Side Event at the GRC Annual Meeting in Riyadh
18 May 2025, 16:15 – 17:45h local time

Opportunities for Safeguarding and Intensifying Multilateral Research Collaboration in Changing (Geo-)Political Environments

Event Report

BACKGROUND:

The Global Research Council (GRC) is a virtual organization, comprised of the heads of national research funding agencies from around the world, dedicated to promoting the sharing of data and best practices for high-quality collaboration among funding agencies worldwide. This is because cooperation and collaboration can enhance the quality of science, avoid unnecessary duplication, provide economies of scale, and address issues that can only be solved by working together.

However, changing (geo-)political landscapes characterised by rising nationalism, trade tensions, shifts in policy priorities, economic constraints, and strategic competition, as well as emerging national security concerns, pose significant threats to the continuity and integrity of multilateral research initiatives.

OVERVIEW:

This Side Event was hosted by the GRC Multilateral Engagement Working Group (MLE-WG) which was established in June 2023 with a mandate to map the landscape of available multilateral funding mechanisms globally, scope possible roles for the GRC in facilitating multilateral engagements, and to develop options for respective implementations and a roadmap to achieve them.

The MLE-WG invited participants of the 13th GRC Annual Meeting to share opportunities for safeguarding and intensifying multilateral research collaboration with an explicit focus on changing (geo-)political environments, facilitated by guiding questions addressed by the invited panel members and all participants in the moderated group discussions (see Annex I for the agenda).

68 participants attended the event onsite and **13 participants** connected virtually. The inputs from participants were a valuable resource for understanding the mechanisms and common principles of how multilateral research collaboration can be affected by changing (geo-)political environments. This event may provide a useful starting point for the GRC to provide support for high-quality and resilient collaboration among funding agencies worldwide. The MLE-WG hopes that this Side Event contributed to raising awareness for the importance of mobility, data access, and academic freedom for multilateral research collaboration.

ABSTRACT:

The side event, held during the 13th GRC Annual Meeting in Riyadh, aimed to explore opportunities to safeguard and strengthen multilateral research collaboration amidst shifting (geo-)political landscapes. Organized by the GRC Multilateral Engagement Working Group (MLE-WG), the primary objective was to identify challenges posed by rising nationalism, trade tensions, and policy shifts—particularly around researcher mobility, data access, and academic freedom—and to discuss how funding agencies can build resilient multilateral engagements (MLEs).

Key outcomes included calls to establish global ecosystems to support researcher mobility and prevent brain drain, advocate for academic freedom as a universal value, and promote open science and secure data sharing. The discussions also emphasized leveraging science diplomacy to align collaboration with both ethical standards and public policy and developing guidelines for MLEs that can withstand geopolitical fluctuations. The event underscored solidarity in science, urging collective responsibility across nations and institutions to ensure inclusive, secure, and impactful international cooperation.

DISCUSSIONS:

The session set out to identify what challenges funders face, what ways funders could address these challenges, and how funders could structure MLEs that are resilient to changing political environments. The session was kicked off with a panel consisting of HORCs from each of the 5 regions who provided regional perspectives to the guiding questions of the session. The participants then split into 4 groups for group discussions to also address the guiding questions which were led by the MLE-WG members. The session was then wrapped up after rapporteurs from each group presented what was discussed during their group discussion. The following are some of the common themes that arose from the panel and group discussions:

- **Researcher mobility**, in general, is best supported by an ecosystem that facilitates it—whether through funding, initiatives, or networks. Funders must work together to build a global ecosystem that is resistant to political changes to enable researcher mobility. Mobility programs should also be designed to promote a “brain bridge” rather than a “brain drain,” particularly when supporting scientists who have been displaced or cut off from their home institutions due to instability.

- Funder must advocate for **academic freedom** as a global value and help policy makers understand the value of science being free and open. Other ways funders can promote academic freedom is by implementing research security measures. Research security measures address national security concerns while protecting the integrity of research environments and ensuring the safety of researchers. By doing so, it creates a secure environment in which researchers can conduct science without fear of interference or harm.

- **Solidarity in science** is the collective commitment of researchers, institutions, funding bodies, and societies to work together across disciplines, borders, and cultures to advance knowledge for the common good. It reflects a shared responsibility to address global challenges like climate change, pandemics, and inequality through cooperation rather than competition. Funding agencies play a pivotal role by supporting collaborative research initiatives, advocating for robust policies prioritizing inclusiveness and ethical values in MLE, providing capacity building, and ensuring that funding resources promote responsible international cooperation that reaches communities and makes science more accessible and inclusive. By fostering open data sharing, transparent methodologies, and equitable access to resources, scientific solidarity promotes trust, equity, and progress that benefits everyone—not just a select few.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The side event organized by the Multilateral Engagement Working Group (MLE-WG) on **Opportunities for Safeguarding and Intensifying Multilateral Research Collaboration in Changing (Geo-)Political Environments** represented a first attempt to openly discuss changing (geo-)political landscapes that may negatively impact international cooperation in science and technology through shifts in policy agendas and imposed limitations on STI funding and mobility. The Global Research Council (GRC) is an organization well-equipped to address these challenges, grounded in its values of neutrality and inclusiveness and its broad representation across all regions of the world.

Based on the discussions during the side event, the MLE-WG proposes the following:

1. Establish global ecosystems to support researcher mobility, ensuring continued collaboration despite geopolitical changes.

2- Advocate, promote, and engage funding agencies to adopt open science and data sharing strategies, while respecting necessary security and privacy constraints.

3- Utilize science diplomacy to foster responsible international collaboration, ensuring alignment with public policies and ethical standards.

4- Develop guidelines for multilateral engagement mechanisms that are independent of (geo-)political shifts and local agendas.

5- Develop universal templates and frameworks for data sharing and cross-border data governance, reducing the need to renegotiate agreements each time and ensuring continuity even amid geopolitical changes.

6- Design flexible and adaptive research programs and funding initiatives that can adjust to political shifts and maintain international cooperation under varying conditions.

7- Strengthen research security frameworks to protect sensitive information, while continuing to champion openness and academic freedom.

8- Enhance solidarity through inclusive policies to ensure that language and cultural barriers do not impede participation in multilateral initiatives, encouraging diverse partnerships to build resilience.

9- Mobilize additional financial resources, including partnerships with international organizations, NGOs, and the private sector, to support researchers and institutions at risk of exclusion due to funding gaps.

10- Encourage program administrators and funding councils to actively collaborate with researchers and policymakers, building robust support systems that sustain research productivity despite external disruptions.

11- Support initiatives that facilitate researcher mobility, such as covering visa costs and streamlining administrative processes, to reduce barriers arising from political or regulatory challenges.

12- Promote the creation of multilateral declarations or manifestos to reinforce shared commitments to academic freedom, open science, and cooperation as global standards that transcend national agendas.

ANNEX I

Agenda[1]:

5'	**Welcome from the Side Event organisers** (Osamu Kobayashi)
5 x 5'	**Panel with representatives from the 5 GRC regions** (Lidia Borrell-Damian/Marcus Wilms) Americas — Alejandro Adem, President, NSERC Canada Asia-Pacific — Vissanu Meeyoo, Vice President, TSRI Thailand Europe — Claire Giry, President, ANR France MENA — Riham Daher, Senior Director Scientific Research, Qatar Research, Development, and Innovation Council Sub-Saharan Africa — Cephas Adjei Mensah, Director for Research, Statistics, and Information Management, MESTI Ghana
20'	**Discussion at tables** (including assignment of rapporteurs)
10'	**Rapporteurs report from the tables** (Hassan Alayied)
25'	**Plenary discussion & Summary** (Shaun Baron)
5'	**Way forward & Closing** (Prudence Makhura)

ANNEX II:

Group Discussion Notes:

The following group discussion notes were presented by rapporteurs during the side event.

Group 1 notes by MLE WG member, Rune Vistad, Research Council of Norway:

Challenges:

- Examples of challenges that come with geo-political changes, in particular with respect to mobility, data access and academic freedom.
- Scientific cooperation being threatened - academic freedom, autonomy, mobility.
- Increasingly difficult to work internationally - research security, strategic autonomy more present.
- Increased mobility - challenges on both sides; brain drain, economic consequences on the receiving side, but also opportunities.
- Dangerous when policy makers/decision makers do not value research

Data Related:

- Access to data that are exposed, timelines and secure historical data

[1] Plenary shortened to account for longer discussion times and late start of event

- For whom is it a challenge - for the researchers, funders?
- Wish data available for AI training - data are sovereign, how can we address this internationally within for example the GRC.
- Universal regulations for data transfer, template for data sharing, not to renegotiate this every time, will it survive geo-political changes?
- Data across borders - GDPR rules.

Possible solutions:

- How can these challenges be addressed? How can respective barriers for collaboration be removed or circumvented?
- Describe what is the benefit of academic freedom and international cooperation - speak up - will trickle down to e.g. mobility and data sharing
- Responsible internationalization
- Trust - GRC - important value amongst ourselves
- Solidarity - what does it mean, how do we do it? Example from Qatar
- Diversify with regards to partners

Group 2 notes by MLE WG Member, Sharapiya Kakimova, National Agency for Research and Development, Chile:

Challenges Arising from (Geo-)Political Changes

- Mobility: Geopolitical changes can restrict the movement of researchers, affecting international collaboration and exchange programs.
- Data Access: Political shifts can lead to restrictions on data sharing, impacting the openness and availability of research data.
- Academic Freedom: Changes in political climates can impose constraints on academic freedom, affecting teaching practices, research topics, and the dissemination of results.

Addressing These Challenges

- Mobility Solutions: Establish global ecosystems for researcher mobility, such as the DARI initiative, to ensure continued collaboration despite geopolitical changes.
- Data Access Strategies: Promote open science and data sharing mechanisms while respecting necessary security and privacy constraints.
- Safeguarding Academic Freedom: Advocate for academic freedom as a global value, ensuring it is upheld across institutions and regions.

Building Resilient Collaborations

- Flexible Program Design: Develop adaptable research programs that can withstand geopolitical changes.
- Science Diplomacy: Utilize science diplomacy to foster international collaboration, ensuring it aligns with public policies and ethical standards.
- Research Security: Implement clear guidelines on research security to protect sensitive information while promoting openness.

Role of Funders

- Support Open Science: Encourage funders to adopt open science policies and specify which research areas require security measures.
- Guided Principles for Collaboration: Develop and maintain collaboration through agreed-upon principles that ensure inclusive participation.
- Additional Considerations
- Impact on Publishing and Dissemination: Geopolitical changes can affect the publication and dissemination of research results, necessitating strategies to maintain openness and accessibility.
- Institutional Variability: Recognize that academic freedom and data access can vary significantly between institutions, countries, and regions, and tailor approaches accordingly.

Group 3 notes by MLE WG member, Ana Vasquez, National Agency for Research and Innovation, Uruguay:

Financial support.

- Some governments are not providing enough support for research for different reasons. Whatever the case, this issue has to be addressed with solidarity rather than competition. More resources need to be secured to make sure the scientific communities in these countries are not excluded from international cooperation. These additional resources may come from international organizations and NGOs, the GRC may have a role to play in securing the funding. Other funding agencies may step up and facilitate the allocation of these additional resources. Consider involving multinational companies to develop international cooperation.

Barriers for multilateral engagement.

- Language is a barrier for many Portuguese and French speaking countries. The GRC has to make sure that it is an inclusive space that fosters participation.

Group 4 notes by MLE WG member, Enrico Paringit, Philippine Council for Industry, Energy, and Emerging. Technology Research and: Development Eric:

- In light of the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, the engagement of researchers in both large and small countries is increasingly vital. They are coming together to ensure the continuity of research efforts despite the challenges posed by international collaboration disruptions. To address these issues, there are concerted efforts to enhance both multilateral and bilateral programs, focusing on expanding funding opportunities and types of activities. This includes ensuring that Ukrainian researchers remain involved in research initiatives in Latvia, emphasizing the need for sustained collaboration and support.

- In response to these crises, the establishment of a foundation aimed at addressing various challenges—including brain drain—has been proposed. This initiative seeks to foster an environment where research culture thrives and

academic freedom is upheld. Engaging with administrative bodies to promote awareness of academic freedom remains crucial, as this has a significant impact on attracting and retaining talent within the research community. For instance, Spain has encountered difficulties in drawing researchers from the U.S. due to administration changes and issues related to trade, which threaten academic freedom, highlighting a global phenomenon where opportunities vary significantly by region.

- While the importance of academic freedom is recognized, there is also a pressing need to balance the focus on military-related research during existential crises. The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is actively monitoring unstable countries and exploring flexible measures like mobility programs and the provision of research infrastructure to support ongoing work in these affected regions. Collaboration among neighbouring countries is encouraged to provide assistance where it is needed to support continuity of productivity.

- To effectively tackle the challenges faced by researchers, there is a call to build upon existing multilateral frameworks, particularly in Southeast Asia, to facilitate the exchange of talent and sharing of resources. Additional pressure is being placed on various departments and ministries to alleviate visa challenges faced by researchers, with initiatives like "Researchers Without Borders" gaining traction. In the UK, arrangements have been made for funding bodies to cover visa costs, promoting smoother collaboration.

- We ended recognizing need for cooperation between program administrators and researchers to develop strategies that can successfully address the challenges at hand. Funding and research councils must engage actively with research institutions or academe and political leaders to ensure that the necessary support systems are in place, fostering a robust network dedicated to advancing research amidst geopolitical shifts. The collective effort is culminating in the creation of a GRC manifesto, outlining a unified approach to these pressing issues.

EVENT PHOTOS:

1. Panel Discussion:

2. Groups Discussion:

3. Rapporteurs Presentations:

Special Thanks:

We would like to extend a special thanks to Prudence and Osamu for their leadership and contributions over the past two years as the Co-chairs of the MLE-WG. Though your roles have changed, we look forward to your continued participation in the group. We would also like to thank Felina for their dedicated support over the past two years as the group's secretariat. We know first-hand that you will continue to do an excellent job as the Deputy Executive Secretariat for the GRC.

From Left to Right: Prudence Makhura (National Research Foundation South Africa) Osamu Kobayashi (Japan Science and Technology Agency), Felina Wittke (German Research Foundation)