Transforming Research Excellence

Tijssen, Robert, Wallace, L.

Published by African Minds

Tijssen, Robert and L. Wallace.
Transforming Research Excellence: New Ideas from the Global South.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/73291.

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CHAPTER

10

Southern conceptions of research excellence

Suneeta Singh and Falak Raza

Introduction

Research-based inquiry has, and will remain, a process that is integral to how we go about our lives; it kicks into play when we ‘research’ a holiday or the options for dental treatment. Yet these instances of ‘desk research’ do not rest upon research rigour.

Quality becomes critical when ‘scientific research’ is done with the intention of proving discoveries, determining paradigms or changing ways of doing that have the potential to affect the lives of many. Because such research done with these intentions has far-reaching consequences, it is necessary to safeguard its attention to scientific quality and probity. Research funders have, understandably, a particular interest in ‘research quality’. They can see the need for research quality and are held accountable for it. With funds for research coming under stress, the need to operationalise the notion of ‘research excellence’ is increasingly acute.

The difficulty is posed by differing views on what excellence of research means. Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula (2018) note that ‘the underlying generic concept of “research quality” is not so easily pinned down: it is [a] complex, multidimensional notion with many
context-specific and time-dependent attributes’. A growing body of scholarship suggests that discussions of research excellence are dominated by the ‘Global North’, and calls for the knowledge gap between the Global North and the Global South to be addressed. While these terms no longer accurately represent the geographies that they did when coined, they continue to express a social cognisance of the gap between countries that have large-scale influence and those whose influence is more local.

Background

In 2012/2013 Amaltas carried out an enquiry into how Southern researchers view research excellence and how their experiences could inform framework(s) for assessment of research excellence at IDRC (Singh et al. 2013). The aim of the study was to analyse and summarise the prevailing discourse on questions such as: where is the field moving; what are and who are the different proponents of key debates; and what is the spectrum of definitions and approaches being used?

The nature of the study on which this paper primarily rests was exploratory. Its respondents, drawn from the databases of IDRC and Global Development Network grantees, were well experienced and were engaged in multidisciplinary research. The study received responses to a survey questionnaire from over 300 Southern researchers based across the Global South, and in-depth interviews were held with ten researchers identified as being ‘innovative’ by agencies funding research for development. Over three-quarters of the respondents to the main survey of the study had been born and resided in the Global South, but a majority had completed their last degree in the North, blurring the line between what is a ‘Southern’ view and what is not.

Since research funded by research councils such as IDRC typically occupies the space of use-inspired research, or research for development, this paper looks at research excellence in the context of use-inspired research. Use-inspired research occupies the Pasteur’s Quadrant, a model and term coined by Donald Stokes in 1997 (Stokes 1997). He placed ‘quest for fundamental understanding’ along one
axis and ‘consideration for use’ along the other axis in this model (see Figure 1). This paper discusses research that falls into Quadrant II, represented by Louis Pasteur, whose work was the epitome of high quest for both fundamental understanding and consideration for use.

In addition to the work cited above, this paper also draws from experiences across the range of work at Amaltas, in particular a project commissioned by what was then Research Councils UK to identify leading institutions actively engaged in research in the areas of public health and well-being (Amaltas 2015). Over 4500 peer-reviewed papers were captured by the study. The paper relied on bibliometric analysis using publication and citation counts to capture researchers and institutions working in the identified themes. Institutions were ranked based on aggregation of data of the researchers affiliated with them, using a natural inflection point in the data to classify their institutions as ‘leading’ or ‘other’.

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**Figure 1: The Stokes Typology of Research (1997)**

![The Stokes Typology of Research](source: Adapted from Singh et al. (2013))
Research excellence and Southern perspectives

Introduction

A significant body of research that takes place in the South is quite often funded by the North; it is natural that the concerns that dominate quality judgements of North-funded research are applied to this research as well. And even if it is not, Southern research is often held to Northern standards and notions of quality when time comes to publish. Yet Northern and Southern researchers operate in markedly different social, economic, cultural and political environments.

Do notions of research quality and research excellence travel well across these different milieus? Do the noisy debates about the definition of research excellence and appropriate indicators for it resonate in Southern corridors? Do those grappling with real-world research in the South find the standards, methods and dimensions that are applied to Northern research persuasive when applied to research in the South? Is the world – both North and South – agreed upon what constitutes research excellence? And finally, is there a level playing field between the North and the South?

Based on the 2013 study and others since, it seems that Southern views on research excellence can broadly be categorised into three brackets: (i) Southern value systems; (ii) dissonance in measurement applied to use-inspired, real-world research; and (iii) the disadvantage that research in ‘other’ institutions/’other’ languages faces. The next subsections address each issue.

Importance of Southern value systems

Our sample of Southern researchers exhibited a wide range of value systems when they define or describe research excellence. Definitions of excellence least frequently identify the traditional dimensions of research rigour, namely, research publications and citations (see Figure 2). Stakeholder involvement, originality and dissemination appear more frequently than publication and citation counts. But exceeding these, by a factor of 2–3 times, are less traditional
dimensions: relevance to clear development needs within the context in which research is undertaken and its impact and influence among key stakeholders. At the top of the list is scientific merit, signaling the central desire to see that research meets the standards of quality and probity that researchers of the South hold.

Southern researchers lay a great deal of stress on the notion of relevance. It is important for them that research be relevant to the country context. They believe that relevance is made more meaningful by ensuring that the research question(s) are framed by communities whose lives were sought to be changed. Thus, *relevance ‘to whom’* arises as an important issue to be examined by a research excellence framework. One researcher said, ‘Excellence as a uni-dimensional quality is useless for evaluating research. What we need is criteria that incorporate a variety of dimensions of how research can be useful.’

Southern researchers also emphasise that all the possible kinds of influence and impact that the research might have on practice or policy must be taken into account. For Southern researchers, impact is significantly linked to ‘other-than-academic’ effects as also ‘other-than-policy-changing’ effects. A researcher noted, ‘More robust mechanisms for peer review should be developed; impact on the field of research must be prioritised; public impact should be considered widely rather than being restricted to policy influence.’ Thus effects such as gender
sensitisation of field workers or the incorporation of new indicators into a monitoring information system are seen as important by Southern researchers.

Funders of research have highlighted the significance of relevance as a key parameter of research excellence. When Southern researchers are asked to identify what the most important funders of their work emphasise, their responses indicate that funders, with the exception of Research Councils, emphasise relevance the most. This runs counter to intuition – it would seem that science granting councils would be most likely to support relevance as an important parameter of well-conceived research.

Southern researchers weigh up scientific merit, influence and impact, and relevance in what they feel research excellence embodies. Yet the practice of research evaluation does not appear to lay as much importance on these dimensions (see Figure 3). Research quality frameworks in use most commonly cover aspects such as research question, research design, methods for data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, outputs and conclusions drawn (Singh et al. 2013).

Researchers conducting ‘implementation research’ caution against using a common set of dimensions, without taking into account the nature of their research. As one researcher observed, ‘I would like

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**Figure 3: Aspects of research excellence that are emphasised by evaluations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Emphasised (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical concerns</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection method</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis method</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion drawn</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research design</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research question</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Singh et al. (2013)*
evaluators to use different criteria in the evaluation of academic and policy writing...’. They emphasise that research with practice or policy at its heart dealing with complex ideas ought to be judged differently from research for academic outputs.

Given the often-mercurial nature of the environment in which Southern researchers function, adopting a rigid framework with the hope of achieving standardisation is problematic. Use-inspired research conducted in dynamic settings is very likely to deviate from the original research plan. Such complexities and evolving situations in the real world that impinge on research of issues are inadequately captured and/or addressed by available evaluation frameworks of research excellence.

**Dissonance in measurement applied to use-inspired, real-world research**

Interestingly, despite their emphasis on relevance and influence and impact, Southern researchers are not able to articulate how the dimensions they consider important could be measured. When asked to identify what indicators ought to be used, they fall back on indicators such as publication and citation counts. Is the disjunction in indicators and dimensions of research excellence due to the high value that is attached to research publications in the academic world? Or is it perhaps related to the difficulty of constructing objective and easy-to-apply indicators that can be used to assess impacts?

The reliance on these ‘bibliometric’ measures to assess research excellence is problematic, given the widely held views on their limitations. Donovan (2007) suggests that although these counts may be a good measure of productivity or impact on subsequent academic publications, these measures do not capture the quality of the papers or the research that lies behind. Citations could be made to advance or refute findings of the cited paper, citation counts may be inflated when research is published in an established journal or under-represented when published in non-English language journals (Jarvey et al. 2012).

From the perspective of use-inspired Southern research, these limitations have implications for how the quality of research is judged.
Due to the context in which Southern research often takes place, researchers may adopt innovative methodologies, often emergent in nature, which have never been used in the North. These are not always valued when assessing a paper for inclusion in a top-notch international scientific journal. The evaluation and publication of multi/inter/transdisciplinary work and emerging disciplines – another hallmark of research in the Global South – poses another set of difficulties. Top-tier disciplinary journals are sceptical of publishing interdisciplinary research, and there are few journals that publish interdisciplinary research exclusively (Kulkarni 2015). An OECD report (1997) similarly points to the neglect of grey literature – often of cardinal importance in interdisciplinary work and for innovative developments – in favour of codified literature in scholarly journals that has been a drawback in research evaluation. This is a key concern for Southern researchers, especially because the overwhelming majority of them in Pasteur’s quadrant are engaged in multi/inter/transdisciplinary work (Singh et al. 2013).

Disadvantage of research in ‘other’ languages and/or ‘other’ institutions

Southern researchers are doubly disadvantaged with respect to the language they use for reporting vis-à-vis their native languages. Not only do they have to overcome the hurdle of communicating in a language that frequently does not instinctively ‘come to them’, the value that they create in their native language is often not assessed as a ‘product’ of their research. Knowledge products in the local language are ordinarily not taken into account when judging quality of research – this is especially unfortunate as these products might exert considerable influence on local practice and policy, which is the purpose of use-inspired research.

Singh et al. (2013) note that 58% of the respondents in their study have native languages other than English, Spanish and French, the dominant languages of the world. Yet, approximately 85% of the respondents use English, Spanish or French to report results within their own countries and 99% use these languages to report outside of
Figure 4: Most Southern researchers opted to report in English outside their countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>90</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td>0</td>
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Source: Singh et al. (2013)

their countries. About 83% of reporting outside the country was in English alone (see Figure 4), compared to the 19% who have English as their mother tongue. This raises important questions about the bearing that use of dominant languages has on researchers’ facility to report, and the possibility that acceptance of their reports may be prejudiced by their language skills in a language not their ‘own’.

The disadvantage to researchers speaking and writing in a language other than English is apparent in their under-representation in counts of publications or citations. Donovan (2007) notes that standard citation counts such as Thomson Scientific have a relatively low representation of regional journals, small research fields and
non-English papers. In a vicious circle, academic platforms for native language reporting struggle to survive in a competitive world as they are scarcely cited, discouraging authors from submitting high-quality research articles to these journals (Fung 2008).

The bias towards established researchers as evidenced by their bibliometric counts has also been identified by Amaltas (2015) in its mapping of researchers, institutions and funders engaged in the areas of public health and well-being in India. The study found that researchers in ‘leading institutions’ have higher productivity (publication counts) and greater scholarly influence (citation impact) than researchers in ‘other institutions’. Leading institutions are clearly able to nurture researchers to not only publish more, but to also publish in more impactful publications. The obverse – that researchers from other institutions are at a significant disadvantage in terms of publications and citations – also holds true. Some observers have referred to the importance of this kind of professional ‘social capital’ by relying on collaborations with the North to enhance their reputation.

**Future directions**

Research excellence encompasses a wide range of meanings. At one level, research excellence is a methodological construct of ensuring that scientific rigour is maintained and that processes which are required to be undertaken receive due attention. At another, and one might argue a more important level, it is a ‘political construct’ delineating the complex relationship between that being researched and the wider world.

Use-inspired research must be judged on the basis of this construct. Any discussion of its quality must account for the relevance of the research to local issues, the applicability of research findings to the context, and the influence and impact that is generated on the lived reality of the people whose lives it seeks to transform.

There is as equal a need to focus on research process issues, as on the dynamics between the protagonists in use-inspired research and their wider context. Research quality is epistemological, Southern researchers argue, while research excellence is concerned with results
and application to a policy discourse (see Figure 5). They suggest that it is important to be ‘inclusive’ and involve those whose lives are sought to be changed in defining the research question in an initial step, and hence the idea of relevance ‘to whom’ is another important dimension of excellence.

Emergent research methods, and cross-disciplinary approaches are an important facet of use-inspired research; this makes research publications in top journals less likely. Oddly, much of Southern research is undertaken without explicit ethical review, despite it being use-inspired; this may at least in part be related to the many scientific disciplines that are jointly engaged on it. In particular, cross- inter-transdisciplinary work faces pressure from each discipline to conform to its own normative expectation; it also faces an internal problem during the research, as researchers from different disciplines and conceptual frameworks attempt to work together cohesively as one unit.

While policy-making or practice influence is an important aspect that Southern researchers emphasise, there are apprehensions about the delay between taking action and seeing change. Concepts such as ‘knowledge creep’, what constitutes innovative research, what the most fitting endpoint of the research should be, and the degree of

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**Figure 5: Research excellence encompasses research quality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research excellence</th>
<th>Political construct</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focuses on influence and impact</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Concerned with applicability</td>
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<td>Centres on relevance</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research quality</th>
<th>Methodological construct</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focuses on progress</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concerned with rigour and scientific merit</td>
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Source: Adapted from Singh et al. (2013)
control that researchers have to ensure a desirable impact, go into this mix of concerns. Another important concern is related to accounting for non-English (or Spanish or French) reporting from non-native speakers. Finally, it is also important that the dynamic nature of the context in the case of use-inspired research is factored in.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that the perspectives of the Global South on excellence in the context of use-inspired research are distinctive from, and somewhat dissonant with, prevailing majoritarian views. Southern perspectives are disadvantaged in so far as their value is judged and consequently, their reach and influence is compromised. Because of this, it is important that science granting councils based in the Southern world ensure that they take cognisance of Southern understanding of what excellent research is; they develop systems that can assess quality in this light; and they elevate the value of Southern-based scientific research.

In considering Southern understanding and systems for assessing quality, an initial step would be to think about the unit of assessment. This has implications for the design of the assessment framework. Various approaches have been taken – department-level assessments are promoted by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (Hubble 2015); fields of research by the Australian Research Council (2018); while the IDRC’s Research Quality Plus (RQ+) framework aggregates quality from the projects, upwards to the portfolio level (Ofir et al. 2016). Granting councils will need to make practical decisions regarding the methodology applied, based on availability of evaluators, technology reach, etc.

It may also be worthwhile to consider different performance measures and indicators for the phase of the research cycle when assessing a piece of research work or a research proposal. Given the stress that Southern researchers lay on relevance, outcomes and impact, this becomes particularly critical, bringing focus to the two ‘ends’ of the research cycle not usually covered in normative quality assessments. Singh et al. (2013) suggest three phases at which quality evaluation
could be carried out: (a) pre-grant phase which assesses the conceptualisation of the grant; (b) grant phase which is aimed at understanding the scientific merit and research rigour; and (c) post-grant phase which can gauge influence and impact.

Amplification of the ‘voice’ of Southern researchers must be an important aim of the work of South-based granting councils. Southern voices must be heard more at international conferences. They must exemplify the kind of research that Southern researchers value. Excellent research and researchers conducting excellent research must be identified and encouragement provided to bring more use-inspired learning to the fore. Institutions must be encouraged to develop high-quality portfolios of work. Finally, granting councils must work closely with leading scholarly journals and academic associations to discuss and put forward examples of what, by Southern lights, is excellent research.

Notes

1 SGCI/IDRC Workshop Concept Note: ‘Perspectives on research excellence in the Global South’.
2 Amaltas Consulting Pvt Ltd is a Southern development institution that works to expand intellectual capital and innovative approaches for development.
3 Other dimensions emphasised by funders, as perceived by researchers, were rigour of design, methods of analysis, outputs, dissemination, policy impact, originality, stakeholder involvement and ethics. Academic impact was ranked the lowest.
4 Some of the other indicators suggested by the respondents were changes at policy and community level, relevance of topic, use of innovative design or methods and capacities built.

References


