Project and Studentship proposal

‘Understanding and improving research capacity in the global South’

The Robert Beevers Memorial studentship, with Christian Aid and The Open University, are co-funding this PhD studentship

In 2015 The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) was launched as a 5-year £1.5bn investment of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) into research as a means of addressing the problems faced by developing countries. A key tenet of the fund has been to build research capacity in the global South: in research institutions and civil society as well as through broader national and transnational knowledge systems and processes. However, there has been limited analysis of what is understood by ‘research capacity’, and an implicit set of assumptions which suggest that such capacity will be built through knowledge transfer from global North to global South.

A 3-year PhD studentship (available to an Open University Graduate), with substantial funding from the Robert Beevers Memorial Studentship and Christian Aid, has been created to research these issues. The studentship will critically engage with mainstream understandings of ‘research capacity’ and develop new conceptualisations by mapping and comparing the research/knowledge ecosystem in two countries in the global South. The countries will be chosen collaboratively from those where Christian Aid currently works and will be selected to provide contrasting experiences. For example, the research might involve comparing a country with an established academic tradition with one that has had less investment in this area; or it might examine different cultural practices and understandings of research. In particular, it would aim to explore questions such as:

- How is research understood, produced and used nationally?
- What role is played by civil society (national and international) – as research producers, research users and research capacity builders?
- How do different actors build partnerships and networks to develop their own research capacity and/or tap into that provided by other organisations?
- How is research capacity understood and developed – in individuals, institutions and more broadly in society?

The two-country comparison will enable understandings of different opportunities for and challenges to research capacity building in each context and foster learning for those involved. The study will also contribute new ways of understanding research capacity and will inform the policy and practice of research capacity building in other contexts.

Christian Aid is an international NGO that has always worked in partnership, which it understands as a process of mutual learning and exchange. Christian Aid is interested in research capacity development and how its expertise can be applied in this area. To this end Christian Aid recently launched its ‘Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning’ (REL) with capacity strengthening as one of its key remits. REL hopes to nurture skills and knowledges in Christian Aid staff (both in the UK and country offices) so that they are able to develop strong research partnerships and practices that will
complement and reinforce their programme and policy work on poverty eradication. A key dimension is to enable staff and partners to value and evidence their work to inform global debates on development. Therefore, the research produced through this studentship will inform Christian Aid’s thinking on ‘what is research capacity?’ and how Christian Aid engages to strengthen research capacity.

As well as the facilities available to doctoral students at The Open University, Christian Aid would make office space available in London, encourage close links with the Centre of Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning, and facilitate mutually beneficial access to country programmes.

Candidates wishing to apply should think about what knowledge and prior training they would bring from their own background to this research and to identify questions they consider relevant from their own academic and professional experience. Clear, well-informed and feasible proposals of no more than 2000 words (exclusive of references) are invited. In addition to following the guidance for doctoral applicants on The Open University website, proposals should explain how the research would be approached in a way that it would:

a. Make an original contribution to academic knowledge
b. Build ‘research capacity’ through the process
c. Deliver appropriate practitioner focussed outputs during the process

Guidance for applicants

The PhD would start on 1st October and the deadline for applicants is 7th May 2018. The application procedure should follow that laid out in The Open University website for applying to a PhD:

http://www.open.ac.uk/postgraduate/research-degrees/how-to-apply/mphil-and-phd-application-process

Note that there is some guidance on the website on how to write a research proposal. Remember that the proposal length for this special call is 2000 not 1000 words. It is important to think about gaps in the literature/current state of knowledge (also from your experience if appropriate) which the research will aim to fill, how you would design and carry out the research (explain your methods as fully as possible), and what qualifications and experience you bring to the project (why are you the right person to do it?).

For further information about the Christian Aid see www.christian-aid.org, and for the Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning, see:


If you wish to talk to someone at the OU about applying, discuss your ideas or draft proposal, please contact Jude Fransman (jude.fransman@open.ac.uk).