimensions (with most of the non-cited publications being recent ones, published in 2020 or 2021). Table 10 summarises the top-cited publications. Interestingly, the publication with the highest number of citations (net of self-citation) is a relatively recent one, published only in 2019. Only one of the top-cited RLO articles (Trani et al., 2015) includes Southern authors. The six top-cited publications are associated with three RLO grants (with two publications per grant). Thematically, two of the top-cited publications focus specifically on disability, while two are associated with a project (ES/M005445/1) that has a strong disability focus, although the publications themselves look at inclusion more broadly.

Table 10: Top cited RLO publications

Title	Year of publication	Grant	Total number of citations (of which self-citations)
Kim S., Raza M., Seidman E. Improving 21st-century teaching skills: The key to effective 21st-century learners. Research in Comparative and International Education. 14(1):99-117.	2019	ES/M004740/1 (Seidman)	34 (0)
Alcott, B., Rose, P. Schools and learning in rural India and Pakistan: Who goes where, and how much are they learning?. Prospects 45, 345–363.	2015	ES/M005445/1 (Rose)	34 (6)
Trani, J.F., et al., Disability and Poverty in Morocco and Tunisia: A Multidimensional Approach, Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 16:4, 518-548	2015	ES/M005011/1 (Bakhshi)	33 (2)
Alcott, B., & Rose, P. Learning in India's primary schools: How do disparities widen across the grades?. International Journal of Educational Development, 56 42-51.	2017	ES/M005445/1 (Rose)	30 (6)
Wolf, S. Measuring and predicting process quality in Ghanaian pre-primary classrooms using the Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System (TIPPS), Early Childhood Research Quarterly, Volume 45: 18-30.	2018	ES/M004740/1 (Seidman)	22 (9)
Trani JF, Babulal GM, Bakhshi P. Development and Validation of the 34-Item Disability Screening Questionnaire (DSQ-34) for Use in Low and Middle Income Countries Epidemiological and Development Surveys. PLoS One. Dec 2.	2015	ES/M005011/1 (Bakhshi)	21 (9)

Citations are very unevenly distributed across grants – with the 5 top-cited grants accounting for 75% of all citations. These include the three grants with top-cited publications, mentioned above. Not surprisingly, all but one of the top-cited grants are 'older' grants from Call 1 (thus having had more time for citations to accrue). Table 11 shows the RLO grants with the highest number of cited outputs in Dimensions.

Table 11: RLO grants with the highest number of cited publications in Dimensions

	Call	Citations in Dimensions
ES/M005445/1 (Rose)	1	100
ES/M004740/1 (Seidman)	1	70
ES/N010094/1 (Walker)	2	60
ES/M005011/1 (Bakhshi)	1	56
ES/M004732/1 (Aber)	1	34

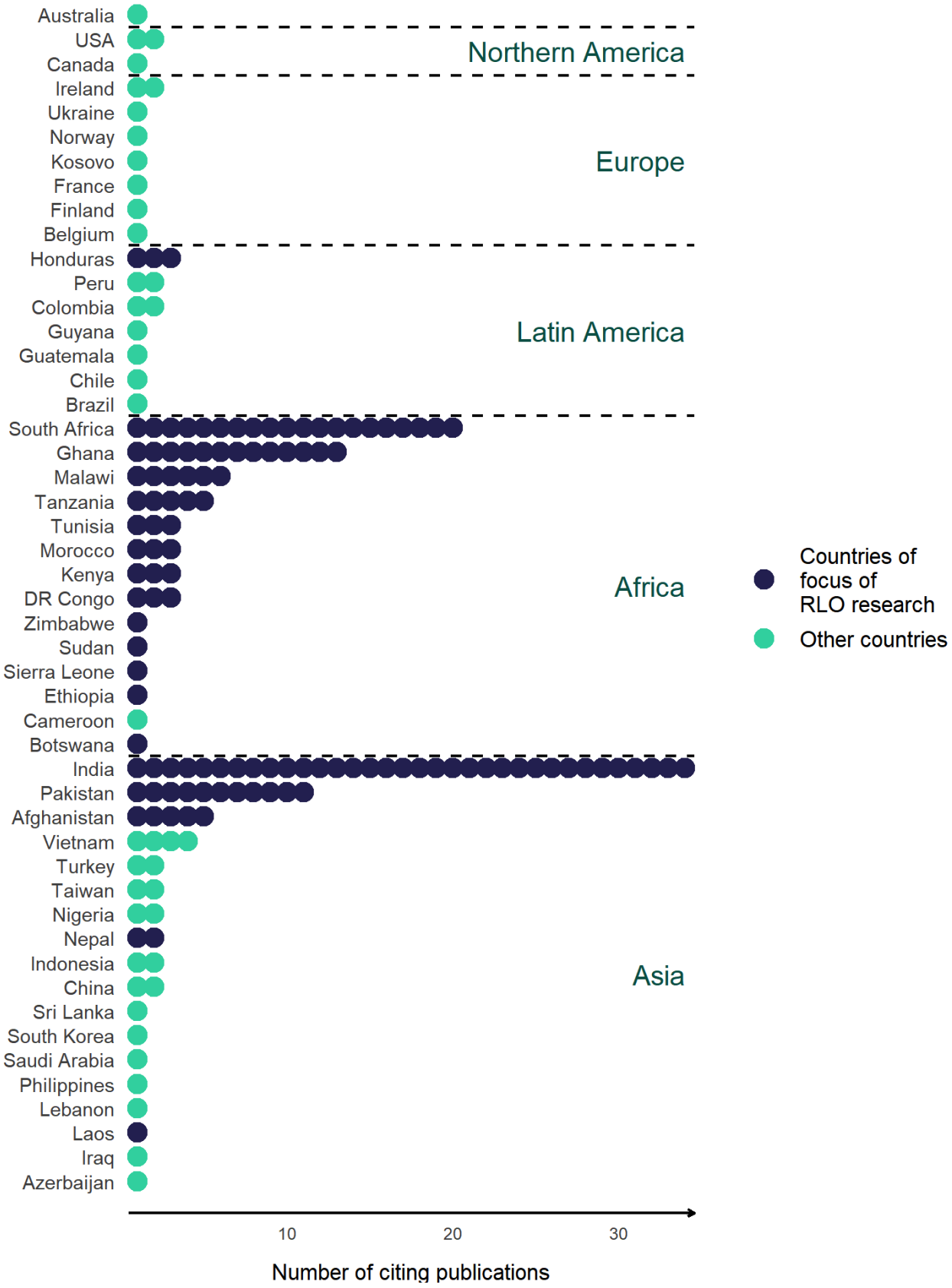
Analysis of citing publications

We found 28 cases in which citing publications were RLO outputs. However, most of those are same-project citations: we found only 7 instances of an article associated with a RLO project citing a publication from another RLO project, which points to limited cross-fertilisation within the RLO programme.

Almost all of the citing publications were in English. Foreign language citing publications are in Indonesian (2), Arabic (1), Czech (1), French (1), Spanish (1), and Turkish (1). There are many cases of citing publications looking at countries that were not a focus of RLO research, as shown in Figure 19. This includes several High Income Countries (USA, Canada, Belgium, Finland, Norway, France, Ireland), an interesting indication that the influence of RLO research is not limited to the Global South.

When looking at the journals where citing publications are featured, we note that the majority of citations are in education-specific journals (147), with the most common being the *International Journal of Educational Development* (25), *Compare – a Journal of Comparative and International Education* (14), and *Research in Comparative and International Education* (10). 26 citations are in journals focusing on childhood studies, 11 in journals specialising on disability, and 19 in journals related to linguistics and language studies. The rest of the publications span an array of different disciplines – from public health, to geography, to psychology and international development, indicating an influence of RLO research findings that goes well beyond the specific field of education.

Figure 19: Geographic focus of citing publications



6.4. Thematic reflections

After reviewing the quantitative evidence on RLO publications and related citations, we circle back to the research context presented in Section 3, to discuss how RLO research complemented and augmented the existing body of research on education and raising learning outcomes.

Disability and inclusive education

On the whole, the most significant contribution of RLO has probably been in the field of **inclusive education** – which, as we saw in Section 3, has received new impetus with the adoption of the SDGs, the related notion of 'leave no one behind', and the emerging reflection on intersectionality as a way to understand how different dimensions of disadvantage and inequality converge and reinforce each other.

As discussed, **disability in education** is a key theme of RLO research. Four projects in the RLO portfolio focus primarily on education for children with disability (in addition to three projects, all led by PI Ulrike Zeshan, that focus specifically on education for Deaf learners).

These projects account for an important share of RLO publications (18 outputs, or 22%), as well as resulting citations. The projects led by Pauline Rose (ES/M005445/1), Parul Bakhshi (ES/M005011/1) and Jean-François Trani (ES/P005799/1) all have a focus on South Asia[58], and consider disability in the broader context of other factors that drive exclusion and unequal learning outcomes. In quantitative terms, these three projects together have a significant footprint on RLO publications, accounting for 23 academic outputs (almost one third of the total of articles, book chapters and books produced by RLO) and eight 'other' publications (just over one third of the total).

RLO outputs on disability and inclusion account for a significant share of the overall RLO citations. As shown in Table 10, two of the top-cited publications focus specifically on disability, while two are associated with a project (ES/M005445/1, led by Pauline Rose) that has a strong disability focus, although the publications themselves look at inclusion more broadly. Taken together, the projects by Rose, Bakhshi and Lynch account together for 176 citations, or about 42% of all the citations of RLO outputs. At least 52 of the (unique) publications citing RLO publications are disability-themed,[59] and many more focus on inclusion more in general.

Publications produced by Bakhshi's projects stand out for being extensively cited by studies looking at many diverse contexts, outside of the original countries of focus of the project – including Turkey (Ozdamar et al. 2021), Sri Lanka (Murthy et al., 2018), South Korea (Park & Nam, 2019), Cambodia (Takasaki, 2020), Philippines (Manella et al., 2020), Vietnam (Mont & Nguyen, 2018), Indonesia (Mani et al., 2018), Kenya (Hunt et al., 2021), South Africa (Graham, 2020), Ghana (Asuman et al., 2021), Peru (Clausen & Barrantes, 2020), various other countries in Latin America (Pinilla-Roncancio, 2018), and the United States (Vick, 2020).

Other themes and trends in RLO research

The remaining part of this section discusses how other key contemporary themes in education research (which we identified in Section 3) have been featured in RLO outputs, and, in turn, how influential these outputs have been, as measured by citations. As a general consideration, while there are several thematic areas where RLO research emerges as significant and influential, these are mostly the results of publications by individual projects, rather than the sum of several RLO projects.

Education in emergencies and crisis contexts is an area of focus that has been gaining increasing attention, as discussed in Section 3. Two projects led by John Aber (Call 1 pilot grant ES/M004732/1 and Follow On Funding

[58] The projects focus on Afghanistan (Bakhshi's and Trani's projects); Pakistan (Rose's and Trani's projects) and India (Bakhshi's and Rose's projects). Bakhshi's project additionally focuses on Sierra Leone, Sudan (Darfur), Morocco and Tunisia.

[59] Based on a keyword search in titles for disabilit*, special needs, developmental delay. The actual number is likely to be higher, reflecting disability-related publications that do not have these keywords in the title.

grant ES/P008607/1, focusing on the Democratic Republic of Congo and Niger, respectively) had a specific focus on education in emergencies, and several other outputs produced by other projects looked at disability and inclusion in conflict and post-conflicts contexts – specifically Sierra Leone (Bakhshi et al., 2021), Darfur (Bakhshi et al., 2018) and Afghanistan (Trani et. al, 2019). Together, publications with an "education in crisis" focus produced 34 citations, or 8% of the total.

The RLO provided an important contribution to filling a recognised knowledge gap on **Early Childhood Education** (ECE) in LMICs (von Suchodoletz et al., 2020: 2). Two RLO projects looked specifically at Early Childhood Education, in the contexts of Bangladesh (ES/N010221/1) and Malawi (ES/M005453/1). These appear to have been highly influential, with at least 27 citing publications focusing on pre-primary education.[60] The article with the highest number of citations in this thematic area is Wolf et al. (2018 - associated with grant ES/M004740/1 led by Edward Seidman), which looks at the use of the TIPPS tool in pre-primary classrooms in Ghana. The publication was cited by various other studies that attempted to measure the ECE quality in different contexts – including Colombia (Bentacour et al., 2021; Maldonado-Carreño et al., 2022), Peru (Hanno et al, 2020), Ethiopia (Kim at al., 2022); Kosovo, Ukraine and Finland (von Suchodoletz et al., 2020).

Similarly, **higher education** is a relatively niche area of focus for RLO (with only two main grants) – but the programme has been relatively influential in this area, with RLO outputs cited in 32 publications which have a higher education focus.[61] The project *Inclusive higher education learning outcomes for rural and township youth* (led by Melanie Walker at the University of the Free State, ES/N010094/1) is the third-most cited RLO project, with a total of 60 citations, or just below 15% of the total. The project used a "capabilities approach" to examine the concept of epistemic justice in the context of University education in South Africa, and in particular the disadvantages of students from rural backgrounds. [62] This research was cited in a variety of contexts outside of South Africa – for example, to analyse race talk and discourses of white normativity in Norwegian secondary schools (Harlap & Riese, 2021), to analyse the barriers that students face in the higher education admission processes in Turkey and China (Erdemir & Wu, 2021), and to study the radicalisation of youth in Europe (Kaya & Benevento, 2021).

Finally, RLO publications also appear to have had a strong influence on the field of linguistics. Five RLO outputs (all resulting from one project, *Multilingualism and Multiliteracy: Raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India,* led by Ianthi Tsimpli at the University of Cambridge, ES/N010345/1) analyse the challenges of delivering quality education in **resource-constrained multilingual contexts**, and the ways in which language-switching can impact pupil learning outcomes.[63] 19 citing publications focus on bilingualism and multilingualism in relation to education.[64] RLO research on this issue has been extensively cited not only by many publications focusing on India, but also by research on bi- and multilingualism in other contexts – for example, by a study comparing native and non-native English students in the United States and Canada (Warrican et al., 2022), and a study on reading comprehension among adolescents in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Abusamra et al., 2020).

6.5. Conclusions

The RLO had a well-structured and rigorous commissioning process, with criteria that mapped well against all four RQ+ criteria for research quality. While the predominant weight – in guidance and actual decisions – appears to have been given to research integrity, considerations related to research legitimacy, research importance and positioning for use played a significant role in funding decisions. As a result, the RLO produced a rich research

[60] Based on a keyword search for Early (years, education); Pre-primary; kindergarten; preschool.
[61] Based on a keyword search for Higher (education) tertiary (education) University*
[62] See Aslam et al. - ESRC – FCDO Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO Programme): Challenging Contexts - A synthesis of outputs produced under Call 2: 'Challenging Contexts' – unpublished draft.
[63] See Aslam et al. - ESRC – FCDO Raising Learning Outcomes (RLO Programme): Challenging Contexts - A synthesis of outputs produced under Call 2: 'Challenging Contexts' – unpublished draft.
[64] Based on keyword search in title:

portfolio that has already influenced academic debates in several areas, and had the potential to continue to do so in the coming years.

The degree of authorship and co-authorship by RLO Southern researchers is uneven across projects, but generally low, and largely concentrated in well-established research institutions in middle-income countries (particularly South Africa and India). The high cost of publication was identified as a key constraint for Southern authorship. The compressed timeframe of research projects means that, often, publication happens after the formal end of the project, further limiting publishing opportunities for Southern researchers.

When compared to other R4D programmes with a broader thematic focus, such as the Joint Fund, the RLO seemed an ideal candidate for producing synthesis across different projects – an objective reinforced by the appointment of a dedicated position to build academic synergies across the portfolio (the Programme Research Lead at the University of Oxford). For a number of reasons, the plans for the PRL did not pan out as expected, and in the latter part of the programme the RLO resorted primarily to a model of 'synthesis by collaboration'. However, there was a sense among grantholders that the RLO portfolio was still too diverse – in terms of themes, geographical focus, and methods – to make collaborative synthesis an interesting and meaningful pursuit.

7. Impact on policy and practice (EQ3)

This section looks at whether the RLO has been successful in influencing policy and practice, in terms of its individual projects (EQ3.1) as well as the programme as a whole (EQ 3.2). If we refer to the Wheel of Impact as an analytical framework (Section 1, Figure 1), these questions mostly focus on 'instrumental impact', with some elements of 'capacity-building' impact (as it relates to capacity-building of external stakeholders).

The section starts by reviewing the way in which impact was conceptualised in the RLO logframe (7.1), and then reviews the typologies of impact that have been envisaged in the RLO projects, and the extent to which those have been realised to date (7.2). We then discuss the question of aggregate impact by offering the example of the RLO work on disability in education (7.3). We close the section by offering some concluding reflections (7.4).

7.1. Policy impact as measured by policy citations

Outcome 3 of the RLO logframe looks at the impact on policy and practice (*Evidence generated through the programme contributes to debates amongst policymakers and practitioners on education systems and how they can deliver learning at scale*). The corresponding indicator is "*Number of programme-funded outputs cited in non-academic publications"* (see Table 12).

Table 12: Progress against Outcome indicator 3

Number of programme-funded outputs cited in non-academic publications	
Milestone March 2021	At least 29 of 73 (40%) programme funded outputs published by the previous year are reported as cited in non-academic publications
Outcome March 2021	35 of 125 (28%) outputs published by March 2021 were reported as cited in non-academic publications by March 2021.

This is the one indicator against which the programme has consistently under-performed, as stated in the FCDO Annual Review for 2020-2021:

> "The RLO programme continues to underperform against milestones related to citations in non-academic publications. [...] This runs counter to expectations that these types of citations would increase rapidly in the later years of the programme as more grants reached completion. Understanding these trends and mapping the broader impact of the RLO programme and the contribution the programme has made to policymakers' and practitioners' understanding of how to raise learning outcomes is a major priority for the ongoing programme evaluation. [...] this will include more complete mapping and analysis of RLO citation data, following on from initial efforts undertaken by the Impact Initiative. In planning for Phase 2 the programme team could also consider different indicators for measuring programme level impact on policy and practise".

We argue, however, that the under-performance of the RLO in this respect is not, in itself, indicative of a low level of policy and practice impact, but rather of the continuing challenges of measuring such impact. A number of observations can be made in this regard:

- The fact that the indicator is framed as a percentage of overall publications (rather than in absolute numbers) means that the RLO can potentially become a victim of its own (academic) success, as a higher number of publications raises the bar for meeting the policy citation target.
- The term 'non-academic publications' is a catch-all category that encompasses very diverse types of outputs, not all equally relevant as stepping stones in the Research-to-Impact pathway. The distinction

between 'academic' and 'non-academic' is also often blurred: research publications from development think tanks (e.g. the Overseas Development Institute, ODI) or international organisations (like the World Bank) could easily fit in either category depending on definition.
- Current search engines are still ill-suited to find reference in policy and programme documents (not least because, in many countries, these documents are not available online, or are only available as scanned PDF documents, often in low resolution, and therefore not searchable).

At a more conceptual level, counting non-academic publications as the only measure of policy success assumes a linear pathway by which research findings are first published in academic journals or books, *then* translated into non-academic outputs, *then* read by policymakers and practitioners who will act on them. This is both overly optimistic (as it assumes that non-academic publications will have a policy and/or practice impact) and too limiting (as it overlooks the many other ways in which research can feed into policy and practice). In fact, the pathways leading to impact are typically more complex and iterative; they involve researchers and key stakeholders working together over a prolonged period of time, and – in the most accomplished cases – co-producing research. In many cases, policymakers and practitioners may not become aware of research findings by reading academic publications, but rather by interacting with the research team on a regular basis, trying things out together, and getting to 'own' the ideas that will subsequently be reflected in their own work.

In recognition of this complexity, the quantitative indicators of the RLO logframe were complemented by funders' annual reporting and analysis, which included qualitative examples of policy engagement and influence.

Analysis of policy citations

Prior to the start of the evaluation, the Impact Initiative had initiated a process of citation analysis for Joint Fund and RLO publications, bringing together two sources: Google Scholar and Overton (Higdon et al, 2021). The evaluation committed to building on and complementing this work through the citation analysis in Dimensions. This however proved to be more effective for academic citations compared to non-academic ones.

Overton is the world's largest searchable index of policy documents, guidelines, think tank publications and working papers. The Impact Initiative analysis found a total of 36 citations of RLO articles that were uniquely on Overton. Our own analysis in Dimensions found 11 non-academic citations in Dimensions. Based on the consolidated list, the following observations can be made:

- 20 RLO academic outputs (or 25% of the total list considered for this evaluation) has policy-related citations (source Overton, Dimensions, or self-reported).
- These publications correspond to 10 RLO awards. There is a significant overlap in citations between the 'most cited' in academic terms and 'most cited' in policy terms.
- Thematically, six policy-cited publications (30%) have a focus on disability; no other trend is apparent.

Table 13 shows that the projects led by Pauline Rose and Parul Bakhshi (both focusing on disability and inclusive education) have the highest number of citations in Overton. Both projects also feature among the list of highest cited projects in Dimensions, with the project led by Pauline Rose topping both lists. Table 14 shows the five most cited RLO outputs in Overton.

Table 13: Five most cited grants in Overton (Higdon et al, 2021).

Grant ID	Grant title (PI)	Citations in Overton	Also in top-5 for Dimensions citations?
ES/M005445/1	Learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness for children facing multiple disadvantages, including those with disabilities: India and Pakistan (Rose)	16	Yes
ES/M005011/1	Constructing a Global Framework for Analysis of Social Exclusion From and Within Learning Systems (Bakhshi)	12	Yes
ES/P006043/1	Partnership Schools for Liberia: Impact on Accountability Mechanisms and Education Outcomes	8	
ES/M005445/1	Accountability for gender equality in education: Critical perspectives on an indicator framework for the SDGs	5	
ES/M004732/1	Promoting Children's Learning Outcomes in Conflict-Affected Countries: Generating, Communicating, and Incorporating Evidence for Impact (Aber)	5	Yes

Table 14: Top 5 most cited RLO outputs in Overton

Grant ID	Publication title	Citations in Overton	Also in top-5 for Dimensions citations?
ES/P006043/1	Outsourcing Education: Experimental Evidence from Liberia	8	
ES/M005445/1	Learning in India's primary schools: How do disparities widen across the grades?	6	Yes
ES/P005675/1	The many meanings of quality education: Politics of targets and indicators in SDG 4	5	
ES/M005445/1	Schools and learning in rural India and Pakistan: Who goes where, and how much are they learning?	5	Yes
ES/M005011/1	Education of children with disabilities in New Delhi: When does exclusion occur?	5	

Box 10: Examples of policy citations across RLO projects

The project *Promoting Children's Learning Outcomes in Conflict-Affected Countries: Generating, Communicating, and Incorporating Evidence for Impact* (led by John Aber at New York University - ES/M004732/1) published a paper entitled 'Impacts After One Year of "Healing Classroom" on Children's Reading and Math Skills in DRC: Results From a Cluster Randomized Trial' (Aber et al, 2017). The paper was cited in a World Bank policy brief in 2020, entitled, 'Three Principles to Support Teacher Effectiveness During Covid-19'.

The project *Literacy Laboratory Project (LLP) under the Northern Uganda Literacy Program,* led by Rebecca Thornton at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (ES/M004996/1), published in an academic paper entitled *Making the Grade: Understanding What Works for Teaching Literacy in Rural Uganda* (Kerwin & Thornton, 2015). The paper was cited in the 2018 World Development Report, the flagship publication of the World Bank *Learning to Realise Education's Promise* (World Bank, 2018).

The project *Learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness for children facing multiple disadvantages, including those with disabilities: India and Pakistan* (led by Pauline Rose at the University of Cambridge, ES/M005445) published a paper entitled 'Learning in India's primary schools: How do disparities widen across the grades?' (Alcott and Rose, 2017). This was cited in a UNESCO Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education, which was published in 2018[5], particularly in section 4: 'Measuring equity for national education planning'. Pauline Rose was a contributing author for this section of the report.

The project *Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings* (led by Nicola Ansell at Brunel University London, ES/N01037X/1) published an article entitled "Educating "Surplus Population": Uses and Abuses of Aspiration in the Rural Peripheries of a Globalising World" (Ansell et. Al, 2020), which was cited by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition, hosted by FAO, in its 2021 report "Promoting Youth Engagement and Employment in Agriculture and Nutrition".

7.2. Types of impact pathways in RLO projects

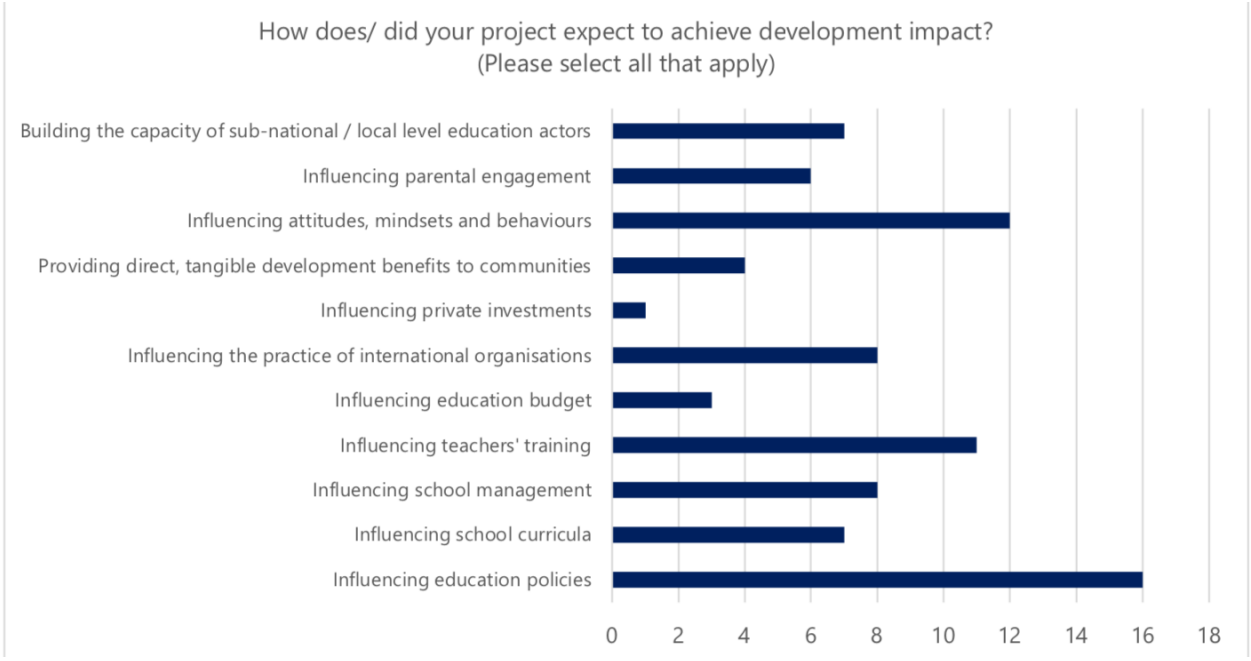
The projects that make up the RLO portfolio have led to a variety of cases of 'instrumental impact'.[65] Those have been extensively documented by the Impact Initiative in Impact Stories, and summarised in the Working Paper "Celebrating the impact of the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme" (Impact Initiative, 2021).[66]

In the online survey, PIs were asked to define in which way their project aimed to influence policy and practice; multiple responses were possible. As shown in Figure 20, a multitude of pathways were identified, with impact on education policies being the most common answer (16 out of 19), followed by influencing attitudes, mindsets and behaviours (12); influencing teachers' training (11); school management (8); and parental engagement (6).

[65] In the online survey, PIs were asked to define in which way their project aimed to influence policy and practice; multiple responses were possible. A multitude of pathways were identified, with impact on education policies being the most common answer (16 out of 19), followed by influencing attitudes, mindsets and behaviours (12); influencing teachers' training (11); school management (8); and parental engagement (6).

[66] The working paper is based on a meta-review of outputs based on three sources: Gateway to Research UK Research and Innovation's portal for publicly funded research and innovation); ESRC reports (with a focus on the Pathways to Impact sections); and content developed in collaboration with the Impact Initiative to highlight the impact of projects (such as Impact Stories and Research for Policy and Practice papers). This information was used to conduct a meta-impact pathway mapping exercise, applying an Outcome Harvesting approach to identify, formulate, verify, analyse, and interpret the different types of outcomes reported across the research portfolio.

Figure 20: Pathways to Impact identified by PIs



Typically, projects pursued different pathways to impact – as noted in a publication by the Impact Initiative, "it is rare for any project to place all its eggs in one basket and focus on a single pathway or change process. It is therefore sometimes unclear how envisaged outcomes relate to the choice of pathway" (Georgalakis, 2021: 18).

Policy influence

While there are several cases where it can be said, in a general sense, that RLO research has 'influenced' policy, this was done through pathways that were more complex than simply 'communicating' research to policymakers and influencing policy documents. Examples of these more iterative pathways included:

- **Enhancing the government counterparts and other key stakeholders' skills to use data for policy and planning.** An example of this is provided by the project *Learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness for children facing multiple disadvantages, including those with disabilities: India and Pakistan,* led by Pauline Rose at the University of Cambridge (ES/M005445/1). Working with the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS), the project was able to gain a fuller picture of the prevalence of disability in the country through the use of the questionnaire developed by the Washington Group for Disability Statistics. The Punjab Special Education department was provided with training on how to use the Washington Group child functioning survey tools. As a result, data to identify children with disabilities were included in national surveys, resulting in more effective planning" (Impact Initiative, 2021).
- **Providing evidence to 'back up' policy decisions, thus enabling policy change.** An example of this is given by projects on deaf education led by Ulrike Zeshan at the University of Central Lancashire– described in Box 11.
- **Bringing new voices and perspective into the policy-making process.** Many RLO projects have tried, in different ways, to strengthen the degree to which policymaking in education is influenced by the voices and perspective of students, their parents, the teachers and the school managers. In particular, some projects have attempted to 'bridge the gap' between policymakers (typically based in capital cities and large urban areas) and local communities living in remote rural areas. For example, the project *Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings* (led by Nicola Ansell at Brunel University - ES/N01037X/1)

investigated perceptions of education system held by rural children and their families, and found that "[t]he content of education is an obstacle in rural children's learning. The subject matter and the way in which it is taught render learning more abstract for rural children. [...]. Rural life is underrepresented in textbooks, and the partial depictions of village life that have made it into textbooks are often out of sync with children's lived reality."[67]. Acknowledging this disconnect led to concrete recommendations on how to adapt textbooks, curricula and teachers' training. The project engaged particularly closely with the government of the Indian state of Chhattisgarh, leading to some of the recommendations being taken on board. NGO partners in this project remarked that research can act as a 'door opener', providing access to senior decision-makers who would otherwise be hard to reach.

- **Rethinking assumptions around particular policy issues.** This is the most difficult pathway to document and evidence, as it involves problematizing existing assumptions rather than providing straightforward recommendations. One policy-relevant example is the debate around private schooling, which has been a key focus of RLO research particularly in Call 3. As discussed in Section 3, the use of private schools in resource-constrained contexts has increased significantly in recent years, and many governments have experimented with hybrid forms such as Public-Private Partnerships, charter schools, voucher-funded schools and concession schools. Not surprisingly, policymakers are keen to hear from researchers about 'what works', and to get clear guidance on what system provides the best results. As research shows, however, the answer is more complicated and generally along the lines of "it depends". While this can be frustrating for policymakers and practitioners, there was a strong sense emerging from our discussions with researchers that this role of 'infusing complexity' into policy debates is an important one, and should not be eschewed in favour of straightforward policy recommendations.

[67] Project final report: https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Projects/pdf/Education-aspiration/Report-2019-English-48-page.pdf

Box 11: Supporting the promotion of Indian Sign Language as a school subject

India has one of the largest deaf communities in the world, with several million sign language users. Indian Sign Language (ISL) is a full-fledged language with its own vocabulary and grammatical structures that are different from those of all the spoken languages used in India.

The 2020 National Education Policy makes explicit provisions for the use of ISL in education, calling for "National and State curriculum materials [to be] developed, for use by students with hearing impairment" (Government of India, 2020: 15). In addition to the lack of curricula and learning materials, the education of deaf children and youth is also hindered by the scarcity of teachers who are adequately trained in ISL. This makes it impossible to deliver effective face-to-face instruction to the millions of deaf learners across the country.

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) – the largest open-schooling system in the world – has devised a number of strategies to facilitate the education of deaf learners. A key achievement in this respect was the creation of a course on Indian Sign Language for the 10th standard board exams (the Indian equivalent of the GCSE in the UK). Several members of the RLO research team led by Ulrike Zeshan joined the curriculum committee, and the RLO team developed most of the ISL teaching and learning materials needed for this reform to take effect. Therefore, while the team was not the main initiator for the reform, it provided the know-how and resources for policy implementation.

The course was launched in July 2021, on the occasion of the one-year anniversary of the 2020 National Education Policy. The content will be offered in flexible ways, including on television and online. Once rolled out, the course is expected to be available through the national system of the NIOS, and students will be able to select Indian Sign Language as one of their language subjects for the board exam, on a par with spoken languages.

Sources: Singh & Mahapatra (forthcoming 2021); interview with PI Ulrike Zeshan (November 18th, 2021).

To further illustrate the complexity and iterative nature of the research-policy relations, it should be noted that in some cases, members of the RLO research team were also playing a policy role. The original Co-I for the project *Assessment for Learning in Africa: Improving Pedagogy and Assessment for Numeracy in Foundation Years (AFLA)* (ES/N010515/1) in Tanzania ended up taking the position of Minister of Education. In other cases, RLO researchers acted in advisory roles to governments.

By and large, the main policy focus of the RLO projects has been at the national or sub-national level. The project *Accountability for gender equality in education: Critical perspectives on an indicator framework for the SDGs,* led by Elaine Unterhalter at University College London (ES/P005675/1), represents an outlier in the RLO portfolio – not only because it was the only RLO project with a primary gender focus (as explored in section 8), but also because it mainly tried to influence a *global* Community of Practice and *global* policy discourses around the SDG4 and Education 2030. Working in Malawi and South Africa, the project sought to identify indicators that were sensitive to the specific (gender) realities of the local contexts. The project was designed and implemented in close collaboration with key global stakeholders, including the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM). Many of these collaborations emerged from people knowing each other, and being part of the same networks: for example, two of academic team members had previously worked in the UNESCO GEM team. As this was a Call 3 project, it was severely affected by Covid. Ultimately, while the project did not result in an actual change in the SDG4 Indicators, it was instrumental in establishing gender as a realm of discussion when measuring progress towards SDG4. As the PI put it, by the end of the project "*we*

were not just banging at doors, but it felt as though we had become part of a movement and a realignment– the dial had been moved". [68]

Impact on education practice

The specificity of the RLO – compared to others R4D programmes with a more general focus, such as the Joint Fund – was to have a privileged 'locus' for impact, namely the classroom. Consequently, the most visible impact of RLO projects is not to be found in formal policies, but rather in different ways in which teaching and learning practices have been changed, through new tools, perspectives and approaches. One informant remarked that their project initially had a much higher emphasis on policy, but this gradually changed towards a greater focus on engaging with school-based actors and acting where change happens.

The ways in which RLO projects have influenced practice have been diverse. Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) were extensively used in RLO projects – as part of a growing (if not uncontroversial) trend of using RCTs in education (Magrath et al, 2019; McPherson et al., 2020). The RCTs conducted by RLO projects can be broadly categorised under two main headings: RCTs that tested the effectiveness and scalability of existing models and approaches; and RCTs that put in place new interventions and then tested them. Below we discuss each of these categories in turn.

Test the effectiveness and scalability of existing approaches. This included:

- Assessment of the Mango Tree Literacy Programme in Uganda, carried out by the *Literacy Laboratory Project (LLP) under the Northern Uganda Literacy Program,* led by Rebecca Thornton at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (ES/M004996/1). The assessment found that the Mango Tree's approach (focused on the use of mother-tongue in schools and strong parental engagement) succeeded in substantially improving literacy levels in early primary school grades, raising literacy levels equivalent to a whole additional year of schooling − amongst the largest improvements ever achieved for randomised education interventions of this kind.[69] These findings had impact both at the national level in Uganda, where one team member was invited to be part of a government working group on the issue, and globally, influencing in particular USAID's reflection on mother-tongue literacy.[70] Findings from the project (Kerwin & Thornton, 2015) have been quoted in the 2018 World Development Report, the flagship publication of the World Bank *Learning to Realise Education's Promise* (World Bank, 2018).
- Assessment of the International Rescue Committee's Healing Classroom model in the Democratic Republic of Congo[71], carried out by the project *Promoting Children's Learning Outcomes in Conflict-Affected Countries: Generating, Communicating, and Incorporating Evidence for Impact*, led by John Aber at New York University (ES/M004732/1). The research concluded that "interventions embedding social-emotional learning principles into the academic curricula are a promising but not yet proven approach to improving children's outcomes in low-income countries affected by war" (Torrente et al., 2019). A series of in-country reflection workshops were held at both provincial and national level to share research with potential users, including policymakers and practitioners. The team created accessible materials - including a policy brief, presentations, and infographics – to aid in dissemination efforts. The national-level presentation in Kinshasa was attended by the Minister of Education and USAID DRC officials.

[68] Interrview with Elaine Unterhalter – October 18th, 2021.

[69] See https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14052/ResearchImpact_Uganda_Online2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[70] The research findings have also influenced a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) White Paper on approaches to improving literacy instruction in Uganda. Heidi Soule, USAID Uganda Education, Youth and Child Development Advisor reported that 'Without this research, the local language development component would not have been included in the White Paper.' https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14052/ResearchImpact_Uganda_Online2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[71] See https://www.rescue-uk.org/article/healing-classrooms-helping-children-cope-after-crisis

- Assessment of the Partnership Schools for Liberia, Africa's first fee-free national public private partnership for basic education[72], carried out by the project *Partnership Schools for Liberia: Impact on Accountability Mechanisms and Education Outcomes* led by Justin Sandefur, at Innovation for Poverty Action (ES/P006043/1). The project found that the results varied crucially depending on the different private providers, suggesting that the identity of private contractors and the state capacity to monitor performance matter for the outcomes of these public–private partnerships. After the first year of research, these findings were presented to the then Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and her cabinet. As a result, provider contracts were amended to prevent some of the failures that had been identified by the project. However, even providers that had shown serious failings had their contracts renewed – a compelling indication of the challenges of translating research findings into decision-making.[73]
- Assessment of the Madhya Pradesh School Quality Assessment (MPSQA) in India, carried out by the RLO project *Improving school governance and learning outcomes at scale*, led by Karthik Muralidharan at the Institute for Financial Management & Research, India - ES/N010388/1).[74] The assessment concluded that, while the intervention remains a flagship national reform and exemplifies good practice in a number of areas, no evidence could be found that it improved school functioning or students' outcomes. The assessment offers recommendations around better incentives, better visibility on outcomes at the beneficiary level, and the importance of dedicated and well-qualified programme staff (Muralidharan & Singh, 2020). As the project was implemented in close cooperation with relevant sectors in the Madhya Pradesh state government, findings were shared on an ongoing basis.

These projects have all a relatively straightforward pathway to impact – they are evaluating an intervention and providing findings and recommendations primarily targeted to the actors implementing those interventions (be it governments, NGOs, or private companies).

Assess the potential of new approaches and test new ideas. While the projects in this second category also used RCTs, they differ from the above-described projects because they directly design and implement new interventions, as opposed to evaluating existing approaches put in place by others.

One example is given by the project *Investing in our Future: The Early Childhood Intervention and Parental Involvement in Bangladesh,* led by Asadul Islam at Monash University (ES/N010221/1), one of the two RLO projects that focused specifically on early year education. As only 40 percent of children in Bangladesh are enrolled in pre-primary education (with this figure estimated to be much lower in rural areas), the project aimed at exploring whether introducing preschools in remote rural communities in Bangladesh can help prepare children for primary school. This project used an RCT to evaluate the efficacy of two different low-cost interventions aimed at children of pre-primary age: a formal pre-school programme that provided early education to children for five days a week, and an approach of nurtured at-home development, by which teachers were carrying out weekly home-visits to enhance the home-learning environment.[75] It was found that, while both approaches had positive results, the traditional pre-school settings were associated with higher cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, including literacy, numeracy, gross and fine motor skills, communication and problem-solving skills. Children benefitted from interaction with other children, and the nursery-based intervention was also more cost-effective.

[72] Launched in 2016, the Partnership Schools for Liberia is a public-private partnership aiming to dramatically improve learning outcomes for children in Liberia. All schools remain government schools and are free to students.

[73] https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15597/ResearchImpact_OutsourceLiberia_Online_3.0.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y

[74] The MPSQA is a comprehensive programme that aims to improve school governance and outcomes through a combination of regular monitoring of schools, creation of school report cards, and a customized school improvement plan, with regular follow-ups and use of ICT.

[75] The interventions were carried out in 223 randomly selected rural villages in two districts (Khulna and Satkhira). Over two years, 7,000 children were assessed at the beginning of the programme, after one year, and at the end. As well as analysing the two separate interventions, the team also assessed the effectiveness of combining the pre-school programme with the home visits. See https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15596/ResearchImpact_BangEarlyEdu_Online_Final%202.2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Another project in this category is *Strengthening schools accountability mechanisms through participation: Addressing education quality and equity in Afghanistan and Pakistan,* let by Jean-Francois Trani at the Washington University in St. Louis (ES/P005799/1).[76] The project developed and implemented a social accountability intervention, using Community Based System Dynamics (CBSD), to engage parents, teachers and children, and evaluated such intervention through an RCT. Both teachers and children took part in facilitated discussions, where they reflected on key concepts (such as 'inclusion') and key challenges, and identified 'action ideas', which were then placed on a graph indicating levels of difficulty to implement and levels of effectiveness. Participants then voted on the action ideas that they wanted to implement. A distinctive feature of the project is that this was not only a theoretical exercise: the action ideas with the most votes were actually implemented, providing a concrete and tangible benefit for participating schools and their communities. These activities were not directly financed by the RLO grant, but were made possible by partners – specifically the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) in Pakistan, the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. Examples of funded action ideas included infrastructural projects (e.g. construction of classrooms, latrines, 'boundary walls', playground), provisions of equipment and teaching materials (e.g. library books, desk, tables and stationery), as well as training for teachers and activities that involved parents in the school life. The intervention also provided training for teachers, particularly around inclusive education and positive class management.

A third example is provided by the project *Transforming the Pedagogy of STEM Subjects,* led by Per Kind (and later Vanessa Kind) at Durham University (ES/M005240/1), which tested a training programme in Ethiopia to study how pedagogies in higher education can be changed, and the subsequent effects on student learning and attitudes. Through comparison between the treatment and control groups, the project found that when teachers adopted more learner-centric methods of teaching, students' levels of engagement and learning increased. This was especially prevalent for teachers who were exposed to both pre-service and professional development training. Findings were communicated to local policymakers through conferences and dissemination, and booklets were produced to provide a tangible resource, in addition to project publications. A network of teacher ambassadors was also identified to 'champion' this professional development training. [77]

The use of RCTs generates mostly from the health sector, and its growing application to the field of education is not without critics (Pampaka et al., 2016; Magrath et al., 2019). Critics argue that the set-up of a control group make this a costly and time-consuming method, that there are unresolved ethical implications, that results are micro-level, intervention-specific and thus difficult to generalise and synthesise, and that even successful interventions pose challenges when brought to scale. There is also a possible selection bias, with researchers looking for interventions that may be amenable to be assessed through a RCT, leading to 'method driving research' rather than the other way round. It is now widely recognised that RCT methods work best in combination with qualitative analysis, something that has been done to varying degrees in the RLO projects described here.

Given its scope, the Evaluation is not in a position to provide conclusive answers on how RCTs have performed against these concerns in the RLO; however, this does appear an important area of reflection for the RLO research community and funders, particularly in the lead up of a possible Phase 2 of the programme. One interviewed PI noted that the cross-project collaboration and synthesis in RLO was made challenging by the fact that so many projects were RCTs, thus looking at very discrete interventions, which made it more difficult to engage in broader conversations about the 'big picture'.

Beyond RCTs, an important contribution of the RLO has been to **develop and test tools and instruments** around a wide range of topics, such as classroom observation and measuring teaching effectiveness – or, in other cases, adapting tools developed in the Global North for application to resource-constrained contexts. A clear example

[76] The project builds on the results of a previous project led by Parul Bakhshi, also at the Washington University in St. Louis,

[77] For further information, see https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/13957/ESRC_DFID_RfPP_QualityTeaching.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

of this is provided by the TIPPS observation tool, described above in box 7 and in the Honduras case-study in Appendix 1.

For several projects, a key dimension of impact was bringing families and communities closer to the schools and education providers – **bridging the gap between the education sector and local communities**. Several projects working in remote local areas across the world have remarked on how there is often a great distance between the schools and the community, which can at times result in a 'blame game' as to who is responsible for unsatisfactory levels of learning. The project *Can schools' accountability for learning be strengthened from the grassroots? Investigating the potential for community-school partnerships in India,* led by Ricardo Sabates at the University of Cambridge (ES/P005349/1) appointed community volunteers as a means of building a bridge between schools and communities. They supported learning for primary school children, conducting classes and interacting with the parents regarding their children's education. Volunteers were trained by the project's partner Pratham, an Indian NGO specialising in education, and served as a crucial resource during school closures due to Covid-19, acting as a touchpoint for schools to disseminate lessons to local students (see Box 12). The project also examined the dynamics between teachers and parents; in this area of rural India, there were historically low levels of parent engagement in their children's education, attributed to economic status, caste, and/or gender. During school closures related to Covid-19, it was found that there was a significant increase in engagement from parents in their children's education, particularly from mothers. As schools begin to open up, the project is focused on building on this engagement, and creating stronger connections and communications between parents, teachers, and other community members.

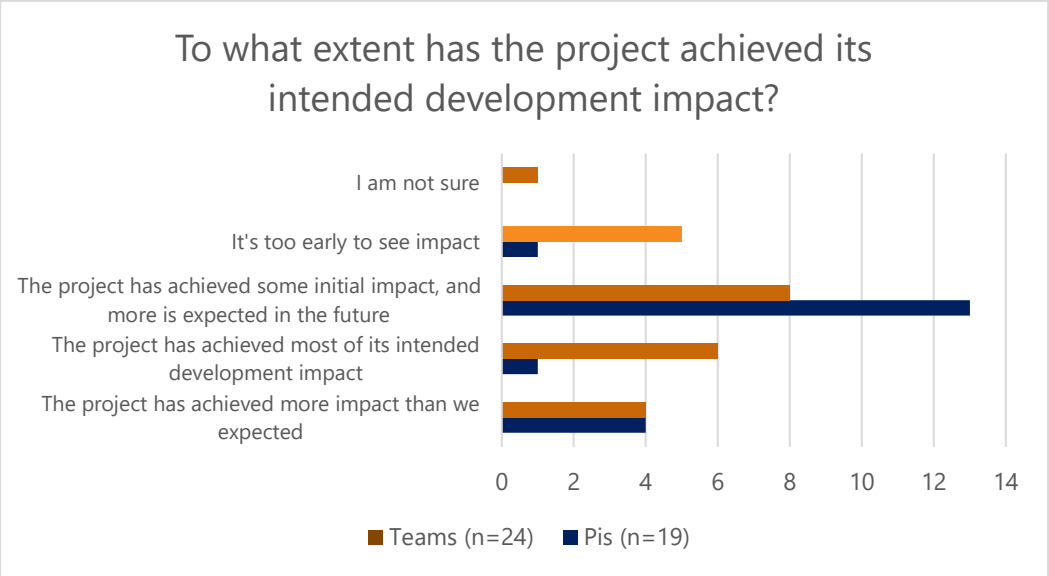
The distance between the education system and local communities has effects in particular at the pre-primary level, with very low percentages of children in rural areas in most Southern countries having access to pre-school. These challenges are amplified for children with disabilities, as explored by the project *Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi,* led by Paul Lynch at the University of Birmingham (ES/M005453/1), which is examined in the case-study in Appendix 2. Many children in rural areas of Malawi do not have access to Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE), and so local communities set up their own Community Based Childcare Centres (CBCCs). CBCCs often face challenges such as limited training for caregivers and lack of facilities to cater for children with disabilities. As such, the project aimed to promote greater inclusion of children with disabilities in CBCCs through providing targeted caregiver training. Caregivers at 24 CBCCs attended training on inclusive learning and caregiving techniques, as well as social-cultural methodologies for teaching children with disabilities. Several caregivers interviewed for the case study noted that the training was crucial in increasing their awareness and understanding of disabilities, and subsequent techniques on how to make caregiving more inclusive. The case study found that attendance at CBCCs greatly increased after the project, with parents reporting improved learning environments for their children. In particular, parents of children with disabilities noted an improvement in their children's behaviour and a greater interest in attending school, in part due to the availability of disability-friendly games and tools used for teaching. In addition to providing more tailored and inclusive care for children in the community, greater enrolment in CBCCs has had an impact on families, allowing parents more time to complete household chores or engage in a small-scale business. The project team held several dissemination events in Malawi to present findings at both the national and district level. [78]

7.3. Barriers and enablers of impact

In terms of self-assessed performance, most informants (both PIs and Co-Is) felt that their project was well underway, with some impact already having been achieved and more expected in the future. This was expressed in the online survey (see figure 21) and confirmed through interviews and review of project reports.

[78] For more detail, please refer to 'Tikule Limodzi Case Study' in Appendix 2

Figure 21: Feedback from PI and Co-I online survey



Covid-19

Not surprisingly, for more recent projects (particularly in Call 3 and in FoF Calls), Covid-19 was identified as the main barrier for impact. Annual progress reports submitted in 2021 showed that all active plans reported to be affected in some measure by Covid-19 and related containment measures – particularly school closures. As stated in the 2020-2021 ESRC Annual Report, 13 RLO Grants received No-Cost Extensions to compensate for challenges and delays caused by Covid-19 (e.g., disruption of travel, fieldwork and dissemination events; researchers' own caring responsibilities, illness and losses). ESRC issued guidance to the research community and has been in regular contact with grantholders to provide support.

Challenges of remote data collection varied greatly according to the context, also reflecting the varying degrees of incidence of the pandemic in different countries and at different points in time. As noted by a Co-I, "*ESRC issued guidance on conducting remote fieldwork. But at that particular time, Covid cases were very low in Malawi and the government was finding it difficult to convince people that the pandemic was a serious disease. So there was resistance from some of the participants to be interviewed through telephone, which was the mode that we changed to. Remote interviews were not something people were accustomed to.*"[79]

While grantees were not explicitly asked to review their approaches based on the pandemic and its consequences, several of them tried to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, adapting planned activities in order to achieve project objectives as far as possible within difficult and unprecedented circumstances. The FCDO 2020-2021 Annual Review identifies several creative ways in which projects have adapted their data collection and engagement with stakeholders (e.g. through the use of WhatsApp or Slack).

The 'online switch' was particularly difficult for projects working in remote local communities, where internet connection and mobile phone reception were often very weak or non-existent. An example of Covid-adaptation is discussed in Box 12.

[79] Interview with Esme Kadzamira – 14 December 2021.

Box 12: Using community volunteers to adapt to remote learning

The project 'Can schools' accountability for learning be strengthened from the grassroots? Investigating the potential for community-school partnerships in India' aimed to understand whether and how school accountability could be improved at a grassroots level. The study utilised a community-based intervention in rural India to engage with local actors and provide knowledge and resources to improve children's foundational learning. Community engagement was led by ASER, the research arm of Pratham Institute, which is an Indian NGO specialising in education research. Pratham's reputation as an expert in these issues enabled high levels of community access and engagement, and the main method of engagement was through designated community volunteers. During its implementation, the project faced significant methodological challenges, including school closures due to Covid-19 and heightened political tensions due to local elections in Uttar Pradesh.

During such closures, schools sent learning materials remotely to children via WhatsApp. However, this posed challenges to access, as not every family had a phone (or if they did, it was shared between the whole family), and networks were generally poor due to the rural locations. In response, the project mobilised its community volunteers who had phones to serve as a 'landing point' for schools to send educational materials. The community volunteers would then reach out to children and physically bring materials or run activities with a group. This was meant to offer both literacy learning and social support to communities during a difficult period, and the project team is currently examining the results of this adaptation.

PI: Ricardo Sabates (University of Cambridge)
Budget: 657,264.79
Dates: 2017 - 2022
Grant reference: ES/P005349/1

Even for projects that had been completed before Covid-19, the pandemic posed a challenge for dissemination and uptake – with multiple events being cancelled. It was remarked in several cases that government's priorities had shifted, and that the appetite for engaging on education reform had decreased.

Other contextual challenges

The **in-country political situation** was noted by many informants as a key challenge for data collection and engagement. One prominent example was the 2021 Taliban coup in Afghanistan and its consequences on education, particularly for girls. Other examples given in interviews included student protests in South Africa (as part of the #FeeMustFall movement), teachers' strikes in India, and general political instability in many contexts. One informant noted that the data collection for their project was slowed down because of its timing coincided with elections, and 'knocking at doors' during this time would have put researchers at risk.

Frequent turn-over of staff in governments and other key institutions was another frequently reported challenge, as relations needed to be rebuilt from scratch in the tight timeline of a research project. Diffuse **mistrust towards outsiders** and their motivation was mentioned as a challenge in many cases, particularly (but not exclusively) by project working with remote rural communities, as discussed in more detail in Section 8.

Enabling factors

The **flexibility and adaptive management** of the programme were repeatedly identified as enabling factors, helping to overcome the challenges posed by Covid-19, political instability, and other contextual challenges. Several informants positively compared RLO with other grant mechanisms, and praised in particular the supportive attitude of the fund managers. This was appreciated in particular by grantholders working in complex contexts, where, as one informant put it, "*you can't stick to a plan*", because events are so dynamic and fast-changing.

Requests for changes in the project were considered promptly by the fund managers, and approved when a convincing rationale for change existed. One informant observed that this trusting attitude allowed projects to be bold and take risks, "*which was really priceless*".

Strong research partnerships with local institutions and stakeholders were considered instrumental for overcoming contextual challenges and achieving impact. This is a consistent finding across RLO – irrespective of the focus, context and pathways to impact – and reflects more general learning across the R4D community. In-country research partners are well placed to identify emerging opportunities of impact and key stakeholders to engage, and to steer the project so that it remains relevant and responsive to changing realities. Looking across the RLO portfolio, what appears to have made the difference in particularly impactful projects (including those selected as case-studies for this evaluation) is the willingness to take the time to listen to research partners, and the flexibility to modify plans and timelines to allow for meaningful engagement, even when this comes in the way of 'getting things done'. The importance of 'taking a step back' and re-assess the situation as it develops – possibly scaling back on initial ambition – emerges as a crucial lesson.

Highly-successful RLO projects tend to be those where research partnerships are based on **long-term research collaborations** – as the two case-studies selected for this evaluation exemplify. As in other R4D programmes, the duration of the partnership appears to be an important factor for impact. The corollary is that the first collaboration may not be the most effective in terms of concrete deliverables – but rather lay the foundations for more impactful work in the future. It is important for this to be recognised by both project teams and partners, so that sufficient time is allocated to build common ground and relations of mutual trust (see also ESPA, 2018b).

The engagement of non-academic stakeholders in the research process was mentioned repeatedly as an enabling factor for impact. As noted by the Impact Initiative in their conclusive reflection on the RLO and the Joint Fund:

> "the structure and effectiveness of inter-sector partnerships was found to be of paramount importance. These partnerships brought together academics, civil society organisations, government bureaucrats and decision makers. Researchers' ability to leverage awareness of their work was found to be dependent on shared agendas with these partners, despite significant institutional differences." (Georgalakis, 2021: 18).

7.4. Aggregate impact: the case of RLO research on disability (EQ3.2)

An important example of RLO programmes coalescing together to influence a policy process is given by the work facilitated by the Impact Initiative around the 2018 Disability Summit – explored in detail in a dedicated case-study (Appendix 3). **Disability in education** is a theme where the RLO has found itself in the "elusive sweet spot" where 'offer of' and 'demand for' evidence converge (ESPA, 2018: 34).

On the 'offer' side, there was a critical mass of RLO projects focusing on education (more than on any other single theme). In addition, the Joint Fund also had two projects focusing on disability.[80] Disability projects proved to be relatively easy to bring together around a common focus, whilst other projects had broader or more complex topics, making it harder to group them together. Two of the Impact Initiative team (including the Director) from REAL were experts in the field, which ensured immediate awareness of events and trends in the sector. The

[80] Both projects were led by Leonard Cheshire Disability, a UK-based charity. The first one, *Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities in Liberia* (PI: Maria Kett, ES/L005719/1) addressed the overarching question 'What political and institutional conditions are associated with effective poverty reduction and development, and what can domestic and external actors do to promote these conditions?'. The second project, *Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries* (PI: Nora Groce, ES/L008785/1), undertook a comprehensive analysis of the gaps between policy formulation and implementation in Kenya, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia.

academic sector covering disability, education and international development is a small scene, with many those in the UK well-aware of each other and having established working relationships. One member of the Impact Initiative team thought this probably contributed to why there was such notable enthusiasm amongst this particular group to come together to collaborate.

On the 'demand' side, the lifetime of the RLO coincided with an increasing policy focus on making education work for children with disability. 2018 was a pivotal year in this regard. The DFID (now FCDO) Education Policy "Get Children Learning", published in February 2018, called to step up targeted support for the most marginalised children, including those with disabilities. The policy also stressed the importance of better data as a "lever for change" (DFID, 2018: 21), and a commitment to "continue to invest in high quality education research to ensure investments are based on robust evidence (DFID, 2018: 4). A number of areas were identified as priorities for research uptake, including "teaching strategies proven to work well for poor and marginalised children", including those with disabilities (DFID, 2018: 21).

The **Global Disability Summit**, hosted in July 2018 by the governments of the UK and Kenya, along with the International Disability Alliance, provided a clear entry-point for the 'positioning for use' of RLO research on disability. The Summit was greatly driven by DFID, and the close connection between the Impact Initiative and DFID seems to have been instrumental in instigating RLO work on the Summit. A need for evidence in the field of disability was identified, as well as the desire to promote a position at the Summit reflecting the UN Conventions on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD)[81]. The Impact Initiative had the capacity to respond immediately to this need, clearly to the advantage of both DFID and to the RLO participants in finding a platform for their evidence.

A **preparatory event** was facilitated by the Impact Initiative in April 2018 to provide the opportunity for researchers – from both RLO and the Joint Fund - to engage directly with DFID and INGOs. Participants developed a **Statement of Action on Inclusive Education**, which emphasized the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice. There was also the opportunity to input into the framing of DFID, NORAD and the World Bank's new Inclusive Education Initiative that was launched at the summit with an emphasis on the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice. Budgets and accessibility provisions ensured the attendance and participation of RLO researchers and practitioners with disabilities from global North and South countries.

Around six people involved directly in the RLO attended the Summit. The Impact Initiative secured the only **Summit marketplace exhibition stand**, which was used to promote the use of evidence and research to inform policy decisions and actions.

In interviews, we sought to assess the extent to which the work by the Impact Initiative made a difference to the Summit and its outcomes. Two areas emerged in particular in this regard:

- Placing inclusive education higher on the agenda of the summit. While inclusive education was set to be on the agenda of the summit in any case, most interviewees felt strongly that the work led by the Impact Initiative helped made education more prominent and visible in the summit.

- Strengthening the connection with national level policy-making (before and after the Summit). Kenya, Malawi and the UK all witnessed impact at national level. For example, RLO research on the importance of early years interventions for children with disabilities was presented to the Malawian government, which meant that the government representatives arrived at the meeting with a better understanding of

[81]See https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html, in particular Article 24, on rights to education

the relevance of certain commitments to their own country setting. In the UK context, the Impact Initiative team, together with Results UK, went on to organise a Global Education All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in the UK parliament, which brought key UK and international players in the field of inclusive education together with UK politicians.

More recently, one of the online events organised in 2020 by the Impact Initiative also focused on disability *("Working in Partnership with Multiple Stakeholders on Global Policy Processes: Disability and Inclusive Education"*). Issues that the panellists and grantholders were asked to reflect on included barriers in research uptake and use; value of synthesis research; and benefits and risks of engaging with global policy processes.[82]

Lessons from the RLO engagement with the Global Disability Summit

Amongst those who were engaged in the RLO and the Global Disability Summit, some common ideas emerged as lessons for the future for increasing an impact on policy and practice.

Bringing people together results in effective change: the value of relationship-building in influencing high-level change was stressed by most informants. This happens during formal activities, but also, crucially, in informal 'behind the scenes' moments. Travel and accessibility adaptation budgets for researchers from the global South and researchers and practitioners with disabilities are crucial and highly effective in helping to raise profiles and move towards a more inclusive and equitable academic arena.

The ability to act quickly and flexibly enables research evidence to impact policy change: The 'windows of opportunity' when political leaders become interested in changing policies (on a national or global level) are very unpredictable, and often don't last long before interested individuals or topics of attention move on. Programme plans and budgets which have a good degree of flexibility, such as the RLO had, enable them to respond when these opportunities arise**.**

Leading individuals who already have established networks and connections are crucial for making fast and effective in-roads at high-levels of policy and practice.

The practical role of an intermediary (such as the Impact Initiative) to publicise evidence and to support and increase the impact of connections between academics and policy makers and practitioners is of great value. Almost all interviewees stressed that the Impact Initiative brought time, energy and communications ex-pertise that many researchers lack.

Partnership with specialised Non Governmental Organisations helps to promote long-term commitment: Practitioners working on specific topics are far less influenced by such 'trends' and more dependable in their long-term commitment to change than high-level political players or institutions, as well as being well placed for practical implementation.

Research evidence that is communicated consistently, innovatively, and to a wide audience, has the best chance of influencing change. Almost all interviewees stressed that the Impact Initiative brought time, energy and communications expertise that many researchers lack.

7.5. Conclusions

The analysis for EQ3 has unveiled a range of different impact pathways across the RLO portfolio. In relation to policy processes on education, RLO project teams have worked with government counterparts and other key stakeholder to strengthen their capacity to use data for policy and planning; have provided targeted evidence

[82] https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15801/Disability_WP_Online.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

and tools to implement policy decisions; and have helped bringing new voices and different perspectives into the policy processes.

RLO projects have been very active to influence and strengthen education practice, engaging directly with students, teachers, parents, school managers and broader school communities, to create spaces for participation, open exchanges about 'what works' and 'why', and opportunities for trying new things, documenting the results so that they can be scaled up. A significant portion of RLO projects have used RCTs to assess the effectiveness (and potential scalability) of specific interventions.

The Covid-19 pandemic and related containment measures have posed significant challenges particularly for the more recent RLO projects (in Call 3 and Call 4 Follow On Funding). Even some projects that were completed when the pandemic broke down were affected in terms of more limited space for engagement with governments in the follow-up – even as the need to strengthen education systems and processes is thrown into sharp relief. In-country political instability also posed challenges for many projects. The funders' flexible and supportive approach, allowing for adaptive management, was considered by many as a key enabling factor in the face of these barriers.

The primary example of RLO 'aggregate impact' is given by the programme's contribution to the 2018 Global Disability Summit, led by the Impact Initiative. This was made possible by a convergence of factors: the presence of a 'critical mass' of RLO projects with a specific focus on disability and inclusive education; the expertise of the REAL Centre that co-led the Impact Initiative; and the 'propitious time' of the 2018 Summit, coinciding with a revived interest on disability issues within DFID and other key bilateral and multilateral actors. The experience confirms the importance of bringing researchers, policy-makers and practitioners together around theme of common interest, and being able to 'act quickly' in response to (often transient) windows of policy influence.

8. Gender and equity considerations

This section offers some reflections on how gender responsiveness and other equity considerations have been reflected in the RLO programme and its constituent projects.

Gender in the RLO logframe

In the RLO logframe, Output indicator 2.3 counts the "[n]umber of research grants that report undertaking gender analysis or disaggregating by gender or other structural inequalities". This target was exceeded and completed in 2019, with 90% of grants reporting gender analysis and/or data disaggregation, against a target of 70% (ESRC Annual Report, 2021).

Table 15 shows the way in which grantees reported having considered gender in their project. In some years this was split into the percentage of "grants holders reported that their projects incorporated considerations of gender analysis as a relevant issue to their research" and "the percentage of grantholders reported that their projects incorporated gender analysis"; the latter of which was typically higher and is italicised in table 10.

Table 15: Percentage of grantholders reporting the extent to which gender was incorporated in their project design

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Gender analysis	*91%*	57%	*88%*	*90%*
Disaggregation	82%	72%	56%	60%
Explicit gender analysis	27%	17%	31%	23%

Although this data is difficult to compare year on year, due to the different windows under the RLO programme and hence different numbers of grantholders across different year brackets, it does clearly show that the percentage of grantholders conducting explicit gender analysis remained small and fairly low throughout the lifespan of the RLO programme.

Thus, despite the interim targets for gender analysis and disaggregation being exceeded in most years, and the overall target being met early, annual monitoring reports from ESRC and FCDO on more than one occasion noted in the recommendations that specific attention should be paid to the inclusion of gender.

8.1. Gender and equity in the RLO commissioning process

The RLO programme focused on efforts to raise learning outcomes for all, including attention to issues related to gender, disability, and other intersectional factors of vulnerability and marginalisation that may be relevant in different contexts. As such, the RLO programme was closely aligned with SDG4, on quality education, which recognises the current level of exclusion in access to education, and aims to eliminate gender barriers and ensure equal access of girls and boys, and women and men, in pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary and vocational education.

Both ESRC and FCDO have made commitments to integrating gender equality in their activities. In the RLO funding calls, 'structural inequalities' was considered a cross-cutting issue, relevant to any research undertaken within the programme, regardless of topic or amount applied for. Applicants were required to "make a genuine effort to integrate adequate analysis of gender and other structural inequalities in their research design, even when this may not be the central focus of the project". Researchers were further encouraged "to ensure that relevant data – where feasible - are disaggregated by sex, age and other structural inequalities, but also to analyse the different

roles and responsibilities, constraints and opportunities or power differentials between, for example, girls/women and boys/men".

8.2 Gender and equity in the RLO portfolio

Only one project, funded as part of the third call, had a sole focus on gender. That was *Accountability for gender equality in education: Critical perspectives on an indicator framework for the SDGs*, led by Elaine Unterhalter at University College London (ES/P005675/1) and discussed in Box 13.

Box 13: Accountability for Gender Equality in Education (ES/P005675/1) - Developing a gender equality in education indicator for the SDGs

The project *Accountability for gender equality in education: Critical perspectives on an indicator framework for the SDGs,* funded through Call 3 and led by Elaine Unterhalter at University College London, aimed to develop an indicator framework for gender equality in education that supports work on gender equality indicators for the SDGs, particularly target 4.7 (*ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development*) and 4a (*build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all*). The rationale for this research is that statistics for gender parity in enrolment or completion do not tell the whole story in terms of inequalities that girls face. South Africa and Malawi served as research sites for detailed work reflecting on a proposed indicator framework for accountability for gender equality in education.

Representatives from key international organisations – UNESCO, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and Education International – are part of the project's International Advisory Commission, and closely involved with the research and its uptake. In 2019, the project convened a technical meeting on gender and indicators. The discussions in the meeting fed into the work of UNESCO for the G7 meeting in Paris (2019), which launched the 'Gender at the Centre' initiative.[83] Through Follow on Funding, the project team continues to work closely with UNESCO and UNGEI.

PI: Elaine Unterhalter (University College London)
Budget: £465,444.31
Dates: 2018-2021
Grant reference: ES/P005675/1

While girls' education is a key area of focus for current education research and policy (see Section 3), this is not significantly reflected in the RLO portfolio. However, a number of projects look at gender in the broader context of equity in education, and produced gender-specific findings and publications (see for example box 14).

Box 14: Examining School Dropout, Child Marriage, and Early Pregnancy among Adolescent Girls in Rural Honduras

Murphy-Graham et al. (2020) examines the intersections between schooling, child marriage, and adolescent pregnancy in a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of Honduran girls. It finds that most girls discontinued their

[83] Launched in July 2019, the Gender at the Centre Initiative (GCI) was developed by the G7 Ministers of Education and Development in collaboration with multilateral and civil society organizations committed to advancing gender equality in education. https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/Gender-at-the-Centre-Initiative-Briefing-note-eng-2019.pdf

studies due to lack of financial resources or no longer wanting to be a student, rather than due to marriage or motherhood. Only a small percentage return to school. This study can inform the timing and nature of efforts to protect girls and increase their chances of successfully completing secondary school, delaying marriage, and preventing early pregnancy.

PI: Erin Murphy-Graham
Budget: £286,943
Dates: Jun 15 - Jun 19
Grant reference: ES/M004864/1

As discussed in Sections 6 and 7, disability has been a particular focus of RLO research, as has spatial inequality, particularly for Call 2 projects. In interviews, RLO researchers has stressed the importance of an intersectional lens as opposed to a specific focus on one form of social exclusion.

"We are trying to realise a more comprehensive concept of inclusion. In Afghanistan, 'inclusion' is often considered very narrowly in terms of disability - more 'integration' than real inclusion. Our inclusion lens was broader. For example: having a boundary wall to protect the school from the view of people outside is an inclusion issue, because it means that parents will be more willing to send their daughters to school. The same goes for decent and safe wash facilities for girls. In terms of quality, an inclusive atmosphere is better for everyone – for school managers, for teachers, for children, for parents and communities." (Ian Kaplan, Co-I, *Strengthening schools accountability mechanisms through participation: Addressing education quality and equity in Afghanistan and Pakistan,* ES/P005799/1).

Findings from a number of projects highlighted the importance of intersectionality, and how intersecting identities create situations of exclusion or inclusion. Factors that were investigated as intersecting included gender, disability, socio-economic background, ethnicity and caste. In an interview, one researcher went as far as to suggest that a focus on gender – by now seen as relatively uncontentious – could detract attention from other structural causes of inequality, which are more politically controversial and thus often taboo.

8.2. Working with local communities in research project design and implementation

Given the nature of RLO research, a majority of the projects had direct engagement with local communities, mostly in remote rural settings, involving participants as research informants through a range of methods (including surveys, interviews, focus groups). Out of 19 projects represented in the PI survey, 15 reported having worked with local communities. In most cases (14), communities were involved in interviews, focus groups and surveys. In 11 cases, findings were shared and validated with local communities. A minority of projects reported local communities being involved in the definition of research methods and/or questions (4 projects).

Taking an inclusive approach to including women and men in sampling and engagement was reported by 85% of PI survey participants. To enable this strategy, strategies included consulting with community leaders to ensure access (reported by 35% of the PI survey sample), making provision for people who are illiterate (reported by 45% of the PI survey sample), providing translation for language minorities (reported by 40% of the PI survey sample), and making specific provisions for people with disabilities (reported by 15% of the PI survey sample).

Recognising gender norms and roles, 20% of the PI survey sample reported holding disaggregated sessions (e.g. focus groups, feedback sessions), which have been shown to increase the likelihood of women speaking up compared to mixed gender settings. A further 30% of PI survey respondents reported taking into consideration specific needs and responsibilities when planning meetings and events, for example through adapted timing, providing childcare support, which similarly tends to increase opportunities for women's meaningful participation relative to more typical "gender-blind" approaches which do not recognise gender roles and responsibilities. No PIs reported having taken no steps at all to ensure gender inclusion.

In the interviews, several researchers commented on the importance of having an interviewer or focus group facilitator of the same gender. It was remarked, for example, that female teachers would not open up that much to male researchers, while female researchers attract a degree of sympathy, particularly when they spend the whole day in the school and get to talk about topics other than the research.

Most projects represented in the online survey also included direct interaction with children – mostly of primary school age. Survey respondents shared several lessons related to children's engagement in research, including the need to include the perspective of vulnerable children and children with disabilities from the outset; the importance of considering 'what works' in each context and the specific challenges that may prevent or affect children's participation (e.g. seasonal working patterns; children working as domestic help away from home); and the need to have patient enumerators who know how to engage the children and make it fun.

Some PIs reported purposive sample selection of children to ensure data from girls and boys, even if gender was not a primary focus of the research project. In the project *Investing in our Future: The Early Childhood Intervention and Parental Involvement in Bangladesh* (ES/N010221/1), a conscious effort was made to ensure that early learning centres did not have disproportionate share of boys and, if more boys attended, parents of girls were actively encouraged to bring their children for the centres Sometimes such proactive inclusion attempts met with resistance based on gender norms.

8.3 Reflections on researchers' positionality

A majority of RLO projects took an inclusive approach to gender and equity, with 70% reporting that they had recruited diverse teams of researchers. Even within teams, gender norms at times played a role in who was recruited for what positions, and the opportunities that they had. One researcher reported that the intervention teams on the ground in India was largely male because of the need to travel a lot, until a period of data collection did not require travel, resulting in many more women taking part in data collection.

Team composition is important given the role of positionality of researcher and researched, how this intersects with gender roles, norms and expectations, and what it means for perceptions of realities and contexts. For example, in different contexts, local perceptions of female researchers may be shaped by their age and origin, their marital status, and whether or not they have children (Woods, 2019).

Consistent with the emerging literature in this field, reported and perceived gender identity emerges both as a limiting factor and an opportunity for RLO female researchers. For example, one female ECR reflected on the way in which she was perceived, as a young white woman, in a rural village in Africa where she conducted data collection. Children automatically saw her as a 'teacher', but on the other hand she was able to use her position to engage children through play, and thus break down barriers and establish trust. The same researchers also reflected on the expectations that were placed upon her in the village (for example, that she would contribute to cleaning and other household's chores), and her inability to access certain locations that were socially seen as 'male spaces'. Another researcher reflected on the expectation that she would help with "female" roles in her host family when the landlady was unwell, doing things like cleaning and washing and collecting water, which impeded her capacity to get to school on time to conduct research.

Gender norms and perceptions were not only present in community and school settings, but also in more formal professional ones, with two female researchers reporting that their male colleague was listened to and invited to meetings with ministers – and reflecting on this not being an unusual circumstance ("*That happens, I'm used to that*").

8.4 Conclusions

The RLO funding calls sought to encourage the adoption of a focus on gender and structural inequalities as cross-cutting issues, irrespective of the specific focus of the project.

Almost all RLO projects reported disaggregation of data by gender along with other criteria. While only a minority of project reported 'formal' gender analysis, this does not mean that gender was not present in their analysis. While only one RLO project (funded as part of Call 3) has an explicit and primary focus on gender, many more projects looked at gender and equity through an intersectional lens. RLO research has been cited by many publications with an explicit gender focus.

Issues related to gender and equity also emerged as part of the research process, in particular for projects working in remote rural communities where gender social norms are strictly enforced. This also led to interesting findings regarding researchers' positionality, and the different (and heavily gendered) opportunities and challenges that RLO researchers encountered when working with local communities.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

The RLO programme has produced a rich and diverse research portfolio, which significantly contributes to expanding and deepening the body of knowledge on raising learning outcomes in education systems in developing countries. Overall, the RLO research scores well against both standard metrics of research quality (as indicated by publication and citation rates) and more holistic research assessment frameworks such as the RQ+. While primarily focused on *research integrity*, the RLO commissioning process has given weight to dimensions of *research legitimacy, research importance,* and *positioning for use*. RLO projects have engaged with a variety of non-academic stakeholders to promote research uptake, and several promising examples of impact can already be seen, in relation to both policy and practice.

In this concluding section, we aim to summarise the key characteristics and specificities of the 'RLO model' of Research for Development, and to interrogate how effective and 'fit for purpose' this model has been against two distinct but interrelated objectives:

(1) to develop a portfolio of projects that, *individually*, produce high-quality research that add to the relevant body of evidence and is used to inform policy and practice – and do so through fair and equitable processes of partnership and engagement;

(2) to bring together this portfolio to create a 'whole that is greater than the sum of its parts'. This second objective has, in turn, various interlinked dimensions: the creation of a community of practice of researchers and partners that fosters learning, experience-sharing, and collaboration; the production of research synthesis so as to increase the relevance and robustness of project-specific findings and their applicability across different contexts; and, finally, a collective effort to maximise the use of these consolidated findings to influence policy and practice at different levels.

We approach this analysis with the recognition that trade-offs can – and almost inevitably will – emerge; no R4D programme can reasonably be expected to 'do it all'. Trade-offs can emerge at the level of individual projects – for example, if a project is very focused on producing a high number of academic publications, it will have less time and resources to dedicate to engagement and impact activities; if a project focuses on building long-term, sustainable partnerships that will outlast the funding, it may have less in terms of concrete outputs to show for that particular project (Izzi, 2018). It is therefore important for funders to clarify where they stand in terms of priorities, and encourage project teams to be open about challenges and potential compromises, both at the proposal stage and during implementation, rather than necessarily having to 'check all the boxes'.

From a programme perspective, trade-offs can emerge (in practice if not in principle) between, on the one hand, the imperative to select the strongest project proposals and make each project 'the best it can possibly be', and, on the other hand, the requirement of having a coherent portfolio of projects that 'talk to each other' and can add up to something greater than the sum of their individual parts. Trade-offs can emerge at the commissioning stage: a strong emphasis on curating a synthesisable portfolio of research may lead to de-prioritising research proposals that are too niche to 'add up' with the other. Conversely, a commissioning process that primarily looks at projects for their own merits may result in a very diverse portfolio of projects that are individually very relevant but do not easily 'add up'. During implementation, if grantholders are required to have a strong engagement with the Community of Practice (participating in events, contributing to common learning, etc.), they will have less time and resources for working on project-level publications, engagement and impact activities.

Looking back at RLO, therefore, the question is not whether the programme was successful in 'ticking all the boxes' – but rather, where the programme positioned itself in relation to these various objectives, whether these expectations were clearly communicated, and to what extent the commissioning process, impact support services, and general programme management have been consistent with these objectives.

9.1 Key characteristics of the RLO 'model'

In this concluding section, we highlight the key characteristic of the RLO 'model', comparing it in particular with the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation. This allows us to reflect on the specificity of the RLO while at the same time identifying key 'cross-road points' in the design of R4D programmes, where different choices can be made, depending on priorities and available resources. By building on the evaluation of the Joint Fund (Murray et al., 2021), we aim to contribute to an ongoing process of additive learning in R4D.

Thematic scope

The RLO had a well-defined thematic focus on education (which was further narrowed down by the three thematic Open Calls). In comparison, a key characteristic of the Joint Fund was a broad focus, leading to a very diverse portfolio of projects, with no unifying research theme. As the Joint Fund evaluation concluded, "this openness was one of the strengths of the Joint Fund as it allowed exploratory research and flexibility in topics and approaches [but also] posed significant challenges in terms of research synthesis, and ultimately limited the scope for programme-wide impact and legacy" (Murray et al., 2021: 81). While there were reasonable expectations that the RLO would have an easier time pursuing synthesis, aggregate impact and legacy, some of the same challenges identified for the Joint Fund have also presented themselves for RLO.

Commissioning process

The RLO had two main typologies of calls: Open Calls for research grants, and Follow-On Funding calls used to support existing projects in various ways (expanding on previous research, supporting impact, strengthening capacities, and pursuing synthesis). This same distinction can be found in the Joint Fund, as well as other R4D programmes (e.g. ESPA). RLO had a higher share of funding dedicated to Follow-On Funding compared to the Joint Fund Phase 3 (see Table 16).

For RLO, the three thematic Open Calls were complementary in theme (each focused on one for the three aspects of the RLO 'system approach') but otherwise very similar in formulation, eligibility, and review process. The Joint Fund, in contrast, had a very diverse commissioning process, both in terms of type of research funded (ranging from 'blue sky' to applied research) and selection process (for example, using a 'pitch to peers' *in lieu* of more traditional interview process in one instance – see Murray et al., 2021: 15). [84]

[84] The Joint Fund had three open calls, guided by overarching research questions; these had a two-stage application process, with outline proposals being screened and shortlisted applicants being required to submit full proposals. It also included a scheme for blue-sky, open research (Development Frontiers), and a call for large-scale 'programme' grants for new, in-depth research on critical but relatively under-researched themes. The second Development Frontiers call experimented with an unusual selection criteria, a 'Pitch to Peers' by which shortlisted applicants were invited to give a seven-minute presentation, making the case for their proposals to the assessment panel as well as the other applicants (their 'peers').

Table 16: Disbursements for Open Calls vs. Follow-On Funding in the RLO and Joint Fund (Phase 3)

	RLO	Joint Fund (Phase 3)
Open Calls	£13,768,290.59	£23,254,073 (94%)
Follow-on Funding	£1,851,312.49 (11%)	£1,415,486 (6%)
Total grant disbursement	*£15,619,603.08*	*£24,669,559*

Support services

Both the RLO and the Joint Fund had 'external support services' – i.e. support services housed in institutions that were not directly connected with the commissioning process or programme management. This separation between portfolio selection and support functions represents a key difference from the model of the ESPA programme, where cohort-building, impact support and synthesis functions were part of the remit of the Directorate, which also managed the commissioning process.

The key distinctive characteristic of the RLO that sets it aside from the Joint Fund was having two separate support services, housed in two separate institutions, to help maximise the scientific value of the programme and promote research collaborations and synthesis (Programme Research Lead) and to increase the uptake and impact of funded research (Impact Initiative).

There is a general recognition that this model did not work as hoped – creating transaction costs as well as confusion among grantholders on 'who is who'. One informant also noted that the distinction reflected a notion of 'research production' and 'impact' as being two distinct, sequential processes, rather than two closely connected dimensions of the same process.

While the PRL has only partially reached the objectives it was set up for, its establishment signals an important recognition by the programme funders that synthesis does not 'just happen' and should not be left to the end of the programme – two important points that are consistent with the lessons emerging from other R4D investments.

9.2 How well did the RLO model work in relation to individual projects?

Through its commissioning process, the RLO has funded a portfolio of projects that appear relevant with respect to both the overall research and policy context on global education, and the specific national and local contexts where the research took place. The RLO projects also showed a variety of different pathways to impact on policy and practice.

Influencing education practice was a significant focus of RLO projects. A key characteristic of RLO was the emphasis on directly influencing education practice, through long-term engagement with schools, other education providers, as well as parents and communities. The fact of having the classroom as a privileged locus of impact meant that policy-level pathways to impact were less prominent than in other R4D programmes (particularly the Joint Fund), and at times occurred as a by-product of the primary practice-oriented pathway. Some informants suggested that the support of the Impact Initiative has been excessively focused at the policy level, thus 'out of sync' with the prevailing practice orientation of many projects. In some cases, policy impact occurred more as a by-product of practice-oriented impact than as a main objective. Rather than thinking of policy and practice pathways in either/or terms, projects could be supported in thinking through connections between their immediate practice-oriented focus and opportunities of policy influence.

Long-term partnerships were a key enabling factor for impact in RLO. Most (albeit not all) of the RLO partnerships emerged from existing connections and collaborations. One reason cited for this was the limited time at the application stage to establish new collaborations. From a project's perspective, working with existing partners is not in itself a problem, and can offer significant advantages from the perspective of both effectiveness and equity. Yet, from a broader perspective and in the longer term, limiting partnership to existing collaborations can create distortion in the research ecosystem of the Global South. This potentially creates issues of 'contextual fairness' - defined as the legacy that research processes, in an aggregate way, have on the contexts where they take place. This focus on contextual fairness recognises that, even if individual project partnerships are fair, they can still, taken together, have unfair results – for example, by exacerbating inequalities among countries and institutions in the Global South. The search for 'tried and true' Southern partners may lead to disproportionate capacity development support and funding going to a small proportion of organisations and scholars (Vogel et al., 2022).

Project timelines have significant implications for fairness in partnerships. Most of the projects that we engaged with in the evaluation had put steps in place to promote fairness in collaborations, and the majority of Southern researchers have expressed appreciation for the experience and opportunities available to them. Southern researchers noted that these partnerships could leverage more if collaboration started at an early stage of conceptualising the project, allowing partners to draft proposals together, which would also enable mutual learning. RLO Southern partners often felt that the timeline of projects was so compressed that research had to start immediately after funding was allocated. Participants in the online discussion expressed a strong appetite for a longer inception phase (variedly described as ""pre-implementation stage", "field trailing," "pilot" or "year 0") to allow for more time to get the research design right, opportunity to test and pilot the methodology, test assumptions, revised budget and timeline accordingly – but also for building trust and a common way of working among partners.

The strength of partnership was crucial in allowing RLO projects to adapt to the new reality brought about by Covid-19. Over the last two years, there has been some reflection in the R4D community on the effects of Covid-19 on partnerships. In many projects, when travel was disrupted, Southern partners 'saved the day' – almost overnight, a long tradition of face-to-face cooperation was transferred to virtual cooperation" (Aarts, 2021). For many institutions, this led to a rethinking of modes of partnership and a self-reflection on the extent to which travel of Northern partners to the South was actually necessary and worthwhile (also considering the carbon footprint of international travel). Interestingly, however, travel of partners to work together emerged as a key marker of equitable partnership in our online discussion for RLO. Partnerships that are entirely remote are possibly at a greater risk of falling into a default division of labour, where "Northern partners tend to be most active on project design, relations with funders, academic publications and presentations at academic conferences, as well as interacting with global-level policy processes", while "Southern partners [...] tend to focus mostly on data collection, relations with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communities, and interacting with local-level decision-making processes, along with providing 'case study' materials for communication and reporting purposes" (ESPA 2018b). Participants noted the importance of partners working together at research sites, and all partners going through the process from data collection to publications of results.

Actively promoting Southern authorship emerges as a key area of priority for future R4D programmes. The extent to which RLO publications have included Southern authors varies significantly across projects. Approximately half of RLO publications are authored uniquely by authors based in institutions in the Global North (mostly UK and USA). Furthermore, the majority of Southern authors in RLO have been from South Africa, and (to a lesser extent) India. Of the 81 academic publications that we have found to be associated with RLO, only 16 (or less than 20%) have authors from Southern countries other than South Africa and India.
The problem is broader than the RLO. Researchers from the Global South are significantly under-represented as both consumers of and contributors to development journals. The cost of accessing these journals is prohibitive

for most Southern researchers, and, because writing papers takes time, many publications happen after the end of the project, *de facto* preventing many Southern authors from resource-constrained institutions for publishing independently.

Opening up calls to Southern applicants is not, in itself, sufficient to promote Southern-led research projects. In principle, the RLO was open to applications from all over the world. Still, the RLO experience confirms what already emerged from other programmes, namely that simply opening up the calls to Southern applicants does not automatically lead to Southern institutions being funded. Our analysis has highlighted challenges at every step of the process:

- *Application:* Structural challenges that prevent Southern institutions from applying include low access to information about the calls; limited time for putting the application together, particularly as Southern researchers typically lack the support of Research Offices that their colleagues in the North can rely on; eligibility requirements of institutions; and challenges in accessing to the JeS online portal due to slow or unreliable Internet connection.
- *Screening for eligibility:* Interestingly, 29% of Southern-led applications across the three RLO Open Calls were rejected based on administrative reasons before the peer-review stage. This suggests that a stronger focus on support at the application stage could not only increase the number of applications received, but also decrease the number of administrative rejects.
- *Peer-review and selection:* Southern applications are also less likely to pass the peer-review and selection stages. Evidence emerging from other R4D programmes suggest that this may be due, at least in part, to implicit bias in the selection process, and Northern-led assumptions of what counts as 'good research' (Cieslik et al. ,2021) The RLO programme has been actively promoting more diversity in the peer-review and selection panels, an effort that should continue in future iterations of the programme.
- *Follow-on Funding:* The low representation of Southern-led projects among main grants meant Follow-On Funding calls (which were limited to existing grantees) remained largely Northern-led. Later tranches of the Follow On Funding allowed named researchers to lead FoF applications (although these remained unfunded due to the impact of ODA cuts). In the future, the programme could actively encourage FoF grants to be led by Southern partners of existing projects.

The role played by the Impact Initiative in supporting individual projects' pathways to impact varied across the portfolio. As noted by the Review of Support Services:

> "some [grantholders] acknowledged that the great geographic and topical spread meant that this was: "*… an impossible ask for anyone*". However, there was a view among a small number of PIs that more needed to be done to harness DFID local offices as gatekeepers to in-country policymakers and other evidence-orientated inter-locators. This was felt to be a role for support providers since building these relationships in any one country could potentially benefit a cluster of projects there." (Parsons et al. 2020: 41).

Grantholders particularly valued the role played by the Impact Initiative in helping them better communicate their research findings to policy-makers and other key stakeholders. Citing again from the Review of Support Services:

> "The Impact Initiative support helped grants to produce briefs that were accessible and relevant to key stakeholders and this was seen as an important element in achieving policy impact. [...] [S]upport [by the Impact Initiative] helped many with learning how to communicate their research results, and implications, more clearly to policymakers in written and oral form." (Parsons et al., 2020: 49).

9.3 Was the RLO 'greater as a whole than the sum of its parts'?

On the face of it, several characteristics of the RLO made it an ideal candidate for a programme approach, in particular when compared to other larger R4D investments with a wider thematic focus, such as the Joint Fund. The RLO comprised of 28 research teams, with 12 of them having longer-term, more sustained engagement with the programme through Follow-On Funding grants. All these grants had a common thematic denominator (education), and further common areas of interest around the sub-themes of the calls (effective teaching, contextual factors, and accountability). Many grantholders knew each other before RLO, and there were several cases of teams 'overlapping' across grants (e.g. a PI on one project being a CoI in another). There were also strong linkages between the institutions hosting the support services and the RLO projects.

Yet the RLO experience shows that operating within a relatively small, close-knit research community comes with its own challenges. The fact that many PIs knew each other before RLO potentially decreases the value added of the programme, and the small size of the portfolio comes with risks of 'early saturation'. Research programmes of this nature typically see great variability in the appetite and enthusiasm of grantholders to engage with each other and with support services – depending on individual circumstances, personalities, and previous R4D experience. In a large programme, a minority of 'champions' can still be large enough to lead engagement and results – but with a small project portfolio, it is more difficult to reach this 'critical mass'.

Standard incentive systems in academia work directly against many of the requirements for programme-wide engagement. In interviews, several grantholders have shared their regret for not being able to engage more with the Impact Initiative and with other RLO colleagues, due to lack of time. They recalled coming back from annual events with ideas for collaboration and synthesis, but then being quickly overwhelmed by their regular academic duties, and forced to put these plans on the back-burner, often indefinitely. The implication for a programme like the RLO is that collaboration and synthesis will not just happen – at least not on a significant scale – simply as a result of networking events or targeted support activities. Specific incentives in this direction need to be put in place from the outset, and reflected in the commissioning process.

9.3.1 Reflections on Community of Practice

The RLO cohort of projects appears closer to a 'network' rather than 'Community of Practice'. As defined in the literature, a Community of Practice is not simply a network, or a web of interactions – rather, it is characterised by mutual and sustained interaction, a joint purpose, a shared repertoire of resources and tools, and a commitment to learning and improving the practice together (Bolander Laksov et al., 2008; Wegner, 1998). It is unclear to the evaluation team whether the use of the expression "Community of Practice" in the RLO logframe (and in the evaluation Terms of Reference) was intended in this technical sense, or had a looser meaning. Either way, we can conclude that the cohort of RLO projects does not fit the profile of a full-fledged Community of Practice – lacking a strong sense of belonging, sustained interaction, a common approach, and a commitment to learn together to improve practice. The RLO programme has, however, been successful in strengthening connections across projects, resulting in some new collaborations. The Annual Meetings have been widely praised by grantholders as interesting and fruitful opportunities of networking and reflection.

Programme-level interaction was largely limited to PIs. A clear limit of the RLO network of researchers is that – with some notable exceptions – it remained limited to PIs and other senior academics in the UK and USA, who were also those for which the 'value added' was lower, as they already (largely) knew each other and had other opportunities to interact. A significant effort was made towards the end of the programme to include more Southern researchers in the Annual Meetings, including through dedicated funding – although visa restrictions and later the Covid-19 pandemic limited the success of these attempts.

A Community of Practice is a valuable idea, but it does not happen by default, and it comes with significant costs. At the design stage, it is important to reflect on whether a Community of Practice is an appropriate model,

and what its objectives are (for example, is it primarily seen as a vehicle to ensure synthesis for the programme itself, or rather as a mark of the programme's legacy that is expected to bear fruits in the longer term?).

9.3.2 Considerations on research synthesis and aggregate impact

Research synthesis in the RLO has remained below expectations. Because the RLO was a thematic programme and had a dedicated support function for academic synthesis, it was reasonable to expect that it would lead to a higher level of synthesis research, compared to programmes with a broader thematic focus such as the Joint Fund. The RLO moved from an original plan of synthesis led by the PRL to a model of 'synthesis through collaboration', closely linked to the Community of Practice. The idea was that through facilitated interaction, connections would emerge, grantholders would see potential synergies and work together to develop common ideas, ultimately leading to synthesis. Success was however limited, due to a number of factors explored in this report – primarily the fact that the PRL function did not deliver against funders' expectations. Other factors playing a role were lack of time and incentives from synthesis on the grantholders' side, challenge in reconciling different projects' timelines for collaborative synthesis work, and, above all, a diffuse sense that the RLO portfolio was still too broad and diverse to allow for the spontaneous emergence of synthesis work. Funders recognised these shortcomings and took some steps to address them, including the active encouragement of application for the synthesis stream of the Follow On Funding (later unfortunately cancelled following ODA cuts) and the commissioning of programme level synthesis reports based on the three thematic calls.

The RLO shows interesting examples of 'aggregate impact' through avenues other than synthesis. The clearest example is the role played by the Impact Initiative in bringing together disability-focused projects for the 2018 Global Disability Summit (see Section 7 and Appendix 3). Several factors facilitated a convergence of 'offer' and 'demand' of evidence around that time, offering important lessons for future programming. Another interesting example of projects coming together to foster collaborative impact pathways is given by work around the TIPPS tool (examined in Appendix 1 with regard to Honduras).

The ability to seize 'windows of opportunities' and having evidence 'ready to be shared', in the right format at the right time. Having a critical mass of researchers ready to engage and share their findings was a crucial element of success for the RLO engagement with the 2018 Global Disability Summit, as discussed in Section 7 and in Appendix 3. This was made possible by the fact that the REAL Centre had a significant in-house expertise on disability in education, and was therefore aware at an early stage of the opportunity offered by the Summit and the high degree of DFID interest in the topic. This points to the importance of having a similar 'horizon scanning' function as a key role of support services in future programmes.

9.4 Recommendations

The evaluation has identified a number of key strengths of the RLO model:

- **Well-structured and rigorous commissioning process**. The selection criteria used in the RLO commissioning process mapped well against the four RQ+ criteria for research quality. While the predominant weight – in guidance and actual decisions – appears to have been given to research integrity, considerations related to research legitimacy, research importance and positioning for use played a significant role in funding decisions. Feedback on the commissioning process was generally very positive, with panellist praising the rigour of the process and the clarity of the guidance received. Significant efforts were made throughout the lifetime of the RLO programme to increase the diversity and representativeness of the peer review and selection panels.

- **Impact Initiative.** While there was great variation among grantholders with regard to the degree and depth of engagement with the Impact Initiative, the fact that such function existed in the first place was generally

praised (with words like "brilliant" and "fantastic" being repeatedly used in interviews). The **Annual Workshops** were greatly appreciated as opportunities of networking, a chance to 'step back' from the daily commitment of academic life, exchange views and reflect with peers. Grantholders also greatly valued the role played by the Impact Initiative in helping them disseminate the findings of their research in ways that could more effectively reach policy-makers and other key stakeholders (e.g. through policy briefs, blogs, webinars).

- **Academic synthesis function.** While the PRL function did not perform as it was originally expected, the idea of having a dedicated role for academic synthesis was an innovative and interesting aspect of the RLO, which should be considered again for future phases of the programme. Hosting the impact supports services and the academic synthesis function in the same institution would significantly reduce transaction costs, and help shape a more holistic view of the research-to-impact pathways.

- **Follow-on Funding.** Having a portion of the overall funding allocated to follow-on calls worked well for the RLO, allowing projects to test ideas, expand on successful approaches, and develop long-term, sustainable collaborations.

- **Eligibility of non-UK lead applicants.** Like other FCDO-ESRC collaborations (Joint Fund, ESPA), RLO funding calls were opened to applicants from all over the world, including the Global South. While only three Southern institutions were funded in Phase 1, a number of important lessons – which have been presented in this report – open the way for more substantial engagement of Southern institutions in the future.

- **Flexibility and supportive attitude of funders and programme managers.** The flexibility and adaptive management of the programme were repeatedly identified as enabling factors, helping to overcome the challenges posed by Covid-19, political instability, and other contextual challenges. Several informants – particularly those working in fragile settings - positively compared RLO with other grant mechanisms, and praised the supportive attitude of the fund managers.

Based on our analysis, we identify five Key Recommendations, each further articulated into specific recommendations related to four key areas: (1) programme design and management; (2) commissioning process, (3) support services; and (4) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning.

R.1 Set clear and realistic expectations for grantholders' participation in a Community of Practice; ensure that these expectations are consistently communicated and reflected in the commissioning process, programme management and support services.

In the following recommendations, we refer to 'Community of Practice' as the most accomplished version of cross-portfolio collaboration, but the recommendations still stand for looser networking models – the fundamental idea being that expectations need to be clearly communicated from the outset, and be matched by budgets and timeframes.

Commissioning process

R1.1 Ensure that expectations of time and resource commitment are clearly reflected in the commissioning process. If a Community of Practice is being pursued as an integral part of the programme success (and not just as a desirable add-on), then this needs to be clearly spelled out in the funding call document (to discourage applicants who are just seeking 'business as usual' funding). Relatedly, the requirements of time and resources for a Community of Practice need to be clearly reflected in the guidance provided to reviewers and panellists, and budgets and timeline need to be assessed from this perspective.

Support services

R.1.2 Promote an inclusive approach to the Community of Practice, taking concrete steps to ensure participation from Southern researchers and Early Career Researchers.

R1.3 Consider having a Community of Practice focal point other than the PI. PIs are typically very busy and have limited time for being involved in cohort-building activities or cross-portfolio initiatives. The involvement of dedicated team members in regular communication from the programme and the support services can foster a less hierarchical approach, broaden participation and increase overall engagement.

R.1.4 Nurture sub-groups with common interests within the overall Community of Practice. In parallel with activities that target the programme's cohort of projects as a whole, it may be beneficial to think about sub-groups with key interests in common. This can be done through dedicated online platforms, targeted events (online and/or in-person), support to set up joint panels for conferences and/or publishing special journal issues. Dedicated pots of money – with an expedited application process – could play an important role in nurturing such mini-networks, and facilitate the emergence of a Community of Practice from the bottom up.

R1.5 Facilitate a shared reflection on the opportunities and challenges of supporting Communities of Practice and equitable partnerships in a post-Covid world, including the pros and cons of international travel.

R.2 Promote fairness in research partnerships – considering not only 'who participates' but also 'who is left out'. Explicitly recognise the challenges related to establishing new partnerships: these projects may need targeted support, and there may be trade-off to consider in the short term. However, support to the establishment of new partnerships is an essential dimension of 'contextual fairness'.

Commissioning process

R2.1 Ensure that the timeline for the application process is sufficient for new partners to 'find each other' and explore the best partnership for the project at hand.

R.2.2 Provide clear guidance to reviewers and panel members as to how partnership criteria will be assessed and weighted against other selection criteria. To promote equitable partnerships, reviewers and panellists can be provided guidance to prioritise proposals that can demonstrate to have given serious consideration to factors influencing equity, and that demonstrate awareness of the time and effort required to build and sustain equitable partnerships. In parallel, encourage applicants to be open and upfront in their application on the challenges that they expect with regard to their partnership, and the kind of support they would need to ensure fairness and equity.

R2.3 Consider providing pump-priming funds targeted to the support of new partnerships. These dedicated calls would recognise the challenges of developing new partnerships and thus have adjusted expectations about immediate results in evidence generation and impact.

Programme design and management

R2.4 Once the project is funded, ensure an adequate 'lead time' to allow for partnership-building activities and the integration of all partners' voices and perspective at an early stage.

R2.5 **Actively promote Southern authorship,** including by proving specific funding to support publications by Southern authors after the end of the project.

R2.6 **Provide funding to promote Open Access publishing.** Southern researchers are greatly under-represented not only as authors but also as consumers of leading academic publications, as many resource-constrained institutions in the Global South cannot afford subscription. Contributing to addressing this problem – rather than reinforcing it – is a key dimension of 'contextual fairness'.

Support services

R2.7 **Provide targeted support to projects to promote fairness in partnership.** This may include tools and guidance for projects to conduct a 'health check' of their partnerships around known challenges (for example, authorship and data-sharing protocols) that often tend to 'slip in between the cracks' as project teams get busy to deliver among conflicting commitments and tight timelines.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

R2.8 **Track key elements of fair partnership in the programme logframe** (e.g. project with data-sharing agreements in place)

R2.9 **Track Southern authorship of publication in the programme logframe.** The RLO logframe does not include indicators of authorship – so it does not capture the substantial under-representation of Southern authors in RLO publications. Future iterations may consider including specific indicators in this regard – e.g. "number of RLO publications authored or co-authored by researchers affiliated with institutions in the Global South". In addition, it is recommended that the number of countries and institutions with publications is monitored, to be able to detect a situation where most Southern publications come from a limited number of well-established institutions in one or two Middle-Income Countries. Finally, the logframe may usefully capture the difference among different grants in terms of Southern authorship (e.g. "Number of projects with at least one publication authored/co-authored by Southern researchers").

R2.10 **Track Open Access publications in the programme logframe.**

R.3 **Promote Southern-led research, addressing known challenges and bottlenecks at every stage of the process** (from the application process to Follow-on Funding).

Commissioning process

R3.1 **Advertise calls widely through Global South institutions and networks, and provide advance notice of calls to be released**. This will ensure that calls are put on Southern researchers' 'radar screen' in good time, and they can plan ahead to be ready to apply when the call actually comes out. Webinars and virtual meetings can be used to promote the call to Southern institutions and researchers.

R3.2 **Ensure an adequate timeframe for the application process.** Determining an adequate timeframe will be specific to each call, depending on the complexity of requirements (as well as the advance notice given to potential applicants).

R3.3 Provide tailored support to Southern applicants. Ideas for tailored support to Southern applicants include a dedicated help-desk dealing with application-related queries, as well as online training and tutorials on particularly 'tricky issues'. Previous successful applicants from the Global South may be asked to share their experience and advice, for example through short videos.

R3.4 Provide clear feedback to unsuccessful applicants. In addition to written feedback, as a specific step to promote Southern applications funders may want to consider follow-up calls to further elaborate on the feedback, allow the application to ask questions etc.

R3.5 Consider a step-wise application process, with a final iterative phase where shortlisted proposals can be adapted on the basis of the feedback received. In this way, funders can support applicants to reflect on particular issues.

R3.6 Consider earmarked funding for 'pump-priming' grants or 'new applicants' funds, where new institutions can be brought in through small grants to build their capacity, confidence and reputation to then apply for larger grants.

R3.7 Continue efforts to promote diversity in peer review and selection panels, ensuring wide representation of Southern academics as well as non-academic partners. Relatedly, facilitate a process of feedback, reflection and learning with panellists after each call.

R3.8 In Follow-on Funding calls, actively encourage FoF grants to be led by Southern partners of funded projects.

Monitoring and evaluation

R3.9 Track the number of Southern-led projects in the programme logframe. The RLO logframe includes a measure of Southern engagement in Output indicator 3.1: *Proportion of proposals and number of research awards funded which include PIs or Co-Is based at Southern Institutions*. By merging PIs and CoIs, the indicator does not capture the very low number of Southern PIs in the RLO. For a programme like RLO, having projects with at least one Southern CoI is a relatively low bar, while (as we have discussed) having lead institutions from the Global South encounters many challenges. For future programmes, it would be useful to disaggregate the two, having a specific indicator to measure the percentage of projects with a Southern lead institution and PI.

R.4 Clarify expectations in terms of degree and modes of research synthesis, and ensure that adequate resources are in place for meeting such expectations.

Commissioning process

R4.1 Consider synthesis at the commissioning stage, possibly through a diverse range of funding calls with varying 'synthesis ambition'. It is possible to curate a portfolio of research at the commissioning stage so that it produces outputs that are synthesisable at a later stage. This is done by having clear and well-defined questions, as opposed to broader themes. These questions can be based on pre-identified gaps in the existing knowledge base, and/or particularly compelling questions for policy and practice. If synthesis is a priority, this also needs to be reflected in the guidance provided to reviewers and panellists: in other words, proposals are to be assessed not only based on their individual merits, but also in terms of how well they fit in the overall portfolio. Future programmes may want to consider a more diverse range of funding calls with different purposes – for example, the main funding calls may be more geared towards building a 'synthesisable' portfolio of projects,

with a clear common denominator. Other calls may be aimed at promoting innovative research on new issues or under-analysed issues, and for these the expectations of synthesis may be lower.

R4.2 Consider having funding for cross-project collaboration and synthesis on a rolling basis, with an expedited selection process. The RLO had a dedicated stream for collaborative synthesis as part of the Call 4 Follow On Funding call. In the first three calls, no application was received for this stream. In interviews, grantholders remarked that this was 'bad timing': collaborative work across projects need to work for all parties, and coordinating schedules is difficult. Considering this, we suggest that if collaborative synthesis work is sought, this could be funded on a rolling basis, where applications are assessed individually on their own merits rather than in comparison to other proposals. Any leftover in this fund could be used towards synthesis activities in the final stage of the programme.

Programme management

R4.3 Leave time at the end of the programme for synthesis and legacy work. A common reason for the low level of synthesis research emerging from R4D programmes is the lack of time at the end of the programme to 'step back', look across the portfolio, and take stock of where the potential for synthesis is. In the case of RLO, this was compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and related ODA cuts. Future programmes should consider having a final 'synthesis and legacy phase', during which no new research would be funded, and synthesis would be pursued possibly through a combination of collaborative synthesis grant and externally commissioned synthesis.

R.5 Support a variety of pathways to impact, encouraging projects to connect 'practice' and 'policy' pathways in education, and ensuring the incorporation of gender and equity considerations throughout the pathway.

Commissioning process

R5.1 Increase the scrutiny on the proposed impact pathways as part of the commissioning process, ensuring that this is reflected in the funding call and guidance provided to reviewers and panellists. This should include clear guidance on how gender and equity dimensions should be assessed as part of the selection process.

R5.2 Continue efforts to diversify the composition of peer review and selection panels, including in particular ensuring significant representation of key non-academic partners, as well as gender expertise.

Support services

R5.3 Provide 'impact surgeries' for newly funded projects at the inception phase, with the participation of all partners, where the envisaged pathways to impact are discussed along with gender and equity dimensions. This could be followed by periodic (e.g. biannual) catch-up calls with all project teams to assess progress along the impact pathway as well as discussing emerging opportunities.

R5.4 Provide support in 'horizon-scanning' for opportunities of impact (e.g. upcoming international policy events and processes) **and curate the evidence offer from the project portfolio** (e.g. through dedicated meetings, calls for targeted Follow On Funding, commissioned synthesis pieces).

R5.6 Facilitate a reflection on the process of engaging with local communities – including the imperative of 'do no harm' and issues around researchers' positionality.

Monitoring and evaluation.

R5.7 Consider integrating qualitative indicators for impact in the logframe. With hindsight, the main limit of the RLO logframe was to consider non-academic citations as the key indicator of research uptake and proxy for policy and practice impact (as discussed in Section 7). While quantitative data is useful to get an overall picture, the type of R4D MEL framework that enables programme staff to unpack the complexity of R4D impact pathways can ultimately only be gathered through a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators. Qualitative data was collected by the funders through the annual reports but was not directly linked to the logframe. In this sense, it would be useful for future programmes to envisage the development of 'learning case-studies' or 'impact stories' as an integral part of the MEL system.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Honduras Case Study

Case-study: Examining Effective Teaching in Rural Honduran Secondary Schools

Background and context

The Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial program (Tutorial Learning System or SAT) was developed by the Colombian organization "Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias" (FUNDAEC) in the mid-1970s. It is a secondary school program designed for rural areas, and combines theory and practice with a focus on life skills. SAT consists of an interdisciplinary curriculum, which focuses on the development of competences with an emphasis on community service. It is characterized by its flexibility and its rootedness in the community, so that it addresses the needs of the rural areas in which it operates.

The *tutores* are teachers who receive a continuous training aimed at overseeing the learning process of students throughout their lower- and upper-secondary education (from the 7th to the 12th grade). Another feature of SAT are the *asesores* who conduct regular on-site visits and accompany the *tutores* in their professional development offering them ongoing support. Within SAT, the families of the students and the community as a whole also take an active role in their education.

SAT was adopted in Honduras in 1996 by the Bayan Association, a local non-profit organisation.[85] Since then, SAT has spread across rural areas in the country, and is currently being implemented in 12 out of 18 administrative regions. The Ministry of Education recognizes it as an alternative modality, and covers the tutors´ salaries.
Levels of completion of secondary education have remained low in Honduras due to elevated school dropout rates, especially in upper secondary education (the net enrolment ratio was below 50%[86] and the completion rate below 40% before the pandemic[87]). This particularly affects rural areas. In addition to lacking the economic resources to continue their studies, students don't perceive a higher level of schooling as an advantage to access the labour market. Another compelling reason for students to leave the educational system is that the content of the basic national curriculum does not fulfil their expectations, and they simply lack motivation to continue their studies[88].

A good interaction between teacher and students is therefore crucial to keep both sides engaged in the teaching and learning process. As such, the focus should be on improving the teacher's professional development, which in turn leads to an increased academic performance. Within the formal system, teacher performance is assessed by supervisors from the Ministry of Education. When being evaluated, teachers feel the pressure of being observed, and a disconnect between what is being observed and their professional development in the long term[89].

[85] Created in 1987, the Bayan Association initially operated in the tropical jungle of La Mosquitia in the northeast of the country.
[86] Paz-Maldonado, E., Flores-Girón, H., & Silva-Peña, I. (2021) "Educación y desigualdad social:El impacto de la pandemia COVID-19 en el sistema educativo público de Honduras/Education and social inequality:The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the public education system in Honduras", *Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas*, 29(133), p.3 https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.29.6290
[87] https://data.worldbank.org/
[88] Pacheco, D. at the "Reconceptualizing teacher professional development in Honduras" webinar, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvRIaZiO8LM

[89] Correa, B. at the "Reconceptualizing teacher professional development in Honduras" webinar, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvRIaZiO8LM

In contrast, the whole philosophy of SAT is based on mutual accountability and 'horizontality', and the *asesores* have a "coaching role" for *tutores*. Rather than providing more traditional supervision and evaluation, *asesores* serve as a support and motivation for the *tutores*. *Asesores* reflect together with *tutores* on what they observe, and provide suggestions for the improvement of their practice based on their own experience. There are no specific formats or timings for the feedback, and it can happen on a formal or more informal basis.

Asesores do not have a fully-fledged feedback mechanism available yet to observe the classroom and give structured input to the *tutores*. The TIPPS methodology (see section 2) was identified as the right one to fill this gap.

> *"Teachers within SAT experience a sense of personal and professional satisfaction from seeing the progress of their students, and proving that the model is working. It becomes like a virtuous cycle: teaching in a way that is effective, and students are engaged and learning. There's this virtuous feedback loop that serves as a motivating force and a reinforcement for the good work that teachers are doing"*, Dr. Erin Graham-Murphy, Associate Adjunct Professor, University of California, Berkeley and Principal investigator of the "Application of the TIPPS Observation Tool in Rural Honduran Secondary Schools" project

Project overview

The Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System (TIPPS) is a methodology developed by the New York University "*to provide neutral feedback at the classroom in a continuous cycle of improvement*"[90]. It seeks to improve pedagogical practices, teacher performance and ultimately student learning outcomes. The tool was successfully developed and tested in India, Ghana and Uganda.

The idea to work together on the improvement of the SAT coaching aspect with the TIPPS methodology arose through an exchange of ideas between PI Erin Murphy-Graham (who had been working on the SAT in Honduras) and PI Edward Seidman (who had been working on the TIPPS tool in Uganda), when they met at the first RLO Annual Workshop. The objective of this collaboration was to "*augment and expand the TIPPS methodology to develop a feedback protocol uniquely compatible with the SAT program structure, organization and processes*" [91]. For this purpose, they relied on key Honduran stakeholders from the Ministry of Education, the National Pedagogical University, and the Bayan Association with whom they already had an established relationship. The two grants worked in parallel to adapt and contextualize the TIPPS methodology to SAT in Honduras, creating a TIPPS-Accompaniment (TIPPS-A) mechanism. The original pilot phase of this project planned a training to a selected group of *asesores*, which took place in March 2020. Due to the pandemic, the training could not be completed.

The TIPPS-A tool focuses on the following six pedagogical aspects of the teacher performance:

- the creation of opportunities for cooperative learning to facilitate positive interactions and learning among students;
- the promotion of critical thinking among students;
- the ability to connect the classroom with their everyday life experiences;
- the provision of concrete feedback to reinforce the student performance;
- the fostering of subject mastery and deeper learning by students;
- the monitoring of and response to the students´ academic and emotional needs.

[90] Project proposal to ESRC-DFID RLO in Education 2018-21 (2019), "Teacher Instructional Practices and Processes System (TIPPS): Cultural extension and testing as a feedback tool to improve pedagogical practices"

[91] Most of the research studies on SAT (such as the "Impact Evaluation of SAT", the RLO study "Examining effective teaching in rural Honduran secondary schools") as well as the book "Opening Minds, Improving Lives: Education and Women's Empowerment in Honduras" have been written by Dr. Erin Graham-Murphy, Associate Adjunct Professor, University of California, Berkeley and other researchers

Observers are trained to take an objective and systematic look at the classroom. The information collected is seen as useful and tangible, allowing for regular and mutually respectful feedback, and the identification of concrete action points that are discussed with the teacher.

New knowledge

The TIPPS-A has proven to be a valuable tool helping asesores frame their feedback in a constructive and useful way

Before the introduction of TIPPS-A, *asesores* were using long checklists to observe the tutor's performance. They were looking at many dimensions, which did not allow them to focus on pedagogical aspects. By using a two-steps rating process, TIPPS-A requires *asesores* to first describe what they have seen, and then assess it against the quality of teaching practice in the pursuit of the objective in question. '*This model brings together an innovative professional development system and a classroom observation instrument. It emphasizes accompaniment, trust, accountability, and relevant feedback focused on observed pedagogical practices*'[92].

> "*This tool is fully in line with what we want, what we look for, and what we do. It was almost hard to believe that we could find something that matched perfectly with what we want to do and are doing. The connection with New York University just happened*" Alejandro Martínez, Executive Director, Bayan Association

Impact

One of the key features of SAT is that students develop important life skills; they are trained to practice values such as responsibility, honesty, and solidarity while also developing a sense of community belonging. SAT also contributes to the reduction of school dropout. This has been especially relevant during the pandemic. Schools were closed in Honduras for almost two years, leading to interruption in classes and leaving almost two million students out of the school system. Despite these challenges, SAT was able to continue. Since the *tutores* come from neighbouring areas, this has allowed for a closer accompaniment during the pandemic. The SAT curriculum also has its own syllabi and study materials, which served as a guide for students and guaranteed a certain degree of autonomy in their learning process.

The SAT curriculum focuses on concepts and the ability of students to analyze and translate it to their individual and community environment. SAT textbooks promote notions of gender equality by clearly recognizing "that boys and girls have the same rights because they are capable of doing any kind of work"[93]. This concept is translated into practice, since boys and girls are equally integrated in its activities and projects. Because of their involvement with SAT, parents in the communities are committed to their daughters continuing their education. This has a direct effect on the empowerment of girls, who are agents of change in their communities. Its impact on the prevention of early marriage and early childbearing has also been demonstrated[94].

> *"By undertaking productive projects on our own, we challenge the mentalities in the communities because men see that we can do them as well". Female tutor*

[92] Murphy-Graham, E. and Pachecho-Montoya, D. (2021) "Re-conceptualizing Teacher Professional Development in Honduras", Briefing Paper, *The Impact Initiative*

[93] https://hey.berkeley.edu/what-students-say-about/gender-equality

[94] Murphy-Graham, E. and Leal, G. (2014) "Child Marriage, Agency, and Schooling in Rural Honduras", *Comparative Education Review,* Vol. 59, No. 1. & Murphy-Graham, E. Cohen K. A., and Pachecho-Montoya, D. (2020) "School Dropout, Child Marriage, and Early Pregnancy among Adolescent Girls in Rural Honduras", *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4.

All stakeholders interviewed highlighted the creation of life-changing opportunities by SAT: it allows students to pursue their studies even in remote areas. *Tutores* can develop a professional career close to their communities. The relationships between students and *tutores*, and *tutores* and *asesores* are based on mutual trust and respect, which is attributable to the model of teacher professional development and coaching utilized by SAT. They have built a community of learning, where they all constantly learn from each other. The key factor for the success of SAT even in remote areas is the deep commitment of all stakeholders, from students to *asesores* to its functioning. This is enabled by the close relationship of *asesores* with the family parents and the community as a whole. All these elements contribute to the continuity of SAT in contrast to the formal system, which is subject to political interference.

> *"I really like SAT because one learns together with students. SAT has been a great opportunity to grow personally, professionally and spiritually". Asesor*

The longstanding relation between the University of California, Berkeley and Bayan has allowed the latter to gain empirical evidence about its impact and increased the visibility of its outreach, gaining access to funding and ensuring its financial sustainability. Having two parallel research projects of foreign universities funded by the RLO programme which focus on SAT gives it credibility in the eyes of national authorities, whereby preserving its independence from them.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic did not allow for full training of *asesores* and to further implement SAT and TIPPS-A. However, all stakeholders agree on its potential to improve teacher professional development and ultimately student learning outcomes. Even two years after the pandemic, *asesores* were very keen about finalizing the training. The new way of collaboration between grantholders and local stakeholders is very innovative and has proven to be mutually reinforcing. Despite the Covid-19 related setbacks, the collaboration has continued and new research topics related to the resilience of SAT in face of the pandemic have emerged.

Honduras is the first country in Latin America to test the TIPPS-A methodology. This represents a great incentive for the Ministry of Education and the National Pedagogical University to attract international attention and support for innovative approaches to teachers' professional development. International organizations[95] see SAT as a promising solution to guarantee access to education in rural communities in Honduras.

Thanks to the successful collaboration between researchers, the Bayan association, and the national education institutions enabled by the RLO programme, the TIPPS-A methodology is a contextualized, innovative and ready-to-use tool to conduct classroom observations and capture quality teaching. By clearly stating the purpose of the observation, TIPPS-A provides a technique to use the feedback in a specific manner to actually change teachers' behavior. It can allow for strengthened accompaniment of teachers, who will improve their performance and self-efficacy. This will contribute to an increase of their satisfaction, and also allow them to take ownership of their professional development. Ultimately, the tool will transform the way teachers conceive the classroom and will improve their teaching practices and the quality of education.

If scaled up, the model can be a key factor to address some of the biggest challenges currently faced by Honduras: by fostering emotional wellbeing conducive to student retention and encouraging self-initiative among students, SAT strengthens their sense of belonging to their communities. These are important factors that contribute to sustainable rural development.

Learning for future programmes

[95] UNICEF in Honduras

- ***Joining forces for a shared objective***

The combination of two successful mechanisms in the pursuit of a common goal was possible thanks to the partnership that grew out of two sister grants: the two projects supported each other and developed a fruitful collaboration which allowed to maximize their impact. To that effect, facilitating exchanges among RLO grantholders was crucial.

- ***Meaningful and long-standing partnerships with local actors***

One key success factor of this new developed tool was the long-term alliance and level of trust of researchers with a strong local partner like the Bayan Association with a consolidated experience in SAT, and the close work among all actors to contextualize the tool in Honduras.

- ***Sharing a common agenda with national stakeholders***

Aligning the research priorities with that of local institutional stakeholders like the Ministry of Education and the National Pedagogical University (in this case to develop instruments to conduct classroom observations and improve teacher professional development), and closely engaging with them in the implementation of the projects represents a unique opportunity for them to take up this tool.

- ***Importance of risk mitigation measures***

The project did not foresee any contingency measures that could have allowed the continuation of the work despite the pandemic. However, the good working relationship among researchers allowed them to study how the pandemic affected SAT effectivity, and which lessons can be drawn from Bayan´s response to it.

- ***Ensuring project sustainability***

The successful development of the training package was conceived in such a way that it addressed the needs of *asesores*. The training, which consisted of a peer review mechanism, allowed them to understand and value the tool, event two years later after having been trained. These two factors will be determinants for a successful resumption of the pilot project and its adaptation to the new circumstances in the education sector after two years of the pandemic.

Case Study Methodology:

This case study was carried out as part of the final evaluation of the RLO Programme. It was conducted from January to March 2021. It was informed by review of project documentation, including annual reporting and publications, as well as broader literature on SAT and TIPPS. The case study also conducted 10 semi-structured with project stakeholders, as well as a focus group discussion with *asesores*. All interviews excepting one were conducted remotely. Project stakeholders consulted are included in the table below:

Institution	**Number of Interviewees**
University of California, Berkeley	2
FUNDAEC	1
National Pedagogical University/ INIIE	1
New York University	2
Bayan Association	3
Ministry of Education	1
UNICEF	1

Asesores/ Bayan Association	6

In-person interviews in a SAT community in La Ceiba were scheduled to take place, but unfortunately could not be conducted due to a family emergency.

Project Information:

Project name	Examining Effective Teaching in Rural Honduran Secondary Schools (Call 1 Grant); Application of the TIPPS Observation Tool in Rural Honduran Secondary Schools (Call 4 Follow-on Fund)
Lead Institution	University of California Berkeley
Budget	£286,943.19 (Call 1 Grant); £93,460.92 (Call 4 Follow-on Fund)

Appendix 2: Malawi Case Study

Case-study: Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi.

Background and context

Fifteen percent (15%) of the total population (17 million people) of Malawi is aged under five years (GoM population and housing census, 2018[96]). Child mortality and malnutrition are high due to preventable diseases and deficiency in micronutrients and vitamins. The Malawi Demographic Health Survey (MDHS[97]) 2016, indicates that stunting, underweight and wasting are very high in Malawi at 49%, 25% and 6% respectively. These are some of the challenges that affect early childhood development in the country.

The research project - Tikule Limodzi - was conceptualized within the Early Childhood Development (ECD) context in Malawi with a specific focus on children with special needs. ECD is centred on children from birth to eight years of age. The Malawi government developed an ECD policy in 2003, which attributes vulnerability of this age group to several stressors such as poor health and nutrition, food insecurity and poverty (National ECD Policy, 2003[98]).

Many children in rural areas of Malawi do not have access to Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) and only a few centres exist in the country. Communities in rural areas mainly organise on their own to establish a Community Based Child Care Centre (CBCC). NGOs and religious organizations may come in to assist these centres, but with limited resources and coverage. The national ECD policy aims to deliver "high quality services in early childhood care that ensure his/her survival, growth, protection and development", and recognizes CBCCs as the most effective and sustainable services for early childhood development. However, CBCCs remain largely unsupported by the government, and face challenges such as low caregiver to child ratio, untrained or limited training to caregivers, and lack of child friendly facilities, let alone facilities to cater for special needs such as children with disabilities. Although CBCC fees are minimal, many parents are unable to pay, and most caregivers work almost on a voluntary basis.

Project overview

In order to promote care in the early years and enhance households' and caregivers' awareness on care for special needs children, the Tikule Limodzi research project undertook case study research in rural Malawi, Thyolo District. The first aim of the research was to identify and test effective strategies to promote and secure the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECDE services. Secondly, the project aimed to identify and test strategies to improve curriculum and teaching methods for caregivers providing ECDE services. These two objectives were achieved through conducting caregivers training in inclusive education. In addition, the project aimed to make evidence-based recommendations to policy makers to allow them to improve the delivery of quality ECDE services in Malawi; appraise current institutional, policy and programmatic provision of ECDE services for pre-school children in Malawi; address the strong inequalities and inequities that exist in different settings in Malawi and within different

[96] Government of Malawi, 2018; Malawi Population and Housing Census Report. National Statistics Office
[97] National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ICF. 2017. Malawi Demographic and Health Survey 2015-16. Zomba, Malawi, and Rockville, Maryland, USA. NSO and ICF.
[98] Republic of Malawi, 2003; National Policy on Early Childhood Development. Ministry of Gender, Youth and Community Services. Lilongwe

groups (including nature of impairment, age, gender, and ethnic group) to describe the main barriers to the uptake of ECDE services for children with disabilities at pre-school level; develop tools to address these barriers, drawing on a broad range of disciplines in social sciences; measure the progress of a child's development and learning outcomes of children with disabilities attending child-based community centres or at home because of a feasibility study; and understand the impact of new ECDE interventions on the successful educational (both formal and non- formal) inclusion of children with disabilities. These objectives were achieved through collecting data from parents, children, and caregivers in the selected CBBCs using different methodologies and tools.

Throughout the course of the project, the following considerations and achievements were observed:

The project design phase strengthened partnerships with different stakeholders. The University of Birmingham responded to a call for proposals on the RLO and partnered with University of Malawi, Sightsavers, and Save the Children to draft a proposal. The Malawian partners consulted the Ministry of Gender and Child welfare, the Association of Early Childhood Development, and other stakeholders to inform the design phase of the project. Different issues were raised by partners to complement the project design after stakeholders were consulted, such as provision of a caregiver start-up kit to assist caregivers to deliver lessons after being trained. The partnerships with the local teams brought contextual considerations in the design of the project (although the caregiver training promoted use of locally available tools for teaching in CBCCs, caregivers were still provided with a sample of tools for assessments, certificates and start up registers for their use in the CBCCs).

Enhanced capacities for research assistants and data collectors. The project identified and trained five researchers to conduct data collection in the field using Kobo Collect tool on smartphones. Additionally, two researchers were trained on how to collect data and record observation of children with disabilities in the CBCCs. Furthermore, the project randomly selected 48 CBCCs in Thyolo district and divided them into two groups, the intervention group and another one for a control group. The research assistants (RAs) collected baseline information in all 48 CBCCs in the first phase of the research. Information was collected from randomly selected parents/guardians, children and caregivers using M-DAT, caregiver satisfaction tool, child observation tool, Washington tool, CBCC questionnaire and caregiver questionnaire. The tools and methodologies for the research improved knowledge and capacities of the local teams involved.

Contribution to policy through capacity building for local caregivers. To influence policy and decision making, the project reviewed the curriculum for training caregivers and incorporated issues for children living with disabilities. This engagement at a higher level ensured that policy makers and other stakeholders and partners are aware of pertinent issues on caregiver training and other needs fundamental for impactful learning in the ECDCs. The researchers conducted a training of trainers for institutions such as Association of ECDs, Magomero Institute of Disabilities and Montfort School of Disabilities. These trainers are the ones that trained the caregivers from the randomly selected CBCCs. The caregivers from the intervention group were trained for two weeks at the Association of ECD. The training focused on inclusive learning and caregiving techniques as well as social-cultural methodologies for teaching children with disabilities. After the training, the caregivers delivered learning for eight months after which an end line evaluation was conducted. It is evident that the training brought new insights and knowledge for the trainers and caregivers.

The research assistants improved their skills, knowledge, and capacity in research as they learned new research methodologies. One of the RAs reported that they have increased expertise and networks for research because of the skills gained in this project.

The caregivers excitement with the project was still seen during this case study as they all agreed that they were never given an opportunity for training before the project and have never gone for any refresher or other training ever since. The training was a big milestone for the caregivers because they received certificates, something they consider a big achievement in their career.

"ever since I have established this CBCC, I established it because of my own interest and seeing the struggles in the village, but I was never trained before. During the training I learnt how to handle children with disabilities and how to make sure that they are not discriminated by the other children" (caregiver)

"I never knew that some children who are withdrawn and not very active in class may have a mental disability or slow learning, I just thought it was shyness or dullness" (caregiver).

Social and ethical considerations in the project design and implementation process. The project ensured against research fatigue and instilled a sense of ownership in all participants, especially parents and caregivers. The project identified 20 parents from each of the intervention CBCCs (total of 24) and conducted interviews to identify the barriers facing parents with children with disabilities in the community. These interviews were conducted by community trained research assistants. The participatory research was meant to reduce research fatigue and limit expectations of communities who often do not see any tangible benefits of research. The participatory research worked well, and parents recalled that when they heard of this project, it was a relief for them, because they heard that caregivers would be trained which will translate to increased skills to teach and care for their children. The project conducted an end line survey eight months after the training, which clearly indicated the differences in teaching methodologies and approaches to caring for the children, especially children with disabilities.

None of the stakeholders reported any risks or concerns that they had with the intervention. This is due to the flexibility of the project to incorporate ideas during the implementation. Parents saw the research as one way of encouraging learning because when the researchers came, they explained that some caregivers will go for training. Parents were also encouraged because after interviews the children were given incentives. The caregivers valued incentives such as training, start-up kit and visits from the researcher to encourage them.

New knowledge

Knowledge on research tools. It was the first time for some of the Malawi-based research assistants and data collectors to use the tools for collecting child information, in addition to other participatory methods for collecting data, such as making use of the community representatives. The data collectors developed new knowledge of such tools, which has enabled them to further their careers in research.

New knowledge for caregivers. All the caregivers that were interviewed during this case study had not attended any training before or prior to this project. The project presented a learning opportunity and an eye opener for the caregivers that brought new knowledge and skills. The caregivers learnt new skills on how to keep attendance registers and learning progress records, how to assess a child's learning progress and produce school reports for parents and certificates for entrance into primary school. The caregivers were also trained on how to use locally available materials to make toys, assemble swings and other learning tools like sawing alphabet letters.

The data collectors were also surprised to see the knowledge gaps that exist in the caregivers' capacity to deliver lessons to the children. Data collectors noted that at one CBCC, they found a caregiver teaching the kids distinctive parts of the body in English; however, they were pointing at entirely the opposite body part. For example, "a caregiver was saying this is my head, whilst touching her arm, this is my leg, whilst touching her hand and this is my hand whilst touching the leg" (research assistant). Such a scenario is common when the caregivers' literacy level is so low, but they work in the profession driven by passion to take care of children. It was mentioned that in some cases, CBCCs were established or could just crop up when a community member understood that there were NGOs or visitors coming, and often were staffed by caregivers with lower literacy levels. However, the

sampled caregivers in this case study and in the project were thoroughly scrutinized by the District Social Welfare Office (DSWO) and were registered and renown.

Stimulating a discourse on inclusive learning and mental disabilities in ECDCs. The most outstanding learning that the caregivers highlighted was the inclusive learning on how to identify mental disabilities and child uniqueness. The project opened up stakeholder interest in tackling issues of disability in ECDE. Through observation techniques, the caregivers were trained to identify children's behavioural patterns such as those who always seem withdrawn or had difficulty picking up group activities, which could potentially demonstrate learning disabilities of various degrees or other social challenges such as troubled/abusive homes or hunger as they were coming from severely food insecure homes. This was new knowledge for the caregivers, as they used to assume children were on the same level and never knew that such externalities could affect children's behaviours. Data collected during the end line survey also showed the differences between the trained and untrained caregivers. One of the RAs noted that, "when we started the research, as an RA, I only thought about disability as in physical disability, but we were surprised at the existence of mental disability in the CBCCs in our rural areas and nobody is talking about these issues, there is need to raise awareness."

Impact

The research project has led to the following outcomes:

ECDC curriculum review to include Inclusive Learning. The locally-based team held several dissemination activities in Malawi to present findings of the project both at national and district level. The dissemination workshops discussed inclusive learning amongst stakeholders working in the early childhood development and disabilities sector such as NGOs, CSOs and government. However, apart from inclusion of disability issues in caregiver training at national level, this case study could not establish any policy-level influence that can be attributed to the project since we did not interview the Ministry. The project PI and Co Leads attended several international seminars and in-country stakeholder dissemination workshops to discuss the results of the research. One of the researchers highlighted that, "the discourse regarding the findings of the study is reported to have been taken seriously by the focal point in the Ministry of Disabilities and Children Welfare".

Increased capacities in caregivers. The caregivers who participated in the research project have learned how to assess children under five based on their capabilities, which differs from the way they used to assess the children before they attended training. One caregiver reported that, "before the training I used to write a school report similar to the one written by primary school teachers where I could assign grades to the children, but at the training I learnt that I should use abilities as a way of assessment".

Caregiver training stimulated improved learning in children's early years. Almost all the parents reported that they observed improved learning experiences after the caregivers attended the inclusive training held by the project. Almost 90% of the parents interviewed for this case study testified that the children are still doing well in primary school because they did not struggle to learn letters and numbers for the first time. The children also assimilated easily into the learning environment at primary schools because they were already aware of classroom environment and rules. One parent reported that her child used to be rude and had bad behaviour before attending the CBCC, but in general the child's behaviour changed for the better when she started CBCC. This result is encouraging other parents who thought sending their children to CBCCs was a waste of time.

Caregivers training increased enrolment in CBCCs. Attendance in CBCCs greatly increased after the project. Parents could see how other children who attended CBCCs, including children with disabilities, were doing well in primary school, which encouraged parents to bring their own children to the centres. There was high engagement from children, in part because children were given incentives such as sweets and biscuits after being interviewed as part of the research project. The CBCCs reported that they experienced increase in enrolment after this

project started. The research has however brought in expectation from parents and caregivers that more needs to be done by outsiders for the centres to do better. During the evaluation, the respondents were often asking when they will be given more training or toys and other materials for learning.

Freeing time for parents, specifically mothers, for other productive activities. The parents also reported that sending the children to the CBCCs gave them time for household chores, since now children were looking forward to playing with toys and other creative approaches that the caregivers were trained on. Most of the parents who were interviewed during the research baseline and end line and even during this case study were women. Women in rural Malawi are the main caretakers at household level and carry the burdens of walking long distances to fetch water and firewood whilst carrying the children on their backs. All the respondents in this case study agreed that when the children attend CBCC, the women are given time to do house chores, engage in small-scale business, work in the fields or do other productive work. This is especially meaningful, as all the sampled participants in the case study did not have formal employment and mentioned that their main income was piece work and unreliable small-scale businesses that depend on the harvest season.

Improved attendance and attainment of skills amongst children. Parents of children with disabilities reported greater incentive for their children to attend school and participate in activities since there were disability-friendly games and tools used for teaching. In general, the parents with children with disabilities noticed changes in children's behaviour and an improvement in abilities after the caregivers attended training. The children had increased interest in attending school because the caregivers were encouraging them, and they developed interest because of the child-friendly learning methodologies and techniques. The children with disabilities also found it easier to integrate into primary schools and are doing well in terms of grades.[99]

Improved independence for children with disabilities to participate in daily activities. The children developed greater interest in learning how to eat by themselves, dress themselves, help in household chores based on their capacities such as sweeping, washing dishes and cooking. The children also learnt to play with other kids in the community, while initially the children with disabilities were either stigmatized or did not have confidence to assimilate with others. This is attributed to the fact that the caregivers were taught inclusive learning and participatory child friendly tasks that they can teach children at the CBCCs.

Apart from the impact that is seen now, no groups interviewed in-country for this case study reported any additional anticipated evidence of impact for the future. Stakeholders strongly recommended more programmes such as RLO to fund research and implementation in the early childhood education sector in Malawi. The uniqueness of RLO in linking research with practice brought in the incentive of training caregivers, thus addressing an essential need. However, there is a strong possibility for the RLO research outcomes/findings to feed into the policy space, because gaps still exist in attaining quality ECDCs in Malawi. There is aspiration amongst caregivers, district social welfare officers, trainers, RAs and researchers for the results from this research to feed into the policy and decision-making space in the country. The research outputs such as publications should still be communicated to the Ministry, Departments and Agencies (MDAs).

Case Study Methodology:

This case study was conducted in February and March 2022. It was commissioned to identify: impact on policy and practice; evidence that contributed to how policy and practice can deliver learning at scale; how this contribution had tangible impact on policy and practice, and how significant; and lessons learnt for future programmes.

[99] However, one child with disabilities passed away due to severity of her disability, and another cannot attend primary school but needs special needs education which is not available in the area.

It also looked at cross cutting issues such as how gender and equity issues were considered in the Tikule Limodzi Project, the unintended effects and the enablers and barriers for the project in reaching its intended impact.

Data was collected from four CBCCs that were in the project in Thyolo district. Data was collected using a topic guide for the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with five groups of parents. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to interview key informants from the same four CBCCs. KIIs were conducted with four parents and five Caregivers. Additional interviews were conducted with two Data Collectors, one Research Assistant/Trainer and one in country Lead Researcher to triangulate the information as well as get views from the project staff on the impact of the project. The data was analysed using both content and thematic analysis to highlight findings that meet the objectives of this case study.

Project information

Project name	Tikule Limodzi : Improving curriculum and teaching methods to influence policy and increase the quality of ECDE provision for children with disabilities in Malawi
Lead Institution	University of Birmingham
Budget	£439,201

Appendix 3: The Global Disability Summit Case-study

The Global Disability Summit

The Global Disability Summit, hosted in July 2018 by the governments of the UK and Kenya, along with the International Disability Alliance, provided a clear entry-point for the 'positioning for use' of RLO research on disability. The Summit brought together around 1200 people from 67 countries, to discuss disability inclusion in the Global South, and to sign up to commitments in a Charter for Change[100], which signals a continued commitment to progress through implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals for persons with disabilities. Delegates included government ministers, heads of UN agencies, organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), I/NGOs, donors, private-sector representatives and more.

Inclusion in education was one of the summit's 4 main themes[101], with the Charter for Change inviting delegates to choose to commit to:

1. Creating and implementing inclusive education sector policy and plans
2. Expanding teacher capacity building and training on inclusive education
3. Endorsing or supporting the Inclusive Education Initiative (a multi-donor trust fund for inclusive education, overseen by the World Bank & supported by Norwegian & UK governments) **[102]**

The Summit was greatly driven by DFID, for whom disability had become a key area of focus, following the release of its Disability Framework in 2014[103]. The DFID Education Policy "Get Children Learning", published in February 2018, called to step up targeted support for the most marginalised children, including those with disabilities. The policy also stressed the importance of better data as a "lever for change" (DFID, 2018: 21), and a commitment to "continue to invest in high quality education research to ensure investments are based on robust evidence (DFID, 2018: 4). A number of areas were identified as priorities for research uptake, including "teaching strategies proven to work well for poor and marginalised children", including those with disabilities (DFID, 2018: 21).

The close connection between the Impact Initiative and DFID seems to have been instrumental in instigating RLO work on the Summit. A need for evidence in the field of disability was identified, as well as the desire to promote a position at the Summit reflecting the UN Conventions on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD)[104]. The Impact Initiative had the capacity to respond immediately to this need, clearly to the advantage of both DFID and to the RLO participants in finding a platform for their evidence.

[100] https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/gds_charter_for_change.pdf
[101] Other themes included ensuring dignity and respect for all, routes to economic empowerment and harnessing technology and innovation
[102] https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/global-disability-summit-summary-commitments_2.pdf
[103] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/382338/Disability-Framework-2014.pdf
[104]See https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html, in particular Article 24, on rights to education

Preparing for the summit

In preparation for the Summit, an event was facilitated by the Impact Initiative in April 2018 to provide the opportunity for researchers – from both RLO and the Joint Fund - to engage directly with DFID and INGOs. In total, there were 31 international organisations, including organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), donor agencies, research institutions and global education networks, in attendance. Participants developed a Statement of Action on Inclusive Education, which emphasized the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice (see Box 15). There was also the opportunity to input into the framing of DFID, NORAD and the World Bank's new Inclusive Education Initiative that was launched at the summit with an emphasis on the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice. Budgets and accessibility provisions ensured the attendance and participation of RLO researchers and practitioners with disabilities from global North and South countries.

Box 15: Five interlinked actions for transformational education for children and youth with disabilities (from the Statement of Action: Accelerate Equitable and Quality Inclusive Education for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 2018[105])

1. Generate and use robust data and evidence for inclusive planning, programming and for ensuring accountability.
2. Develop, train and support a professional education work force that responds to inclusive education and encourages teachers with disabilities into the profession.
3. Achieve targeted financing and ensure national systems promote the implementation of inclusive education.
4. Reduce barriers to inclusion by adopting a cross-sectoral and life course approach.
5. Involve people with disabilities, their families and Disabled People's Organisations in partnership with development actors to further the inclusive education agenda.

Attending the summit and promoting RLO research

Around six people involved directly in the RLO attended the Summit, made up of Impact Initiative team members and UK-based researchers[106]. The Impact Initiative secured the only Summit marketplace exhibition stand, which was used to promote the use of evidence and research to inform policy decisions and actions. More than 100 copies of the *Research for Policy and Practice: Disability and Education* brief were distributed, in addition to research evidence from individual projects. Participants also distributed promotional material and social media communications on the Statement of Action, calling for delegates to include education in their own country/organisation's choice of commitments on the Summit's 'Charter for Change'.

Assessing RLO contribution to the Summit and its outcomes: what difference did RLO make?

In interviews, we sought to assess the extent to which the work by the Impact Initiative made a difference to the Summit and its outcomes. Two areas emerged in particular in this regard: first, the contribution to placing inclusive education higher on the agenda of the summit; and second, strengthening the connection with national level policy-making (before and after the Summit).

[105] https://www.ukfiet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Statement_of_Action.pdf.

[106] Including 2 individuals representing both. All were UK-based individuals & had costs covered by II.

Placing inclusive education higher on the agenda of the summit

Inclusive education was set to be on the summit agenda with or without any RLO input, and the Statement simply reflected priorities that were already being raised in that sector at that time. Most interviewees, however, felt very strongly that the RLO input certainly helped place education *higher* up the agenda at the summit, and helped to inspire and justify certain details of the sub-clauses under both the inclusive education and data disaggregation commitments. This included the fact that evidence from RLO projects using the Washington Group Questions illustrated the benefits of this data collection tool, which was being promoted at the Summit to facilitate global comparative data within the disability sector.[107] Impact was generally thought to have been achieved through the collaborative output of the Statement of Action, gaining many signatories to this prior to the summit, and the success of networking and the promotion of the Statement via the Impact Initiative stand. In addition, one interviewee noted that the Statement of Action was key in influencing the Summit's content around inclusive education, and that the team choosing the sentence on inclusive education in the Charter for Change was guided by the Statement of Action, as they felt confident that a consultative, inclusive process had taken place through the RLO's pre-summit workshop. Notably, of the eight different themes for commitments in the Charter for Change, Inclusive Education was the second most popular to gain signatories, with Data Disaggregation being the third.[108]

During the Summit, the Inclusive Education Initiative was launched, led by the World Bank. Although not a part of the activities of the Impact Initiative or individual RLO research projects, key individuals from within the programme were involved in discussions about the shape of the Initiative. Some of this had taken place at a Global Education Summit in Oslo, and some during informal moments at the RLO's pre-Global Disability Summit Workshop. Individuals involved in both the RLO and Inclusive Education Initiative were quick to point out that the RLO research findings and the work of the Impact Initiative did not have a direct influence on the shaping of the Inclusive Education Initiative, but that the opportunities provided by RLO events (& the budgets to travel to them) provided a space for individuals to share they ideas and contribute to the discussions.

Strengthening the voice and role of Southern participants in the summit, and supporting national-level follow-up

Kenya, Malawi and the UK all witnessed impact at national level. Evidence from Dr Foster Kholowa's research into early years intervention in Malawi had been presented to the government from early stages of the project, which meant that ministers came to the Summit informed, and aware of the relevance of certain commitments to their own country setting. Dr Kholowa felt that hearing these same themes on the global platform of the Summit, and witnessing other world leaders committing, served to strengthen the case for these commitments in Malawi, and for their own project and further work in the field of disability and education i.e. there was a *cycle of influence*[109]. Similarly, Anderson Gitonga, then of the United Disabled Persons of Kenya, mentioned that he directly used his learnings from RLO meetings and the Statement of Action to help influence the inclusive education commitments of the Kenyan government. In the UK context, the Impact Initiative team, together with Results UK, went on to organise a Global Education All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) in the UK parliament,[110] which brought key UK and international players in the field of inclusive education together with UK politicians. Impact Initiative budget enabled the significant attendance of OPD representatives from the Global South[111] and World Bank[112]. This session solidified the UK government's continued commitments to the Statement of Action, including engagement in the Inclusive Education Initiative.

[107] For information on Washington Group Questions see https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com
[108] First was Eliminate Stigma and Discrimination. See https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/commitments
[109] Foster Kholowa, in Interview
[110] For details of the event see https://www.globaleducationappg.co.uk/a-year-on-from-the-global-disability-summit-what-progress-has-been-made/
[111] Anderson Gitonga of United Disabled Persons of Kenya
[112] Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, Global Disability Advisor for the World Bank Group travelled from USA

Lessons from the Global Disability Summit:
Amongst those who were engaged in the RLO and the Global Disability Summit, some common ideas emerged as lessons for the future for increasing an impact on policy and practice.

Bringing people together results in effective change:
Almost everyone interviewed mentioned the critical value of relationships in influencing high-level change, and the benefits of the RLO's ability to bring stakeholders together to develop and strengthen these relationships, networks & ideas. This happens during formal activities, but also, crucially, in informal 'behind the scenes' moments. Travel and accessibility adaptation budgets for researchers from the global South and researchers and practitioners with disabilities are crucial and highly effective in helping to raise profiles and move towards a more inclusive and equitable academic arena.
The growth of online meetings resulting from Covid-19 has revealed a more democratic platform for some - those from the global South, and people with certain disabilities may no longer be excluded due to budget or accessibility constraints.

The ability to act quickly and flexibly enables research evidence to impact policy change:
The 'windows of opportunity' when political leaders become interested in changing policies (on a national or global level) are very unpredictable, and often don't last long before interested individuals or topics of attention move on. Research programmes, however, typically take years from conception to published results. Programme plans and budgets which have a good degree of flexibility, such as the RLO had, enable them to respond when these opportunities arise**.** Other recommendations linked to this factor included:

- Leading individuals who already have established networks and connections are crucial for making fast and effective in-roads at high-levels of policy and practice.
- The practical role of an intermediary (such as the Impact Initiative) to publicise evidence and to support and increase the impact of connections between academics and policy makers and practitioners is of great value. Almost all interviewees stressed that the Impact Initiative brought time, energy and communications expertise that many researchers lack.
- Research evidence that is communicated consistently, innovatively, and to a wide audience, has the best chance of influencing change. Although a high-level event such as the GDS brought benefits, some interviewees spoke of other successful avenues such as continuous engagement with national-level policy makers and in posting papers and articles at lower-level political activities, which can contribute to a more 'nudging' approach in influencing change. One interviewee suggested a kind of buddying/mentoring scheme bringing mid-level civil servants to collaborate with researchers, to raise awareness of each. Others expressed the advantage of having research evidence readily available in different formats, to present to different audiences as soon as needed.
- Practitioners such as large INGOS are much less influenced by such 'trends' and more dependable in their long-term commitment to change than high-level political players or institutions, as well as being well placed for practical implementation. Increasing research collaboration with INGOs could therefore be a good investment.

In engaging with the Global Disability Summit of 2018, each individual from the RLO was determined to make the most of this rare opportunity: when top-level decision-makers take an interest in a topic at that very same moment that relevant new research has just been published. It is clear that the RLO was not the driving factor in initiating research in disability and education at this time, nor in introducing the researchers to concepts of working together and with practitioners. What perhaps is most significant is that the RLO served to strengthen and mobilise an already existing Community of Practice that was unique to the disability and education sector, and reached much wider than the academic community. Through the programme and the support of the Impact Initiative, it provided a 'platform' to enable this community to come together, to strengthen, pool and publicise their evidence and their ideas, and to influence policy and practice on global and national levels.

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