

# Concept Note: SPHEIR Open Call for Partnership Proposals

**September 20, 2016**

## Table of Contents

1. Overview .....	3
2. Higher education and development: DFID's strategic objectives .....	4
3. Focus of open call for partnership proposals .....	5
3.1 Enhancing quality in higher education delivery .....	5
3.2 Ensuring relevance of higher education programmes and institutions.....	7
3.3 Broadening access to higher education .....	8
3.4 Improving affordability.....	8
4. Open call requirements and desired features of proposals.....	9
4.1 Geographic scope and language .....	9
4.2 Fragile and conflict-affected environments .....	10
4.3 Targeted beneficiaries .....	11
4.4 Composition of partnerships and roles of partners .....	12
4.5 Grant size, use, co-funding and project length .....	13
4.6 Challenges associated with seeking HE transformation and innovation .....	15
4.7 University specific vs multi-university partnerships .....	16
4.8 Private sector engagement in projects .....	17
5. The application, selection and grant process.....	18
5.1 How to apply .....	18
5.3 How a SPHEIR grant works.....	19
6. Obtaining information and advice .....	20

## 1. Overview

The **Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR)** programme is a new competitive grant scheme established by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). It is designed to catalyse innovative ‘partnerships’ in low-income countries (LICs) to improve the performance, governance and influence of higher education systems and institutions. SPHEIR is managed on behalf of DFID by a consortium led by the British Council that includes PwC and Universities UK International (UUKi).

SPHEIR partnerships will seek to transform the quality, relevance, access and affordability of higher education to achieve sustainable change in higher education (HE) systems. This may involve stimulating participation of new actors, such as public and private employers, introducing new modes of delivery, or new approaches to quality assurance, academic leadership or other strategies as described in this paper. SPHEIR funding is focused on partnerships – formal collaboration among a group of organisations that address HE in ways, and at a scale, that a single organisation cannot. SPHEIR seeks to strengthen the HE system in target countries with the view that HE systems can be changed through partnerships that focus on either:

- **HE delivery** – meaning the design and delivery of degree programmes that embed new and more effective content, and/or apply innovative delivery models and teaching strategies to achieve learning outcomes that respond to market needs (private and public). This could be in one or more specific departments, faculties or universities, or through ‘collaborative’ programmes involving multiple universities in one or more countries.
- **HE enabling systems** – meaning initiatives intended to enhance HE systems and institutions, by changing the culture and practices that affect the performance of public or private universities. This might include, for example, higher education governance bodies, national or regional quality assurance and/or accreditation bodies, staff development and leadership, financing models, etc. Systemic improvement strategies might also include reforms to university business models to improve their ability to generate and manage income streams; attract students and secure private sector investment.

The boundary between these two categories is not always clear. For example, an initiative focused on course re-design and pedagogical skills in a specific degree programme could also involve embedding capacity for ongoing curriculum design and pedagogical development across one or more entire institutions. It is the potential for the latter that would have a transformative impact on the performance and influence of higher education institutions systems.

This concept note describes SPHEIR’s approach to its ‘open’ call for partnership proposals, which will be launched on 21 October 2016. It is intended to help prospective applicants understand SPHEIR’s objectives for the call, and illustrate the breadth of opportunities possible for proposals that can lead to transformative, systemic change in HE.

The note also sets out some of the eligibility requirements and provides guidance that will help organisations develop clear and comprehensive proposals. The concept note should be carefully reviewed by all organisations potentially involved in forming a partnership in order to understand what SPHEIR will be looking for in proposals. The note is being released in advance of the call being launched, to provide additional time for prospective applicants to collaborate. More details are provided in the last section of this note.

Once the call window is launched on 21 October, the concept note should be carefully reviewed **along with the more detailed information on eligibility and application materials** that will be available at <http://www.spheir.org.uk/apply/call-for-proposals>

## 2. Higher education and development: DFID's strategic objectives

In many countries that give or receive official development assistance (ODA), higher education used to be viewed as less central to development than other more visible problems, such as child mortality, access to basic education, food security or other objectives set out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, the transition from the MDGs to the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflects a broader, more comprehensive view of education that has emerged from the ODA community: one that emphasises outcomes, and views education in all countries as an interconnected system that involves pre-school to university learning, employability and life-long learning.

Governments as well as some ODA funders, including private foundations and non-ODA supporters of development, have specialised interests associated with tertiary education. Some focus on technical and vocational training; some on specific degree programmes; some on strengthening universities' roles in research and knowledge systems, or on systems for regulatory oversight, quality assurance and accreditation. SPHEIR's particular focus is to provide LICs with a timely opportunity to undertake multi-year initiatives that will improve the performance, governance and influence of their higher education institutions (HEIs) and systems.

In determining this focus, DFID was guided by its own Higher Education Taskforce, which was set up in September 2013 to advise on future engagement with the HEIs in DFID focus countries. It found that higher education can contribute to greater economic development and growth, improved public services and government effectiveness, and greater equity.

The SPHEIR programme is a direct result of this work and supports the UK's broader objectives in global development. Since 2015, the UK Government ODA strategy has been guided by four mutually reinforcing strategic objectives, all of which support poverty reduction and are aligned with the UK's national interest. These strategic objectives are captured in Figure 1, and are accompanied by markers that illustrate the contribution of higher education to each objective.

**Figure 1 – UK Government strategic objectives guiding ODA and higher education linkages**



SPHEIR provides LICs with an opportunity to draw on the UK's globally respected higher education expertise and its many institutions with deep experience of collaboration with Southern HEIs in teaching and research. It is also an opportunity to draw on the wider global knowledge base in HE reform, through partnerships that involve North-South and South-South collaboration, especially lessons from the experience of middle-income countries that have introduced various HE reforms.

### 3. Focus of open call for partnership proposals

In May 2016, SPHEIR launched a call for 'demonstration projects' seeking proposals that involve delivery of HE using technology enhanced learning (TEL) in programmes that also demonstrate relevance to labour market needs and employability of graduates. The demonstration call will lead to selection of projects delivering HE to beneficiaries displaced by the Syrian crisis, and to students in one or more of the countries where DFID works directly in Sub Saharan Africa. Because the demonstration call involved a short time period for proposal development, and had specific technical features such as refugee beneficiaries or technology enhanced learning, it was tailored more to partnerships that were already formed and engaged in delivery of these activities. Once initial partnerships are selected, they will be announced on the SPHEIR website.

By contrast, the 'open' call, which is the subject of this concept note, will **not** specifically seek the features that were the focus of the "demonstration" call, and will be different in several other key respects, such as:

- The open call will have a longer period in which applicants can prepare their proposals, closing on 20 February 2017.
- The call may result in selection of as many as ten partnerships that will commence activities between April and June 2017.
- It will provide greater scope for innovation, creativity and variety in the focus of proposals and in the nature of partnerships.
- It will look for proposals that will deliver transformative changes that have a sustained impact on HE governance and performance.
- The open call will accept proposals from a much larger group of countries in which DFID is engaged. A full list of countries is provided in Section 4.1.

To help prospective applicants think about the opportunities, illustrations of what SPHEIR is broadly seeking in proposals are provided below. These should be taken as illustrative of the range of opportunities possible through SPHEIR, and should not be interpreted as the only kinds of projects that SPHEIR will support.

#### 3.1 Enhancing quality in higher education delivery

If there is a global consensus around the most fundamental current priority in HE, it is arguably about **quality** and the challenges of achieving or maintaining quality where massive growth in enrolment is present or predicted, and resources are scarce. There is no single 'magic bullet' that will achieve higher quality in HE; nor is the level of public funding the only constraint (although it may determine

the choice of quality improvement strategies). The SPHEIR team believes that strategies to address quality can vary considerably, and in most countries a combination of strategies may be more effective than a single one, especially if designed to reinforce one another. Four areas stand out for consideration by prospective applicants in the context of possible SPHEIR projects.

- Efforts to improve the **content** of programmes and courses which, in many disciplines, are outdated, rely heavily on literature and materials that have been unchanged for years, and offer little discernible connection to current knowledge and graduate skill requirements in both the public and private domain. At the root of meaningful content is clarity about the competencies desired from graduates, and the extent to which courses support learning relevant to building generic competencies (e.g. analytical skills, verbal and written communication skills, problem solving) as well as occupationally-specific competencies. Effective engagement of employers (private and public), as well as graduates and teaching staff is a necessary precondition in content reform.
- Helping universities diversify **delivery strategies** to shift from almost universal reliance in many LICs on lectures, reading and exams, to a broader array of delivery strategies. The challenge is to combine these conventional practices with greater use of group work, technology that enhances access and/or facilitates interactive learning, collaborative teaching, exposure to field experience and student exposure to external experts and knowledge sources inside and outside the lecture room. Many HE stakeholders in LICs are concerned about quality of delivery and relevance of content, and would welcome moves beyond rote learning towards competency-centred learning, to produce graduates with critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Although use of technology is not a requirement for the open call, applicants are encouraged to consider if and how technology can be used to enhance delivery and learning. Any proposed technology-based intervention will need to thoroughly consider risks and mitigation strategies to ensure the proposed application can be successfully implemented and sustained. For example, if internet-based teaching strategies are being proposed, applicants should ensure they have analysed the internet bandwidth availability in target institutions and IT-literacy of potential learners. If necessary, strategies to mitigate risks, such as avoiding reliance on internet connectivity by uploading content on to local servers, should be identified. Applicants should also address support to students/staff in online learning, strengthening bandwidth management and/or other optimisation strategies.
- Diversification of delivery strategies is directly dependent on strengthening the **pedagogical skills** of teaching staff. In many HE systems, university teaching staff attain their position on the basis of their academic qualification (a Masters or PhD) and research output, and in almost all LICs this path rarely includes formal pedagogical training. University teaching staff often have less preparatory training in pedagogy than primary or secondary level teachers do, despite having many more years of formal education. Moreover, HE involves adult learners which has significant implications in terms of how students learn, how they engage with peers and instructors, and the way they absorb information outside the school environment through media, social and cultural experiences. Efforts to build pedagogical capacity can include the use of technology by teaching staff (which may or may not involve building technical capacity to produce e-content), as well as skills in class settings, facilitating access to external learning, small group, and one-on-one coaching including research or thesis supervision. Changing pedagogical approaches is not easy, and prospective applicants interested in focusing on upskilling a specific group of lecturers should carefully consider how they will embed changes in teaching culture and practice across an entire institution.

- Delivering HE to larger numbers of students will also require an increase in the number of suitably qualified teaching staff, including changes in the way teaching staff are deployed (i.e. delivery strategies). Proposals may therefore focus on **strategies for training, deployment and retention of qualified staff**, and doing so cost-effectively in order to reach larger numbers of students.
- **Effective HE systems** have a significant role to play in cementing sustainable changes in pedagogical practices through accreditation processes, quality assurance mechanisms, and institutional governance. System-level actors need to incentivise and encourage reform, rather than hinder innovation and constructive competition. New content, delivery strategies and pedagogy require equally new tools, such as learning metrics, and practices such as employer and graduate engagement across the entire system. Systemic improvement strategies might include raising the standards of university-level and system-level leadership in areas such as resource management and mobilisation, information systems for knowledge transfer, public-private partnerships or employer engagement. Systemic improvement strategies might also include reforms to university business models to improve their ability to generate and manage income streams; attract students and secure private sector investment. Applicants should ensure they have assessed whether the systems and processes within institutions are of a sufficient quality to support proposed projects. Where this is not the case, they should include analysis of how core functions such as financial management, IT capability, communications/marketing etc. will be strengthened to ensure project success.

Prospective SPHEIR applicants interested in any of the above should think carefully about how their proposed strategies should be connected and combined to achieve impact at a systemic level. It is possible to focus on quality improvement in a single programme in a single institution, which may result in a step-change in quality for participants in that programme. However, this may not be sufficient to catalyse change across several programmes or indeed across the entire university system, which, in many countries, includes both public and private providers.

### 3.2 Ensuring relevance of higher education programmes and institutions

A considerable number of surveys and research have raised concerns about the extent to which HE programmes are **relevant** to potential employers (private or public) or to graduates in respect of the perceived value or utility of their learning experience.

The discussion on quality above refers to 'competencies', and the need for those who design HE reforms to think about how the learning experience contributes to building generic competencies as well as occupationally specific competencies. SPHEIR's interest is to help HEIs become better in ensuring that their graduates have a pathway that enhances their opportunities for subsequent formal or informal employment, self-employment (including the ability to create jobs through entrepreneurship), and/or further learning.

This is unlikely to happen where teaching staff, or the university as an institution, do not effectively engage with employers in either the public or private sectors, or draw systematically on data regarding the post-school experience of graduates as well as students who, for whatever reasons, do not complete their programme. Examples of efforts that could enhance relevance include:

- Engagement of employers in course design and delivery



- Collaboration arrangements that facilitate student learning experiences outside the university (e.g. meaningful placements or field experience) and bring outside experience inside the university
- Active collaboration between universities, employers and graduates to understand perceptions of graduate competencies and the employment and further educational trajectory of students.

Whatever strategies are used to enhance the relevance of HE, they need to be sustainable, and are more likely to be so if combined with other aspects of reform, such as content and access strategies to leverage transformative outcomes.

### 3.3 Broadening access to higher education

The explosive growth of enrolment in HE in many LICs has on one level meant that a larger share of the population has access to HE. However, this may not necessarily result in **broader access** for women, students from poor families, remote or rural communities or groups that may face particular physical, social, cultural, or religious barriers to higher education participation. For example, although the participation rates for women in undergraduate programmes in many LICs has grown, figures do not necessarily measure retention and completion; nor are women's participation levels maintained through Masters and Doctoral programmes (which is a factor in underrepresentation in senior HE leadership). Data for other groups facing access barriers is more difficult to come by. Access barriers are nationally contextual, and what may be a marginalised group in one context may not be quite the same in others. This has implications for proposals that seek to operate across multiple countries.

Even in the context of apparently useful and innovative HE reforms, the design of projects may inadvertently create added barriers to access. Access to HE does not start and end with facilitating entry of targeted students. Effective access strategies involve understanding the experience of students once in HE, by monitoring and intervening to assure retention and course completion. It also means understanding the experience of graduates and how their post-university experience differs from those who did not face the same barriers.

SPHEIR is interested in proposals that look at access from a systemic perspective, and include reform activities that will target enhancing access for particular groups across an entire university system. This may or may not be combined with other objectives in HE reform, and the SPHEIR team recognises that not every proposal will seek to expressly address access across an entire university or HE system. However, all SPHEIR applicants will be expected to describe the effect of their proposal on access, however narrowly or broadly defined, and whether their proposal might potentially raise new, unintended access barriers and, if so, how these effects will be mitigated.

### 3.4 Improving affordability

Next to quality, **affordability** of HE is an almost universal concern in both developed and developing countries, whether from the perspective of governments funding HE, or from the perspectives of families and students mobilising resources to enable them to access HE. In LICs, affordability has a variety of potential focal points which SPHEIR partnerships can consider addressing.

- Steps to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of public expenditure allocation in HE



- New or improved mechanisms for student financing that may include a combination of university-specific strategies, including private sector investment, or system-wide strategies
- Financing mechanisms that are designed expressly to facilitate access for types of students who face particular barriers to entry, retention and completion
- Holistic approaches to HE system governance that encompasses both public and private providers where both exist or are desired, and effective administration of quality and accreditation mechanisms that are relevant to the needs of all HE providers
- University-level and system-level leadership in one or more areas such as resource management and mobilisation, pedagogical development, knowledge systems, public-private partnerships, employer engagement in other areas.

#### 4. Open call requirements and desired features of proposals

Although the open call will be broader and more flexible than the SPHEIR call for demonstration projects, it will include some specific eligibility requirements, and involve preferences for some features over others in the substance of proposals and the composition of partnerships. To help prospective applicants in developing proposals, the following sections describe SPHEIR's approach to:

- Geographic scope and language
- Fragile and conflict-affected environments
- Targeted beneficiaries, including a definition of primary and secondary direct beneficiaries, as well as indirect beneficiaries
- Composition of partnerships and roles of partners
- Grant size, use, co-funding and project length
- Challenges associated with seeking transformation and innovation in HE
- University specific vs multi-university partnerships
- Private sector engagement in projects.

Additional information on each area will be provided in the guidance note and application materials that will be available on the SPHEIR website when the open call is launched on 21 October 2016.

##### 4.1 Geographic scope and language

For the open call, partnership proposals must focus primarily on one or more of the twenty-four countries listed below.<sup>1</sup> This means that proposals must be focused on primary and secondary

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<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

beneficiaries (see 4.2 below) and involve project activities located in these countries. However, proposals may also cover countries within a region that are not on the list, as long as the majority of beneficiaries are located in the countries listed. This reflects the reality that HE institutions have established networks that do not necessarily align with donor country lists.

SPHEIR encourages partnerships to capitalise on the significant experience of UK and other 'Northern' universities, the private sector, and other organisations. Many middle income countries in the global South also have HE reform experience and technical expertise that has much to offer in terms of opportunities for knowledge transfer. SPHEIR actively encourages North–South and South–South collaboration, providing that the focus of partnerships is on strengthening HE quality, relevance, access and affordability in the targeted countries. Proposals should also aim to build or reinforce target country capacity for sustainable delivery. Partnerships that rely on ongoing delivery, degree granting or accreditation by organisations outside targeted countries are unlikely to be sustainable, and will be disadvantaged in comparison to other applications.

A large proportion of the targeted countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), which provides potential scope for partnerships that involve multiple universities or multiple countries. There are already HE networks and formal collaborative institutional arrangements in SSA, and SPHEIR is open to building on existing networks and organisations, and sees this as preferable to the establishment of new Pan-African or regional organisations. Similar potential may exist in non-SSA countries, and SPHEIR will accommodate proposals that involve two or more countries in other regions where they are consistent with the country list below.

The SPHEIR team recognises that the language of instruction in HE in some eligible countries is not English. Moreover, in countries that do not include English as an official language, HE systems such as governance, accreditation and quality assurance, will occur in another language. SPHEIR will support proposals that include non-English activities in eligible countries. However, to ensure that such partnerships are able to fully benefit from participation in SPHEIR, and engage in knowledge sharing activities with all other partnerships, a certain threshold of English language capability is mandatory. This will be demonstrated in part by requiring that proposals be submitted in English, and by the lead partner showing that it, as well as key team members, can operate in English.

#### **4.2 Fragile and conflict-affected environments**

It is a reality that not all countries or regions have the same need or priority for systemic reform; nor readiness to engage in major HE reforms. For example, some fragile or conflict-affected states can be loosely characterised as 'pre-system' to the extent that HE support is likely to revolve around maintaining a foundation of academic capacity until reconstruction of the HE system is feasible.

A number of countries on the list are considered fragile or conflict affected states. The SPHEIR team recognises that HE reform is additionally challenging when circumstances involve:

- Limited or no access to necessary external technical assistance as a result of security requirements. HE reform is highly specialised and generally cannot rely on local actors such as consulting services or civil society organisations to have relevant expertise
- Connectivity as a constraint on both the feasibility of certain kinds of projects as well as on communication between the SPHEIR team and a partnership

- Limitations on effective project technical collaboration and monitoring by the SPHEIR team
- Barriers to participation in collaborative knowledge sharing activities *among* SPHEIR partnerships, which will be an integral part of the SPHEIR programme.

These do not necessarily preclude the possibility of partnerships involving fragile or conflict-affected environments. However, SPHEIR does not want prospective applicants in high risk environments to commit time and scarce resources to developing proposals that will not be technically feasible or have little chance of selection in competition with other proposals. To reduce this risk, applicants for projects in high-risk countries are encouraged to contact the SPHEIR team directly before and while the call is open. A member of the SPHEIR team will discuss the applicant's proposal in the context of risk and feasibility and will then provide a view on the feasibility of the proposal from a security perspective. Prospective applicants may then make a more informed decision as to whether or not to proceed with an application. Information on how to access this advice is included in Section 6.

### 4.3 Targeted beneficiaries

To help prospective applicants be as explicit as possible about the benefits and targeted audience of their proposal, the SPHEIR application materials will use the following definition of direct beneficiaries.

- **Primary** beneficiaries must be those directly targeted by project activities (e.g. students and teaching staff, academic support staff, and staff of regulatory or other HE bodies who will receive course, training or other forms of support from delivery of project activities).
- **Secondary** beneficiaries may include a broader group such as: i) additional students and teaching staff who benefit from knock-on effects from project activities (e.g. staff from elsewhere in a university trained who are not directly involved in the project); ii) employers of primary beneficiaries (e.g. universities themselves and any employer of graduates).

Indirect beneficiaries are invariably present, and may include those in broader society indirectly impacted by a project (e.g. a programme which trains nurses could consider children or families as indirect beneficiaries).

The SPHEIR team is principally interested in primary beneficiaries; their projected numbers, and how they will benefit. How proposals directly affect possible secondary beneficiaries, especially private and public sector employers, will also be carefully looked at, including the extent to which they have been engaged in development of the proposal or will be engaged during its implementation. SPHEIR will look very closely at the number of primary and secondary beneficiaries targeted, in terms of feasibility, and value-for-money.

Applicants will be required to present a 'theory of change' in their application – essentially a description of how project activities will lead progressively to achieving desired outcomes, along with the assumptions made about this, for example about reaching beneficiaries, or about the social or political environment surrounding implementation. The SPHEIR team recognises that some applicants will be more familiar than others with project monitoring and evaluation (M&E), so support and technical guidance will be provided to selected partnerships as required. However, it would be advantageous for applicants to have some team members with experience in this area.

#### 4.4 Composition of partnerships and roles of partners

SPHEIR funding is focused on *partnerships* – formal collaboration among a group of public and/or private organisations that address HE in ways, and at a scale, that a single organisation cannot. The optimum number of organisations in a partnership should be determined by what the partnership proposes to do. The minimum number of partners is two, and although there is no maximum, some guidance on partnership composition is provided below. For SPHEIR, a successful partnership is one where *all* partner organisations share the following:

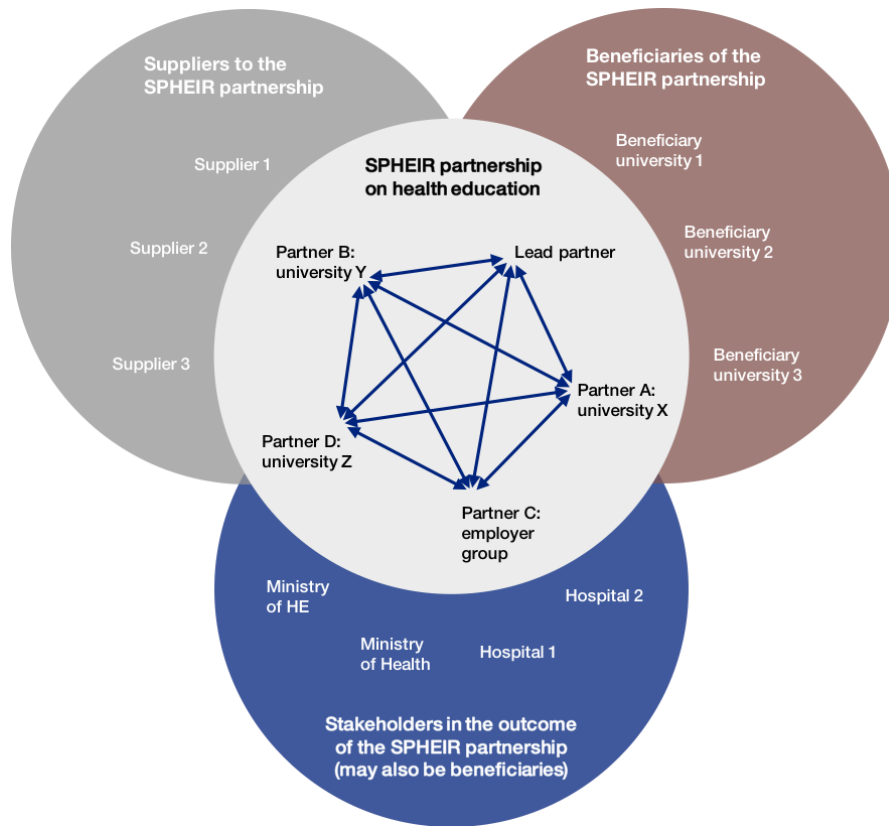
- Commitment to the goals of the proposed project including shared responsibility for its oversight and success
- Willingness to commit their own organisational resources to the project in cash or in kind
- Clearly defined roles and reciprocal obligations between and among all partners
- Commitment to assume performance and monitoring obligations including assuring access to data and fulfilling reporting requirements
- Support for the designated lead partner and of its role, including, where applicable, willingness to enter into contractual obligations with the lead partner where the intention is that SPHEIR funding flows through the lead partner to one or more partner organisations
- Accountability for the use of SPHEIR resources if directly received from SPHEIR or through the lead partner.

SPHEIR will look for evidence that the partnership is composed of committed organisations with clear roles, and will be less concerned about how many partners there are. South-South as well as North-South partnerships are welcome to apply. A variety of organisations within and outside targeted countries may be involved in an SPHEIR project without necessarily being a partner. Three examples are illustrative of such relationships:

- **Suppliers** – organisations that are effectively a supplier of goods or services (e.g. educational technology or connectivity) that do not assume any broader responsibilities as outlined above (lead partners will need to demonstrate that they have sound procurement practices to select suppliers).
- **Beneficiaries** – organisations such as a university that might benefit from a project's activities (e.g. access to new curricula, or training) but may not be directly involved in the management or leadership of the project.
- **Key stakeholders** – a range of organisations that may be interested in a partnership, provide inputs in the form of advice, or approvals in the course of their ongoing role in some aspect of HE such as curriculum approval. Examples include employer groups, civil society organisations, research organisations, government departments or agencies, and/or regional/international organisations.

Figure 2 below is intended to help applicants 'map' their partnership, and distinguish more clearly for themselves who might be partners and who might be suppliers, beneficiaries or stakeholders.

**Figure 2 – SPHEIR partnership mapping**



The ‘web’ in the centre of Figure 2 illustrates that a partnership is an interconnected set of reciprocal obligations. Once selected, SPHEIR will work with a partnership to help them develop some form of partnership document appropriate for the specific proposal and nature of their partnership.

It is also important to note that SPHEIR will enter into a contract with only the lead partner, and it will be the lead partner that receives SPHEIR funds. Other partner organisations, although not necessarily all, may receive SPHEIR funds *through* the lead partner, but this will depend on the nature of the activities, the countries and local partners. Many effective HE partnerships involve expenditures on activities, such as professional development of staff or curriculum development, that have been collaboratively designed by all partners but are arranged by and funded through the lead partner, or by a designated partner on behalf of the others. There are restrictions in some target countries on the provision of UKAid funding to government bodies which may include public universities. The SPHEIR team will provide guidance on this and other points, as described in Section 6.

#### 4.5 Grant size, use, co-funding and project length

The size of grants available through SPHEIR will range from £1 million to £5 million over a minimum of two years to a maximum of four years. Given the objectives of SPHEIR and its desire for transformative change in the performance, governance and influence of higher education systems and institutions, it is unlikely that this can be accomplished in less than two years or involve less than £1 million. Accordingly, proposals that are below these thresholds will not be considered; nor will proposals seeking in excess of £5 million in SPHEIR funding be considered, except where evidence of catalytic “systemic” transformation is provided. For example, in proposals where, during the life of

the project, the partnership and proposed activities are such that *all HE institutions in a country* will be impacted, or where reforms in one or more universities will *holistically impact all programmes from undergraduate through doctoral education in targeted universities*.

Although more details will be available in the guidance note that will accompany the application once the call is launched, prospective applicants should be aware of some specific areas of expenditure from SPHEIR funds that may be *included* or *excluded* or *restricted*. Examples include:

- Capital expenditures related to vehicles and infrastructure (including property acquisition, construction and renovation) will not be funded at all.
- Content such as learning material (in whatever form, including e-learning content), that constitutes intellectual property will be supported by SPHEIR providing that the rights are either open source or accrue to all participating universities in targeted countries prior to the end of the grant.
- SPHEIR will support costs associated with the development of new content, delivery and pedagogical skills as well as capacity development for HE leaders, and will support reasonable costs of project management, monitoring and evaluation associated with the project. However, SPHEIR will not fund salaries of teaching staff or HE administrators associated with the performance of their regular duties. For example, SPHEIR will support training of teaching staff in the roll-out of a new HE programme, but not their salaries while they teach. Under no circumstances will SPHEIR provide funds to be used for 'sitting allowances' or salary top-ups. Limited exceptions may be made and will be described in the application guidance note when the call is launched. For example, teaching costs may be a necessity where a proposal is geared to a beneficiary group, such a mobile or displaced populations, in eligible countries, that are not able to access host country HEIs.
- Co-funding (actual financial contributions mobilised by partner organisations) is not a mandatory requirement in terms of actual cash contributions – but SPHEIR will expect *all* partner organisations to either contribute co-funding through cash, or in-kind contributions. Where a project team member's time is included as an in-kind contribution, the partnership will be expected to account for the provision of that individual's time the same way that they would for team costs paid for by SPHEIR.
- Applicants will be required to declare *any* funds sought or received from other external sources that are directly or indirectly connected to the proposed project.
- SPHEIR is very interested in proposals that involve private delivery or private investment in higher education. Private organisations that deliver HE are encouraged to apply, and SPHEIR resources can be used in scaling up effective delivery or expanding access recognising that private providers charge and retain fees. As for public providers, SPHEIR will support a wide range of activities associated with programme and course development as well as quality improvement but will not fund the salaries of teaching staff during the actual delivery of programmes as described above. The same exceptions may be made for transitional incremental cost coverage and will be described in the application guidance note.
- In some cases, a proposal might involve activities that will need financial support beyond what the SPHEIR grant can offer, or may include activities that while not directly supported through the SPHEIR grant, might be logical and complementary activities that would enhance the transformative impact of the SPHEIR project. Applicants are free to describe such



activities, but should not include them in the SPHEIR budget submission. In some circumstances, where a SPHEIR partnership is demonstrating exceptional results, the SPHEIR team may initiate discussions about funding beyond the level of the approved grant.

- SPHEIR funds cannot be used to support research grants. While research is an important dimension of universities' role as HE institutions, there are a range of research support mechanisms available through DFID and other development actors. SPHEIR funds may be proposed for *limited* research specific to evaluating the impact of the partnership's activities, but this will be in exceptional cases only.
- SPHEIR grants may include use of a holdback (typically the final grant payment) linked expressly to the partnership's demonstration of outcomes achieved. Partnerships are encouraged to consider how this might be included in their proposal.

#### 4.6 Challenges associated with seeking HE transformation and innovation

In developing proposals that meet SPHEIR's objectives, all partnerships will need to think about the systemic impact and transformative potential of their proposal as well as its direct impact on beneficiaries. SPHEIR is also interested in innovation, but recognises that it is neither easy to define or recognise. The following is intended to help prospective partnerships think about **transformation** and **innovation** in developing their proposals.

The two terms are at the heart of SPHEIR. Of the two, **transformation** is somewhat more easily recognised, in that it implies that something will be different in the HE environment *after* a SPHEIR grant than it was before. However, transformation – the 'something different' – may involve an effect on *individuals* (students), and/or an effect on *organisations* (a university), and/or an effect on an entire *system* (a country's research and knowledge system).

For an individual there would be obvious benefits to having access to a high-quality degree programme with relevant content. However, if benefits accrued only to graduates from a single programme, the transformative effect is unlikely to be at a scale that has systemic impact. For *system* transformation to happen, benefits would probably need to accrue to large numbers of graduates from multiple degree programmes, possibly multiple disciplines and/or through one or more universities.

How to measure the transformative effects of any project supported by SPHEIR will be something that applicants will have to start thinking about as they design their proposal, and recognise that it is likely to be complex and involve long time frames. Most SPHEIR initiatives will run for 3 to 4.5 years from selection to grant closure. For initiatives that involve delivery of degree programmes or enabling system reforms (e.g. new financing models, governance, leadership, or quality assurance mechanisms), the initial cohort of affected students is not likely to graduate until the final year or later of the SPHEIR grant. Assessing effects on employability would require looking at graduate job placement, labour market retention and/or employers' feedback on graduate competencies. While collecting data on any of these is technically feasible, it would take at least several successive graduate cohorts before any robust evidence base can be developed. Applicants will need to think about how transformation can be sustainably measured beyond the end of the grant.

Transformation can also involve quite different approaches to similar objectives. For example, employability may be enhanced by focusing on occupationally-specific competencies, which is more feasible for a specific and relatively small beneficiary group (e.g. graduates of a single HE programme linked to a particular employer or employer group). However, there is growing evidence that



employers are finding it particularly difficult to find graduates with generic competencies such as analytical thinking, communications or problem-solving skills. This kind of transformation may be more complicated to attain, and to measure, because it is less specific than occupationally relevant curricula, and requires attention to delivery models, the learning experience of students and structural programme changes that affect a much larger cohort of students, and involves larger numbers of teaching staff. Generic competencies potentially impact a much broader range of potential future employers that encompass the private and public sector, and those who enter self-employment.

**Innovation** in any context is a term notoriously open to interpretation. In the context of higher education, there are several risks associated with requiring proposals to be 'innovative'. For example, it is hard to frame expectations with regard to what constitutes innovation in a way that would help prospective applicants understand what SPHEIR will and will not support. Innovation may be framed as 'the innovative use of X', where 'X' is technology, or private sector participation or something else. However, a proposal that includes 'X' may or may not turn out to be innovative. For example, introduction of distance learning in a country might be considered innovative in that country context, but if it involved delivery of poor content or courses with high incompleteness rates as is the case with most open, unaccredited MOOCs the innovation would have little benefit in and of itself.

SPHEIR takes a broad view of innovation and encourages proposals that go well beyond 'business as usual' and challenges applicants to find new ways to improve the performance, governance and influence of their higher education system and institutions.

#### 4.7 University specific vs multi-university partnerships

A desire for transformative systemic impact suggests that SPHEIR should be less interested in projects that involve a single programme, however well-conceived the proposal might be, and be more interested in projects that impact multiple degree programmes, involve multiple universities, or deal with national system-level reforms.

An example of the former would be a project that focuses on curriculum re-design, including pedagogical and technological capacity development for teaching staff in a specific programme. An example of the latter would be the collaborative project with similar goals but involving multiple universities and possibly several disciplinary programmes, or an initiative that involves all universities in a country through a national quality assurance or accreditation body. Noteworthy at the British Council's 2016 Going Global conference was the call from many senior African academic leaders present for more intra-African initiatives, effectively meaning projects that involve multiple universities in more than a single country. This suggests that proposals from SSA that involve multiple HE institutions in multiple countries would resonate with demand.

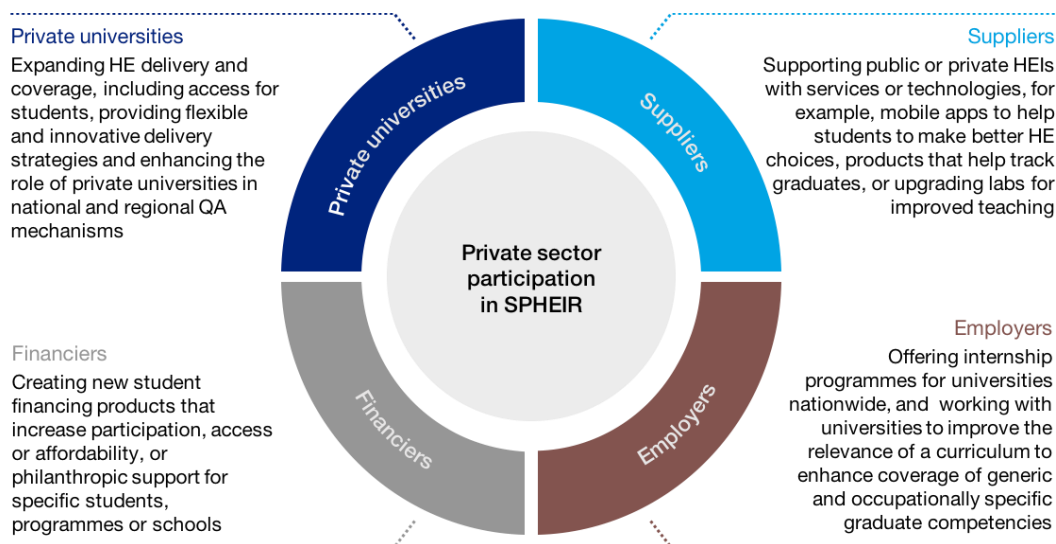
SPHEIR is interested in the widest range of innovative and transformative proposals and will accept proposals that involve a single university in a targeted country. However, such applicants should think broadly about how their proposal can catalyse change in higher education in targeted countries, and be able to describe a clear sequence of activities during the life of the SPHEIR grant (and beyond) that will achieve system change. SPHEIR will be looking for proposals that reflect how the 'demand-side' of HE – views of employers, public and private investors and graduates – have informed the proposed interventions.

#### 4.8 Private sector engagement in projects

SPHEIR was designed in part to encourage new actors to engage in HE in LICs, and sees the private sector as an especially important actor for several reasons complementary with the broad interests of private firms. For example, firms or sector groups have a significant interest in graduate talent – specifically, the supply of local employees with optimal skills that would diminish the need for importing staff. Some firms may have a high level of interest in enhancing their brand or reputation that can be achieved through a visible public investment in local HE, thereby enhancing local government and/or community relations.

There are a variety of ways in which private sector organisations can be involved in SPHEIR as indicated in Figure 3 below. The possibilities are by no means confined to the examples described, which are just indicative. As long as a proposal addresses SPHEIR's aims, ideas are only limited by the creativity of applicants.

**Figure 3 – Private sector engagement in SPHEIR**



Where proposals involve the private sector as a provider or investor, SPHEIR will look for 'additionality', so that SPHEIR is not treated as a free source of financing for activities that would otherwise have been engaged in. That said, SPHEIR funds may be used to offset risks that would otherwise be prohibitive; or to demonstrate a model of private sector involvement in HE that would otherwise go untested.

Where SPHEIR proposals involve generation of profit during the grant period, that profit must be reinvested into partnership activities. After the grant period profits may be retained or used as the investor sees fit. Unexpected losses incurred by private companies will need to be absorbed by them. As mentioned, co-funding is expected (in either cash or in-kind) from all applicants, private and public.

It is important to emphasise that all prospective applicants will be expected to engage private and public employers as a dimension of their proposal. While the form of engagement will vary by proposal, SPHEIR wants all partnerships to bridge the university-employer divide in the context of their proposed activities and objectives.

The SPHEIR team is available to provide suggestions on private sector participation in SPHEIR before the call opens on 21 October, and has dedicated team members available to respond to private companies, in particular those companies who may be looking for other organisations to form a partnership with. More details on this are described in Section 6.

Once partnerships from the open call are selected, the SPHEIR team will actively assist partnerships to develop private sector (and employer) engagement strategies relevant to their project and country focus. There will also be opportunities for partnerships to share experience and practices on engaging employers and the private sector.

## 5. The application, selection and grant process

Outlined below is a summary of the application process and timing; the selection process used by SPHEIR and DFID; and a description of the stages involved in the SPHEIR grant process for selected partnerships. More detailed information will be provided in the guidance note once the call window is launched on 21 October 2016.

### 5.1 How to apply

The call-for-partnership proposals will commence on Friday 21 October 2016. On that date, application materials will be available for download from [www.spheir.org.uk](http://www.spheir.org.uk) and will include a printable version of the application form, workplan and budget forms, the application guidance note, and a variety of other forms and supporting documentation. These materials should be carefully reviewed along with this concept note.

All proposals will need to be submitted through the SPHEIR online grant application portal, and instructions for applicant registration will be provided on the website. Once registered, applicants will be able to work on the on-line form, copy, paste, print, upload documents and save and return as frequently as they wish until formally 'submitting' their application. **The call will close at 23:59 GMT on Monday 20 February 2017.** At that time, any applications on the system that have not been 'submitted' will expire, and no further changes can be made or documents added. Nor will revised proposals be accepted. SPHEIR will not accept proposals outside the on-line portal, and will only review materials that have been submitted through this system.

### 5.2 The review and selection process

Once the call closes on 20 February 2017, the SPHEIR team will commence the review and selection process. This will involve several stages over a period of six to eight weeks, depending on the number of applications, and will culminate in SPHEIR's submission to DFID of a shortlist of recommended proposals. Final selection of proposals will be made by DFID, based on advice from SPHEIR.

The initial stage involves a screening of applications against the eligibility requirements set out in the application guidance note. Applicants/proposals that do not meet all eligibility requirements will not be reviewed or further considered. Ineligible applicants will be informed of the reason for rejection towards the end of the selection process.

All proposals that meet the eligibility requirements will be reviewed by the SPHEIR selection team. This process includes a review against criteria that will be described in the application guidance note. Criteria will be grouped and weighted. For example, a criteria group might use several criteria to assess the relevance, innovation and overall quality of the proposed project. The objective of this step in the review process is to enable the SPHEIR review team to distinguish between stronger and weaker proposals, in order to focus attention on the those most likely to merit detailed consideration because of their quality, consistency with the objectives of SPHEIR, taking into account the desire for a portfolio of SPHEIR projects that vary in design, focus, and targeted countries.

The SPHEIR team will then discuss the reviewed applications and reach consensus on an initial short list. Applications on the initial short list will be further reviewed in more depth, including through:

- A due diligence review focused on the lead partner
- Consultation with DFID and British Council country offices in all countries targeted by the proposal, focused primarily on factors potentially relevant to the partnership and/or the country context that could have material bearing on implementation.
- An interview with members of the SPHEIR review team.

Once these three activities are completed, the SPHEIR team will determine which applicants will be included in the final shortlist submitted to DFID along with SPHEIR's specific recommendations. Inclusion in the shortlist and selection by DFID will not constitute acceptance of all aspects of the proposed project or budget. These will be subject to further discussion with the SPHEIR team during the initial grant stage described below.

DFID will consider the proposals on the final shortlist along with the SPHEIR team's recommendation, and communicate its selection to SPHEIR. At this stage, all applicants will be informed by SPHEIR of the outcome of their application, including feedback on their proposal. Selection and notification of selected partnerships for the open call should occur around the end of March 2017.

### 5.3 How a SPHEIR grant works

A stage gate model is used for SPHEIR grants, meaning that selected partnerships will move through all grant stages over the life of the SPHEIR grant. These grant stages are summarised below:

**Grant Stage 1 (Preparation)** – this is an initial period of up to five months following selection, in which the partnership and SPHEIR team will work on a number of tasks that will culminate in the following:

- A comprehensive plan of work and budget (PWB) for the entire project, including milestones, work plan, negotiated budget, reporting requirements, communications strategy, etc.
- An M&E system for the project that includes a theory of change and logframe that dovetails with SPHEIR's overarching monitoring, evaluation and learning model
- A 'partnership document' that indicates all partners' shared commitment to the PWB, their respective roles and reciprocal responsibilities to each other, including the role of the lead partner. This document will be agreed among the partners, not with SPHEIR, and may vary in form depending on the partnership

- Negotiation of a grant agreement with the lead partner covering Grant Stages 2 and 3, which will set out the financial and operational reporting requirements and other contractual details. Many of the documents noted above will form annexes to the grant agreement.

The actual length of Grant Stage 1 will vary depending on the nature, location, experience and activities of the partnership. Some partnerships may only need 6 to 8 weeks to complete this stage, while others may need a longer period. During this grant stage, the lead partner may receive an initial grant of up to £25,000 to facilitate partnership meetings and work on these activities. Actual delivery of project activities will not commence until the end of Grant Stage 1, when an agreement covering the implementation stage is signed.

**Grant Stage 2 (Implementation)** – this marks the formal commencement of delivery of project activities and covers a period between 12 and 24 months, depending on the nature of the partnership. The focus of the partnership's attention will be on delivery and monitoring of results in accordance with the PWB and agreed M&E indicators. Some partnerships may only run for 24 months or slightly longer, although most will likely run for a period up to 48 months. SPHEIR will work closely with partnerships during Grant Stage 2 with attention focused on programme and financial monitoring as well as lessons sharing. Where implementation challenges emerge, SPHEIR will help the partnership develop a suitable plan to address these.

Towards the end of Grant Stage 2, a review will occur at which point the SPHEIR team will advise DFID that the project is on track to move to the third and final grant stage. SPHEIR may determine that a partnership is not performing adequately, or has encountered challenges that will prevent it from achieving the desired outcomes. In such circumstances, SPHEIR may terminate the grant in accordance with the contract. In exceptional circumstances, SPHEIR may recommend that DFID approve an increase in a partnership's funding and/or extension of time. This would only occur in cases of exceptional performance and achievement of demonstrated outcomes.

**Grant Stage 3 (Implementation and Wind-down)** – This stage will typically cover from month 25 to the end of the project. During this period, implementation of project activities will continue, and depending on the partnership, at a specific point the partnership and/or SPHEIR funded activities will start to wind down in the final six months of the grant. For some partnerships, activities may continue beyond the end of SPHEIR financing, either supported by internal partnership financing or through new sources of external finance. For many partnerships, Grant Stage 3 will involve an orderly closure of all activities.

SPHEIR's focus during this period will be on monitoring, evaluation and lessons learning, and for many partnerships this will involve attention to evaluating outcomes of the project. As noted in Grant Stage 2, some high performing partnerships may receive extensions of time and/or funding. Where this occurs it will be reflected in a revised PWB and contract amendment. Ultimately such partnerships will still include a wind-down of activities. Partnerships will vary substantially in the nature of activities, countries, form of partnerships and other ways. This will have some bearing on the precise timing of grant stages, the activities and funding arrangement for each. So while all partnerships will be expected to progress through these stages, some variation is anticipated.

## 6. Obtaining information and advice

In order to assist the broadest possible number of prospective applicants SPHEIR uses a variety of communication channels during the period up to the call being launched, and while the call is open.

Prior to 21 October 2016, the SPHEIR team will be available to discuss ideas on the substance of possible proposals, and on the formation of partnerships. The SPHEIR programme is managed on behalf of DFID by a consortium led by the British Council that includes PwC, and Universities UK International (UUKi). This means that prospective applicants have the benefit of advice connected to the experience and knowledge of each consortium member:

- Public and private HEIs and development partners active in all targeted countries, as well as prospective applicants thinking of proposals in fragile or conflict affected states, may access guidance from the British Council. Contact with the SPHEIR team may be initiated through British Council country offices, or directly through [info@spheir.org.uk](mailto:info@spheir.org.uk). Prospective applicants in Sub-Saharan Africa may contact SPHEIR's Nairobi-based Partnerships Manager, [Pauline.Gangla@britishcouncil.org](mailto:Pauline.Gangla@britishcouncil.org)
- HEIs, especially those in the UK higher education space, may access guidance from the UUKi. Contact with the SPHEIR team may be initiated through [mostafa.al-mossallami@international.ac.uk](mailto:mostafa.al-mossallami@international.ac.uk) at UUKi, or directly through [info@spheir.org.uk](mailto:info@spheir.org.uk)
- Private sector organisations may access guidance from PwC, although private universities may also access guidance through the British Council and UUKi. Contact with the SPHEIR team may be initiated through PwC by contacting [amina.adewusi@uk.pwc.com](mailto:amina.adewusi@uk.pwc.com) or directly through [info@spheir.org.uk](mailto:info@spheir.org.uk)

Each organisation will be engaging in a various events and activities related to the open call which will be publicised on the SPHEIR website. Prospective applicants should understand that SPHEIR team members will not review and comment on draft proposals, but can and will offer general feedback to assist applicants in thinking about proposals and/or partnership formation, and clarify the objectives of the call and eligibility requirements.

Once the call is launched on 21 October 2016, the SPHEIR team will not interact with individual applicants, although it will host or attend events and provide answers to questions raised by them and posted them on the FAQ page.<sup>2</sup> This is to ensure that all prospective applicants may benefit from equal treatment and access to the same information. Once the call window is launched on 21 October, this concept note should be carefully reviewed **along with the more detailed information on eligibility and application materials** that will be available at <http://www.spheir.org.uk/apply/call-for-proposals>

Effective 21 October 2016, the SPHEIR team will accept questions about the open call submitted through [info@spheir.org.uk](mailto:info@spheir.org.uk)

Questions will be reviewed and selected for answers that will be posted on the FAQ page at intervals as noted on the FAQ page. Questions from individual applicants will not be answered directly while the call window is open.

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<sup>2</sup> Except for prospective applicants from fragile and conflict affected countries in respect of the security risks associated with a proposal.