

## Summary Report

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# Webinar on writing a research proposal for international collaboration

18 June 2020



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## Introduction and context

On 20 April 2020, the Philippines joined the opening of the global Newton Fund Programme's opportunity calls for research and innovation projects. For the first time in its delivery of the Newton Agham Programme, The British Council in the Philippines partnered with the Department of Agriculture-Biotech to co-fund the Researcher Links Workshop Grants, a project that supports international cooperation through fully-funded workshops for PH and UK early-career researchers.

Researchers from higher education institutions and research institutions are eligible to apply for the Workshop grants. However, through the years, the same PH and UK institutions have been submitting applications, and subsequently are being awarded with the grant. Data shows that these institutions are mostly large, private, and situated in Metro Manila. These are also the same set of institutions that are being partnered by UK universities, creating lesser opportunities for smaller institutions to conduct their research.

We are still challenged to break paradigms to fully realise the capacity of other institutions to conduct research within their specialisation and mandate. For this reason, it is important to work on these institutions help to improve capacity.

One way of contributing to this growth is to aid in improving skills to produce a compelling proposal, relevant to the standards set by the Newton Fund body and the ODA requirements. We need to provide different viewpoints in the proposal-writing that could transform a scientific initiative to have a more social, economic, and even entrepreneurial relevance.

In this regard, we believe that a webinar to be conducted by a previously successful applicant could provide enough learning for emerging researchers and would later equip them in the process of applying for partnership opportunities in the future. This will apply only in the context of science but for Higher Education in general.

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# Session 1

## What Constitutes a Strong Research Proposal?

4 June 2020, 16.00-17.30 | MS Teams Live



### Webinar summary

**Dr Manuel Dayrit's** presentation was centred towards setting up for an international collaboration. He stated that the strength of a proposal begins with a clear idea simply explained, very succinct, and straight to the point. He referred to his two Newton Agham research grants to further illustrate his points: 1) Researcher Links Workshop on Universal Health Care in 2016 and the 2) Institutional Links Project on Primary Care Physicians in the Province of Northern Samar in 2017-2019.

Dr Dayrit said that in a proposal, there can be just one or two researchers who can incubate any idea they wanted to do. In his case, his projects began with a passion to improve health care in the country, a very timely and socially-relevant topic in the country. The Universal Health Care (UHC), as he stated, was an idea adopted by different countries. Their team partnered with the UK in understanding what the UHC was about considering the UK's national health service and they needed to understand more about that. There was much conversation among the team who are equally passionate about the idea.

Dr Dayrit also talked about other fundamental points a researcher must consider, distilling the key concepts and describing them properly being one. He stated that one should be able to convince the award-giving body that there is merit to the proposal. Additionally, proposals must be on priority with the governing body, which in his case were the British Council, Official Development Assistance (ODA), the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and the

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Department of Science and Technology (DOST).

Dr Dayrit continued to discuss about how they partnered with local and international collaborators willing to work with them. In his slides, he showed photographs of Philippine and UK collaborators and mentors involved in the project. These networks were found in his personal contacts and some professional colleagues in the past. They eventually ended up writing proposals together and have then established the collaborations.

In conclusion, Dr Dayrit enumerated the factors that made their applications successful: 1) Early preparations and study of guidance; 2) selection of highly-relevant topic such as the UHC and quality primary care; 3) identifying strategic collaborators in the UK and the Philippines; and, 3) a dedicated set of staff.

In 2019 the UHC Law was signed in the Philippines and Dr Dayrit shared that in some way, they could say that their Institutional Links project has contributed for the lawmakers to understand how to better prepare a primary physician for UHC.

In his introduction, **Professor Cameron Johnstone** showed how important it is for research proposals to adhere to the ODA requirements. He noted that it is best to consider how project plans, short-term objectives, and tangible deliverables could directly address the challenges of ODA. Furthermore, he suggests looking at the medium- and longer-term benefit of the research including the evaluation of performance and identification of wider impact socially & economically.

He cited key guide questions to consider: 1) Does it address economic development? 2) Is there evidence of the need for this research? 3) How will this be applied in the partner country? And lastly, 3) Who would benefit the project outcomes? Dr Johnstone believes that these vital points would satisfy the eligibility criteria of the ODA.

To provide the perspectives of a UK collaborator, Dr Johnstone also illustrated his reasons for engaging with Filipino researchers and shared the relevant skills and experience one would expect for a local partner. Academics, according to Prof Johnstone, are engaged in research and understanding the science of study, but it is important in the UK to go beyond understanding science and to ensure a positive effect to the society. Utilisation of outcomes of the project is important and as such, impact acceleration should be considered. Researchers consider that everything has a global impact and that proposal should not only benefit the UK, and Prof Johnstone added that the Newton Fund supports and adheres to this premise.

And in doing so, they also considered capacity of the research team especially in consideration of local applicability and understanding of local environments. He agreed that there is a greater drive for UK researchers to be better engaged to the applicability of research outputs whether it is in policy development, delivering a product, in the context of medicine, among others. In his

experience as a collaborator, he needed contributions from local research leaders to share own expertise and values. He had to expand local research knowledge and partnered with other institutions and have created a consortium that focuses on marine renewable energy meeting community demands.

In conclusion, Prof Johnstone enumerated the UK partner expectations from partner researchers, such as 1) Experience in subject area, and potential engagement in PH initiatives; 2) Track record of projects and publications that displays capabilities and capacity; 3) Complementary and good technical skills; 4) Interest, enthusiasm, and commitment to subject area; and finally, 5) Existing robust IT infrastructure for communications, and communication curb affected by time difference.

## Key points from Session 1 Q&A

Question	Answer from speakers
<p><b>How long did the preparation take by the time the proposal was submitted up to the time the project was implemented?</b></p> <p><b>How much were the grants</b></p>	<p>Approval of our workshop was given late of 2015 and the implementation was January of 2016. The Institutional Links project, due to processes in the grant disbursement, was delayed but it took us less than a year to prepare for the project</p> <p>On the local side of funding, the RLWK costed about PHP1.5M and the IL was about PHP6M to PHP 7M. <i>(Dr Dayrit)</i></p>
<p><b>What qualities and experience are UK institutions looking for in a Filipino partner?</b></p>	<p>It is important to have complementary skillsets and capabilities between partners. It's also vital to have local knowledge and bring local understanding of the specific subject area. <i>(Prof Johnstone)</i></p>
<p><b>What would be a good starting point in a research partnership for someone new in the research for collaborations?</b></p>	<p>You may find internet sources, including journals, for research ideas especially if you are particular with the literature and then you can find a problem you want to solve. The problem should be more than an academic exercise but the impact in the society that you're wanting to have</p> <p>Essentially, the starting point is the idea that you have and a partner in the UK who believes in that idea. <i>(Dr Dayrit)</i></p>

<p><b>How important is it to have government connections?</b></p>	<p>Government agencies are among the audience in the presentation of the project partnerships we proposed. And the existing engagement with the LGU of Northern Samar paved the way for the success of our Institutional Links project. <i>(Dr Dayrit)</i></p>
<p><b>Are emerging researchers in a good position to seek for research funding?</b></p>	<p>Yes. The contribution of early career researchers is key in research activities and it's important to develop the early career researchers' potential. New PhDs have the understanding of the scientific area and have an appreciation of the applicability of knowledge to the local application. <i>(Prof Johnstone)</i></p>
<p><b>What were the most challenging problems in the application process?</b></p>	<p>The most challenging and most important is crystallizing the research project pathways of impact and collaboration, and outlining it in the application form. We also had to think of deliverables and outputs and finally aligning these with the UK partner. <i>(Dr Dayrit)</i></p> <p>Detailing of your project versus the number of characters in the template portal is difficult as there is a message you want to send across in a condensed manner. <i>(Prof Johnstone)</i></p>
<p><b>Do government structures have bearing on the success of research collaboration initiatives?</b></p>	<p>The effect of government has something to do with the efficiency of administering such a programme. If there are problems that cause any delays caused by the system, then that affects in the administering the programme. <i>(Dr Dayrit)</i></p>
<p><b>With restrictions in the implementation of the project caused by COVID-19, how do you plan to reinforce your IL grant?</b></p>	<p>Infrastructure is vital, and there are platforms that we can use to meet such as Zoom. Within the work packages, we should structure the timing of these activities. Since you cannot have f2f meetings, in-country engagement with other stakeholders will be affected so we're also looking at submitting extension requests. This is already happening in other activities globally, so this is not unique as a situation so it will be a matter of restructuring your project timelines. <i>(Prof Johnstone)</i></p>

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## Session 2

### Assessing the value of research with a UK partner post-COVID-19

4 June 2020, 16.00-17.30 | MS Teams Live



### Webinar summary

**Dr Jopeth Ramis's** presentation discussed views on establishing relationships with UK-Philippine partnerships as an early career researcher completing a PhD in the UK. He began with ways of forging connections with the UK by finding mutual benefits for the research proposal. Jopeth shared that while research grant competition is fierce, one should consider having completed graduate school, published initial papers, and have work experience in the academe or industry. Such as in his case, he looked at the connections he wished to foster and surveyed maps available that specified regions and their priority areas—tissue engineering and regenerative medicine, to be precise.

He later suggested it is best to contact the professor who would move forward the collaborations and the students to the university. Scholarships and internal funding, Jopeth underlined, are also offered besides the Newton Agham and it's good to be aware of these opportunities.

He continued by emphasizing that alignment of the proposal to the priority of the UK and PH governments is fundamental. He then shared slides that showed the UK Research and Innovation's priorities such as 1) Global Food Security, 2) Technology Touching Life, 3) Digital Economy, 4) Animal and Plant Health, 5) Energy, 6) Urban Living Partnership, 7) Tackling



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Antimicrobial Resistance. Likewise, the Harmonised National R&D Agenda has identified priority areas for the Philippines including 1) Water Security, 2) Food and Nutrition Security, 3) Health, 4) Agriculture, 5) Energy, 6) Disaster Risk Reduction among many others.

Ultimately, Jopeth states that one's PhD process should be directed towards sustainable collaboration. It's important to plan ahead of the research and make way for contingencies; it is also equally vital to discover skills needed and find other networks beyond what one's institution can offer; and finally, Jopeth reminds the audience to attend conferences.

Jopeth concluded his presentation by sharing that initial proposal changes drastically and researchers should be ready to re-model and seek guidance from post-docs for help. Implementation goes a long way and includes publishing and to some extent, patenting, and applying for other grants. He advises that one should perpetuate this by maintaining connections with essential people whom one would meet in the future, and keep in mind one's skillsets, resources, and valuable network.

**Dr Michael Angelo Promentilla's** presentation was about investing in a UK-PH partnership and citing his experience with their Newton Fund grant as the case. He emphasized that the key point is investing in solving big problems and focussing on the 21st century challenges one should address. When one looks at the bigger picture, Mike illustrated, one can align these ideas on how they could achieve sustainable development goals and conceptualize the problem one would like to solve.

Their seed grant focused on envisioning how future cities will look like considering water-energy-nutrient nexus. They intended to bring together international researchers to understand the nexus for better water quality, energy supply, nutrient recycling and long-term social improvements of future cities.

The second point that he emphasized is the importance of developing partnerships as research requires different disciplines, sectors, and perspectives. In his slides he shared that they conducted series of workshops to understand the needs of stakeholders and see if they could translate the research to a business model. They also did focus group discussions and site visits.

The last key point that he highlighted was investing on people/team as they were able to train students and early career researchers. For exchange or researcher, he cited the case of Carla Pausta doing her internship in the UK while experiencing a different research culture and access to top of the line facilities. As a result, Ms Pausta was able to train undergraduate students of DLSU-Manila. According to Mike, his greatest accomplishment is having a team who shared the same mission of his advocacy. He always tells his team to not be afraid of being criticized, take risks, and not be afraid to make mistakes.

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His advice to researchers was to use the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to change our system. For him, the pandemic serves as a catalyst to enhance the future. His Newton Prize grant is to initiate a change for a sustainable agri-food system particularly to use fertilizer from wastewater to grow food.

**Dr Devendra Saroj** presented their experience with the Newton Prize project entitled Project NexCities (Water-Energy-Nutrient Nexus in Cities of the Future) with partnerships from both the Philippines (DLSU-Manila and Maynilad) and UK (University of Surrey and University of Nottingham). They envisioned to bring together interdisciplinary researchers to understand the nexus for better water quality, energy saving, nutrient recycling for food security and long-term social and environmental improvements in future cities.

Metro Manila is the ideal future city to start testing some of the hypotheses to understand the nexus between very important parameters and to plan long term social and environmental improvements. Their goal was to improve clean water sanitation (SDG 6) to address water quality issue; and at the same time, improve cities and communities (SDG 11). They also wanted to address responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) by making use of the nutrients in a sustainable way. He added that they are contributing to climate action (SDG13) and setting a common goal for partnerships (SDG17).

Identifying a call is the first thing before anything can materialize. They had a very interesting call because they have a funding body from the UK and the Philippines. What they developed was a proposal to address challenges drafted by these funding bodies together. The grant aims to provide new insights and stimulate creative thinking and contribute to economic development welfare in Southeast Asia. Proposals should also enable researchers to explore new regional or international approaches. There are a lot of requirements in a single call document and it's challenging to keep everybody happy.

Researchers also need to consider their own research interest within their research boundary. First thing should be to identify the vision of the funding body. One must address their progress honestly and in a consistent way which is believable. The reviewer should feel proposal is achievable, within the budget and concrete enough. One should produce knowledge that they consider pathways that people can use during the project and after that.

For eligibility, researchers need to clearly demonstrate having done a solid piece of work and generated good piece of knowledge that people would be enticed to use in the future. When writing a research, the following are very useful: common interest; mutual benefits; two-way communication; equal participation (but not same work twice, complement each other instead); clear role and responsibilities; and trust.

While delivering research, it's important to establish partnership and keep following-up to make sure that the partnership is being productive. Helping each other especially if people have

different work culture and expectation is significant. Finally, reward follows when one has patience.

## Key points from Session 2 Q&A

Question	Answer from speakers
<b>What are your plans after your PhD and how you will sustain partnership with your UK institution, long-term in consideration of what's happening now?</b>	My main focus now is applying for funds and writing proposals and connecting to the public regarding Covid-19 misinformation. I have to redirect my research specifically for tissue engineering going into Covid-19 response. I'm doing a fundamental research to help understand how the virus transfect and kill the hosts. <i>(Dr Ramis)</i>
<b>What way can you influence research policies or priorities in the Philippine government and your institution, Technological Institute of the Philippines?</b>	I want to propose instead for the Philippine government is to restructure our policy making such as this current pandemic, rather than letting us make it evidence based. These policies should be based on solid research that are peer reviewed eternally and applied to be submitted by the politicians. Research should be easily understood by people. <i>(Dr Ramis)</i>
<b>Did you also have opportunity to partner or work with UK industry through your partnership with University of Surrey and what value did it give?</b>	<p>We don't have yet, but we will consider the possibility in the future. <i>(Dr Promentilla)</i></p> <p>We don't have UK industry as a partner in the project but they were always available for support. For example, when we conducted the workshop here in the UK, Filipino participants visited Thames Water wastewater treatment plant. Thames Water is the first UK company which installed nutrient recovery technology. Partnership for industry is more focused in the Philippines. <i>(Dr Saroj)</i></p>

<p><b>What advice can you give to lone researchers who are in the process of building their teams? How do we start looking for the right stakeholders to join our research projects?</b></p>	<p>Be sure about your research advocacy. In my experience, I developed first a research program on what I envisioned a research program should be. From this, I checked what expertise are needed. Then, it is important to have networking skills to help in building a team. It was easy on my case with DLSU because I have my colleagues who share the same vision with me. From the core team, we are now inviting researchers from other discipline. Also, attend international symposiums to meet someone with the same research interest. <i>(Dr Promentilla)</i></p>
<p><b>For a researcher who is in the process of building a team, what could be the role of the government? Or is it wise to partner with the government in this case?</b></p>	<p>In our project, it is important that our partner is a regulatory agency and that they are in the loop. Make them appreciate what you are doing as a researcher and understand your language. <i>(Dr Saroj)</i></p>
<p><b>How does the lack of mobility in the foreseeable future affect research partnerships of the UK with partner countries?</b></p>	<p>Lack of mobility is a major problem for us biological researchers and other physical scientists. What we do is performing initially the experiments here in the Philippines or if it's not possible, to send the samples through courier, which is now possible. At the same time, e-meetings and online conferences are very eminent. <i>(Dr Ramis)</i></p> <p>This is a very important topic to think about for a researcher irrespective of their subject area. One is about delivering what you are doing, other is planning for the future. And they both have different challenges. For delivering, do not lose the momentum and deliver what was planned. It's important for the people in the Philippines and British Council to make sure researchers exchange ideas even if they are not meeting and how best you can mediate the knowledge exchange so that future research quality is</p>

	not compromised. <i>(Dr Saroj)</i>
<p><b>Can you further articulate the value of the UK partnership, not just to the actual research but more broadly to your institution (DLSU)?</b></p>	<p>When you partner with a university abroad, this will add value on the reputation of the university. As an institution, we could learn more about the research culture being practiced by prestigious universities. <i>(Dr Promentilla)</i></p>
<p><b>How do we strengthen UK-PH joint work in basic research (which tends to be neglected in developing countries)?</b></p>	<p>In a basic research, we need to be good storytellers of a research that is impactful to the society. <i>(Dr Promentilla)</i></p> <p>Most developing countries are struggling to do basic research because of the economic output. Perform parallel researches and collaborate to lobby to the scientific institution. Fundamental research is what drives applied research. Right framing is very important. Co-apply the grants and then later expand the basic researches based on the previous excesses of the applied grants. <i>(Dr Ramis)</i></p> <p>It's a global trend that people are looking into applied research. For putting a big proposal, combine fundamental research as an integral part of it. Package basic research as a part of capacity building that can be seen as more productive. <i>(Dr Saroj)</i></p>

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# Webinar Recording Links

- [Session 1: What constitutes a strong research proposal?](#)
- [Session 2: Assessing the value of research with a UK partner, post-COVID-19](#)

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## About the speakers

- **Dr Manuel Dayrit** is professor and former dean at the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health. He also served as Director for the Department of human Resources for Health at the World Health Organization (WHO) and Secretary of the Philippine Department of Health in 2001.
- **Professor Cameron Johnstone** is Senior Lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, UK. He served as Director at the Energy Systems Research Unit at Strathclyde. He received his Newton Fund Institutional Links grant in 2019 to research on utilising marine renewable energy
- **Dr Jopeth Ramis** recently received his PhD in Regenerative Medicine and Cellular Therapies from the University of Nottingham. Jopeth will return to his home institution, the Technological Institute of the Philippines this year, equipped with experience and new expertise. Jopeth is also finalist of the 2019 Newton Prize Chair Award where he represented the Philippines among thousands of proposals.
- **Dr Michael Angelo Promentilla** is Professor at the Chemical Engineering department in De La Salle University. He's a recipient of the 2013 Outstanding Young Scientist Awards by the DOST and was recently awarded the 2019 Newton Prize Country Award for his research that seeks to convert wastewater into nutrient-rich fertilizer to improve farming.
- **Dr Devendra Saroj** is Senior Lecturer and Head of Centre for Environmental Health and Engineering at the University of Surrey. With research interests in waste water treatment, urban water management, and water supply sanitation, Devendra also supervises two of Newton Agham's PhD scholars.

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## About British Council and Newton Fund



The British Council builds connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and other countries through arts and culture, education and the English language.

We help young people to gain the skills, confidence and connections they are looking for to realise their potential and to participate in strong and inclusive communities. We support them to learn English, to get a high-quality education and to gain internationally recognised qualifications. Our work in arts and culture stimulates creative expression and exchange and nurtures creative enterprise.



The United Kingdom's Newton Fund programme builds research and innovation partnerships to support the Philippines' economic development and social welfare. It also aims to develop research and innovation capacity for long-term sustainable and equitable growth. Known as Newton Agham in the Philippines, this programme has partnered with the Commission on Higher Education, Department of Science and Technology, and Department of Agriculture in co-funding opportunities.