

**EVALUATION OF  
THE BLOOMSBURY SET**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**THE BLOOMSBURY SET®**

Science | Economics | Technology

Prepared for

**The Bloomsbury SET**

**Executive Summary from  
the Final Report to RVC**

July 2021

**SQW**

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## Background

1. In 2017, The **Connecting Capability Fund** was launched by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, now known as Research England). **The Bloomsbury SET** (Science, Economics, Technology) is a partnership between the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), London School of Economics (LSE), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and, SOAS, University of London. The programme also works closely with the London International Development Centre (LIDC)
2. Following a successful bid, in 2018, The Bloomsbury SET – led by RVC – was awarded £4.96million through CCF to create a knowledge exchange platform to accelerate the delivery of innovative scientific and technical solutions to help safeguard human and animal health. Over three years, the consortium aimed to deliver a programme of **knowledge exchange activities** that would enable major human health benefits; improvements in animal health, welfare and productivity; and enhancements in biosecurity and food safety. The focus of the programme was on antimicrobial resistance (AMR, the reduced efficacy of antibiotic medicines over time), infectious diseases (particularly neglected tropical diseases) and zoonotic pathogens (which can transfer between humans and animals), predominantly in low- and middle-income countries.

## The evaluation

3. In March 2021, [SQW](#) was asked to consider progress in relation to the aims, objectives and expected outcomes stated in the original CCF application. The intention was that the evaluation should:
  - communicate to Research England key findings relating to The Bloomsbury SET programme’s outcomes, impacts and processes.
  - identify key successes, challenges, constraints and lessons learned throughout the programme.
4. The evaluation was structured around two phases of work:
  - **Phase 1:** The scoping phase ran from April until mid-May 2021. It included a literature review, scoping consultations, development of a logic model, the identification of key research questions, and the preparation of a detailed design for the second phase of research.
  - **Phase 2:** The fieldwork phase was delivered in May and June 2021. It was based around 25 bilateral consultations with Principal Investigators (PIs), Co-Investigators (CoIs) and wider stakeholders; an e-survey of participating researchers, partner organisations and expert advisors; focus groups of PIs and CoIs and other academic partner institutions; and case studies derived from the bilateral consultations.

## Key Findings

### Implementation and programme delivery

5. The **early stages** of the programme were challenging. The funding was awarded in early 2018 but the offer letter from Research England was not received until May 2018. This delay meant that a dedicated programme manager could not be recruited until well after the scheduled start of the programme and there was no opportunity to ‘front-end’ the establishment of administrative protocols; given the Programme’s fixed timescales, this all created significant pressures from the outset. In practice, the administrative burden linked to setting up The Bloomsbury SET rested with a small programme team from the four HEIs, most especially key individuals from RVC; and responsibilities in relation to The Bloomsbury SET were absorbed in addition to existing workloads. In outlining the subsequent achievements, it is important not to lose sight of these early pressures and the efforts that were required both to launch the programme and then to run it during the early stages.
6. The compressed delivery timescale and limited ‘set up’ period had some downstream implications. In particular, it impacted on funding calls for two-year projects. The time pressure meant that some calls were only open for six weeks. Programme staff reported that this was almost certainly the reason why some calls received fewer applications than expected.
7. It was noted that most calls focused on natural sciences and therefore the majority of applications came from RVC and LSHTM. Two other important observations were made in this context. First, there were variable levels of engagement from the four colleges in promoting the Programme internally. Second, social scientists may not have engaged fully or quickly given the strong focus on AMR and neglected tropical diseases combined with a push for commercialisation of the research outputs.
8. The pandemic presented obstacles during later stages of the programme. A number of projects could not be completed within the three year timescale as they were reliant on international fieldwork or access to laboratories in other countries. The pandemic also limited opportunities for collaboration which often relies on ‘being in a room together’. Generally, PIs and CoIs wanted more time to complete their research and felt the timescales (which could not be varied significantly under CCF) added a significant level of pressure.
9. Throughout, The Bloomsbury SET programme team (led by RVC) was guided by a Steering Group, made up of the four colleges and the London International Development Centre; and an Advisory Council (representatives from industry and government). Overall, programme leadership was well received by participating researchers. Communications were clear and research calls and events were well coordinated and managed.

### Activities, outputs and outcomes

10. Despite these challenges, since 2018 The Bloomsbury SET has funded a diverse range of activities which have encouraged collaboration and knowledge exchange between the four HEIs. It has fully committed the resources that were made available through CCF.
11. The funded activities have taken different forms:
  - There have been **30 Bloomsbury SET Grants**, including:
    - **eight Project Grants** – applicants could respond under any relevant theme for the programme
    - **19 Follow On/ Commercialisation Grants and Small Grants** - (such as AI/big data or social sciences). Small Grants were available via participation in ‘sand-pits’, where academics from different disciplines and different institutions came together to develop proposals which could then be pitched to a panel of peer-reviewers.
    - **three Innovation Fellowships** – where funding was targeted on early career researchers.
  - **11 Bloomsbury SET Events** – including **conferences, networking sessions and symposia**.
12. The **Events** were very well received – even though some had to be delivered virtually in the context of the pandemic.
13. A wide range of different outcomes were identified in relation to Bloomsbury SET **Grants**, many of which were specific to individual projects. However there were also some common themes:
  - **Commercialisation:** Although some of the ambitions for the commercialisation of products were not met, consultees reported that Sandpits, Project Grants, Small Grants and Follow On/Commercialisation grants gave researchers the freedom to model or test new theories and develop new concepts prior to and during product development. PIs and CoIs also reported that The Bloomsbury SET helped to establish relationships with industry and support researchers to have a more commercial mindset.
  - **International collaboration:** This was both a key delivery mechanism for many projects but also a significant achievement. Although international relationships were hindered by the pandemic, there is evidence of fruitful partnerships and collaborations.
  - **Early-career researchers:** The programme has been especially beneficial to early career researchers. It was suggested by consultees that early career researchers with an interdisciplinary mindset have been positively impacted by the funding that was made available.

### Perspectives on collaborative knowledge exchange

14. Collaborative knowledge exchange was expected to be a key enabler of and outcome from The Bloomsbury SET. Some collaborations between researchers responding to The Bloomsbury SET funding calls pre-dated programme. However there were examples of new relationships forming, particularly with international partners.
15. Participating researchers felt the programme had enabled new connections with other academics or provided funding which cemented pre-existing relationships. A number of researchers also reported that The Bloomsbury SET has encouraged them to respond to other interdisciplinary funding calls and to apply other techniques, such as qualitative surveys, in their work.
16. Several research participants reported that collaborative knowledge exchange between researchers has to be learned. Researchers may not be used to working in collaborative ways or know how to do so effectively. For this reason, there appeared to be a particular role for small projects (which were not too risky). Several others said that working with industry and different disciplines can be challenging as they tend to have vastly different working practices and cultures. Some referred to it as 'speaking a different language'.

### Conclusions

17. The commercialisation aims and ambitions of The Bloomsbury SET were very ambitious given the overall timescales, and it will take time to translate research into intellectual property. Collaboration between disciplines has also proved more difficult than was expected at the start of the programme. However a great deal has been achieved in a relatively short amount of time, despite some challenges (many of which were beyond the control of the programme's management). For some academics, the legacy of the programme will be its impact on how they approach their work in the future. These researchers reported that the programme has been transformational, leading to new interdisciplinary ways of working and the development of new networks and relationships that will endure.

### Reflections and key lessons

18. The evidence gathered during the evaluation points to wider reflections and lessons which are relevant to future programmes based on collaborative knowledge exchange:
  - **Building relationships takes time** and this could have been better reflected in delivery timescales. Due to circumstances beyond the programme team's control, The Bloomsbury SET had a delayed start, and its later stages were delivered through a global pandemic which inevitably was disruptive.
  - Effective '**hands on' programme management** is critical from the outset. There is a major job to be done in setting up a programme of this nature and that needs to be properly resourced (rather than 'absorbed' alongside existing commitments).

- A programme of this nature **needs to be as flexible as possible and capable of adapting to changing circumstances**. This was especially true in the context of the pandemic.
- There is a need to be '**radically inclusive**' if the aim is to engage across different disciplines on a reasonably equitable basis. AMR – as a topic, field and headline – had much more immediate resonance with scientists than most social scientists, yet the aim was for interdisciplinary approaches. The programme relied heavily on – and was much more effective with – academics who were **genuinely open** to working across disciplines.
- **Small projects** seemed to be especially effective in developing new collaborative approaches. This may be because risks are relatively low – both for funders and for participating academics.



## THE BLOOMSBURY SET

A knowledge exchange platform bringing together four partner Colleges of the University of London, together with the London International Development Centre, to accelerate the delivery of innovative scientific and technical solutions to help safeguard human and animal health.

## CONNECTING CAPABILITY FUND

Research England's Connecting Capability Fund (CCF) supports university collaboration in research commercialisation through allocation of £100 million for competitive projects and formula funds. It aims to share good practice and capacity internally across the higher education sector, forge external technological, industrial and regional partnerships, and deliver the Government's industrial strategy priorities.

### Partners



### Supported by the Connecting Capability Fund





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