

## Panel Discussion A04

### Reflexivity and Positionality in Doing Excellent Research

Convenors:

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Science in Africa is advancing, but in under great pressure: a mix of limited resources, increasing expectations, tensions between competition and cooperation, and the need for evidence-based funding is creating major changes in how scientific research is perceived and conducted. At the centre of this 'perfect storm' is the concept 'research excellence' which drives the strategies and careers of many scientists, but also the priorities of research funding agencies. But what exactly is 'excellent' science in Africa? This panel intended to take a critical view of this issue from a practical and managerial point of view: how should we recognize, monitor, and assess research excellence? Two recent publications served as an analytical framework: *Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality in Social Science Research: Experiences of Doing Fieldwork with Smallholder Farmers in Central Uganda*, Mugabi, N. (2018), and *Research Excellence in Africa: Policies, Perceptions, and Performance*, Tijssen, R. and Kraemer-Mbula, E. (2018).

From a practical point of view, the way researchers relate to study subjects, communities, and measures to manoeuvre through structures of academics have called for thorough researcher reflexivity and positionality, specifically in excellent social scientific research in Africa. Dr. Nicholas Mugabi opined that knowledge production, through excellent research, especially in specific disciplines, for example, social science field in Africa; is an interactive, dynamic process which unfolds with the prevailing research settings as well as constructed acceptable research standards. As such, for example, social science researchers are entwined in duality of relationship. On the one hand, researchers exercise their [agency](#) in everyday fieldwork interactions with the research community, while on the other hand; researcher's [agency](#) is enabled or constrained by the structural rules of the game, such as research ethical standards, academic supervision and mentors' relations, university systems and publishers' requirements.

From managerial point of view and based on an increasing drive to steer science funding towards 'research excellence' Prof. Dr. Robert Tijssen assessed global and local dimensions of excellent research based on a meta-study of research excellence in Africa. He posed questions that enquired: who determines what research excellence is? And how do they determine this in Africa?

In answering these questions based on his fieldwork experience with smallholder farmers in central Uganda, Dr. Mugabi espoused that excellent research constitutes stronger agency of a researcher to discern field dynamic experiences, this could be done through various stakeholders and research brokers, and by making appropriate decisions about multi-level scientific research processes. Moreover, Mugabi also noted the agency to view research communities as knowledge structures that constrain and/or facilitate rigorous research without compromising the basic ethical standards and institutional rules of excellent scientific research.

Tijssen further contributed to Mugabi's assertion by defining local research excellence in terms of conducting research that is highly relevant in addressing local issues or challenges and production of goals that meet national quality criteria. Thus, local excellent research is basic research that focusses on knowledge creation, transfer and local utilization of excellent research (Applied Research). However, comparative research of local excellent research, is scarce, and performance indicators and measures are still under development. Nevertheless, Dr. Mugabi posed, what constitutes research excellence in other disciplines, for example in social sciences? In his scientifically informed opinion, there is a nexus of excellent research based on academic disciplines. To this question, Tijssen reiterated that excellence is not just a concept, excellence is context dependent and goal dependent. Moreover, scientific discipline is a very dominant context and, therefore, it will partly determine or holistically determine how researchers and funders perceive research excellence.

However, Tijssen noted that global research, a more advanced version of excellent research, is determined by scientific reputation of authors or organizations in international scholarly communities, and cooperation with research partners in scientifically advanced countries, or the global north. In essence, the focus of global excellence is on knowledge creation and international dissemination of research articles. Global excellence is established through indicators and comparative measures such as peer review and/or citation impact on community or social development. Finally, global excellence is recognized by international awards, and highly - cited research publications.

Tijssen concluded that there is an urgent need to balance global excellence with local excellence in the sense that local excellence is heavily reliant on international sources (Global Excellence). The main point of Tijssen here was the type of definition or operationalization of excellence that an individual chooses as an excellent research scientist; excellent research must be contextualized because specific discipline, whether it is social science, is a large part of the research setting or contextualization of excellent research.

For example, in local excellent research, according to Dr. Victoria Namuggala, researchers, both global and local, should regard the processes that research participants have gone through and help participants define what they would want to be considered as major participants. So that any kind of intervention considers the thoughts of research participants or the context in which research participants view themselves. The goal would be to tailor interventions that are targeted towards effective individual and community intervention as per the goals that are formulated.

The notion of global excellence and local excellence is an instrumental way of distinguishing different dimensions in excellence and excellent research. According to Tijssen, it is actually irrelevant who actually produces scientific research, be it someone in the global north or in the global south. The idea is to distinguish excellence according to the targeted audiences. One targeted audience could be the scholarly peers, known as the global science community. When this is the targeted community, then research can be perceived, operationalised, and framed in terms of global excellence.

Yet, this comes with the prices that are mentioned in distinguishing global excellence from local excellence, such as recognition from highly cited papers. Global excellence is thus the traditional way of looking at research excellence. But then, there is the local dimension, and Tijssen reiterates that we are still struggling with this concept: what does it mean to be excellent within the local framework, the local community, the national science system? In response, Tijssen notes that this question opens up opportunity for richer discussion not only for what excellent research is, but also more nuanced multi-disciplinary way of operationalizing research excellence.

Moreover, there is more appreciation of applied research in this context for science-based innovation, community engagement, as such; those issues that have become less relevant if you focus on global excellence perspective are addressed within local excellence.

So, rather than forcing colonialism in local research excellence, local excellence actually decolonizes global excellence by moving away from the more traditional way of looking at the global north and global south in terms of scientific achievement and performance.

#### Take-aways

1. Scientific research is a dynamic process; it is an interaction that a researcher has with the community in various disciplines such as social sciences.
2. The type of definition or operationalization of research excellence chosen by a researcher must be contextualized because a specific discipline is a large part of the setting or contextualization of research excellence.
3. Implementation of research findings applies to all countries worldwide; a lot of excellent scientific research are never implemented by relevant national authorities.
4. Global and local excellence are actually complementary to each other, like two sides of the same coin. The terms are not meant to create tensions, as in academic research and policy research. In conceptualizing the two concepts, a researcher ought to ask, am I doing research for my peers (Academic peers), or am I doing research to solve local problems (community, organizations)?

*Catch phrase:* research is an interactive, dynamic process which unfolds with the prevailing research settings as well as constructed acceptable research standards.