

# Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Norms and Practices in Higher Education Institutions

**Conversation Event Report  
SOAS University of London,  
18th September 2019**

Written by:  
Dr Romina Istratii and Dr Alex Lewis

Minute-taker:  
Dr Maya Goodfellow



**Acknowledgements:** SOAS would like to acknowledge the support of the event partners, the London International Development Centre (LIDC) and the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). We are grateful for their participation and involvement of the day and for disseminating the event and its outputs to their wide networks. We also wish to thank everyone who contributed to the organisation of the event, including colleagues in the Research Office, the AV team, estates and catering at SOAS, the student ambassadors and the videographers.

**Stable URL:** <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/id/eprint/32053>

**Licence:** Published under the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial (CC-BY-NC) 4.0 International Licence, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## Contents

<b>Aims of the Report .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Background of the Event .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Panel 1: Applying a 'decolonial' lens to higher education and research funding .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Panel 2: Assessing funder language and structures and research office practices.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Panel 3: Assessing attitudes and norms in collaborative global research .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Roundtable .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Overarching themes and challenge areas .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Limitations with the structures of ODA-funding.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Power inequalities and the dominance of Anglophone epistemology .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Researchers and research practices as part of a larger system.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Research does not happen only within academia .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<b>Suggestions going forward .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Relevant readings .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Useful links and contacts.....</b>	<b>19</b>

## Aims of the Report

The current report summarises a recent conversation event that was held at SOAS University of London to discuss research practices in higher education institutions from a decolonial point of view. The event emerged from concerns about the changing funding landscape in recent years, and the role of research offices in research development practices, especially in relation to emerging schemes that fund research related to UK Official Development Assistance (ODA). It aimed to bridge on-going efforts to diversify university curricula and decolonise knowledge production in British and other western universities with research development structures and norms as propagated by research offices and researchers, which had previously received little attention.

The conversation event, which was attended by almost a hundred people and watched online by an even larger number of viewers internationally, included three panels and 13 presentations by researchers, academics, practitioners, funders and research office directors from the health and social sciences in the UK and internationally. The report summarises the presentations and identifies the overarching issues and challenge areas that emerged on the day, and especially during the roundtable that was held after the panel presentations. The aim of the report is to provide funding bodies, research offices and researchers with some directions for thinking through these issues and identifying what actions they each may take to start to address such challenges more systematically from their different contexts.

## Background of the Event

The event opened with introductions by **Dr Alex Lewis**, Director of Research & Enterprise at SOAS. Dr Lewis acknowledged that the funding landscape has changed importantly in the past five years, with more funding being allocated to international research. She observed the need for research offices to reflect on how they can best support researchers to develop and implement such international research ethically and in ways that promote egalitarian relationships with local partners. She stressed the need for bringing the various stakeholders together to have this conversation as a prelude to taking more systematic, collaborative strategies for long-term effect.

**Dr Romina Istratii**, who led this initiative from the Research Office in her capacity as Research Funding Officer, next provided some background on the event. With the hindsight of ten years of experience in international development research, practice and consulting and having worked in more recent years to attune development theory and praxis to local knowledge systems and community priorities, Dr Istratii stressed the necessity to look more closely at the regulatory framework governing research funding and its contribution to the on-going prevalence of Euro-American epistemology in knowledge production. She observed that colonial continuities that reflect in ways of knowing and theoretical thinking are underpinned by structural and normative factors and are perpetuated by a matrix of actors and processes simultaneously and in complex ways, not always intentionally. Applying a decolonial lens to research practices seeks to draw attention to these colonial legacies and power asymmetries in the process of international development-oriented research. Dr Istratii acknowledged that decolonisation has become a buzzword in today's academic circles, and stressed that the aim was not to appropriate the term, but to employ it resourcefully and build on the momentum created by

indigenous, post-colonial struggles to reverse fundamentally problematic structures, practices and norms underpinning research and knowledge production.

She next referred to funding regulations and rules that govern international collaborative research, and specifically the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and the Newton Fund which aim to promote development-oriented research in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Dr Istratii observed that these funding opportunities have the potential to link academic research better to local communities and produce societal benefit, but the eligibility criteria and due diligence rules and expectations of these calls tend to place local partners at a disadvantage. She problematized the degree to which these calls, framed around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and more broadly the so-called Agenda 2030, are attuned to local understandings of development issues and priorities and can accommodate local particularities. Moreover, she worried that by being predominantly (albeit with marked exceptions) tied to UK-based institutions these can curtail the possibilities of local researchers to lead in international research projects.

Lastly, Dr Istratii referred to the crucial role of research offices in research development and their relevance to decolonising knowledge production. She observed that research development entails important selection, governance, contractual, legal and logistical procedures, and this means that research offices in universities significantly influence how research proceeds. She also referred to the increasing pressures felt by research offices to meet funder criteria and expectations for rigorous internal peer review or selection processes, which could lead to new barriers for some researchers if power asymmetries among academics and other biases within the university are not considered carefully. She stressed the crucial role that research offices must have in in this conversation and the need for a decolonial awareness on their part as well.

Responding to these concerns, the conversation event was conceived to raise reflexivity around these matters, draw attention to the interlinkages between the structural, normative and practical aspects of research development and explore how each stakeholder might adapt to achieve more egalitarian and reflexive research practices. It was also envisioned that the event would provide a common platform for universities and other stakeholders to share knowledge and lessons and to start developing better practices together.

To encourage these conversations, the event was structured as a series of three panels culminating in a roundtable with speakers and members of the audience. Prior to the event all speakers were circulated the theme of each panel and a few questions to guide them in preparing their presentations. The chair introduced the theme of each panel and the speakers, and each speaker presented for about seven minutes, leaving 10 minutes for a Q & A session with the audience at the end of each panel.

### **Panel 1: Applying a 'decolonial' lens to higher education and research funding**

The first panel sought to bridge current efforts and discourses to decolonise higher education with research ethics, structures and funding. It sought to provide the audience with a common understanding around decolonisation to ensure that everyone could follow the conversation in later stages and obtain a better sense of what applying a decolonial lens could mean in their

own practices and contexts. Speakers were asked to contemplate the following questions in preparation of their presentations:

- What does applying a decolonial lens to higher education mean? How might a decolonial lens be applied to research ethics, especially in low/middle-income countries and post-colonial contexts?
- How can a decolonial lens be operationalised at the structural, normative and practical level in relation to research in higher education institutions?
- How can we use decolonising epistemology to transform knowledge production and research structures, practices and norms (e.g. as propagated by funding bodies, research offices, researchers)?

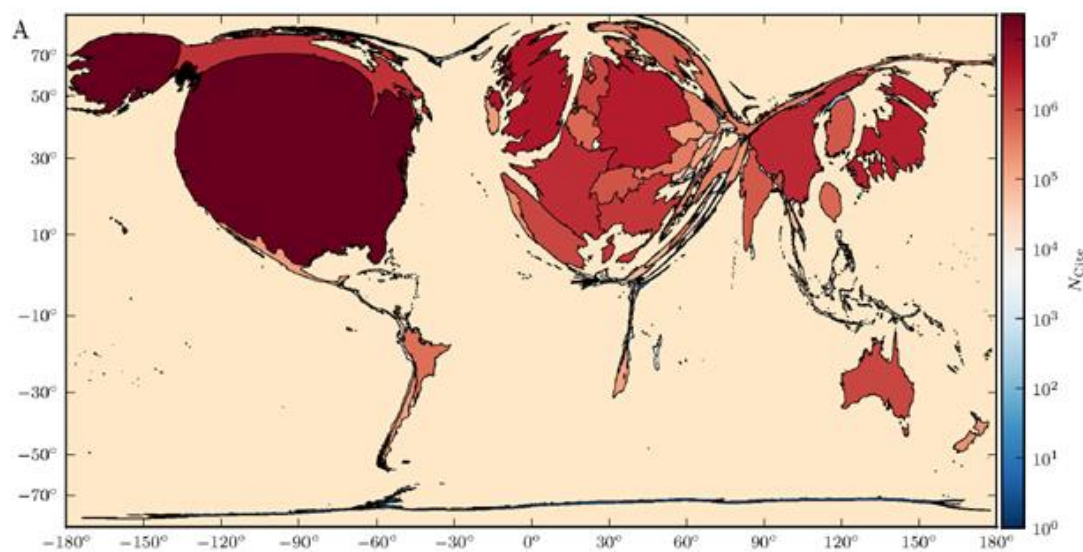
This panel was comprised of four speakers, and was chaired by **Professor Lindiwe Dovey**, Professor of Film and Screen Studies at SOAS. Prof Dovey reiterated that decolonisation is not a new term or praxis by any means, mentioning the notable examples of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* published in 1986. While she agreed that the term has been criticised for having become a buzzword, she also stressed that its contemporary recirculation can prove resourceful for bringing different stakeholders together to question the norms of knowledge production.

The panel was opened by **Dr Meera Sabaratnam**, Senior Lecturer of International Relations and the current Chair of the Decolonising SOAS Working Group. Dr Sabaratnam proceeded to explain what is meant when it is said that research is or can be colonial and what the term 'decolonising' captures that the term unequal simply does not. In her analysis, she drew on the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith *Decolonising Methodologies* published in 1999 to highlight how indigenous communities experience research as an 'extractive endeavour', with foreign researchers side-lining indigenous knowledge and researchers through their practices. She also referred to her one work from Mozambique, invoking the concept of '*protagonismo*' that her research participants used to refer to foreign partners, their need to always be the centre of attention. Her explanation underlined that the nature and form of the inequality is shaped by hierarchical attitudes and structures that find their roots in colonial relations and legacies. She then proposed viewing the current problems as a tension between upward and horizontal accountability of researchers. She described upward accountability being shown to funders, research offices and bureaucratic parties and horizontal accountability to partners, collaborators and research participants, with the latter being often subordinated to the former. She spoke of the necessity to cultivate a decolonial ethos as a way to redress colonial asymmetries and to make research more respectful and collaborative.

The second speaker of the panel was **Dr Matthew Harris**, Clinical Senior Lecturer in Public Health Medicine at Imperial College London. Dr Harris spoke about efforts in his institution to apply a decolonial lens to the Master's programme in public health. Dr Harris referred to evidence showing that most of the research articles used in teaching public health courses have been found to be disproportionately originating in Western Europe and North America (Fig. 1). A similar exercise conducted by his team that evaluated the reading lists of 16 modules in public health at ICL found considerably more skewed results. Moreover, journal articles with impact factors over 10 were over-represented. He narrated that when this information was shared with the 16 module leads he was asked *inter alia* to retract the research, send an apology and attend a disciplinary hearing. He described and analysed the opposition that this generated within the

institution in reference to the concept of 'epistemic fragility'. Here he drew from Robin DiAngelo's concept of 'white fragility', who noticed that white people would often react in terms of confusion, anger or stress when confronted with the idea of racism as a systemic challenge. Dr Harris also problematized the notion that scientists choose to teach research and papers based on pure merit, since evidence showed a clear difference in perceptions around work that originates in high-income societies (positively viewed) and works generated in low-income societies (negatively viewed). He concluded his presentation by asking if 'epistemic fragility' is something other scholars have observed in their own disciplines and what might be done better to achieve a better integration of humanities and social sciences into medicine and public health research.

**Figure 1: Word Citation and Collaboration Networks (slide shown by Dr Harris)**



Pan et al World citation and collaboration networks: uncovering the role of geography in science *Scientific Reports* 2012 2 : 902

The third speaker of the panel was **Dr Kerry Harman**, Programme Director of Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) at Birkbeck University of London. Dr Harman invoked the now often used notion of 'epistemicide' to discuss the erasure of indigenous knowledges, and westernised universities' complicity in this process. Drawing from the Australian context, she proposed that decolonising means taking marginalised groups seriously as producers of knowledge. To achieve this it is necessary to reconfigure the way in which knowledge and knowledge production have been understood in the western university. She stressed the need to move beyond thinking about knowledge production as 'making sense of sense' and knowledge for the purpose of explanation, to something that is more creative and non-hierarchical. She insisted that when we think about knowledge we have to think about learning as well, where learning is expansive. This more comprehensive and exploratory approach to knowledge has yet to be normalised in the western university, which we may want to move toward.

The final speaker of the panel was **Dr Faye Gishen**, a consultant physician at Royal Free London and Associate Head of the MBBS Programme at UCL Medical School. Dr Gishen spoke about efforts to diversify and consolidate a person-centred medical curriculum. She acknowledged

that the medical education community had been slower in terms of decolonising compared to the arts and humanities, but that this was becoming a widely adopted goal. She observed that the momentum to decolonise the undergraduate medical curricula was generally motivated by drivers to foster patient-centred practice and to develop a more diversified, humanised and professional education for future doctors, some of whom were co-curating these changes. Decolonising is a fairly new term when applied to medicine, with previous work mainly applied to indigenous populations. She observed that medicine has historically been quite hierarchical, and referred to the significant challenges of mapping the infinite scope of a medical curriculum in order to identify gaps and use such mapping to subsequently achieve desirable levels of inclusivity. While the medical curriculum may traditionally be largely focused on white patients and learners, medics are increasingly called to serve diverse populations and need to educate accordingly. Additionally, clinical academics are also tasked with improving the student experience by making diverse learner populations feel more visible and represented in teaching and learning materials. Finally, she spoke about pedagogical changes that have been already made at her institution as a result of diversifying the medical curriculum (Fig. 2), for example teaching students to recognise skin cancers on darker skins. Lastly, Dr Gishen stressed the need for decolonising health practices and widening participation.

**Figure 2: Liberation the Medical Curriculum at UCL (slide shown by Dr Gishen)**



## **Panel 2: Assessing funder language and structures and research office practices**

Panel 2 sought to take a closer look at funder language, guidelines and priorities, and more broadly, the governance framework in which funders and research offices in the UK operate. It aimed to explore the degree to which this framework is informed by priorities and conditions that are pertinent to the UK and other western European societies and how these may or may not align with non-western contexts, local regulations and available infrastructure and resources, especially in relation to LMICs and post-colonial contexts, where much international development research currently takes place. Speakers were asked to contemplate the following questions in preparation of their presentations:



- How may funder language, guidelines and priorities and decolonial research commitments align or be at tension with each other?
- Funders are highly committed to egalitarian partnerships and co-production of research, but when this objective is translated into practice, what may be some structural or normative impediments?
- How do research offices mediate between funders and local research institutions/researchers and what are some logistical challenges when capacity/infrastructural differences between countries/researchers are considered, especially *vis-à-vis* UK/EU governance expectations?

**Dr Romina Istratii**, who chaired this panel, contextualised the conversation by asking: If funding is tied to UK-based institutions is it really conducive to helping research partners in local societies lead? Moreover, how advanced are research offices in universities with setting up clear guidelines and protocols (e.g. around safeguarding, ethics, gender-sensitivity, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, etc.) to support international collaborative research?

The first presenter in the panel was **Dr Sarah Plowman**, Senior Official Development Assistance Project Manager at the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Dr Plowman presented the UKRI's learning journey and evolution of processes since 2014 (Fig. 3). She explained that prior to 2014, some funding schemes within UKRI funded international development, but these were small in comparison to the large-scale activities that UKRI currently undertakes. The change occurred with the introduction of the Newton Fund and the GCRF. In the aftermath, UKRI and other bodies delivering these have seen numerous internal evaluations and have been keen to integrate reflective learning in their processes, such as through workshops in effective partnerships to address the SDGs, and engagement for learning with other funders. The rules on eligibility also evolved in this period. When GCRF was first introduced, the schemes did not allow for an international co-investigator, but now some schemes have an international principal investigator. Dr Plowman also referred to the development of the international Peer Review College as a strategy to involve international partners in the review process, who can assess if projects consider the local context and speak to local priorities.

**Figure 3: Reviewing Processes and Learning from others (slide shown by Dr Plowman)**

- Rethinking Research Collaborative – Promoting Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships to Respond to Global Challenges – recommendations to UKRI 2018
- Working in Effective Partnerships to Address the Sustainable Development Goals (UKRI –KFPE workshop Tanzania Sep 2018)
- ESRC/AHRC Indigenous research methods workshop (Brazil 2019)
- GCRF Evaluation Foundation stage and Newton Fund process evaluation review
- ICAI reviews – GCRF, Newton Fund, How UK Aid learns
- Learning from other funders – SNSF, IDRC, RCN, SRC, NWO, JST

UK Research and Innovation



The next speaker was **Professor Simon Goldhill**, Professor of Greek and Classics at the University of Cambridge and incoming Foreign Secretary at the British Academy. Prof Goldhill argued that one should not be politically naive, pointing out that the funding that has been made available for international development research reflects what he described as a 'cynical' plan conceived by the UK government. He drew from his experience sitting in different funding bodies and research councils and observed that the government controls funds in an incredibly instrumental, controlling and bureaucratic way, expecting researchers to demonstrate almost immediately that they are producing economic impact for the country they are working in. He charged that the government has paid little attention to institutional blockages that can impede achieving the desirable changes, not least because of cultural differences and lack of infrastructure that make work in these countries challenging and complex. He proposed as an alternative strategy to train government officials in order to loosen the currently rigid stipulations around research and impact delivery.

The third speaker was **Professor Alex Tubawene Kanyimba**, Associate Professor of Education for Sustainable Development and Deputy Director at the Centre for Research and Publications at the University of Namibia (UNAM). Prof Kanyimba provided a closer assessment of funder language and structures from a Namibian perspective. Some of the issues he mentioned had to do with alignment in terminology. He noted that some international funders promote the notion of trans-disciplinarity, referring to conversations between disciplines, sectors and research communities - as integral part of the teams and not merely as knowledge givers (data collectors). However, due to global economic challenges and conservatism, this has not yet been achieved. He also raised the issue of epidemiological and methodological pluralism, to promote egalitarian integration of Euro-American and African epistemologies and methods into research projects. Prof Kanyimba mentioned that he has recently started working with the University of Strathclyde on a UKRI/GCRF Funded project titled '*Transformative Governance for a Sustainable Blue Society*'. This project aims to incorporate decolonial and silenced perspectives into the Namibian ocean governance at the ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological level. He observed that researchers in Namibia continue to see European researchers dominating discussions and stressed the need to promote anti-hegemonic practices in order to achieve a more equal exchange of knowledge and methodologies. He also referred to logistical challenges, such as difficulty in tracking and finding UK-based partners and collaborators. Moreover, researchers in Namibia do not have protected time to develop projects and there are limited resources in the country. This all causes imbalances when collaborating with overseas researchers.

**Dr Mulugeta Beri**hu, former Research Director at Aksum University in Northern Ethiopia, also spoke about challenges and best practices in international research collaborations. Dr Beri hu gave an overview of the kind of support that the research office in Aksum provides and its dealings with international partners. As a research office, they advertise funding calls that are brought to their attention, provide training, mediate extensions of projects where there are valid reasons and prepare calls, prioritising specifically female researchers. Dr Beri hu also referred to some of the challenges faced when international collaborators are involved. He explained that most projects require a legal representative from the foreign institution or organisation, who may not speak the local language(s) and be unattuned to the local cultural contexts. According to Dr Beri hu, local researchers can feel demoralised by this situation. At other times, funder priorities neglect the development agenda locally or the foreign partners' lack of commitment reflects in projects lacking continuity. Dr Beri hu also offered some

recommendations for changing this asymmetrical relationship by facilitating student and staff mobility and exchange between the UK and institutions like the one he works in, establishing substantive Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) or other agreements between institutions, working collaboratively to explore and to develop new research projects and organising conferences and workshops together to share learning and knowledge.

The final speaker was **Dr Jude Fransman**, a Research Fellow at Open University and co-convenor of the Rethinking Research Collaborative. Dr Fransman stressed that the university is not the preserve of knowledge production and that decolonising knowledge is not pertinent only to this realm. There are other bodies – such as NGOs - that do this work. She explained that the unprecedented investment in ODA-related research by the UK government has been informed by a complex set of political and ideological agendas, including the influence of the Industrial Strategy (Fig. 4). Despite the rhetorical commitment to development impact, the question of whether universities are the best place to promote these objectives has not been considered reflexively enough. Dr Fransman stressed also that we should not limit ourselves to understanding egalitarian partnerships as promoted in UKRI documents, definitions that do not appear to capture hierarchies within countries and between local institutions (e.g. national versus regional or urban/rural institutions or across sectors). She urged attendants to think about transnational collaborations between different funders, highlighting as innovative practice funding that invites researchers in LMICs to lead on projects, and the work of the African Academy of Sciences across Africa - supported by Wellcome Trust and other funders – seeking to set research agendas and build capacity in a more equitable way across institutions.

**Figure 4: Political environment informing funding priorities (slide shown by Dr Fransman)**



### **Panel 3: Assessing attitudes and norms in collaborative global research**

Panel 3 explored norms that govern collaborative research cross-culturally, structural barriers to egalitarian partnerships and co-design/co-production of research and how funder/research office practices may contribute to these from the perspective of researchers and research support services in the UK and globally. Speakers were asked to contemplate the following questions in preparation of their presentations:

- What are some normative and systematic barriers to egalitarian research partnerships or co-production of research in collaborative international projects?
- How may the current dominance of industrialized societies in knowledge production be related to structural, normative or attitudinal factors pertinent to collaborative research?
- How might funders and research offices in higher education institutions alter/improve their regulations and practices to adapt to the needs and realities of partners/researchers in low/middle-income countries to support research leadership, especially in international development research where it is especially pertinent for local researchers to lead?

The final panel was chaired by **Dr Alex Lewis**, who invited presenters to contemplate on norms and practices governing collaborative global research, and how these might be improved where problematic, such as through strategies taken by research offices when supporting researchers.

The first speaker was **Dr Maru Mormina**, a Senior Researcher and Ethics Advisor at the University of Oxford. Dr Mormina focused her presentation on the ethical dimensions of capacity building, which have not received always the attention they deserve. She stressed that in decolonising research, it is equally important to think of the practical aspects, while keeping in mind that these often overlap with epistemological issues. She proposed the need to move away from the dichotomy of 'bad' North/'good' South, while also acknowledging their regional differences. Dr Mormina observed that many of the challenges faced to conduct partnerships in an egalitarian manner can only be tackled at the systemic level, highlighting the need to address the many structural problems that perpetuate dependency and power differentials, for example around access to funding and local investments in research support. Lack of local opportunities can foster a 'mercenary' approach to partnerships, whereby Southern researchers adopt an opportunistic approach to international partnerships, joining projects just to attract funding to their institutions. Dr Mormina also warned that the emphasis on 'global challenges', whilst welcome, can squeeze out local agendas. She also pointed out that narrow definitions of impact can incentivize short termism and disincentivise long-term theoretical research. Moreover, Dr Mormina observed that capacity building is generally understood in a technocratic manner as mere skills training and this in fact reinforces Eurocentric paradigms of knowledge production. Capacity building can become an instrument of power if used to impose western ideas of excellence. She called for a greater commitment to a joint articulation of research agendas and a stronger emphasis on research capacity strengthening as a standalone intervention. Institutional incentives for good practice are needed, for example through promotion criteria that reward collaborative behaviour and efforts to strengthen capacity independent of research outputs.

**Professor Michael Hutt**, Professor of Nepali and Himalayan Studies at SOAS, next drew on his own personal history of work on Nepal and the Himalayan region to evidence research and publication asymmetries. In particular, he looked back to his editorship of a volume on Nepali political change in the 1990s: this had no Nepali contributors, and was criticised by local

researchers, including Drs Pratyoush Onta and Seira Tamang (see below), for this reason. Twenty four years later, Prof Hutt and Dr Onta co-edited another volume on political change and public culture in Nepal. Of the twelve contributors to this book, six were Nepalis, and Prof Hutt observed that it was increasingly the norm for research to be done in close conversation with Nepali researchers. But he noted that there are still different grades of collaboration in the Nepali context. He mentioned four scenarios: researcher soloism (individual foreign researcher conducts work, speaks to some indigenous researchers and may or may not credit them); the 'Research Sherpa' syndrome (foreign researcher designs project and employs Nepali researchers to collect data); post-design collaboration (foreign researcher designs project and then invites partners in and they apply for funding jointly); partners in design (partnership starting at the early stage of design and continuing throughout). Lastly, Prof Hutt emphasised the crucial importance of foreign researchers speaking the languages of the societies in which they work and using materials published in those languages.

**Dr Seira Tamang**, an international relations scholar affiliated with the Martin Chautari institute in Nepal, enforced and expanded on these points. She reaffirmed the norm in Nepal for foreign agencies and researchers to look for 'Research Sherpas.' She referred specifically to a recently started DfID-funded project on federalism where the role of the Nepali researchers was solely to collect and provide data. She mentioned that Nepali researchers are often contacted at the last minute under an 'any-one-will-do' attitude and stressed the need for a larger discussion on ethics before the project even begins. She then expanded on two main issues faced by researchers in Nepal: ownership of research and capacity building. Authorship and co-authorship was described as a particularly problematic area, with Nepali researchers being constrained by western partners as to how research data can be used and published by Nepalis, including in locally relevant ways. She argued that impact needs to go beyond the needs of the western researchers. The 'publish or perish' motivation governing higher education culture did not necessarily overlap with the primary or additional policy- and society-oriented motivations of local researchers. Local priorities include getting donors to continue funding local research institutes and ensuring that the information produced around Nepal remains relevant to Nepal and is accessible to Nepalis. Regarding capacity building, Dr Tamang stressed the lack of external commitment to support and follow through with capacity building activities and the predicaments faced by local researchers participating in such programmes.

**Dr Daniel Hammett**, a Senior Lecturer and Director of Learning and Teaching in the Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, observed that one of the overarching messages emerging from the day's discussions pertained to the various pressures felt by academics, especially the different demands on their time. He observed that in international partnerships, UK-based researchers and local researchers often work within different timelines and highlighted tensions between teaching and research responsibilities faced by academics in UK universities. He also observed that imbalances in research funding have consequently fostered the systematic exploitation of colleagues in LMICs. Speaking from his experience with promotions criteria in higher education institutions, Dr Hammett highlighted the emphasis placed on high-impact journals and the 'inverse incentives' that UK-based researchers may have to hold on the largest share of the budget. Conscious of these problems, he has tried to find alternatives, such as by publishing one paper in a REF-able journal and one in a 'local' non-REF-able outlet. He also spoke of patterns that favoured certain local institutions over others on the basis that some universities would not look at 'good' in GCRF applications. On the other hand, the implicit language of funding understood by some researchers better than others could foster

colonial legacies. Finally, Dr Hammett referred to barriers to travel and mobility that has hindered international scholars to engage in knowledge production in western institutions.

### **Roundtable**

The roundtable was led by **Mr Ben Prasadam-Halls**, Director of Programmes, ACU, and revolved around the three questions identified below:

- What have we learned from today's presentations and discussions?
- What can be done better from the perspective of funding bodies, research support services in higher education institutions and researchers?
- How can we create better lines of communication and feedback mechanisms between academia and funders in the UK?

While there was no time to discuss all these questions meticulously at the end, the presentations of the day and the Q & A sessions at the end of each panel addressed them either directly or tangentially, providing also suggestions going forward. The themes that were summarised by Mr Prasadam-Halls are included in the final section of this report, which identifies the overarching messages and challenge areas for further contemplation and action.

### **Overarching themes and challenge areas**

- **Limitations with the structures of ODA-funding**

The overall presentations emphasised tensions between the tight deadlines of ODA-related funding, largely informed by fiscal regulations followed by funders in the UK, and the time needed to develop relationships of trust with local partners and to design collaborative projects. The implication seemed to be that such tight deadlines incentivise UK-based researchers to rely on existing partners in order to be able to develop applications within tight deadlines, which can be counterproductive for research, but can also promote local asymmetries among institutions. As a result, UK researchers may consistently favour the same institutions, typically national or more prominent universities, neglecting institutions or non-academic organisations and agencies located in rural or more peripheral areas in the countries of research. Moreover, the pressure to meet deadlines can mean that new partnerships that may be required in order to develop truly interdisciplinary questions and research are not sought due to lack of time.

Another particularly problematic aspect of funding calls is their focus exclusively on 'global challenges' as aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It was reasoned that such directed funding can result in instrumentalist partnerships that are centred on global interests and that neglect local priorities and needs. Moreover, it was agreed that the exclusive focus of ODA-related funding on LMICs can hinder genuinely interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary learning and research design. As it was noted, collaboration between high-income countries and LMICs may be desirable and fruitful in certain disciplines, such as in tackling public health challenges.

Similarly problematic from an epistemological and practical perspective is the way in which impact has been understood in the context of ODA-related research funding - usually not disconnected from the notion of value for money (VfM). It was agreed that the concept is predicated primarily to the idea of economic growth, which needs to be demonstrated within the timelines and according to the standards set out by the funder. Such conceptualisations and timelines for producing impact do not easily accommodate the types of intricate, long-term and multi-dimensional changes or effects sought in social scientific and humanities research or culture-sensitive development interventions.

While emphasis is placed on egalitarian partnerships that enable local researchers to contribute or to lead in international research projects, the existing guidelines do not make it clear how reciprocity, mutual learning and leadership for local researchers is to be achieved and promoted. How egalitarian partnerships can be fostered in teams that are cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary and inevitably imbricated in colonial relations and dynamics lacks clarity and requires more systematic thinking.

- **Power inequalities and the dominance of Anglophone epistemology**

As highlighted by the speakers from Namibia, Ethiopia and Nepal, local researchers who are on the receiving end can become frustrated and disheartened when project leads are external and do not understand the local context or do not speak local languages. Moreover, current dynamics continue to favour the Anglophone epistemological framework of the UK-based researchers, preserving the dominance of western European knowledge, stifling pluralistic linguistic, epistemological and methodological approaches. Publication standards and norms proliferated by western publishers, academic institutions and researchers can in turn curtail local researchers' publication potential and the kind of impact they can have in local societies. Local researchers are often impeded from publishing in their own terms data or research that they have contributed to integrally. These constraints may be expressed in the language of journal policies, or may emanate from the contractual arrangements of the research funding awarded to the UK-based researcher.

- **Researchers and research practices as part of a larger system**

Another recurrent point raised was that researchers are not contained entities, but are embedded in an institutional and regulatory system of competing interests and multiple pressures. UK-based researchers exist and operate in institutions that are themselves engulfed in a competitive system of rankings, and are faced by various constraints (teaching, administrative capacity, etc.) and risks (financial, other vulnerabilities, etc.). Academics feel pressured to be both full-time researchers and support administrative tasks, as well as teach. They are also compelled to publish in high-impact journals to meet university standards and achieve career stability and progression. Such priorities can compete with the commitment to produce highly impactful research with societal benefit. Being imbricated in a nexus of power politics, career progression expectations and institutional conditions, universities are perceived to have altered the very idea of creating knowledge.

- **Research does not happen only within academia**

Research does not happen only in universities, but is undertaken by a host of other entities, including non-governmental organisations, charities, humanitarian organisations, think tanks, consultancies, research-intensive institutions and other stakeholders involved in the business of knowledge production and specifically development research and practice. Alarmingly, as it was

suggested, not all of these non-academic actors have practised epistemological reflexivity or have rigorous ethical processes integrated in their practices, despite engaging with local communities almost routinely. As more ODA-related funding calls encourage cross-sectoral partnerships, it is imperative to engage these stakeholders and to examine more systematically ethical issues emerging from these collaborations.

### **Suggestions going forward**

Multiple implications emerge from the presentations, conversations and overarching themes outlined above. Funding bodies ought to consider seriously how funding calls can be developed in ways that enable multi-vocal narratives and that do not silence non-European voices by automatically privileging a UK-based understanding. Invoking the SDGs does not suffice since these do not necessarily capture local priorities and needs, even though they may be adopted nationally or by local organisations.

Funding bodies need to integrate reflective learning in all their processes and to take more substantive steps to consult with diverse local stakeholders and other groups on how they can facilitate co-production and foster egalitarian partnerships with UK-based researchers. Government officials working in departments and agencies that control and decide the structures of ODA-related research funding could be provided with training that aims to sensitise them to the realities and complexities of overseas research as a means to loosening the vertical pressure on delivery bodies.

Another set of suggestions emerged from the discussions around accountability to local research communities and other parties participating in the project. It was suggested that funding bodies and research offices could refine peer review and evaluation approaches to incorporate feedback from local partners and research participants and to assess how these research activities impacted on them. These consultations should include diverse local partners and not always or only researchers from prominent universities and institutions.

The overall discussions also point to the need for reflecting on the meaning of knowledge, including indigenous understandings, and exploring how research in higher education institutions could accommodate the promotion and sharing of knowledge informed by local experience. The discussions around the pressures of UK-based researchers suggest that universities should encourage their researchers to prioritise good research practices by providing them with an enabling environment, such as by considering how they may reduce or balance teaching or administrative responsibilities.

From their context, research offices in British and other western universities could focus more on building trust and promoting mutual learning by liaising directly with research offices in partner institutions. They can put in place more rigorous ethical review processes and provide incentives to researchers that foster good practices. Rewarding ethical and thoughtful project development approaches, such as when principal investigators invest in linguistic training to overcome language barriers or in transparent and collaborative budgeting practices, could provide an effective strategy for incentivising reflexive and decolonial research.

Lastly, in view of the recognition that multiple stakeholders are involved in the production of knowledge and research, NGOs and other non-academic parties need to be brought into the



conversation. It is important to explore how they currently respond to challenges around research development in the face of funding constraints and the regulatory framework in the UK that they operate under. It is also crucial to render transparent the implications of cross-sectoral collaboration for research, given the different degrees of epistemological and ethical reflexivity encountered in the sector.

### Relevant readings

Following the event, speakers and participants developed a bibliography of works that were mentioned or proposed as relevant to the themes discussed. The list is provided below as a roadmap, but it should not be considered by any means exhaustive or representative of pertinent works. Readers are encouraged to contact the speakers for a full bibliography on their respective presentations.

- **Reviews on ODA research funding**

ONE, Real Aid Index, [www.one.org/international/real-aid-index/](http://www.one.org/international/real-aid-index/)

ICAI, "Report: Global Challenges Research Fund: An ICAI rapid review," 12 Sep 2017, <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-report/global-challenges-research-fund/>

Centre for Global Development, "ODA for Research & Development: Too Much of a Good Thing?" 11 Mar 2019, [www.cgdev.org/blog/oda-research-development-too-much-good-thing](http://www.cgdev.org/blog/oda-research-development-too-much-good-thing)

Centre for Global Development, "The UK Needs a New Formula for ODA-Funded Research," 9 Jul 2019, [www.cgdev.org/blog/uk-needs-new-formula-oda-funded-research](http://www.cgdev.org/blog/uk-needs-new-formula-oda-funded-research)

UK Collaborative on Development Science, "Building Partnerships of Equals: The role of funders in equitable and effective international development collaborations," 2017, [www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Building-Partnerships-of-Equals - REPORT-2.pdf](http://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Building-Partnerships-of-Equals-REPORT-2.pdf)

Rethinking Research Collaborative, "Promoting Fair and Equitable Research Partnerships to Respond to Global Challenges Recommendations to the UKRI," September 2018, [www.ukri.org/files/international/fair-and-equitable-partnerships-final-report-to-ukri-sept-2018-pdf/](http://www.ukri.org/files/international/fair-and-equitable-partnerships-final-report-to-ukri-sept-2018-pdf/)

- **Decolonial epistemologies & methodologies**

Anibal Quijano (2000) "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from South* 1(3): 533–80.

Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon (2017) "Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education," *Research for all*, 1(1): 6-19.

Edward W. Said (1979) *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, Inc.

Fanon Frantz (2001 [1961]) *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books.

Godwin Y. Agboka (2014) "Decolonial Methodologies: Social Justice Perspectives in Intercultural Technical Communication Research," *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 44(3): 297-327.

Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999) "Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies: A Guide to Indigenist Research Methodology and its Principles," *Wicazo Sa Review*, 14: 2, Emergent Ideas in Native American Studies.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann Educational.

Robin DiAngelo (2011) "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 3(3): 54-70.

Sarah Chiumbu (2017) "Why Decolonise Research Methods: Some Initial Thoughts," <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/research-data/ktree-doc/18320>

Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (2018) *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, London: Duke University Press.

- **Diversifying the academic curriculum and teaching**

Decolonising SOAS Working Group (2017) "Decolonising SOAS Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programme and Module Convenors," <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/files/2018/10/Decolonising-SOAS-Learning-and-Teaching-Toolkit-AB.pdf>

Faye Gishen and Amali Lokugamage (2018) "Diversifying the Medical Curriculum," *BMJ*, 364: l300.

Hope Chow, Amali U. Lokugamage and Faye Gishen (2019) "The Diversity Health Check: How does an Undergraduate Curriculum Shape Up?" *The Clinical Teacher*, 16: 1-4.

- **Asymmetries in academic knowledge production and publication**

Carole J. Cassidy, R. Sugimoto, Guo Zhang and Blaise Cronin (2013) "Bias in Peer Review," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 64(1):2-17.

Catherine Beaudry, Johann Mouton and Heidi Prozesky (2018) *The Next Generation of Scientists in Africa*, South Africa: African Minds, <http://www.africanminds.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AM-The-Next-Generation-of-Scientists-in-Africa-TEXT-WEB-11112018-1.pdf>

Farid Dahdouh-Guebas, J. Ahimbisibwe, Rita Van Moll and Nico Koedam (2003) "Neo-Colonial Science by the Most Industrialised upon the Least Developed Countries in Peer-Reviewed Publishing," *Scientometrics*, 56(3): 329-343.

Jay Kubler (2009) *Strengthening mechanism of Competitive Research Funding and Peer Review in Africa*. RIMI4AC.

Laura Camfield (2019) "Rigor and Ethics in the World of Big-team Qualitative Data: Experiences From Research in International Development," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 63(5): 604-621, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218784636>

Márton Demeter (2018) "The World-Systemic Dynamics of Knowledge Production: The Distribution of Transnational Academic Capital in Social Sciences," *Journal of World-System Research*, 25(1): 111-144.

Matthew Harris, James Macinko, Geronimo Jimenez and Pricila Mullachery (2017) "Measuring the Bias against Low-income Country Research: An Implicit Association Test," *Global Health*, 13(1), <http://globalizationandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12992-017-0304-y>

Raj Kumar Pan, Kimmo Kaski and Santo Fortunato (2012) "World citation and collaboration networks: uncovering the role of geography in science," *Scientific Reports* 2: 902.

Romina Istratii (2019) "Research reflexivity in the current governance framework: Problematising trends and reconsidering the meaning of research ethics in 'cultural translation'," <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/2019/06/03/>

- Ryan C. Briggs and Scott Weathers (2016) "Gender and Location in African Politics Scholarship: The Other White Man's Burden?" *African Affairs*, 115(460): 466–489.
- Sarah Cummings and Paul Hoebink (2016) "Representation of Academics from Developing Countries as Authors and Editorial Board Members in Scientific Journals: Does this Matter to the Field of Development Studies?" *European Journal of Development Research*, 29 (2): 369–383.
- Thomas F. Burgess and Nicola E. Shaw (2010) "Editorial Board Membership of Management and Business Journals: A Social Network Analysis Study of the Financial Times 40," *British Journal of Management*, 21: 627–648, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1660019](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1660019).
- Tom Lee (1995) "Shaping the US Academic Research Profession: The American Accounting Association and The social Construction of a Professional Elite," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 6: 241–261, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1045235485710234>.

- **Journal issues and special editions**

- Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Issue 31:3 (2019), "Roundtable: Ethical?! Collaboration?! Keywords for our contradictory times," edited by Carli Coetzee.
- South East Asia Research (SEAR)*, Issue 27:1 (2019), "The Past, Present and Future of Area Studies," edited by Rachel Harrison
- The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research (SJPR)*, Volume 11 (2018), "Decolonisation in Praxis," edited by Romina Istratii, Monika Hirmer and Iris Lim
- Globalization and Health*, Series: Reverse Innovation in Global Health Systems: Learning from Low-income Countries, edited by Viva Dadwal, Matthew Harris, and Shams Syed

## Useful links and contacts

Event livestream, <https://soas.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=5e3a6a9f-a0c6-4fbd-be0c-aabc008c9723>

Event round-up blog, <https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/applying-a-decolonial-lens-to-research-development-practices/>

DECOLONIALHE@JISMAIL.AC.UK to continue the conversation, <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?SUBED1=DECOLONIALHE&A=1>

SOAS Decolonising Research Initiative, <https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/researchstrategy/decolonising-research-initiative/>

SOAS Online Module "Ethical Reflexivity and Research Governance: Navigating the Tensions," <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/32038>

Decolonising SOAS Blog, <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/>

Continuing the Conversation: THE SOAS-OXFORD Research for Development (R4D) Lunchtime Series, <https://www.soas.ac.uk/decolonising-research/>

If you would like to give your suggestions to help develop the SOAS Decolonising Research Initiative or you have questions about this report, please email [ri5@soas.ac.uk](mailto:ri5@soas.ac.uk) or join [DECOLONIALHE@JISMAIL.AC.UK](mailto:DECOLONIALHE@JISMAIL.AC.UK).

