

INEQUITY IN RESEARCH COLLABORATION

Research support professionals have a crucial role to play in decolonising international research partnerships

Equity between higher-education institutions (HEIs) in High and Low-and Middle-Income Countries is increasingly being discussed as a key principle of forming sustainable and meaningful relationships. With heightened calls for decolonisation in higher education, not least from institutions in Low-and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), it has brought to the forefront the importance of assessing the systemic root causes that continue to maintain the status quo on inequity in such partnerships. European HEIs' response to these issues is occurring in waves, linked, in some instances, to other social phenomena and movements, such as Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter. Naturally, countries with historical colonial ties, such as the UK, have had the urgency to respond quicker with the narrative on decolonisation revolving around curricula, institutional practices, and knowledge production.

While contemporary discussions on inequity and decolonisation may be propelled by recent social movements, the essence on which they

are based is not new. Guidance documents and conversations on equity have been in existence for a considerable length of time. For instance, the Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries published their 'Guidelines for Research in Partnership with Developing Countries' already in 1988, in response to unethical practices and the complexities of working with partners or research participants from regions with different political, economic, social and cultural contexts. The 'new' focus on decolonisation provides an opportunity to deconstruct the link between colonisation and inequity in the research culture of collaborating with LMICs.

THE EQUATION OF POWER DYNAMICS

Power dynamics in Higher Income Countries (HIC) and LMICs relationships inherently impact how the partnerships are formed. The basis of unequal power can be traced to the history of dominance (coloniality) and consequently imbalanced economic systems that currently dictate how research is funded. Financial power

plays a significant role in power dynamics and with it the concept and reality of *value attribution*. The reliance on financial flows from the North to the South is a result of a complex global system that sees LMICs unable to adequately fund their own research. Thus, situated in this resource constrained context, the research culture surrounding partnership with LMICs is one that's driven by a value mindset of LMIC HEIs as being inferior and incapable of knowledge contribution. As such, the lingering colonial thinking of superiority acts as the foundation on which the research agenda is set, proposal writing processes are directed and how knowledge is produced, attributed and disseminated, further contributing to inequity.

Central to this pipeline of decisions and actions is the role of funders. Despite great efforts, largely driven by the academic community, calling for a shift in how HICs and LMICs interact, there has been little progress in the funders' landscape. Ironically, the funding community has itself published numerous reports and guidelines on

how to tackle inequality, begging the question on how participatory and inclusive those drafting processes have been. It is comprehensible that national interests do and should play a part in calls for funding and agenda setting. The challenge however lies in whose national agenda takes precedence at the expense of the other. There is a general tendency for HICs to observe LMICs from an advantage point of view. For instance, if one examines the EU-Africa Strategy and other similar strategies from the US, the UK or Finland, there is a commonality in their recognition of the importance the continent holds, and especially its youthful population, who are envisaged to be the backbone of future economies – a view that’s mutually recognised by African countries. The value of the youthful population is however cast in the light of being important as a recruitment net for HICs, though it is well understood that Africa itself requires the same talent to develop its own countries.

REPIVOTING THE RESEARCH CULTURE

A recent publication by ESSENCE on Health Research and UKCDR¹ on approaches to supporting equitable partnerships identifies a list of assumptions and misconceptions that inhibit equity in research partnerships.

To pivot the research culture requires applying a critical lens to these elements and how they

impact government funding policies, research institution practices and interaction between academics. Playing a crucial role and as a conduit towards change are research support professionals. In their strategic position of working closely with academics, research managers and administrators have opportunity to develop and steer mindsets and increase contextual understanding on their LMIC partners within their own institutions. Drawing from the UK context, there are good examples from some HEIs on practical steps they have taken to change the value mindset they apply to their LMIC partners².

To catapult this change however, research institutions and researchers will need to pragmatically respond to questions such as:

- How committed are they to adhering to guidelines they develop?
- How binding are these guidelines and how do they monitor their use and impact?
- What approaches do HIC academic institutions and research integrity bodies take to ensure that the change towards equitable academic partnerships occurs?

In the end, it will be a question of willingness to shift the power dynamics.

PROFILE

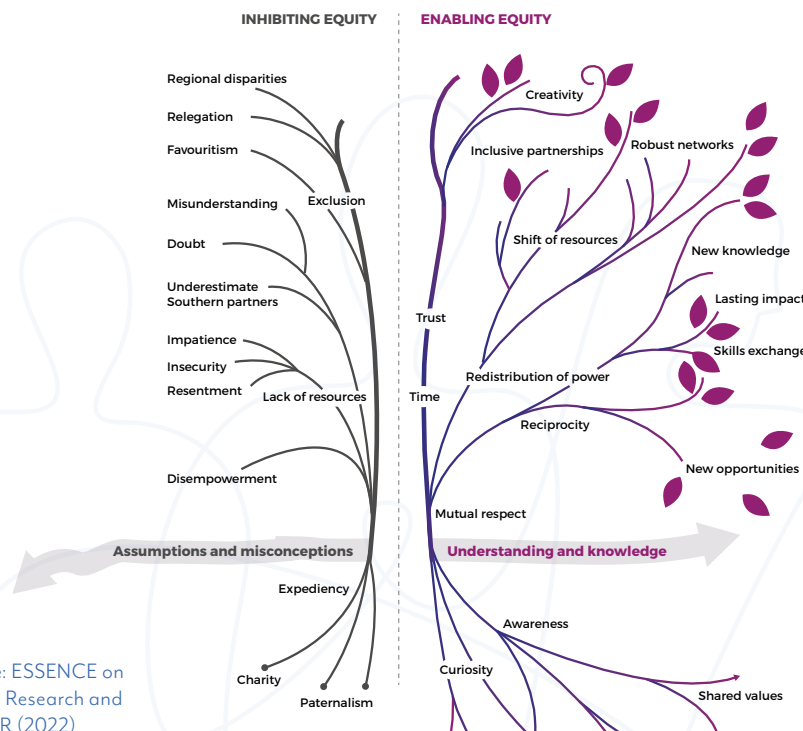


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PROFILE



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Source: ESSENCE on Health Research and UKCDR (2022)

¹ ESSENCE on Health Research and UKCDR (2022) Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships. Available at <https://tdr.who.int/publications/m/item/2022-09-07-four-approaches-to-supporting-equitable-research-partnerships>

² ESSENCE on Health Research and UKCDR (2022) – Case Study 8; Reid C, Calia C, Guerra C and Grant L (2019) Ethical Action in Global Research: A Toolkit. University of Edinburgh; Altink A, De Jong S, Gascoigne J, Grugel J, Mazumdar P, Omukuti J, Roy I and White P (2022) Guide to Good Practice for Inclusive Research in Global Development. Interdisciplinary Global Development Centre, University of York.