Rethinking **Research** Collaborative

Case study: Kate Newman

Resource materials to support fair and equitable research partnerships

Kate Newman, Christian Aid, UK

This case study explores insights from Dr Kate Newman, co-Head of Christian Aid's Centre of Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning (REL). She has worked in both the UK university and UK INGO sector. A key aim of REL is to build more rigorous research practice within Christian Aid. In 2017, Kate was invited to join an Arts and Humanities Research Council moderator panel; here she shares her experience.

Background and context

In June 2017, I was invited to participate as member of a Moderator Panel to interview 8–10 finalists who had applied for a large (up to £3m) Global Challenges Research Fund grant. The initial invitation suggested that preparation time would be about a day, and then the interviews would take place over three days – a total workload of four days, for which I would receive an Honoria fee of about £425. While the fee would not cover my salary costs for four days' work, in discussions with my line manager we decided that there was a strategic value to my participating – for example, I would learn more about this type of grant, engage with academic funding proposals and therefore deepen my understanding of the research funding environment, the types and forms of proposals that get considered, and the types of assessment criteria used. So I accepted the invitation.

Preparing for the panel

Two weeks later I received the bundle of proposals that had been invited to interview – in the end 12 candidates had been selected. Each proposal included over 100 pages of information: the initial case for support, pathways to impact and justification of resources, along with letters of support, CVs, six sets of moderator comments and the Principal Investigator's response to those. Each panel member was expected to read all 12 proposals, and to be the 'introducer' (i.e. summarise the range of supporting material and raise key questions) for six of these.

It took me a good week to read the material – this meant working into the evening and over two weekends, as I didn't have much flexibility to reorganise my week. While academics at the end of June and early July may have relative flexibility in their workloads, as teaching has finished, the INGO calendar works at a different rhythm, and our day-to-day work is very dependent on team and organisational needs, so I had to make time elsewhere. Moreover, it was the first time I had done anything like this and I found it overwhelming and intimidating. I had never read an academic funding proposal before, or been part of a panel. I grappled with the style of writing, the language used – both the academic and funding terminology. I had some bullet points that suggested what I needed to do as an introducer, and research council guidelines on the role of a moderator panel, but this was the extent of the input I received. Ahead of the panel meeting I therefore

had a few sleepless nights. I would have withdrawn if I had not been concerned about reputational repercussions for me and my organisation, and about the fact that I had been advocating for practitioners to be involved in this process, and the opportunity was such a good one.

At the panel

I turned up at the panel, and the chairperson was lovely, as were the other panel members; I breathed a sigh of relief! But no one made any effort to explain expectations to me; I don't think anyone had considered what it might be like as a practitioner to be in that space. There was no real introduction of who we each were or the skills we brought, or clarification as to whether I was there as 'the practitioner' and should comment extensively on the practice-based elements of the proposals, or if each panel member was to be expected to contribute across the whole discussion. Being the only practitioner among a group of four academics meant it was quite difficult to get my voice heard, not because they weren't listening, but because I was speaking a 'foreign language' and there was no one else on the panel who could respond from their experience.

Reflection

As a practitioner, my day-to-day work is not focused on academic endeavour, although I have a good academic training; I rarely write or read academic materials. This means that the leap from my practice to reading the academic proposals was enormous and probably slowed my reading speed and my ability to pick up salient points quickly; it also made it hard to judge the quality of proposals from a research perspective. What I could see quickly was whether and how the efforts at 'development impact' were realistic and appropriate, if they were properly resourced, and the extent to which they were likely to engage with and respond to practitioner needs. But although the other panel members were respectful of my input and we tried to explore impact, there was not space in the panel meeting to do this properly or prioritise it in relation to our funding decisions. The academic coherence trumped development impact every time.

Suggestions for the future

In assessing these bids – where new and different types of impact are considered – it is important to include non-academic members on resource allocation panels. However, if we as practitioners are going to participate with impact there are certain processes that could be institutionalised to maximise effectiveness. Here are four ideas to support this:

1. **Forming the panel.** More time could be given to forming the panel and sharing what we each brought, and then assigning roles based on the range of skills and knowledges

that existed in the room. Part of this would include clarification of whether panel members are representatives of their sector/discipline/expertise area, or there as an individual bringing their own thoughts and perspectives. Being clear about how you are positioned in the panel impacts on how any individual participates. For example, I wasn't sure how assertive I should have been in terms of impact and development benefit, as I wasn't sure if I was speaking as the voice of civil society, or just as an individual. Forming the panel should also include discussion on how to weight different aspects of the proposal in the assessment. In my panel there was a representative from the global South – but she was an English literature academic. Just living in the global South does not make you an expert on development research!

2. **Exploring concepts of impact.** As noted in some of the resource materials there are a variety of interpretations of impact. In another event we talked about 'bureaucratic impact' on one end of a continuum and 'real world change' at the other and discussed different conceptions of impact along the way. Airing these differences would have helped in prioritisation and contributed to our assessment and interview approach.

3. **Coaching and supporting practitioners.** Entering into an academic space as a practitioner is challenging. Language use and forms of discussion are different in different settings; the way proposals are interrogated and analysed is different, as is the interaction with candidates on the interview panel. I think that there could have been more investment in preparing/supporting practitioners ahead of the panel. At the very least this could include a phone call to talk through the process and to explain roles and terminology, and give advice about how to start in engaging with the material. A more in-depth training could include role playing and scenario discussions – an approach which might also be useful with academics to create space for mutual learning and exchange.

4. **Payment.** The payment did not cover my salary. Moreover, it could only be paid to me, not my organisation. But I participated in the panel as part of my role in my organisation, because we assessed the strategic value of participation – I was not there in an individual capacity. This meant I received the honoria and then made a charitable donation to my organisation, equal to the honoria; but recognised that I contributed unpaid for time to the panel process. If practitioners are to be involved in panels their time needs to be properly paid for, and if they are part of a civil society organisation payment will need to be to that organisation – and will in all likelihood have to include value added tax.

Rethinking Research Collaborative

About the collaborative

The Rethinking Research Collaborative is an informal international network of organisations – academics, civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations and research support providers – who are committed to working together to encourage more inclusive responsive collaborations to produce useful and accessible international development research. It first came together to understand and develop principles and practice to support fair and equitable partnerships in response to global development challenges. It is planning a series of initiatives to encourage greater diversity of participation and leadership in international development research.

About these materials

These materials – an introduction, six modules and a set of case studies – provide insights and ideas to support research stakeholders to translate eight principles we have identified for fair and equitable research partnerships into practice. They were written by staff of Christian Aid's Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning, and bring together original ideas with research carried out by the Rethinking Research Collaborative. They were funded by a grant from UK Research and Innovation (NS/A000075/1).

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