Transforming Research Excellence

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There is an increasing drive to steer funding towards research ‘excellence’ around the world. In the Global South, especially in low- and medium-income countries (LMICs), emerging granting councils face the challenge of supporting science that is both high quality and relevant to their own national priorities. However, recent scholarship has revealed that the notion of excellence is problematic in many, if not all, contexts. It is highly associated with subjective value judgements on disciplines, methodologies, and is closely linked to journal impact factors, H-index scores, sources of funding and university rankings, each of these being highly contested. In the Global South, many have explored to which degree scant research resources must be focused on development priorities. Given these developments, the time is ripe to fill the knowledge gap regarding research excellence in the developing world, providing balance to ‘Global North-dominated’ scholarship on this issue.

On a more practical level, initiatives such as the Science Granting Councils Initiative (SGCI) in sub-Saharan Africa have revealed pressures on research organisations in LMICs to demonstrate competitiveness in a global research space, and demonstrate that research is ‘as good’ as that which is done elsewhere. Partially driven by the same spirit of accountability and a desire to build capacity for ‘world-class’ science, external donors are increasingly pushing for their funds to go towards ‘excellent’ research. In both cases, the issue of quality and
accountability cannot be ignored, as many governments are weighing the benefits of allocating larger budgets to scientific research. However, they are generally poorly equipped to evaluate research quality and excellence, and to use this evaluative evidence to manage the tensions between national research capacity (and capacity-building) issues, local relevance and demand for research, and various types of quality standards. This speaks to the need for more context-specific quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess and measure research quality, more robust methods for conducting research evaluation, as well as well-developed modalities and programme designs for supporting research.

The ideas in this book emerge from various sources. Our initial quest to learn more about ‘research excellence in the Global South’ arose from the SGCI. Beginning in 2015, the SGCI is a multi-funder initiative that aims to strengthen the capacities of 15 science granting councils (SGCs) in sub-Saharan Africa in order to support research and evidence-based policies that will contribute to economic and social development. It is funded and managed by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), the National Research Foundation (NRF) (South Africa) and, since 2018, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). It is guided by the priorities of the 15 granting agencies who, in 2016, sought to explore the notion of research excellence in greater depth, leading to a report by Erika Kraemer-Mbula and Robert Tijssen, later published as a research article in a scholarly journal (Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula 2018) and a policy brief (Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula 2017); followed by a fulsome discussion with SGCs, which included experts Carlos Aguirre-Bastos from SENACYT (Panama) and Robert Felstead of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

This was followed by an international workshop that took place in Johannesburg in July 2018, supported by SGCI, and co-hosted by the University of Johannesburg and the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University. The workshop deliberated on the experiences and reflections of scholars and practitioners from around the world, with a particular emphasis on those from, or working in, the Global South. Experts in attendance came from Asia, Latin America, Africa, Australia, Europe and the UK,
and included representatives of funding organisations such as the NRF South Africa, NRF Kenya, Wellcome Trust (UK), UKRI and DFID, as well as key stakeholders such as the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) and some of their research partners across the continent. This workshop provided a fruitful platform to discuss early drafts of the chapters in this book, as well as collectively shape ideas for a future agenda of research excellence that includes the realities of the Global South. The meeting notably included several panels with invited researchers and funders operating across Africa, which infused our discussions with new perspectives and debates that significantly informed the chapters of this volume.

We wish to acknowledge the above organisations for their leadership, participation, support and insight during this event, with special thanks to the University of Johannesburg for hosting and supporting the organisation of the event (particularly to the Executive Dean of the College of Business and Economics, Prof. Daneel van Lill), as well as AAS for coordinating to have this event take place alongside the annual DELTAS meeting in the same location. We also wish to thank the following presenters and discussants, in addition to the contributors to this book, who were responsible for the rich feedback and discussions during these three days in July 2018: Dr Mark Claydon-Smith (UKRI), Dr Robert Felstead (UKRI), Allen Mukhwana (AAS), Dr Eunice Muthengi (DFID), Dr Simon Kay (Wellcome Trust), Dr Sam Kinyanjui (KEMRI), Tirop Kosgei (NRF, Kenya), Dr Glenda Kruss (HRSC), Prof. Rasigan Maharaj (Tshwane University of Technology), Prof. Johann Mouton (Stellenbosch University), Dorothy Ngila (NRF, South Africa), Dr Alphonsus Neba (AAS), Pfungwa Nyamukachi (The Conversation Africa), Dr Gansen Pillay (NRF, South Africa), Dr Justin Pulford (LSTM) and Prof. Nelson Sewankambo (Makerere University).

These efforts took place in parallel to the IDRC’s dedicated work to advance how research for development is defined, monitored, managed and assessed. Many of these efforts have materialised in the Research Quality Plus (RQ+) approach as a tool that contextualises research quality and research evaluation for developing country contexts.

Overall, this book sets out to take a different approach from a standard collection of academic essays. It brings together people from
a variety of settings and disciplines, and includes both practitioners and scholars. Many of the contributions are thus reflections on practical experiences, either from an individual or an organisational perspective. Editors and organisers of the 2018 workshop in Johannesburg from which most of the material is drawn sought to be ‘reflexive’ in the knowledge that is produced here. As we seek to broaden notions of scholarship, and argue for more pluralism, relevance and diversity, rather than decontextualised notions of excellence, we also apply this lens to our own work. We sought out outstanding contributions that bring new ideas that are relevant to the theme, but we chose not to ‘standardise’ the style or perspective taken by participants, preferring instead to have the contributions reflect discussions, debates and a collective search for solutions.

References
