

# SFC Alliances for Research Challenges

## Expression of Interest

### Reducing the impact of childhood adversity on children and young people

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#### Disciplines

Education, Sociology, Psychology, Music

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## Our Proposed Challenge Area

We propose ***reducing the impact of childhood adversity on our children and young people*** as a significant challenge area within Scotland. Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation sets out 'creating a fairer and more equitable society' as a key priority over the next decade. It identifies tackling poverty as foundational to achieving this priority, emphasising the need to address childhood poverty specifically, outlining detailed plans how to do this in its Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-2022. We argue, however, that childhood adversity encompasses more than childhood poverty, to include adverse childhood experiences, which are exacerbated by inequitable education provision, and lack of timely access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Addressing childhood poverty alone will not ameliorate these other factors which impact on the lives of Scottish children and young people.

We propose there is a need to collaborate across disciplines and universities to support a range of different research and related activity, relevant to the wider context in which our children and young people live and learn, so as to better understand how childhood adversity impacts on them and develop evidence-based solutions that reduce this impact. If we, as a nation, are to realise the purpose and outcomes of the National Performance Framework, we must build on the data returned from the 'Children and Young People' indicators, conducting further research that looks beyond the social and physical development of children 27 – 30 months of age, the wellbeing and happiness of 4 –12 years as measured by a questionnaire, the quality of children's services that only looks at provision of early learning childcare settings, or levels of material deprivation. Through research that is multidisciplinary and multifaceted, we contend it is possible to leverage innovative education programming as a key driver in creating a more successful country that increases the wellbeing of children living in Scotland.

Creating this collaborative space to create the conditions for larger, more scalable research in this area to take place is necessary and timely, as the Scottish Government seeks to address ongoing childhood inequalities through Scottish Education, as exemplified by various education policy initiatives, such as GIRFEC, the refreshed Scottish Attainment Challenge, Pupil Equity Funding, Realising the Ambition, and Free School Meals initiative. Although these policies might address the material and educational needs of children, a sustainable, research-informed, intervention that directly addresses the socio-cognitive impact of childhood adversity is needed. In the Scottish Government's Research Strategy for Scottish Education, published in 2017, key guiding goals include (1) closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children, and (2) improving children and young people's health and wellbeing. Here, a multidisciplinary response is critical for understanding the impact of childhood adversity through an evidence-based position in psychological science and evaluating the practical implications of such results in the education sector in Scotland. Ranging from health outcomes such as heart disease to behavioural outcomes including sexual risk taking, the impact of childhood adversity across the lifespan is profound. The Scottish Government has made a commitment to reducing the impact of childhood adversity, highlighting the importance of understanding the mechanisms through which childhood adversity translates to individual and social detriment.

A multifaceted understanding of these mechanisms has important implications for areas of education policy, particularly considering Scottish government goals to (1) mitigate the negative impact of childhood adversity on children and young people, and (2) develop adversity and trauma-informed workforce and services. Through government initiatives such as Scottish Policy Research Exchange, Stem for Britain, and Growing Up in Scotland, we will seek to work with other individuals and institutions that influence public policy to contribute to the wider goal of ensuring our children are happy, healthy and supported as they develop. Through Scottish Education, the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS), initial teacher education (ITE) providers and local authorities, we will undertake collaborative work that meaningfully engages and encourages the teachers and school leaders who respond daily to the impact of childhood adversity on children and young people in their classrooms. We contend that if we can understand the relationship between childhood

adversity, cognitive, behavioural, and social outcomes, we can better understand how policy changes, as well as school-based education interventions, can intercede to reduce this impact on individual children, our education and healthcare systems, and our wider society.

To help us understand this complex relationship between childhood adversity and its effects on children and young people, our research will be broad and inclusive, investigating issues in children's social development related to childhood adversity across epistemologies, disciplines, institutions. Though a multidisciplinary approach, that combines early career researchers with established researchers, new universities with specialist and ancient universities, we seek to create teams of people who can work across areas of expertise relevant to our challenge area to understand the breadth and depth of the issue of childhood adversity. Taking this approach would engender better cross collaboration between higher education institutions and be able to draw upon relationships with stakeholders beyond academia relevant to our challenge area.

Insights gathered from this investigative work into childhood adversity would form a foundation for further inquiry into childhood adversity and children's development in school settings, building a bridge between theory and application. Technologies for data gathering in psychophysiology, such as eye tracking, and virtual reality systems, combined with wearable technologies, will allow for examination of these key issues in child and young adult populations, with a view to understanding issues that affect wellbeing within and beyond the school environment. Indeed, cognitive mechanisms developed in response to early traumas, and their subsequent social effects, can persist through the lifespan. Understanding how and why this occurs will also be of great value in improving the lives of adults who have experienced trauma and adversity during their childhood years. We would look to work with other institutions with strong expertise in augmented realities, such as Heriot Watt, Abertay University, and the University of Edinburgh to feed into this bridging of theory and application. By drawing together a larger coalition of collaborators, we can strengthen our response to our proposed challenge area.

Importantly, linking this bridge between theory and application would incorporate an action-based research approach, seeking to find *solutions* to the problem of how childhood adversity impacts our children and young people, not just descriptions of those problems. This way of working is fundamental to our collaborative approach to this challenge area, as we contend the social sciences over focus on description and under deliver on impactful action. Such actions might take the form of a pedagogical innovation, such as the one currently being piloted in schools by Dr Kat Lord-Watson and Dr Simon Hault, in collaboration with their external partner, Love Music, to address the alarmingly low rates of pupil mental health and wellbeing through school-based pedagogical intervention, Singing4Health, which has been designed to support the most vulnerable children in our schools at a time when the continued lack of timely or sustained access to the Scottish Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. This type of grassroots intervention, which is designed to be a sustainable approach for providing children in areas of high deprivation with music education that acts as a positive social interaction, can potentially improve social, behavioural and cognitive development.

Crucially, whatever actions taken in response to our collaborative work on this challenge area must be sustainable, so they have long-term impact. For example, the end goal of the current Singing4Health pilot is the establishment of a research-informed training programme for initial teacher education and continued professional development for in-service teachers that trains non-specialist teachers to deliver music education confidently. Dr Angela Jaap, Lecturer in Professional Learning at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, provides her personal and institutional expertise in this way of working, as the RCS have a proven track record of impactful community programming.

In terms of policy, we want any tangible outcomes from our collective efforts to create opportunities for children and young people that directly respond to the National Performance Framework. For us, ***reducing the impact of childhood adversity on our children and young people*** must result in outcomes that: (a) increase the wellbeing of people living in Scotland; (b) reduce inequalities; (c) treat people with kindness and compassion; (d) contribute to children feeling loved;

(e) help children feel respected and able to realise their full potential; (f) tackle poverty and share opportunities more equally, and; (g) create inclusive and resilient school communities. Additionally, the Scottish Innovation Action Plan identifies four key actions to support and encourage innovation, and we propose any work in this challenge areas must respond directly to the second key action concerning public sector needs, being the crises in support for mental health and wellbeing of children and adults.

### Our Future Funding Opportunities

There are multiple opportunities to source continued funding for this ARC, given the multidisciplinary nature of this research: UKRI Strategic Priorities Fund, submitting to their 'health, wellbeing and human rights' theme; UKRI Strength in Places Fund, the AHRC Standard Research Grant and the AHRC Research, Development and Engagement Fellowships, given the arts-based aspect of our qualitative research strand. We could also target the Royal Society of Edinburgh Research Network Grant and Personal Fellowships. Additionally, we are well-placed to target the UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships, the AHRC Early Career Research Grant, AHRC Research, Development and Engagement Fellowships (ECR Route); and European Research Council Starting Grants, as we would seek to include ECRs across Scotland whose work is relevant to this challenge area. This would be supported by a model of bringing together academics across different career stages, offering opportunities for mentorship between new and established researchers.

### Our Multidisciplinary Approach

This multidisciplinary research collective draws on the expertise of researchers studying child poverty, adverse childhood experiences, socially vulnerable children, and the health and wellbeing of children. The project will be led by QMU, partnering with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the School of Education at the University of Glasgow. Through QMU's Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) we will bring together researchers from a diverse range of disciplines, with wide ranging expertise across a number of fields. This is a model of research that CASS specialises in, as it has an established track-record of producing research and engaging in knowledge exchange with real-world applications across a range of areas and disciplines.

Dr Angela Jaap represents the RCS. She is the President of SERA, and an expert in developing impactful arts education, serving as a specialist consultant to the RCS (2015 – 2017) in the development of professional learning opportunities for teachers. Dr Jaap is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, achieving this in recognition of the work she has done at RCS within its professional learning and initial teacher education programmes.

Professor McKinney represents the University of Glasgow. He leads the SERA Poverty in Education Network, contributing his expertise in the realities of poverty on Scottish children, providing historical background and a contemporary context for the research. Through Professor McKinney, the Poverty and Education Network has brought together academics throughout Scotland who have researched different aspects of the impact of poverty on education and have disseminated their findings at conferences and in publications. Key members of the network have been involved in a number of BERA (British Educational Research Association) funded projects to date and would act as advisors to this study.

### Added Benefit through SFC Funding

Through SFC Funding, we will be able to bring together a diverse collective of academics currently working to understand the impact of childhood adversity on children and young people, and motivated to find evidence-based, sustainable solutions to reducing its impact on the lives of our children and young people. SFC support is essential to creating financial stability for the establishment, development, and maintenance of this ambitious programme of research and action.