

A Decolonising Approach to Policy Impact in the Global South: Lessons for research culture

Amanda Chukwudozie¹, Chris Sims²

Institute for Policy and Engagement, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Correspondence: Amanda.Chukwudozie@nottingham.ac.uk,

Chris.Sims@nottingham.ac.uk

Twitter/X ¹[@amandaxdev](https://twitter.com/amandaxdev), ²[@kitsims](https://twitter.com/kitsims), ^{1&2}[@UoN_Institute](https://twitter.com/UoN_Institute)

Editorial review: This article has been subject to an editorial review process.



Copyright notice: This article is issued under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License**, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited.

You must give appropriate credit (author attribution), provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract

Efforts to decolonise Higher Education are a key element of work to develop a more inclusive and equitable research culture, but what this means in the context of research impact has seldom been explored in depth. In particular, the pursuit of policy impact in Global South countries throws up particular potential challenges around the reproduction of postcolonial power structures and inequitable partnerships that academic staff need to be prepared to navigate. The University of Nottingham Institute for Policy and Engagement, along with international partners, has begun to explore what decolonisation means in the policy impact context, and what researchers, universities and the sector as a whole might do to ensure this growing area of work takes proper account of the cultural and historical contexts in which it takes place.

Keywords: decolonisation, impact, international, knowledge exchange, policy

Background

In recent years the increasing importance of ‘impact’ within research in the UK higher education sector has been marked, epitomised by the development of the Research Excellence Framework and its explicit valuing of research that has ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (UKRI, 2022). One estimation puts the value of the most ‘significant and far-reaching’ impacts to the submitting University at an average of £308,000 for the 2014 REF (Research Excellence Framework) process (Reed & Kerridge, undated); for the next REF this is set to rise still further (Kerridge, 2023). This has created pressures on academics to achieve – or claim – impact from their research, often as part of conditions to attract funding (Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016). An emphasis on social, policy and service benefits in addition to commercialisation of research has also led to a proliferation of specialist teams within universities aiming to support academics to engage with public policy makers. We work for one such team, the Institute for Policy and Engagement at the University of Nottingham.

In a similar timeframe to the above, universities have increasingly been subject to critical discourses that can be broadly grouped under the heading of ‘decolonisation’: efforts to ‘resist the distinct but intertwined processes of colonization and racialization, to enact transformation and redress in reference to the historical and ongoing effects of these processes, and to create and keep alive modes of knowing, being, and relating that these processes seek to eradicate’ (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Particular focus has been given to the curriculum (Charles, 2019), research methodologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019) and the make-up of the academy itself (Suhraiya, 2020), highlighting how ongoing structural inequalities play out within each of these specific contexts, as well as the colonial history of epistemology itself (Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

However, relatively little attention has been paid within discourses on decolonisation to the specific area of research impact – specifically, policy impact, and how colonial discourses and postcolonial power structures might play out when academics in the Global North, whose work often focuses on the Global South, come under pressure to influence policy makers in the countries where they carry out their research. On the face of it, this seems odd, given that by its very nature the pursuit of policy impact implies an intent to change or influence government decisions by academic experts on the basis of the latter’s expertise. In contexts where those experts represent an institution from a country that was historically the colonising power exerting direct governing control over the country now governed by the target policy audience – and where the academic’s

individual identity or ethnicity may further complicate how they are perceived and understood – the potential for the reproduction of colonial power structures should be clear. With increasing emphasis on impact, interrogating how such reproduction takes place within these contexts, as well as within research collaborations or in the classroom, is imperative.

This is also a challenging question for universities in terms of the support, guidance and training they provide to academics to better enable them to respond to the Impact agenda generally and REF in particular. In-house institutes like ours are building up extensive experience in supporting academics to engage with UK policy making, often based on the extensive professional policy experience of our staff, who are recruited partly on the basis of such experience. Policy making is complex and this guidance function is crucial for academics who do not generally have first-hand experience of it. It is, of course, impossible to replicate that level of experience-based guidance for all international policy contexts, which can leave academics working on international topics reliant on their own networks for support. Furthermore, influencing policy impact across political and cultural boundaries, and in the context of complicated colonial histories, is even more complex than it is in the UK. Yet there remains an expectation on academics working internationally to deliver results in terms of impact.

It is our view that impact is an increasingly important part of the research landscape as a whole, and therefore an increasingly important element in how we understand research culture. As the sector as a whole grapples with what it means to improve research cultures, especially in terms of equality and inclusion, specific focus needs to be dedicated to the specific relationships and challenges that surround impact, and policy impact in particular.

Decolonising Impact: The University of Nottingham initiative

Clearly these questions raise very complex issues that require extensive work to unpack and challenge. At the Institute for Policy and Engagement, we see our role as being to facilitate conversations that can both shed light on the challenges inherent in undertaking policy impact work internationally, and begin to develop tools and resources that academics can draw on in order to think through the specific implications for their own work.

Our first step was to organise our Engaging with Policy in the Global South conference, which took place in April 2022. The goal here was to enable academics working in Global South contexts to consider these issues and learn from each other, but more importantly to give policy actors from Global South contexts the opportunity to speak directly to academics with

the purpose of reflecting on how academic-policy relationships in these contexts can be built on more equitable foundations and avoid reproducing colonial relationships. Our keynote speaker was David Moinina Sengeh, Sierra Leone's Minister of Education, and other speakers included representatives from the African Union, UNICEF, the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), and NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) practitioners with a Global South perspective.

This successful event led to the development of a relationship with the University of Connecticut, which has played a leading role in developing thinking around the decolonisation of Higher Education through its *ICare4Justice* initiative, a programme designed to advance graduate students, faculty, policy makers and community organisers interested in global issues related to racial equity, intersectionality, social justice, decoloniality and anti-colonialism. The programme is a partnership among the University of Connecticut in the US, ECHO Center for Diversity Policy in the Netherlands, and the University of Nottingham in the UK. Since 2022, the programme has hosted an annual global summit which brings together transnational critical scholar-practitioners from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, US, and the Pacific Islands to analyse, assess and design important considerations for establishing a global strategy and framework for advancing equity for racially and ethnically minoritized communities in education research, praxis and policy. The third instalment of the summit will be held at the University of Nottingham in the summer of 2024.

Key Themes

Several key themes emerged from our initial conference, all of which have great potential for further research and action by higher education institutions:

Academic skills and awareness

This theme focused on the importance of academics engaging with policy acquiring the necessary diplomatic skills and cultural and contextual awareness to do so in a way conducive to establishing trusted and equitable relationships with policy partners. Relationships with research and NGO partners in-country can support such development, but ensuring that all academics are equally able to develop their knowledge and skills in this way presents a challenge to higher education institutions.

Funding and administration

A common theme among delegates was the ways in which research funding and administration can create barriers to equitable partnerships, which in turn can create power imbalances that feed through to policy relationships. Funder requirements and administrative demands can lead to an unbalanced distribution of both risk and partnership in research

partnerships, and to research questions that are not framed in the most helpful way to local policy audiences. These questions closely link the question of decolonising impact to that of decolonising research partnerships themselves.

The relationship between the sector's role in the Global South and the EDI agenda in the UK

A complex set of relationships exist for academics from academics of colour who are based in the Global North but carry out research in the Global South, particularly when they seek to develop research partnerships and impact in their countries of origin or heritage. The identity of the individual academic inevitably plays a role in their relationships with both research partners and policy audiences, and their position is also complicated by being, through their professional role, effectively complicit in the very knowledge systems that require decolonisation (**Suhraiya, 2020**). However, delegates also felt that, for instance, there is space to explore how, for instance, African diaspora scholars in the UK can be supported to play a greater role in policy impact in Africa, and to access external sources of support and funding to pursue this agenda.

The relationship between the global and the local

Many delegates emphasised that even responsible engagement in specific places in the Global South do not take place in a vacuum; they have implications for and are embedded in the global context in which they take place. Academics can also be seen as having a responsibility to support locally generated insight to feed into global agendas and generate global knowledge, but they also need to recognise that the localisation of policies pursued at a global level may not always make for a good fit. The role of multilateral organisations is important here, and academics' relationships with them is an area that bears significant potential for further research.

Lessons for researchers

The main learning points targeted around researchers centre around their awareness of who they are in the context of the environment in which they are trying to influence. Understanding personal and/or institutional positionality while engaging with a different and diverse culture is the first step to equitable partnerships in the research to policy continuum. A breakdown of the emerging learning for researchers is as follows:

The four As- attitude, awareness, aptitude and action

A key question emerging from our conversations is of the ability for researchers to interrogate their personal agency and approach. **Attitude** speaks to openness and practice of deep listening, humility and respect, and engaging communities in their local methods. The 2022 ICARE4Justice

summit platformed experience sharing on affirming methodologies in research- the practice of approaching knowledge construction and sharing which is steeped in the lived experiences, traditions, language patterns and practices in Caribbean populations (**Nakhid & Farrugia, 2021**). The western approach to research- and policy- spaces is therefore demonstrably not universal. Researchers should approach engagement with local actors with the intellectual humility required to follow the lead of the former. Affirming methodologies as a concept applied to international policy engagement is one which could enable more equitable and representative evidence to policy partnerships.

Closely linked to the above is *Awareness* - the ability to 'read the room' and recognise the players in the environment, their roles, and any unspoken hierarchies. It is also a contextual understanding of not just the environment in which the researcher is engaging, but also the ability to forecast the impact of your engagement on that awareness.

Aptitude speaks to the investment a researcher has made into the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in policy in these diverse contexts, including a respectable command of the historical background underpinning the issues they mean to engage with.

Action is the perspective of 'what next'? Policy makers anywhere in the world are dealing with urgent and competing issues on any given day and prioritise engagement which lead directly to solutions. This has been seen to strongly apply to Global South countries. At the Engaging with Policy in the Global South conference, a representative from the African Union Commission, the secretariat of the apex decision making body in Africa, asserted that researchers seeking to engage the organisation with evidence are advised to always present an accompanying call to action.

Knowledge exchange is a two-way street

The traditional paradigm of UK researchers engaging with Global South policy has seen knowledge largely flowing unidirectionally, often from the UK and other countries in the Global North to the Global South. This undermines the rich insights and learning which can emerge from a knowledge flow in the other direction.

There is a question of whether researchers in the UK are ready to embrace this two-way knowledge street as a foundational element of their international research and policy engagement. There has to be a fundamental shift from seeing international policy engagement as knowledge exchange- not just a way to disseminate research results in foreign climes but recognising that it is a collaborative process where everybody involved is bringing something to the table and taking something away. UK researchers will have to actively seek the insights and

expertise of their Global South counterparts and acknowledge the value of those insights. Equitable knowledge exchange requires all parties to be knowledge partners.

There is a wealth of good practice from Global South countries which can be learnt in this way. Systems in these countries have grown to be resilient given their complex and often post-colonial histories, and these innovative adaptations under stress and shocks offer up invaluable lessons for academics worldwide. It is not uncommon that 'innovative' strategies in the UK or US to respond to current crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have been in use in many Global South countries for decades as a means of operating under the daily constraints they face. It is only by valuing the engagement with Global South actors as an even partnership will UK researchers begin to deepen impact both ways.

You need people to build bridges

It is easy to forget that policy is about people- not only those who are impacted by it, but also those who make it, who surround it and who influence the makers. A researcher, and especially one from the Global North, seeking to influence policy in the Global South must make some investment in social capital, applying acute contextual sensitivity to those relationships. This is especially relevant as it is likely that formal institutions operate differently, and social capital is indispensable for successful engagement.

Local stakeholders, community and religious leaders could be just as important- and sometimes even more powerful- than the government. Being context-sensitive will allow a modification of approach, accordingly, ensuring that engagement is relevant and respectful of local customs.

In the Global South context, it would be of great benefit for researchers to look beyond government and academic networks and forge solid relationships with diverse stakeholders. Third sector actors have a breadth and depth of knowledge, context, networks and connections that are deeply established from community to international levels. These NGOs and INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations) are invaluable partners in engaging government actors, raising funding for research and development directly linked to local policy priorities, and contributing to contextual knowledge exchange.

Finally, researchers need to have a plan for communicating with their networks- how do you balance public communication with private diplomacy? What can be said and represented in public spaces, and what needs to be handled with more delicacy alongside relevant stakeholders, while ensuring that colonial and paternalistic practices are not being enforced? It is a fine line to walk as a knowledge partner, and a researcher

should arm themselves with a mental (and if necessary, visual) framework for communicating with different stakeholders to ensure that relationships remain equitable and respectful, therefore leaving room for successful and meaningful policy engagement.

Lessons for UK Universities

Systemic bottlenecks reinforce inequity

Across research projects, operational challenges including bureaucracy and red tape, university-wide policy constraints and logistical issues are often faced in admin processes, most especially funding allocation and disbursement. Other areas of complexities include grant application processes, intellectual property considerations, regulatory and compliance processes, and acquisition of resources including equipment. These areas often involve protracted, complex and sometimes expensive processes which throw up hurdles in any research environment. In the realm of engaging policy in the Global South, these difficulties are further exacerbated by the misalignment between UK university policy and the sector in general, and the realities project and policy partners have to contend with.

There are unique conditions that UK universities' traditional operational processes have to adapt to in order to unblock systemic bottlenecks which throw up barriers to diversity in partnership, learning and knowledge exchange.

If UK universities mean to be significant players in global policy engagement, particularly in the Global South, then institutional policy should reflect that intention through a review of potentially harmful, inequitable operational policies which may sometimes be specifically targeted to certain countries or regions based on biased or outdated evaluations. There must be a concerted effort to rethink and remodel these operational and funding frameworks to respond to local contexts without compromising equitable and unhindered access to opportunities for researchers to pursue engagement in Global South regions.

Develop some guiding tools

Navigating the intricacies of policy engagement in the Global South, given what has been discussed on the emphasis of context and relationships, requires some tools which universities are well placed to provide. At the Engaging with Policy in the Global South conference, researchers at the University of Nottingham and policy actors in the Global South put forward some suggestions on what some of these tools might be:

- *A glossary of terms* could be a foundational resource for researchers who may be unfamiliar with the specific terminologies and concepts at a broad level. This would specify language which is used and acceptable to define and describe the more common actors and actions in the international policy engagement ecosystem. It would be quite difficult to have detailed terms for each country or region, not to mention accounting for differences within countries, but delegates at the conference expressed that a starting point in ensuring good communication among partners is ‘speaking the same language’, as a way of bridging cultural, disciplinary and sectoral divides.
- *A map of the global (multilateral) policy landscape* outlining who does what, and where it is done, along with potential entry points, was suggested by delegates. This map would help researchers in the UK visualise the complex and largely unknown-to-them web of policy actors, institutions and processes in the Global South, and they can therefore identify key stakeholders, understand their roles and influence, and come up with informed engagement strategies which have a chance of yielding policy impact.
- *A map of funding opportunities* specifically tailored to support research in Global South countries, to ease the process of facilitating engagement in a context where resources are harder to access.
- *A network of academic partners* within and among universities in the UK and in Global South countries to strengthen collaboration, knowledge and experience sharing.

It goes without saying that developing such tools would be a considerable undertaking, and it bears emphasising that currently it is not obvious who within the Higher Education system would lead or own such an initiative.

Internal champions are needed to drive a culture of equity

Knowledge exchange teams and policy institutes in universities have a unique opportunity to influence change in entrenched systems that perpetuate harmful cycles of historically colonial relationships between UK universities and some Global South communities. This change can be catalysed through an internal advocacy role to dismantle structures that hinder fair representation and opportunity in knowledge exchange.

There needs to be an honest introspection of the ecosystems in UK universities and the ability to act where there is cause for ‘good troublemaking’ in leadership and administration. As the knowledge brokers with a vantage view of the relationship between UK universities

and Global South research and policy actors, knowledge exchange and policy teams must step up in this advocacy role to merge the university's lived research culture to its aspirations.

Additionally, the wider human capital at UK universities remains an invaluable asset. Engaging and leveraging international staff expertise and experience in their home countries provides an incomparable indigenous perspective, which is often marginalised or overlooked completely in general academic or policymaking discourse. These members of staff can serve on advisory groups which can guide universities towards more inclusive and globally aware research and policy engagement.

Lessons for the Higher Education sector

It's time to review funding

Existing funding structures in the context of research engagement in Global South countries run the risk of perpetuating historical power structures reminiscent of a colonial past. A critical review of these structures is not only ethical, but it is imperative for equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships. All actors in the sector should scrutinise current funding criteria and mechanisms to dismantle elements which may unintentionally hinder positive relationships to form and thrive. Who sets the priorities, and are they co-created with the people who are the focus? How are the funds allocated, and could these channels be exclusionary to specific groups of people based on geographical location or availability of certain documents like a passport? Who is deemed eligible and by what/whose barometer is eligibility measured? What kinds of projects are typically accepted and on what basis? These are some critical questions that the sector must ask as part of a wider review of these mechanisms, as we plan to adapt our systems to support more balanced knowledge exchange.

Co-creation is the way forward

This is a call for a methodological and ethical realignment to integrate the expertise and agency of the Global South in their own engagement. Beginning from the very definition of 'impact' which varies between institutions and partners, this includes the facilitation of frameworks which enable international partners, particularly those from the countries of engagement, to have an equal voice and authority in shaping and detailing research agendas and methodologies. The sector should create an ecosystem which emphasises co-creating research questions which respond to the nuanced priorities, co-developing contextually appropriate methodologies which resonate with lived experiences of target populations and co-implementing policy engagement strategies. To incentivise this, there may have to be a redefinition of what success looks

like in international research projects. Funding bodies, universities and research councils could reward projects and engagements which demonstrate real partnership with shared leadership among all collaborators.

Stronger relationships with multilaterals

Multilateral institutions are organisations such as those in the United Nations system, the World Bank, or the World Trade Organisation, as well as regional bodies such as the African Union, that are formed by multiple nation states to cooperate on issues of common interest. They often work at the intersection of government and non-governmental stakeholders and play a very prominent role in the Global South policy landscape, as they have the ability to engage with multiple national governments. With their convening power and reach, they provide the UK HE sector a platform for deepened collaboration with Global South research and policy partners. If the sector is more deliberate and strategic in its engagement with multilaterals, there could be resultant frameworks which ease the way for sensitive and equitable activities at institutional and individual levels. The sector could also leverage the convening power of multilaterals to reach and engage a wide range of perspectives for heightened inclusivity and alignment with global agendas and initiatives, ensuring relevancy in current affairs. Institutions will need to go beyond on-paper agreements, and actively seek roles in committees, consortia, groups, councils, and bodies run by multilaterals to have a seat at the table. This is also an avenue to influence the policies and practices of multilaterals, some of which are policymaking bodies on their own.

The sector will need to examine and optimise the internal incentives and policies which currently guide international engagement, in order to strengthen relationships with multilaterals.

Further work

Our work on the decolonisation of impact has only begun to scratch the surface of the issues raised above. We believe that, if the Higher Education sector in the UK is to continue to incentivise policy impact in post-colonial and other international contexts, then it is imperative that universities continue to interrogate how they approach these relationships and how they support academics to acknowledge and challenge the ways in which postcolonial relationships can be disempowering for both policy audiences and research partners in the Global South. We would be delighted to speak to others within the sector who share the same view and who similarly aspire to equitable and empowering research impact.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the kind support of the iCare partnership, the University of Connecticut, ECHO Netherlands and the ICARE4Justice consortium.

Amanda is currently Research Leadership Development Manager at the Researcher Academy at the University of Nottingham, having worked at the Institute for Policy and Engagement to support academics with policy impact, particularly in the Global South. Prior to this, she has worked at the African Union and UN agencies, designing and mainstreaming policies and programmes on youth employment, education and civic empowerment.



Chris is Deputy Director of the Institute for Policy and Engagement at the University of Nottingham, with responsibility for supporting academics across the University to achieve policy impact from their research. He joined Nottingham in 2018, having begun his career as a fast streamer in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office where he served in London, Seoul and The Hague. On leaving the FCO, Chris took a range of policy-related roles in the third sector, including Head of Education for Stonewall and Policy Director at the New Delhi office of City & Guilds, before entering the HE sector.



References

Charles, Elizabeth (2019) Decolonizing the curriculum. *Insights* 32 (1), p. 24. ISSN 2048-7754.

Chubb, J. and R. Watermeyer (2016). Academics admit feeling pressure to embellish possible impact of research. *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/academics-admit-feeling-pressure-to-embellish-possible-impact-of-research-56059> [Accessed: 15 January 2024].

Kerridge, S. (2023). REF 2028: impact becomes more valuable. *Research Professional News*. Available at: <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-views-of-the-uk-2023-6-ref-2028-impact-becomes-more-valuable/> [Accessed: 15 January 2024].

Nakhid, C. and C. Farrugia (2021). Affirming Methodologies in Two African Diasporic Contexts: The Sharing of Knowledge Through Liming and Ole Talk Among Caribbean Islanders in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Practice of Sharing with Sydney-Based Africans, *Peabody Journal of Education*, 96:2, 177-191, DOI: [10.1080/0161956X.2021.1905359](https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1905359) [Accessed: 15 January 2024].

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. (2019). Provisional Notes on Decolonizing Research Methodology and Undoing Its Dirty History. *Journal of Developing Societies*. 2019 35:4, 481-492.

Reed, M. and S. Kerridge (undated). How much was an impact case study worth in REF 2014. *Fast Track Impact*. Available at: <https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/ref-tips> [Accessed: 15 January 2024].

Stein, S. & Andreotti, V.D.O. (2016). Decolonization and higher education. In M. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of educational philosophy and theory*. Singapore: Springer Science+Business Media. DOI: [10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_479-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_479-1) [Accessed: 15 January 2024].

Suhraiya, J. (2020). Decolonizing the Academy – Between a Rock and a Hard Place. *Interventions*, 22:4, 552-573, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2020.1753559](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1753559) [Accessed: 15 January 2024].

UKRI (2022). How Research England supports Research Excellence. *UKRI website*. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/research-england/research-excellence/ref-impact/> [Accessed: 15 January 2024].

University of Nottingham Institute for Policy and Engagement (2022). *Engaging with Policy in the Global South: Conference Report*. Available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/policy-and-engagement/documents/toolkits/engaging-with-policy-in-the-global-south-conference-2.pdf> [Accessed: 29 January 2024].

To cite this article:

Chukwudozie, A., & Sims, C., 2024. A Decolonising Approach to Policy Impact in the Global South: Lessons for research culture. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 11(3), 239-251. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v11i3.1562>.