ACCESS

Reflections on the ACCESS Flexible Fund

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About this commentary

This document offers a set of reflections on setting up the ACCESS Flexible Fund. The aim of ACCESS is to advance the visibility, use and impact of the social sciences in addressing environmental problems. Our work programme is diverse, including capacity building, innovation, scoping activities and networking, underpinned by three guiding principles: knowledge co-production, sustainability and equality, diversity and inclusion. We aim to work reflexively across our five year programme, documenting learnings and sharing them as widely as possible across interdisciplinary social science communities in multiple sectors. This commentary on our Flex Fund is an example of that.

About the Flexible Fund

The ACCESS Flex Fund has a total value of £1m, is a core element of the project and 20% of the total grant award. It was also mandatory part of the project, as laid out in the call documentation issued by Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It's not hard to see why a funding council would be keen on such a fund. It encourages innovative approaches, can bring new researchers into a project team, and outsources the research commissioning process to the team involved. Given that ACCESS is an unusual investment combining leadership team, project and network, providing a mechanism like the Flex Fund to stimulate innovation and extend the investigator team made a lot of sense. There was also a sense that there was still much to learn about how to effectively enhance the visibility and impact of social science in addressing environmental problems of all kinds.

With no 'Ladybird Guide to Flexible Funding' available that we could see, and few formal evaluations of flexible funds conducted to date, we began by gathering informal learnings from past and current investments before making key decisions. There were many such decisions confronting us:

- What type of awards were we seeking to make (e.g. project awards to teams vs fellowship awards to individuals)?
- How many rounds of funding would we have?
- When should we issue the call(s)?
- How many awards were we seeking to fund and across what duration and time period?
- What were our criteria of award?
- What kinds of outcomes did we want projects to have?
- Who would review the proposals?

With so many issues to resolve in a short time frame, it seemed like a mountain to climb.

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Who was involved?

We began by putting together a Flex Fund management group comprising as diverse a team as possible, including both academic and non-academic members representing different disciplines, university partners and sectors. This diversity was key to ensuring that a wide range of skills and experiences could shape the Flex Fund as it develops over time. With our commitment to capacity building, we ensured one member of the group was an early career researcher drawn from the project's Knowledge Exchange Fellows. To ensure consistency with our integrated Guiding Principles (equality, diversity and inclusion, sustainability and knowledge co-production), we invited theme leads to be involved, where capacity allowed. Reflecting the diverse leadership team of ACCESS, we invited a member of the Nature Agencies Social Research Network to join the management group. ESRC provided a representative to input detailed guidance on procedures and eligibility rules. The group was chaired by myself as the ACCESS Director, reflecting its importance to the project as a whole. We had the input of the Exeter Project Manager and administrative lead, to arrange meetings, circulate agendas, take minutes and liaise with research admin teams. We would call on the skills of our ACCESS Communications Manager when it came to publicising the call for proposals, and our extensive network of Co-investigators to establish a peer review college.

It would be crucial to ensure the Flex Fund had clear aims and delivered on the overall ACCESS objectives. As a group, we decided upon the following aims for the fund, building on the wording provided by ESRC in the call for proposals:

1. to explore and produce new ideas, approaches, datasets, synthesis and impact activities
2. to foster a vibrant and cohesive environmental social science community by giving ECRs as well as academics and stakeholders from outside ACCESS the opportunity to bid for resource, lead and collaborate activities;
3. to support inter and transdisciplinary collaborations that connect the social sciences with other disciplines and stakeholder partners.

As is clear from these, the Flex Fund was not primarily oriented around conventional research. That makes it interestingly different from most funding calls, but also opens up uncertainties around its boundaries. If not research, then what exactly is it for?

Gathering evidence

Drawing on our existing networks, we arranged to speak to as many academics and project managers involved in other flexible funds as possible, to learn from their own activities. In every case, they were open about sharing their experiences with us:

- UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC)
- Place Climate Action Network (PCAN)
- UK Unconventional Hydrocarbons research programme (UKUH)
- Centre for Energy Demand Reduction (CREDS)
- Exeter ESRC Impact Accelerator Award (IAA)
- Exeter Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health
- Groundwork Cheshire Lancashire and Merseyside
- Building Communities Generator Fund (GW4)
- COVID Rapid Response Call (UKRI)
- Mental Health Network Plus Fund (UKRI)
- The UK Carbon Capture and Storage Research Centre (UKCCSRC)
- Emerging Minds Network Funding Call (UKRI)

In addition, we collated the experiences of our project advisory board who had led previous ESRC funded programmes fostering inter and transdisciplinary collaborations. In each case, we asked simple questions: what were the main challenges you faced in distributing funds? How much did you steer both the content and the process of funding awards? How have you dealt with aspects such as EDI, sustainability and interdisciplinarity? Have you included Blind Review procedures in order to promote diversity, and if so, how? What were the main challenges involved in that? Our goal was to gather as much informal learning as we could before deciding next steps. Fortunately for us, they were all very gracious, sharing their time, experiences and documentation (e.g. application forms). We began to learn that distributing sizeable amounts of funds was resource intensive, complex and challenging. Administering blind review required careful forethought, to prevent the need to 'strip out' identifiers after bids were submitted. The depth of peer review could be calibrated to the size of the award, with light touch reviews for small grants and multiple formal reviews for larger awards.

We benefited from two activities early in the ACCESS project. First, we developed internal process guidance on EDI for recruiting to our first PhD Summer School (led by Knowledge Exchange Fellow, Sarah Golding, and ACCESS EDI Lead, Kate Burningham). Second, we applied this guidance for recruiting the ACCESS Leadership College, a cohort of emerging environmental social science leaders across sectors, led by Co-Investigator Saffron O'Neill. With recruitment procedures that employed blind review of applications, a portfolio approach to ensure diversity, commitment to the ACCESS Guiding Principles, and clear application documentation, we were fortunate to have ready-made models to follow from inside our own project!

We also benefited from ESRC guidance. For example, a key plank of our approach would be to adopt a portfolio approach. Learning from previous ESRC funding experiences, this means using diversity of project type and outcome as a guiding principle in making awards. It means wording the call for proposals to ask for different types of award and using an additional criterion beyond 'scientific excellence' to ensure a variety of awards are made at the review stage.

Working through the tensions

Administrative constraints and a bit of luck
Our project was already complex in structure with multiple tasks. It began to dawn on us that the project management and administrative capacity needed to effectively administer the Flex Fund was formidable and could swamp our operations team. Due to the way funding takes place, the burden would be highly uneven – acute at certain times of the year when closing dates occurred, but lighter at other times. We would need to make careful choices, making the best of the resources we had. We were also lucky. We benefitted from an unexpected staff budget surplus due to lengthy recruitment procedures at the beginning of the project. This made available 'extra' administrative resources that could be channelled directly into managing the funds.

Single vs. multiple rounds of award
From an administrative perspective, the simplest path for the Flex Fund to follow would be to have a single round of funding and make a small number of large awards. This could employ a two stage process to limit the burden on both applicants and reviewers, with an initial Expression of Interest stage used to sift through a small number of promising applications invited to submit a Full Proposal. However, given our guiding principle of promoting EDI and the project aim of empowering early career researchers (ECRs), we opted against this, instead choosing a two round structure of funding award that was mapped against our five year programme. By beginning with a large number of small grants in Round 1 and then proceeding to a small number of larger grants in Round 2, we would have the potential to bring new and more diverse entrants into the environmental social science space, and offer a development pathway for ECRs in grant leadership. Round 1 would be small and short awards (less than 30k, less than 12m duration) aimed at ECRs and released in year 2 of the 5 year programme (2023). Once that was completed, we would take stock and evaluate. Round 2 would be larger and use up the remaining resource, with two year duration projects funded towards the end of 2024. We decided on a simple 25/75 split of the total funds in this way, meaning about 8 awards in Round 1 and about 3 awards in Round 2.

Hands-on vs. laissez faire
Another key tension was how much to intervene in funding awards, steering the content and direction of applicant teams. Given our goals to promote inclusive collaborations across sectors, ECR leadership and increased use of environmental social science knowledge and data, there was a strong case for engaging in concerted efforts to communicate widely across environmental sectors, build capacity for collaborations in environmental social science and forge diverse project teams. For example, we discussed holding 'sandpit' or 'crucible' type events to enable new networks and application teams to be created. However, with our limited administrative capacities, we decided not to do this with the first round of small grants. Instead, we opted for a series of activities expected to promote wider access to the funds, yet were achievable with our available capacity and kept to ESRC funding rules (see next pages).

Communicating the Flex Fund
First, we developed a communications strategy for the Flex Fund that aimed to make accessible information about the fund as widely available as possible. We discussed the best ways to reach diverse social groups including ethnic minorities, drawing on the University of Exeter's communications expertise. We revised the wording of a Flex Fund press release to be less academic in tone, to more effectively communicate the fund across sectoral boundaries. Second, we held a webinar to spread the word as widely as possible and used a Padlet during the webinar to field questions about the fund and provide a forum for people to contact each other and form new partnerships. Third, we extended the duration of the time period between announcing the call and the closing date, to afford as much time as possible for applicants to communicate with potential project partners and to create diverse application teams.

How successful has this approach been? It is difficult to judge at this stage but we do have data about levels of interest and engagement with our communication channels. Overall, this suggests a strong interest in the Flex Fund, but perhaps more interest shown by academic researchers to date than other sectors.

Press Release
We sent out a press release to 246 national media contacts with an interest in Climate, Environment, Social Sciences and Science. We had a 35% open rate with a 7 % click-through. We also sent out a press release using the Academy of Social Sciences' media list (approx. 300) and we had a 19% open rate with a 3% click-through. In addition, we sent out a more targeted email and press release to 71 nature organisations suggested by our partners at Forest Research and the Environment Agency, with a 33% open rate and 11% click-through. The Flex Fund was included in several newsletters including Catapult Connected Places and ACCESS was featured in an article in Research Professional News about the Flex Fund.

Twitter
To date, there have been over 15 Flex Fund-related tweets that together generated 9,466 impressions with 520 engagements at 6% engagement rate.

Newsletter
We have included several articles about the Flex Fund in our weekly newsletter. The ACCESS webinar article saw one of our highest open and click-through rates – 51% and 16%.

Website
We have had 4,353 page views to the main Flex fund page – our most visited website page.

Webinar
We had 84 individuals attending the live webinar. 82% used a university email address to register. The spread of universities was wide mostly from England but there were a few attendees from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We have had 199 people watch the recording.

Padlet
We had 32 people contribute to the Flex Fund Padlet which was open to anyone to post questions or express interest in finding partners. We have limited ability to identify who is engaging in this way, except for the Padlet where we had five organisations – Carbon Trust, Catapult, DAERA, REGEN, Natural Environment Research Network looking for academic partners and only one academic partner (Newcastle University) looking for someone to collaborate with.

Email and phone
We had approximately 80 enquiries from when the call opened to when it closed.

Promoting diverse sectoral leadership, involvement vs. conformity to funding rules

Another set of challenges relate to project leadership, involvement and eligible funds. There are a number of ESRC funding rules that shaped how Round 1 evolved. First, it is mandatory that project leads/Principle Investigators are employed at eligible research institutions, not public, private or third sector organisations. Second, it is unusual for early career academic researchers who are employed on fixed term contracts to be permitted to lead applications by academic institutions, if those applications involve projects that will extend beyond their existing employment contracts. Third, ESRC rules stipulate that no more than 30% of the value of an award could be allocated to non-research institutions from public, private or third sectors.

Given that ACCESS has been tasked by ESRC to transform environmental social science, to work co-productively across sectoral boundaries with partners from other sectors, and to empower early career researchers, it is arguable that these funding rules and structural procedures are a constraint on our project aims. What we were able to clarify was that early career researchers could lead on Flex Fund bids, provided they secured a letter of support from the eligible research organisation that they intended to be based at, stating that they will be supported for the duration of the grant if successful. It is also worth pointing out that ESRC is unusual by comparison to other UKRI funding councils, many of whom do not allow any resource, not to mind 30% of project budgets, to be allocated to non-research institutions. Even so, ACCESS was reaching out to interdisciplinary social scientists in all sectors. We wanted to have the freedom to promote social science leadership and resources that were open to all sectors. However, following queries we were assured that the funding rules would not permit this and we would have to live with that constraint of those existing structures.

Clarifying the ask vs. scope for innovative thinking

We faced some uncertainty around what we actually wanted to fund. As mentioned, we were not seeking to fund research projects in any conventional sense. We also needed to avoid duplication of our own project tasks. So that made clear what we did *not* wish to fund. But what does that leave exactly? At the pre-funding stage, the clearer our ideas were, the easier it would be to write the call documents. How then to be as open as possible to innovative or unanticipated ideas? We decided to stress our openness to risky bids that might fail but bring new learnings. And with clarity necessary for the wording of our call documents in order to maximise accessibility, we came up with a few suggestions that fitted with our overall goals, yet were open enough to invite freedom of thought: new frameworks or ideas; networking events targeting particular audiences; novel communication tools such as infographics.

Blind peer review vs. transparent applicants

Having examined in detail how other funds, such as UKERC and the ACCESS Leadership College had handled blind peer review, we opted to divide the review stage for our Round 1 applications in two parts. Following initial eligibility tests, the scoring of applications would be conducted by a college of peer reviewers who would be blind to their authors' identities and affiliations. We would also strive to make that peer review college as diverse as possible, calling on project partners across the ACCESS network drawn from public, private and third sectors. Consistent with blind review, the application form, and guidance to applicants, would be designed to omit identifiers. Only at the review panel stage, which would consider applications in 'bands' reflecting different levels of quality, would all information about applicant teams be made available. We still have to learn how to minimise the impacts of unconscious biases at this 'open' point of the process, but we developed an understanding that our portfolio approach and commitment to EDI would be strengthened by combining both parts of the application and evaluation process.

Our portfolio approach to funding was also why we opted against adopting a recent NERC assessment innovation in which a lottery approach is employed for grants above a certain quality level. The NERC approach allocates applications based on their quality as evidenced by peer review scores (similar to our approach). At the review panel stage, whereas the highest band were guaranteed funding, a lottery approach was used to randomly select award winners from the second highest band (i.e. all those above a certain threshold that merited award in principle). In contrast, we preferred to retain the capacity to select different types of high quality applications from within the bands of high scoring applications.

Clarifying criteria and outcomes of the award
With scientific excellence less relevant as an award criterion for the Flexible Fund, given that bids were not likely to propose new research activities, we needed to find other award criteria that provided a better fit with the ACCESS project aims and objectives. And we needed to
communicate these clearly and accessibly to both our (early career) applicants and peer reviewers. After discussion, we settled on five key criteria:

- Advance the use of social science to address climate and environmental challenges;
- Impact (i.e. identifiable outputs leading to identifiable outcomes);
- Novelty and significance;
- Approach and ACCESS Guiding Principles;
- Value for money.

We also settled on a number of discrete outcomes to orient potential proposals, with applicants encouraged to aim for at least two of these:

- New ideas or frameworks
- New methods of translating evidence or insights (e.g. communication tools)
- New networks
- Development of new skills or capacities
- Increased use of social science amongst specific target groups (e.g. people in diverse sectors (business/industry, civil society, public sector), non-social scientists (e.g. natural scientists, engineering and physical scientists, journalists and media actors).

Getting the documentation together

Before any call could be announced, we would need a Call for Proposals, an Application Form and an online submission procedure. Following lessons from other funds and our own Leadership College, we added an FAQ document to clarify essential details, anticipate questions and hopefully lessen the number of queries from prospective applicants. Early versions of funding documents were revised to be less academic in tone. We have responded to queries as they have come in over time.

Key conclusions

Looking back, a number of key lessons can be distilled that could be of benefit to other flexible funds. These include:

- Devise a team to manage the fund drawn from diverse disciplines and sectors
- Resource the team effectively with project management, administrative and communication support
- Meet regularly (e.g. monthly) and share minutes/actions afterwards
- Orient the flexible fund around the goals and intended outcomes of your specific project
- Learn from existing good practice
- Use the Flex Fund for capacity building as well as innovation (e.g. target funding at early career researchers, appoint an ECR to the fund management group)
- Encourage high-risk, high reward submissions
- Centre EDI, sustainability and co-production into all aspects of the funding programme (e.g. as mandatory conditions of award) and use blind review procedures where appropriate (see ACCESS Guiding Principles)
- Communicate widely and carefully the aims of the fund and application procedures using documents and slides with accessible language
- Use tools such as Padlets and Chat functions within webinars to respond to queries and encourage new collaborations
- Work reflexively to refine your approach as you proceed

Looking to the future

That is the story so far but many questions still remain:

- How many applications in Round 1 will we receive?
- How diverse will those applications be? For example, will they involve partnerships between academic researchers and non-traditional beneficiaries of social science funding, including local branches of national environmental organisations and delivery staff involved in environmental regulation?
- Will we be able to sign up sufficient numbers of diverse peer reviewers from our network of co-investigators and project partners, given that is a voluntary activity and many people are pressed for time?

- How easy will it be to reach a consensus across our review panel about the applications to reward?
- Will we achieve our goal of processing successful awards such that new projects commence in late 2023?

In terms of next steps, following the processing of Round 1 awards, we will evaluate how that has gone and refine our approach to Round 2 larger awards, with a call for proposals planned in Spring 2024.

We will survey all Round 1 applicants to gauge their perceptions of our call procedures. We will monitor what grants are awarded and to what extent they successfully achieve cross-sectoral partnerships. And we will work closely with award winners as they implement our ACCESS Guiding Principles to learn lessons that can be incorporated into the ACCESS network generally, and Round 2 larger grant award procedures in particular.

We will reflect on whether revising some of the ESRC funding rules – for example to allow a higher proportion of project funds to be allocated to non-academic project partners – could provide a more suitable structure with which to achieve project goals. By continuing a dialogue with ESRC and project partners such as the UK Nature Agencies (e.g. Environment Agency), we can discuss the value of using Round 2 to act as a real-world laboratory for testing the impacts of alternative eligibility rules and funding structures.

We will also consider how best to undertake a more 'hands-on' approach to guide larger funding bids in Round 2, in order to produce more transformative outcomes that build new partnerships and raise the visibility of environmental social science. This could include the following activities:

1. **An online 'match-making' service that aims to enable new connections and partnerships between academics and environmental organisations**. We are already preparing the ACCESS website to contain the profiles of academic social science researchers, which can then be widely advertised across public, private and third sectors. Profiles would list in layperson terms what their skills and expertise are, the kinds of projects they would be interested in, and encouragement for organisations interested in exploring ideas to get in touch directly with each academic expert.

2. **A series of regional engagement events, perhaps hosted by local ACCESS partners such as Universities or Nature Agency representatives, to meet with local branches of national environmental organisations (e.g. Groundwork, The Community Forest Network, Woodland Trust, EarthWatch, Trust for Conservation Volunteers)**. This can showcase different social science contributions and deliver early awareness of the upcoming Round 2

funding call, including opportunities the Flex Fund can present for those organisations to collaborate with academic social science researchers.

3. **A set of face-to-face 'crucible' or 'sandpit' activities that bring diverse applicant teams together to co-produce project proposals**. However, we are also mindful that there are limitations to such approaches in terms of forging enduring partnerships based on relationships of trust, and that prevent underwhelming outcomes for those involved. That said, they could be useful if following on from online and face to face engagement events as set out above.

This is just the first part of the story of the ACCESS Flex Fund. We are excited to see what the first round of funding will bring. We will continue to adopt a reflexive approach to fund administration, assess any tensions between funding structures and project goals, maintain dialogue with ESRC, document our learnings and share widely our experiences to benefit other organisations and funds to advance environmental social science.

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