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APPLYING A DECOLONIAL LENS TO RESEARCH STRUCTURES, PRACTICES AND NORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN AND WHERE TO NEXT?

Written by Dr Romina Istratii

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In recent years, commentators have challenged ethnocentric and racialised paradigms of knowledge rooted in colonial histories and power politics. This reflects movements to decolonise curricula, pedagogy and theoretical thinking in higher education. However, we have given much less attention to the structural and institutionalised mechanisms of research development. Similarly, we need to think more about how they promote the diversification and decolonisation of knowledge production in the world.

In the past year, I have worked as a Research Funding Officer in the SOAS Research Office. This role has enhanced my understanding of the funding landscape. It has also allowed me to liaise with funders, support colleagues with research development procedures and engage with internal peer review and other processes. I was fortunate to be in post when Dr Alex Lewis, Director of Research & Enterprise at the university, encouraged a more reflexive appraisal of practices in the SOAS Research Office given the changing funding landscape. Our conversations and collaboration spurred the creation of a recent conversation event at SOAS (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/decolonising-research/>), which attempted to apply a decolonial lens to research structures, practices and norms. This involved multiple stakeholders of research development inside and outside higher education.

INCREASING DIVERSIFICATION OF THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

One of the motivations for this event emanated from the increasing diversification of the funding landscape. This was exemplified in the emergence of ODA-related research funding, such as the Global Challenges Research Fund (<https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/>) and the Newton Fund (<https://www.newtonfund.ac.uk/>). These new funding schemes appear to bridge research with international development practice in an innovative way. However, the language, deadlines, eligibility criteria and due diligence rules and expectations governing them can generate epistemological, ethical and practical issues.

These questions relate to who produces the call narratives and how well the 'global challenges' prioritised by the UK reflect the conceptual frameworks, understandings and priorities of local communities. What's more, these funding schemes predominantly (with marked exceptions, such as the Global

Engagement Networks (<https://www.ukri.org/research/global-challenges-research-fund/global-engagement-networks/>) favour a UK-based institution. These structural characteristics can translate into material differentials through budgetary and other arrangements. This amplifies existing asymmetries between UK-based and local researchers. In such a system, it is likely that the historical dominance of Euro-American epistemology in knowledge production will be preserved.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH OFFICES

Since research development entails important selection, governance, contractual, legal and logistical procedures, research offices in universities have become increasingly relevant to the development and implementation of international research. If research offices are not reflexive of existing inequalities in knowledge production and do not account for the power politics that govern academia, they may help perpetuate them. For example, research offices often require overseas partners to sign contracts or other grant-related forms. How these forms are shared and explained to local partners can have important implications for how collaboration proceeds.

One of the aims of the event was to understand better funder priorities and their sensitivity to asymmetries between UK-based and local researchers. We also sought to explore the extent to which research offices account for and mitigate ethical and practical concerns underpinning international collaborative research. The event, which occupied a full lecture theatre at SOAS and was live-streamed (<https://soas.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=5e3a6a9f-a0c6-4fbd-be0c-aabc008c9723>) and tweeted to the public @DecolonialHE (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/decolonialhe>), was deeply enriching. It called for greater 'decolonial awareness' in funder practices, research offices and institutional research development protocols. Additionally the event demonstrated that funders, research offices and researchers across the UK and globally faced similar questions and concerns. I would like to highlight some of the overarching takeaways to stress the urgency for multi-stakeholder action to improve practices.

APPLYING A DECOLONIAL LENS TO RESEARCH

First of all, what does it mean to apply a decolonial lens to research development in higher education? The term 'decolonisation' has various philosophical connotations and has been contested by some and criticised by others for becoming a buzzword. It is not a new term or praxis by any means. As Professor Lindiwe Dovey at SOAS mentioned, it is important to recognise that decolonisation praxis has come in many forms. Notable examples include the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* published in 1986.

The aim of employing this terminology is not to appropriate it. Rather, it is crucial to leverage its resourcefulness to signal and promote sensitivity to colonial legacies. As Dr Meera Sabaratnam at SOAS noted, it can help embody an ethos that acknowledges and corrects for past and on-going asymmetries and biases originating partially in colonial structures and experiences. These can be replaced with more respectful and humbler attitudes and practices.

CONTINUING COLONIAL LEGACIES

Applying a decolonial lens to research furthermore means to recognise that the continuation of colonial legacies is not merely epistemological. It is also structural and normative. It is perpetuated through a nexus of actors and processes simultaneously and in complex ways, which is not always intentional. Research and research development practices are not dependent only on individuals, but being embedded in regulatory frameworks they are also structurally defined. They can, hence, combine with on-going asymmetries in funding and capacity differences among researchers in the world to interfere with a decolonisation of higher education and knowledge production (within and beyond the university).

Embodying a decolonial ethos means paying attention to the epistemological positionality, geographical location and institutional affiliation of researchers. It also means developing more reflexive research ethics and continuous ethical

review processes. What's more, it requires us to engage more substantively with indigenous voices and knowledge systems. This is especially urgent when engaging historically marginalised communities.

FUNDER STRUCTURES

Multiple insights and suggestions emerged when we applied a decolonial lens to funder and research development practices. Speakers repeatedly emphasised the tension between tight call deadlines, need to build trust with local communities and develop substantive research partnerships. Furthermore, multiple speakers and audience members noted the tensions between short funder impact horizons and impact as understood in the social sciences, involving long-term, complex and multidimensional mechanisms of change. The discussions pointed to the fact that government departments and research councils administering and delivering research-for-development funding are accountable vertically to the UK government. The government defines how such funding should be used and how funded projects ought to produce and demonstrate impact.

Numerous participants questioned whether Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and UK Research and Innovation, which administer and deliver such funding, have the space to manoeuvre these constraints. However, Dr Sarah Plowman of UKRI noted that funding bodies have attempted to integrate reflective learning in their processes. They have also taken steps to consult with multi-stakeholder groups for improving practices, especially in relation to co-production and fostering egalitarian partnerships. As an alternative, Professor Simon Goldhill from the University of Cambridge suggested training government officials and bureaucrats. They should also be sensitised to the realities and complexities of overseas research. This measure would help loosen the vertical pressure. Dr Meera Sabaratnam, in turn, challenged funders to consider how to define funding calls in ways that enable multi-vocal narratives. They should also seek not to silence non-European voices by automatically privileging a UK-based understanding.

RESEARCHER CONDITIONS AND PRIORITIES

Researchers in the UK working overseas can feel constrained by the current funding landscape and its structural barriers. However, these factors could incentivise them in ways that amplify existing asymmetries. As Dr Maru Mormina from the University of Oxford noted, the tight deadlines, short-term impact orientation and focus exclusively on 'global challenges' of this funding can result in instrumentalist partnerships for research and neglect for local priorities and needs.

On the other hand, numerous speakers based in the UK observed that higher education research has become increasingly imbricated in a nexus of power politics, career progression expectations and institutional conditions that together have redefined the very idea of creating knowledge. Dr. Kerry Harman at Birkbeck lamented that doing research has become less about learning. What's more, Dr Daniel Hammett at the University of Sheffield, echoed this sentiment when he observed that academics have many demands on their time and competing priorities and are challenged to navigate the various responsibilities and competing priorities.

LOCAL RESEARCHERS

Local researchers who are on the receiving end can become frustrated and demoralised when project leads are external and do not understand the local context or speak local languages, as Dr. Mulugeta Berihu from Aksum University noted on the day. Professor Dr. Alex Tubawene Kanyimba from the University of Namibia also discussed the negative effects that the domination of western European knowledge has had in international research, calling for more egalitarian exchange and pluralistic methodological approaches. Other speakers referred to publication standards and norms proliferated by western publishers, academic institutions and researchers that curtail local researchers' publication potential and the kind of impact they can have through their work in local societies.

As Dr Seira Tamang at Martin Chautari in Nepal explained, constraints from external research partners often prevent local researchers from publishing research. Rigid or ethnocentric journal policies may express these constraints. In addition, they may emanate from UK-based investigators who have received more authorial rights via the contractual arrangements of the research funding. The overall discussions seemed to point to the need for more engagement with local communities and deeper reflection on how to ensure that research benefits the research participants. This could include communicating research in local

languages and to publishing platforms that are not necessarily 'high-impact' according to Euro-American standards, but *highly impactful* according to local realities.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES MOVING FORWARD

Many of the conversations pertained to the role of research offices in facilitating decolonial, ethical and egalitarian research since they have become key in the research development process. There seemed to be an agreement that research offices in the UK could focus more on building trust and promoting mutual learning by liaising directly with research offices in partner institutions. Within the UK, research institutions can put in place more rigorous ethical review processes that foster research reflexivity, but with the important caveat that research offices should not over-police researchers.

Speaking from the perspective of somebody who has held the role of both researcher and research officer, I would stress that applying a decolonial lens should not mean that research offices must police academics. Rather, they should reflect on their own approaches as research development staff in western institutions and control for their own biases and possible ethnocentric tendencies. What's more, research offices also need to harness similar reflexivity in the researchers whom they support, or learning from researchers who are reflexive.

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, may be some effective ways for incentivising reflexive and decolonial research. The discussions around the pressures of UK-based researchers, in turn, seemed to suggest that universities can and should encourage their researchers to prioritise good research practices by providing them with an enabling environment (e.g. by reducing teaching/administrative responsibilities). This may not be a priority in the current financial climate and competitive conditions they operate in.

RESEARCH NOT THE PRESERVE OF ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

As Dr Jude Fransman from the Open University noted, we need to recognise that research is not the preserve of academic institutions. The issues discussed above are relevant not only to universities, but also to non-governmental organisations, think tanks, consultancies, research-intensive institutions and other stakeholders involved in knowledge production. With the hindsight of a decade-long career in international development research, practice and consulting, I would argue that non-academic institutions working in international development have greatly influenced the establishment of paradigms in their respective areas of work.

Alarming, 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. It is imperative that we bring these parties into the conversation to explore how they respond to the challenges of research development *vis-à-vis* funding needs and stipulations and the regulatory framework in the UK that they must abide by.

A RESPONSIBILITY TO IMPROVE WAYS AND NORMS

We need to work hard to translate this conversation into better practices and strategies, but there should be no doubt that all of us have a role and responsibility to improve current ways and norms, which may then impact on more rigid structures. As I have argued before in the context of a SOAS 'Decolonisation in Praxis' initiative, (<https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/26308>) decolonisation requires an attitudinal change, a commitment to be humbler and more reflexive about everything we do. We must ensure that we do not take only ourselves as a reference point for how we proceed, but we consider our research partners and research interlocutors and their conditions, understandings and priorities to achieve more thoughtful and mutually beneficial research. When we make an effort to engage more substantively, there will always be a lesson to learn. Moreover, new pathways for creative change in the world will always appear on the horizon.

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To read more about the event “Applying a Decolonial Lens to Research Structures, Practices and Norms in Higher Education” please visit the SOAS website here (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/blogs/study/applying-a-decolonial-lens-to-research-development-practices/>).

A webpage under the SOAS Research Office has been set up to communicate follow-up actions, which can be accessed here (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/researchstrategy/decolonising-research-initiative/>).

Interested readers may also join the newly established email list serv DECOLONIALHE@JISCMAIL.AC.UK, which aims to connect various stakeholders and provide a platform to connect.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Dr. Romina Istratii is a critical researcher and practitioner from Eastern Europe with more than eight years' experience in the sector of international development focusing on the African region. She has previously conducted independent fieldwork in Ghana, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Tanzania and Senegal with the support of various research grants and prestigious fellowships by funders that include the Thomas J. Watson Foundation in New York and the Tokyo Foundation in Japan. Dr Istratii has been especially committed to developing cosmology-sensitive and people-centred methodologies and approaches for analysing and addressing issues with gender dimensions in religious societies of Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.



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