

UK-India Covid-19 Partnership Initiative

UKRI (MRC, ESRC) and the [Department of Biotechnology \(DBT\)](#), India, are pleased to invite proposals to the UK-India Covid-19 Partnership Initiative.

This initiative will provide funding for collaborative research projects with potential to deliver public health impacts in mitigating the severity of the COVID-19 outbreak in both the UK and India.

In total, UKRI will make up to £4 million available in support of the UK component of the collaborative projects; with matched equivalent resource provided by DBT in support of the Indian components.

Background

Both the UK and India have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. DBT and UKRI have made significant rapid investments in COVID-19 research in 2020 to further our understanding of this disease. In recognition of the strong links between the UK and India, with the UK Indian Diaspora making up the largest ethnic minority group in the UK, DBT and UKRI have identified a unique opportunity to jointly support research focused on mitigating the severity of COVID-19 in South Asian/Indian populations, through the study of related ethnic groups in different environments.

In the UK, [emerging evidence](#) shows that, after taking account of age and other sociodemographic factors, people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds are nearly twice more likely to die of COVID-19 than White people. The rates of COVID-19 mortality among males of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian origin is far greater than those for similar White males.

The UK government and the UKRI COVID-19 R&I Taskforce have prioritised research into understanding and addressing the unexplained increased mortality rates experienced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. There is an urgent need for more detailed data on why COVID-19 disproportionately impacts people from minority ethnic backgrounds in the UK, building the essential evidence base needed to make recommendations to decision makers and protect the health of these groups. In July, MRC and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) [announced the funding of six new projects](#) to improve our understanding of the links between COVID-19 and ethnicity. In November ESRC will announce further projects to understand the reasons underpinning the vulnerability of minority ethnic groups to COVID-19.

In early September 2020, India became the country with the second highest number of cases in the world. India has a unique transmission dynamic due to early government nationwide lockdown interventions followed by a series of relaxations during a 5-phase “unlock”.

As of early October 2020, the COVID-19 mortality rate in India is around 1.6%. A similar trend has been observed in neighbouring South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, with COVID-19 mortality rates of 2.1%, 0.6%, 1.4%, and 0.4%, respectively.

The death rates in India appear proportionately lower than in the UK. It is important to understand the relevant underlying factors. Age, sex and pre-existing medical conditions have already been

established as predictors of adverse COVID-19 outcomes, but the role of social and other environmental factors, as well as ethnicity, are less well understood.

The funders share the view that it is now timely to pool resources, and bring together the necessary funds and expertise, in order to support research that will underpin efforts to tackle the severity of the pandemic in the UK and India.

Aim

Through the UK-India Covid-19 Partnership Initiative, the funders aim to:

- Support world-leading collaborative research teams focused on mitigating the severity of COVID-19 in South Asian populations in the UK and India.
- Enhance existing partnerships and develop new partnerships between the UK and India in efforts to address COVID-19
- Strengthen the strategic relationship between the UK and India.

Objectives and scope

The objective is to deliver research funding for internationally competitive and innovative collaborations between researchers from India and the UK.

Short term (up to 18 month) proposals are sought, with rapid activation required. Proposals must consider the immediate morbidity and mortality associated with COVID-19 and demonstrate how progress within the period of award could make a direct and significant contribution to the understanding, prevention and/or management of the COVID-19 outbreak among South Asian populations in the UK and India.

Proposals must focus on South Asian populations **in both the UK and India**. As this is a joint UK-India call, the primary population of focus should be Indian, but, where justified, applicants may include an additional focus on other South Asian populations within the UK and India.

The funders are particularly encouraging proposals that: explore the role of external influences and demographic variables in influencing COVID-19 through the study of related ethnic groups in different environments; and/or improve our understanding of the differential outcomes in populations of similar ethnic origin.

Where appropriate, proposals may include a focus on different regions and/or sub-populations within the respective UK and Indian South Asian populations.

Proposals should focus on comparative research between South Asian populations in the two countries that will advance our understanding of COVID-19 in different environments in the below research areas:

Mechanistic studies of the disease and its sequelae

- Identification of key biological determinants of infection severity and immune protection;
- Better understanding the immune response of asymptomatic disease carriers;

- Identifying biosocial interactions that impact on the severity of COVID-19, including for example, understanding of the effects of complex demographic variables, such as age, gender, ethnicity, migration history, socioeconomic status, employment situation and diet;
- Identifying and understanding the effect of prior health status and influence of co-infecting respiratory pathogens on the immune response to primary infection;
- Understanding the effect of abiotic influences (including, but not limited to, climate and population density)
- Mental health and neurological consequences- comparative studies understanding the biological contributors of the disease, its management and/or isolation on mental health, mental illnesses, and neurological consequences, including assessment of the presence and pathology of the virus in the brain. Development of interventions to better manage mental health and neurological consequences.

Virology, Immunity and Pathophysiology

- Research focused on defining critical biological/pathological parameters necessary for the prioritisation of preventative, supportive and/or therapeutic interventions.
- This includes understanding viral genotype/phenotype relationships, the immunology and immunopathology of the disease, the immunity generated post-severe, -mild and -asymptomatic infection and the persistence of that immunity.
- Studies should ensure they include relevant links to epidemiology or clinical expertise and where appropriate the established large-scale studies and consortia in this area.

Epidemiology

- Control and mitigation -research to understand context specific social distancing and other non-pharmaceutical intervention measures that are most effective at preventing or reducing spread of SARS-CoV2;
- Research to investigate how such measures may be most effectively adapted and promoted.

Proposals in the following areas are outside the scope of this UK-India Covid-19 Partnership Initiative:

- *Proposals solely or primarily focussed on either the UK or India. Applications to this scheme must demonstrate potential impact in **both** the UK and India. [Separate funding avenues exist for collaborations primarily focused on benefitting populations in low- and middle-income countries. Please contact international@mrc.ukri.org for details.]*
- *Proposals for pilot or scoping research that do not promise outcomes with a direct and significant contribution to the current pandemic.*
- *Highly applied healthcare focussed proposals, for example focussed on impact of COVID-19 on care delivery of a different disease.*
- *Proposals more appropriate to other existing funding calls and/or other research funders.*
- *Longer term research proposals that address the COVID-19 emergency or future pandemics that do not meet the urgency guidelines for this call.*
- *Proposals that duplicate research and innovation activities previously supported*

Applications should demonstrate the additionality that is provided through the international collaboration proposed – for example, access to knowledge, expertise (scientific and/or socio-cultural), resources, cohorts, populations etc.

Interdisciplinary proposals are welcomed, where appropriate. Review will include experts from a broad range of relevant disciplines.

Proposals must be timely, with rapid activation, to enable early and valuable outcomes to be established and/or to access time-dependent resources.

UKRI and DBT have made significant investments in COVID-19 research and would encourage applicants to consider carefully the value of linking to and building on existing investments. Further information on existing investments can be found at the following links:

- [UKRI COVID-19 investments](#)
- [DBT COVID-19 investments](#)

[Department of Biotechnology has played a proactive role in fighting the mammoth challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on the research and innovation of interventions. The department has supported numerous activities for detection, understanding, treatment, and prevention of COVID-19. The PAN –India 1000 SARS-CoV-2 RNA Genome Sequencing Initiative has created a comprehensive resource for researchers to understand the genetic underpinnings of the viral strains circulating in India. The department has taken a lead in establishing 5 COVID-19 repositories with large collections of patient samples (with well-annotated clinical and pathological data) to foster biomedical research on COVID-19 and to develop various treatment strategies.

While planning research under this call, we strongly encourage the research groups to make use of these crucial resources available to further the understanding of the disease.]

Data produced as a result of this funding will need to be shared in line with the [Joint statement on sharing research data and findings relevant to the novel coronavirus \(nCoV\) outbreak](#).

Start Date and Duration

Projects must be up to 18 months in duration.

All proposals will need to be able to show how progress within the period of award could make a valuable contribution to the understanding, diagnosis, prevention and/or management of the COVID-19 outbreak, with data and tools/reagents generated under this call to be made widely available.

Projects must start by 1 May 2021. Applicant teams must be able to commence research quickly with relevant collaborations in place by the start of the research.

UK applicants should refer to the standard [MRC Guidance for Applicants](#) for information on what the starting procedure entails; please inform the relevant support staff in your organisation of this requirement to ensure the project starts on time.

Applicants from India should refer to DBT guidance for information on the pre-award process and should be prepared to proactively engage in DBT and finance processes to ensure that their project starts on time.

How to Apply

For each grant application, a lead Principal Investigator should be nominated from both the UK and India, who will act as focal points for contact with the funding agency in their respective countries.

- **[Intention to Submit \(ItS\)](#)**

UK based researchers planning to submit to this scheme should submit a short [Intention to Submit \(ItS\)](#) by 23:00 UK time on 11 November 2020. Please note, this step does not form part of the review process and the funders will not undertake eligibility checks at this point; applicants should not await a response from MRC UKRI following ItS submission, but simply continue with the development of the full proposal to be submitted by the deadline 16:00 UK time on 1 December 2020. The funders will use the ItS to help prepare the review process.

Applicants are not expected to submit an ItS to DBT, however, all details submitted to the MRC will be shared with DBT.

- **Full applications**

The UK and Indian applicants will develop a common research plan and jointly prepare the full proposal.

Full applications must be written in English and submitted to the MRC by the UK Lead PI (on behalf of both UK and Indian investigators) via the UKRI [Joint electronic Submission \(Je-S\) System](#). The Je-S submissions must be received by 16:00 UK time on the day of the deadline. UK applicants must complete all sections required for a standard research council grant proposal. Investigators from India are required to ensure due compliance of all eligibility conditions as described in "[Modalities of Participation and Funding for Indian Investigator\(s\)](#)".

The following additional attachment must be uploaded as an annexure on Je-S:

- Completed DBT proposal submission proforma ([Template for Administrative & Financial Considerations by DBT](#)) as type 'Non-UK Components' which summarises details of the Indian applicants and their requested costs (see Indian Costs below).

Once the UK Lead PI has submitted the application through Je-S, the UK Lead PI is requested to download the application and share this with their Indian Lead PI for onward submission by email to icone@dbt.nic.in by 4 pm (Indian time) on 3rd December 2020.

Successful grants will have their UK costs paid through Je-S and their Indian costs paid through DBT's system.

Additional guidance for 'Case for Support'

Briefly, the case for support may be up to 8 A4 pages in length (including illustrations and references) plus an optional additional one-page methodology annex, using Arial 11pt typeface with margins of 2cm on all sides. The Case for Support should address each of the following headings:

- 1 Title
- 2 Importance of the research

- 3 Scientific potential
 - 3.1 People and track record
 - 3.2 Research environment
 - 3.3 Research plans and deliverables
- 4 Ethics and research governance
- 5 Exploitation and dissemination.
- 6 Projects partners

Please see the call specific guidance for further [details](#).

Funding available

The size of grants will vary according to the needs of each research project but will need to provide a robust case for value for money.

In total, UKRI will make up to £4 million available in support of the UK component of the collaborative projects; with matched equivalent resource provided by DBT in support of the Indian components.

- MRC will make up to £4m available in total to cover the UK components of the collaborative research projects selected for funding under this call.
- DBT will provide matched funding to support a comparable research effort on the Indian side
- **UK based applicants may request up to a maximum of £1million per project** (with smaller requests also encouraged); with the equivalent, in terms of research effort, from DBT for the Indian component.
- The MRC will provide funding under standard arrangements and at 80% of the full Economic Cost (fEC).
- The UK element of funding will not cover UK PhD studentships or requests for capital items.
- Due to the tight time scales of this call, successful UK research organisations will need to adhere to strict spending requirements. For this call, the end date of the proposed research should be no later than 31 October 2022.
- Applicants should ensure that they have requested appropriate resources for data management and data sharing.

Eligibility

This call will fund partnerships between UK and India-based researchers working on COVID-19.

Principal investigators/applicants may only submit one application to this scheme as Principal Investigator but may be involved in more applications if listed as a co-investigator.

For support under this call, applicants must be eligible to apply for funding from their respective country's funding agency:

MRC

- For the UK-based participants, standard UKRI eligibility criteria as described on the [UKRI website](#) will apply. Research organisations that are eligible to apply to the MRC, for

example MRC units and institutes may apply to this call. Further information on eligibility is available in section 1 of the [MRC Guidance for Applicants](#).

DBT

- For the India-based participants, eligibility criteria have been explicitly described within [“Modalities of Participation and Funding for Indian Investigator\(s\)”](#).

The funders are seeking to support UK and India based researchers through this initiative. Although it is advised to keep their costs to a minimum, researchers from third country research organisations in affected countries providing important local engagement and context are welcomed as Co-Investigators on proposals. Other overseas researchers may be Co-Investigators, if they provide necessary expertise/access to resources not available in the UK/India. Support for the participation of third country researchers, should be reflected on the UK (and not the Indian) budget (and should be carefully justified).

Assessment criteria and decision-making process

To be funded, proposals must be internationally competitive and at a standard equivalent to that normally expected to be supported by each funding organisation.

Proposals will be reviewed firstly by external experts, chosen based on the subject matter of the proposal. These reviews will then inform an Expert Panel, who will make recommendations on outcome to UKRI and DBT.

The panel will comprise an equal number of UK and India -based members. On the UK side, we will strive to ensure a diverse and representative panel membership.

Applicants will not have an opportunity to respond to Panel comments in instances where feedback is provided, except where clarifications and/or changes are required as part of the award process.

Key assessment criteria for the submissions will include:

- The potential for the proposal to have an impact within the period of the award and to provide a unique value-adding contribution relative to existing activity.
- Access to required resources
- Applicant expertise and experience
- Partnership: including strength and clarity of collaborations and opportunities provided
- Design and feasibility of project plan
- Value for money (for UK and India)
- Alignment with WHO-Roadmap priorities

The decisions of the Panel will not be open to appeal and the funders reserve the right to amend the application process.

Funding decisions will be made through a joint process between MRC, ESRC and DBT.

Collaboration agreement, ethics and intellectual property

As the research projects will be carried out by multiple research organisations and project partners, the basis of collaboration between the organisations and project partners, including ownership of intellectual property (IP) generated during the project and rights to exploitation, and costs of IP

management (this is not an eligible (direct) cost to MRC UKRI or DBT), is expected to be set out in a formal collaboration agreement between the research organisations involved. It is the responsibility of the research organisations to put such an agreement in place within 3 months of the start of the UK component of the project. The terms of collaboration shall not conflict with MRC and DBT terms and conditions. When collaborating, researchers must conform to their respective, applicable requirements on research involving humans and animals.

The funders do not require ethics permissions and regulatory approvals to be in place when an application is submitted. However, Indian PIs of the consortium should apply to their institutional review boards (IRBs)/institutional ethics committees (IECs) at the time of submission of proposal to obtain necessary ethics approvals from all involved institutions. If an application is successful, these approvals must be submitted in a stipulated time to accomplish required administrative diligence. It is the responsibility of the host institutions to ensure that the appropriate ethics approval(s) has been obtained **(in both the UK and India)** and that no research requiring such approval is initiated before it has been granted

Reporting

It will be necessary for each funded group to submit reports to DBT and MRC in accordance with the respective regulations.

Key dates

Stage	Date
Deadline for compulsory Intention to Submit (to be submitted to MRC only)	11 th November 2020
Deadline for applicants to submit proposal (to be submitted to MRC only)	1 st December 2020
Deadline for applicants to forward proposal to DBT	3 rd December 2020
External/remote peer review	December 2020 – January 2021
Joint Panel Meeting	February 2021
Notice of decision date	February 2021
Funding start date	1 May 2021

Contacts and guidance

MRC: international@mrc.ukri.org

DBT: Dr. Ketan Thorat, Scientist-‘C’ || icone@dbt.nic.in ||

For further guidance please refer to [“Modalities of Participation and Funding for Indian Investigator\(s\)”](#) & *UK scheme specific guidance for applicants*