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Position Paper of the
Berlin Center for Global Engagement

Beyond Excellence

Recommendations for More Equitable Research Cooperation Cultures



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1. Introduction
Rethinking Excellence in South-North Research Cooperation

The landscape of international cooperation is shifting in ways that are both dynamic and profound. The rules and principles that have guided international relations for decades are under real pressure – not least from a resurgent 'might makes right' mentality, visible not only in the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, but also in the renewed use of force in international politics. Alongside these geopolitical tensions and increasing authoritarian tendencies, new emerging power centres across Asia, Africa, and Latin America are reshaping the global order, creating a multipolar world in which influence is not only distributed more widely but also more contested. Characterized by a new level of assertiveness, many actors in countries of the so-called Global South[1] are increasingly vocal in this shift of power. They demand fairer and more inclusive partnerships and are no longer willing to operate within international frameworks that were built without them and quite often have worked to their disadvantage (Global Perspectives 2025). These dynamics that can be observed in the geopolitical arena are, however, not unique to multilateral cooperation in politics or economics. They also play out in other contexts, such as international research cooperation, which is the focus of this paper.

Since the 1990s, the paradigm of **research excellence** has become the dominant principle in international research governance – shaping funding decisions and institutional priorities. Initially designed to identify and reward outstanding research, the principle of research excellence has increasingly come to define what counts as valuable knowledge and who is recognized as capable of producing it (Sutz 2020). This prevailing understanding of excellence not only ignores that conditions and settings play an important role in research production, it even deepens inequalities and asymmetries in the global science system. While the strive for excellence has increasingly shaped global knowledge production, critique over the limiting scope of the excellence paradigm, consolidating the Western dominance in science at the expense of Global South partners, has equally grown over the past decades (Moore et al. 2017; Neylon 2020; Kraemer-Mbule et. al. 2020). The **proble**m is not merely that global research partnerships operate within unequal systems, but that the very notion of *excellence* may inadvertently reinforce these structural inequalities.

Against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting geopolitical environment, marked by polycrisis, fragile trust, and the rise of multipolar power centres, these inequalities in the global science system are becoming both more visible and more consequential, making the central question of this paper become more urgent: what kinds of cooperation settings foster high-quality research under the increasingly politically complex and often asymmetrical conditions? The aim is to explore how quality of research can emerge by

1 Throughout this paper, "North-South" and "South-North" are used interchangeably, reflecting varied usage across institutional, academic, and political contexts. It also underscores this paper's central argument that international cooperation must move beyond outdated asymmetrical power hierarchies. The term „low- and middle-income countries" is a technical term following the World Bank's income-based classification while "Global South" serves as broader geopolitical term and by no means a geographical labelling, indicating to some extent shared histories of colonialism and structural marginalization. Yet, the authors recognize that none of these terms is neutral or fully adequate, and that their scope and implications remain contested.

striving not only for the potentially excellent outputs but by building cooperation settings that cultivate co-creation, equity, mutual learning, recognition and visibility, as well as shared ownership. It explores how taking into account the local context and conditions under which research is conducted can strengthen international collaboration and enable greater impact of research innovation to tackle real local as well as global challenges.

This paper builds on the work already initiated by a broader research assessment reform movement which equally strives to give an answer to the pitfalls of the excellence paradigm. For example, the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) has made the case that research assessment practices should foster a culture that recognises collaboration, openness, and meaningful engagement with society, creating space for a wider range of talents and contributions to be acknowledged and rewarded (CoARA, 2022). This vision aligns closely with what more equitable international research partnerships require: assessment frameworks that value not just individual output and institutional prestige, but the quality and depth of collaborative relationships, the co-production of knowledge across different contexts, and genuine responsiveness to the priorities of all partners involved. Reforming how research is assessed is therefore not merely a technical exercise, it is a political and ethical one, with real consequences for who gets to participate in global knowledge production. A lack of equity in research collaboration can lead to suboptimal research outcomes. More equitable research partnerships are therefore not optional, but a prerequisite for successful international research collaboration. For that reason, a discussion on what fosters quality in global research projects is both timely and relevant when thinking of the increasingly difficult conditions of international cooperation: budget constraints for public universities in a number of countries including Germany, but also geopolitical volatility, (re-)autocratisation, and shrinking (public) spaces.

This paper refers to discussions facilitated by the **Berlin Center for Global Engagement (BCGE)** during the Workshop Beyond Excellence in International Research Cooperation, which brought together international flagship projects of the **Berlin University Alliance collaborating with Global South partners in November 2025. The participants stem from the three BCGE Signature Projects co2libri, CritUP, and PRODIGY and the Berlin-based DAAD Global Centers GLACIER, G-WAC and TRAJECTS (for more information see glossary on p. 14)**. Building on Berlin University Alliance`s commitment to fostering more equitable research cooperation, expressed not only by signing the Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations but also hosting the international conference on “Negotiating Scientific Cooperation in an Unequal World“ in November 2024, this paper aims to articulate a collective stance, contributing to the ongoing global debate on fostering positive, equitable, thriving research cultures. The recommendations expressed below have implications specifically for grant providers, university administrations, academic societies, the publishing sector and researchers.

The following section starts with unpacking the excellence framework by reviewing its evolution as well as its limitations and critique. Building on this, the next section introduces how research cultures can reshape understandings of quality in south-north research cooperation. The overarching goal of this paper is to present concrete recommendations for different levels of action, from individual, to institutional and policy-oriented change. With this paper, the Berlin Center for Global Engagement seeks to contribute to an ongoing international debate by moving from problem description to actionable next steps for change.

2. Unpacking the Excellence Paradigm Between Promise and Critique

The Evolution and Institutionalisation of the Excellence Paradigm

In the 1970-80s the system of higher education and science policy underwent major transformations in a wide range of countries in the Global North driven by expanding research systems, growing public investment and increasing governmental demands for evidence of effectiveness and societal returns. In this context, the excellence paradigm emerged and spread quickly across different sectors. Among others, it gained traction in the business sector and inspired a variety of excellence management models (Flink & Peter 2018; Dahlgaard-Park & Dahlgaard 2007). When the idea of excellence soon after entered the scientific space, it was initially shaped by beliefs in meritocratic principles and functioned as an aspirational scholarly ideal rooted in intellectual honesty, originality, and contributions to collective knowledge. The strive for excellence described the pursuit of high standards rather than competition with others.

From the late 1980s onward, the normative ideal of excellence was gradually reframed as a governance instrument. Excellence became a tool through which decision- and policymakers could steer research systems without directly intervening in research content, offering seemingly neutral language for difficult political choices caused by budgetary constraints and increasing resource competition. Therefore, the institutionalization of the excellence paradigm and the usage thereof as a tool served above all two key functions: (1) allocating scarce public funds through selective mechanisms, and (2) enabling institutional and individual ranking. With this shift, competition among universities, research institutions, and individual scholars began to intensify.

Becoming something like a guiding principle, the excellence paradigm has since shaped academic careers. Hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions increasingly relied on standardized excellence indicators, transforming researchers into comparable units within global competition. These metrics started to impact research behaviour. Putting excellence into practice meant producing quantifiable proxies, such as publication counts, citation rates, journal ratings, and the amount of the funding raised. These indicators enabled cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional, and cross-national comparison while claiming transparency and objectivity. Increasingly, the idea of excellence became a standardized currency in international research governance. While undeniably delivering benefits such as greater visibility and facilitating coordination and comparability in a globalized science system, it also generated a number of unintended consequences as described in the following.

Pitfalls of the excellence paradigm

With the evolution of the excellence paradigm, research institutions have developed into “hyper-competitive landscapes,” as discussed during the aforementioned BCGE workshop. While the original intention proved useful to some degree, the paradigm clearly

overlooks structural inequalities and contextual realities across different regions of the world. Excellence as a guiding principle in research remains valuable; yet the narrow, output-driven standards used to measure it have produced increasingly detrimental effects, that become specifically visible in the context of international research collaboration between the Global North and the Global South. The strong focus on excellence has narrowed the definition of what counts as quality research, while the growing obsession with metrics often neglects both research conditions and the quality of research partnerships. Metrics can certainly be a valuable tool when applied carefully, but they become problematic when they implicitly determine which knowledge is valuable and gains visibility or authority. To examine how the excellence paradigm manifests in international research cooperation and has contributed to shaping partnerships operating under diverse conditions, the following section draws on discussions from the BCGE workshop as well as the analysis by French et al. (2024).

Power asymmetries between Global North and Global South research partners become visible early on when institutions and funders in the Global North define research questions, methods, and standards. These dynamics are reinforced by the growing influence of global university rankings, which shape research and higher education worldwide while privileging Northern standards and "global agendas" (often as defined in the Global North) . This leads to the sidelining local priorities and ways of knowing that have existed in local communities across the world for centuries and thereby reducing Global South partners to data collectors or project sites rather than recognising them as equal intellectual contributors to the theoretical and methodological framing of collaborative research. In international research cooperation, these patterns obstruct genuine co-creation and render claims of shared benefits largely hollow. As discussed at the BCGE workshop, the excellence paradigm can create a vicious cycle in which well-resourced institutions receive the most funding, enabling them to set the research agenda and thereby further consolidate their dominance. In his keynote in the aforementioned BCGE workshop, Fidel Nemenzo[2] further argued that "(t)he result is a hierarchy of knowledge that mirrors the world's geopolitical order, granting institutions from the core the power to define academic standards, methodologies, and what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Meanwhile, groundbreaking work in local contexts often goes unrecognised." Excellence-based funding mechanisms compound this problem by favouring high-ranking institutions with strong international reputations, robust infrastructure, and proven grant-writing capacity — concentrating resources and decision-making power among already advantaged actors. Under-resourced partners, often based in low- or middle-income countries, tend by contrast to have limited leverage over agenda-setting, role definition, data ownership, and long-term capacity building in international research cooperation. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how the excellence paradigm reinforces global inequalities and weakens the public mission of science by embedding competition, hierarchy, and selectivity at the core of research conditions.

Research in low- and middle-income countries, especially in vulnerable local communities, can also raise ethical concerns. In different disciplines, international collaborations have sometimes relied on interviews, data or in the context of health and clinical research, on trial designs where control groups do not receive commensurate or timely benefits resulting in extractivist research behaviour. Especially pressure from excellence-driven competition may produce results that can sideline commitments to justice, reciprocity, and community benefit. Closely related is the phenomenon of

2 Fidel Nemenzo, Professor of Mathematics and former Chancellor at the University of the Philippines Diliman. He joined the BCGE workshop on 27 November 2025 in Berlin and provided a keynote speech on „Reimagining Higher Education: University Rankings and Global Asymmetries" to kick-off the workshops discussion.

“ethics dumping“, whereby research practices that would be unacceptable in well-regulated environments are relocated to contexts with weaker governance frameworks. Excellence-focused competition, combined with uneven regulatory capacity, can create incentives to externalize ethical risks to vulnerable populations. Additionally, **cultural differences** are often insufficiently recognized and acknowledged within excellence-driven international research partnerships. Differences in how research cultures function in other countries, disrespecting communication norms, and different understandings of timelines as well as of authority can create misunderstandings and reinforce hierarchical relationships. When excellence is narrowly defined through dominant, Northern academic norms, alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge are systematically devalued.

Finally, power asymmetries remain prevalent in the **equitable publication and commercialization of research findings**. Lead authorship, control over intellectual property, and access to commercialization pathways are frequently concentrated among institutions with greater resources and global visibility. Partners from less advantaged contexts may have limited influence over how findings are disseminated or monetized, despite their substantive contributions. All these aspects illustrate the current imbalance in the global science system and constitute major challenges in establishing equal research partnerships. They also call for moving beyond the excellence paradigm, as the latter seems to reinforce these imbalances.

3. The Development of Equitable Research Cooperation Cultures Towards a More Pluralistic Understanding of Excellence

Understanding What Shapes Research Cultures

When researchers from different contexts come together in collaborative international research projects, they are not simply bringing their respective expertise to the table but instead they need to align their often differing – and unequally resourced – approaches to conducting and valuing research. Understanding what shapes different research cultures is a necessary first step when thinking about North–South research cooperation. Research cultures are not abstract, they are products of their environment. They are lived, daily routines and realities: the assumptions embedded in a grant application form, the unspoken hierarchy at a team meeting, the decision about whose name appears first on a publication, the rules and regulations that determine how research funding can be spend or the institutional calendar that defines a three-year project as long-term are examples that reflect the particularities of a specific research culture. As defined by the

Royal Society in 2018, a "(r)esearch culture encompasses the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities. It influences researchers' career paths and determines the way that research is conducted and communicated." Research cultures can therefore be described as the sum of the conditions and attitudes that influences how research is developed, who gets to ask which questions, by what methods, for whom, and with what recognition. As a result, research cultures greatly vary across disciplines but also across countries. They are neither universal, nor are they neutral. They reflect the histories of the institutions and knowledge systems that produced them.

In the Global North, decades of institutionalised science, competitive funding systems, and commercial academic publishing have produced a particular set of principles for research cultures: peer-reviewed journal articles as the primary measure of output, citation counts as proxies for quality, and global university rankings as benchmarks of institutional worth. These standards have gradually been treated as universal, however, they are not. They privilege specific languages, methods, and publication circuits, and they reflect the priorities of the systems that created them, not those of the global research community as a whole.

The consequences are felt most directly in international collaboration. Researchers in the Global South are routinely evaluated against metrics that were not designed with their contexts in mind. These metrics overlook valuable contributions of all kinds, from theoretical and conceptual work in languages other than English, to specific forms of output with sometimes far greater reach and societal relevance such as policy briefs, community reports, documentary films, or public and artistic engagement, which are often invisible to global standardised metrics and rarely count as a research output. A film that shapes the public debate or informs local policy may carry more impact than a journal article read by a handful of specialists, yet current assessment frameworks only rarely recognise this. What counts as a publication is therefore a critical question. In addition, many Southern partner institutions demonstrate considerably greater strengths in transdisciplinary collaboration, especially in aligning with societal impact goals, despite structural and resource-related disadvantages compared to their Northern counterparts. This could be an area for Northern institutions, including German universities, to learn from.

Material conditions further determine research cultures. Where researchers work without adequate time, infrastructure, sufficient financial resources or institutional support, the research cultures that emerge will inevitably look different from those in well-resourced settings. Precarious employment, excessive (teaching) workloads, and short project cycles limit the space for deep, risky, time-intensive or innovative work. Instead they tend to reward safe and fast outputs.

Understanding all of this matters because research cultures are not fixed. They are shaped by incentives, framework conditions, institutions, and people – which means they can be continuously changed. A foundational shift in what shapes research cultures is therefore crucial. It is critical to recognise which conditions researchers (and not only those in the Global North) require to produce good research and which institutional conditions prevent them from doing so.

The commercial publishing is an example of this: it lies at the core of research cultures. Research that is publicly funded increasingly generates private profit, while access remains restricted behind paywalls, deepening the gap between well- and under-resourced research contexts. Yet, other systems are possible and already in place. Many stakeholders have created working alternatives, such as the open-access ecosystem SciELO in Latin America, which demonstrates that high-quality, publicly accessible publishing is viable and can sustain diverse regional knowledge communities. These models deserve greater international recognition and support.

From Outputs to Conditions: Principles for Equitable Research Cooperation Cultures

Research cultures need to change and so do research *cooperation* cultures, which are part of them. More equitable research cooperation that produce excellent research cannot be built by simply developing a better universal definition of what excellence should stand for. A new definition of excellence would risk reinstating the same hierarchies with updated language, or simply proving irrelevant to contexts it was never designed to fit. What is instead needed for more equitable collaboration is a commitment to dialogue, reflexivity, and the ongoing capacity to ask whether the conditions for good research actually exist – for all partners, in all contexts, be it in Mali, Colombia, Philippines or Germany. This means reorienting how research quality is assessed in cooperation. Rather than asking only what researchers have produced, an equally important question to ask is whether they have the time, the financial and material resources, and the intellectual freedom to pursue their work. Were they free to ask critical and risky research questions? Could they engage genuinely with the communities their work is meant to serve? Was the collaboration structured so that all partners could contribute on their own terms as well as benefit from the collaboration? Who gets visibility when publishing the outcomes? These are the questions that reveal whether collaboration is operating under realistic, fair and inclusive conditions. Quality of research emerges **from relationships, not transactions**. In the following, several principles can be derived from this.

Reciprocity means that collaboration must be genuinely shared in research design, governance and ownership, as well as risk and benefit. Instead of having one side provide access to data and communities while the other provides funding and theory, co-creation of structures that are genuinely cooperative rather than extractive or competitive is crucial. An international research project of BCGE that has done this successfully is Co2libri. The project brings theories and research from different countries in the Global South into Berlin's academic landscape, addressing the underrepresentation of researchers and intellectuals from marginalized regions and communities in mainstream academic discourse.

Building trust requires transparency: who holds the budget, who decides about the research agenda, whose ethical frameworks govern, whose timelines structure the work? These are decisions that all partners need real influence over. Trust is built through transparent decision-making, shared governance, and aligned expectations and by resisting structures where funders or foreign institutions dictate research outcomes.

Long-term commitment is equally essential. Short project cycles cannot build the deep relationships and sustained engagement that meaningful collaboration requires. Also, finding answers to complex problems takes time. Stable funding environments and the freedom to pace work at human speed – allowing time for reflection and care – are not luxuries. They are structural preconditions for the kind of research that actually makes a difference. An example of long-term commitment is the G-WAC project, funded by the DAAD and the Federal Foreign Office of Germany. The project is a collaboration, jointly governed by German institutions and the Kwame-Nkrumah University of Science in Technology with a project base in Kumasi (Ghana) aiming at establishing a joint research centre for global health and pandemic prevention. By creating a joint PhD program, offering recurring short courses, and providing regular policy dialogues with regional stakeholders in West-Africa, the project creates sustainable structures and a long-term perspective for those involved.

Cooperation and long-term care for partners, especially in politically difficult contexts, need to replace competition and extraction as the dominant logic of international cooperation. As Fidel Nemenzo put it during the aforementioned BCGE Workshop: "True quality

lies not only in what we publish, but in how we nurture collaboration, equity, curiosity, and integrity." In many disciplines, language is key to establishing equitable, long-term cooperation settings. An example for a successful multilingual research project between North and South, is CritUp. The international research project that concluded in December 2025, aimed at building sustainable networks for critical theory in systems under pressure. Participating researchers came from Brazil, Peru, Chile as well as Türkiye and were able to produce their research in their own respective languages, while CritUp offered translations into English to increase visibility. This led to invitations of researchers to international conferences. Applying more flexibility in North-South cooperation, is not a concession to lower standards. On the contrary, the CritUp project illustrates how linguistic diversity strengthens rather than weakens diverse scholarly perspectives. The more that research cooperation culture become genuinely diverse – multilingual, multi-method, rooted in multiple knowledge traditions – the richer and more adaptable the entire system becomes.

4. Recommendations
Building More Equitable Conditions for Research Cooperation Cultures

Based on the reflections shared in this paper, the following recommendations have emerged. They are directed at research institutions, funders, researchers and policymakers involved in international research cooperation. They reflect the understanding that research quality in South-North cooperation depends not only on the pursuit of excellence, but also heavily on the cultivation of supportive research cooperation cultures. The recommendations below address three interrelated levels: context, structural conditions, and politics. As each of these levels shapes the conditions under which international research cooperation takes place, the recommendations are not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, they offer concrete starting points for structural change.

I. Context Matters:
Recognising Diversity Across Research Systems

1.1. Respect Differences Across Regional Contexts

Research cultures, institutional capacities, and local knowledge priorities vary significantly across low- and middle-income countries. The Global South is not a homogenous bloc that can be treated like a single entity. Cooperation frameworks must be designed in partnership with specific regional and nation-

al contexts. This means supporting regional research agendas, funding context-specific capacity development, and ensuring that international collaboration strengthens rather than bypasses existing regional research ecosystems. Co-define what matters most at the outset of every partnership, rather than applying generic standards.

1.2. Acknowledge Different Research Practices Across Disciplines

Resist the application of one-size-fits-all evaluation and cooperation frameworks across all disciplines. The conditions, timelines, output types, and community structures of the humanities, medical research, environmental science, and social science research for example may differ substantially. The same applies to the degree to which various disciplines are already engaging in critical discourse about their role and responsibility in fostering more equitable cooperation. Going forward, inter- and transdisciplinary cooperation structures must be developed to allow adequate time and space for building collaboration that is genuinely meaningful and substantive for all parties involved.

II. Structures Matter: Reforming the Conditions for International Research Cooperation Cultures

2.1. Reduce Administrative Barriers to South-North Collaboration

Simplify the administrative and legal frameworks that govern international research cooperation. Excessive reporting requirements, incompatible institutional procedures, and rigid fund-transfer regulations often burden all partners involved – be it in Northern or Southern countries – and consume time that should ideally go to conducting research. Institutions should review their own administrative processes with the aim of ensuring proportionality and reducing the work load for administrative project management.

2.2. Reform Funding Structures for More Flexibility

Redesign funding structures for international research cooperation so that financial resources can flow equitably to all partners. This means enabling direct fund transfers to Southern institutions without prohibitive bureaucratic barriers, allowing budget flexibility across project phases, and removing funding conditions that require budget management to be governed from within institutions in the North. Funders must actively resist configurations where they unilaterally dictate research questions, methodologies, or expected outcomes.

2.3. Invest in Time and Trust-Building as Research Infrastructure

Fund long-term research partnerships that extend well beyond standard project cycles. Build in structured time for relationship development, joint re-

flection, and iterative co-design before deliverables are due. In practice, this means application and proposal timelines must be long enough for partners to genuinely engage with and shape the process together, rather than having terms and priorities simply set by Global North partners. Recognise that trust between partners is not a soft outcome but a precondition for rigorous, equitable collaboration. Slow, careful research is not inefficient: it is what complex, cross-contextual and interdisciplinary questions require. The more diverse the work becomes, the more complex become the requirements for equal conditions. Funding timelines should reflect this reality rather than contradict it.

2.4. Expand the Definition of Research Output

Apply greater openness and flexibility by formally recognising a broader range of research outputs in evaluation, funding, and career progression frameworks to overcome the narrow understanding of the excellence paradigm. Alternative formats, such as policy briefs, documentary films, community reports, artistic works, and oral knowledge formats can carry greater societal impact than high-ranking journal articles. Researchers and funders should co-develop criteria with partners from the Global South for assessing the value and reach of diverse outputs, rather than defaulting to Northern publication norms.

2.5. Build New Circuits of Scholarly Visibility

Actively support publication ecosystems that sit outside the dominant Northern circuits, including open-access platforms such as SciELO, regional journals, and multilingual repositories. Promote multilingual publishing and acknowledge non-English outputs in evaluation processes. Rethink the relationship between visibility, open access, and excellence: research that is widely read and used within its own region should count as high-impact, regardless of whether it appears in a globally ranked journal.

2.6. Diversify Assessment Instruments to Attract Diverse Researcher Profiles

Recognise that excellence takes different forms across a researcher's career and role profile — in teaching, in research, in international cooperation, and in publication. Evaluation systems should be diversified accordingly, allowing institutions to assess and reward strengths in these different dimensions rather than reducing academic merit to publication output alone. This is particularly relevant for ensuring more equitable international cooperation, since researchers who invest significant time and skill in building and sustaining international research partnerships are often not explicitly rewarded for these efforts by conventional, publication-centred assessment instruments.

III. Politics Matter: Shaping Debates and Navigating Different Power Systems

3.1. Bridge Debates on Equitable Partnerships and Research Assessment

The debate about how to improve international research cooperation and the debate about how to reform research assessment are too often held separately. Yet, they have much in common and are in a way connected. How research quality is defined and measured directly shapes who can participate in cooperation, on what terms, and with what recognition. Institutions, funders, and researchers should explore ways of connecting these two agendas deliberately, recognising that fairer partnerships require fairer assessment systems, and that reforming assessment without addressing structural inequalities in international research cooperation will leave the underlying problem untouched.

3.2. Ensure Research Security and Academic Freedom

Institutions engaged in North–South partnerships must be alert to political, economic, and institutional pressures that can compromise academic freedom in different national contexts. International research structures should not make researchers more vulnerable. To prevent this, building explicit protections into partnership agreements is required, such as clear protocols for handling sensitive research, as well as for researchers facing interference or risk. Mechanisms must be flexible enough to respond to rapidly changing circumstances, and robust enough to ensure that all researchers, regardless of where they are based, have access to spaces for open debate in which they can pursue their work. Institutions and researchers together need to develop systematically concepts that balance the protection of academic freedom and research, while enabling research security for the knowledge producers in the cooperation.

5. Conclusion
Invest in Relationships Rather Than Transactions

Equitable research cooperation is not a concession to lower standards. It rather is the pre-condition for standards that are adequate for the complexity of the world that research is trying to understand. Issues like climate change, prevention of pandemics and global health crises, as well as democratic erosion, and economic and social inequality, cannot be solved from a single vantage point. Addressing these challenges effectively requires international research cooperation that is more equitable and inclusive, not as an afterthought, but as a structural necessity for developing sustainable solutions. However, the underlying structures for research cooperation cultures need to shift: how quality is defined and assessed, what counts as a legitimate research output, how funding flows and who governs it, and what values, attitudes and mindset underpin the relationships between collaborating institutions and researchers. At its core, this means recognising North-South collaboration as merit in its own right. In practice, this requires extending assessment beyond research outcomes to include the quality of the cooperation that produced them.

Several arguments in this paper are worth holding onto as the most important. First, that the problem is structural, not only attitudinal. Individual goodwill between researchers is real and matters, but it cannot compensate for funding architectures that concentrate power in Northern institutions, evaluation and publication systems that render local knowledge invisible, or administrative frameworks that exhaust partners before the research has even begun. Second, that fixing the problem requires building capacity for critical reflection rather than imposing new universal definitions. Any rigid replacement for the current excellence paradigm risks reproducing the same dynamics in new clothing. What endures is the capacity to ask: are the conditions right for meaningful North-South research cooperation? Third, that quality, equity, and relevance are not in tension. In-depth research that is locally grounded, highly relevant for all researchers involved, and societally useful is not a lower form of science, but instead it is what research, at its best, has always aspired to be.

The window for action is real, and it is open now. The African Charter for Transformative Research Collaboration is paving the way for more equitable partnerships. The global open-access movement is reshaping how knowledge circulates. International funders are increasingly aware that partnership models need to change but without structural reform, awareness does not translate into practice. Reform processes like CoARA are creating institutional momentum for changing how research is assessed but they risk remaining a largely Northern conversation unless deliberately broadened. Existing frameworks offer useful starting points: the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) already places research culture and impact at its centre, as does the broader open science movement. However, both require critical engagement to ensure that "culture" and "impact" are assessed through an explicit equity lens when applied to North-South cooperation, rather than simply added as new metrics within an otherwise unchanged excellence paradigm. The momentum offered right now can be used, or it can be missed. The costs of inaction are already visible. Collaborations that could be genuinely transformative sometimes remain merely transactive: data flows south to north, funding flows north to south, and the asymmetry that was supposed to be addressed is quietly reproduced.

The recommendations in this paper are practical starting points, not a complete blueprint. They require collaboration among various stakeholders at different levels. Funders need to change how money flows and what it is tied to. Institutions need to change how they hire, promote, and evaluate researchers. Researchers themselves need to resist the excellence-driven bibliometric system and advocate for establishing the conditions that enable fair and inclusive South-North research cooperation. None of this is easy, and none of it might happen quickly. But the direction is clear. International research cooperation that is grounded in reciprocity, that values diverse knowledge traditions, that invests in relationships rather than transactions, and that serves societies rather than markets is not an idealist vision that may or may not be achieved in the future. Instead, creating the conditions for these research cooperation cultures is a practical necessity and can be understood as a forward-looking response to the present moment of crisis in international cooperation.

Glossary

Projects, Coalition, and Charter cited in this paper:

Africa Charter for Transformative Research Collaborations

The Charter is an Africa-centred framework for advancing a transformative mode of research collaborations that will serve to advance and uphold the continent's place in the global production of scientific knowledge. It was co-created by Africa's major higher education constituencies, including the Association of African Universities (AAU), African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA), African Academy of Sciences (AAS), CODESRIA and International Network for Higher Education in Africa (INHEA) among others, and is coordinated by University of Bristol (PARC), UCT (HUMA) and UNISA (Albert Luthuli Research Chair). It has been endorsed by around 130 signatories. The Charter is based on a novel intellectual and moral argument and analytical frame, which draws on a long history of established African and wider global South scholarship.



More Information:
https://africacharter.org/

CoARA

The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) is a collective of organisations committed to reforming the methods and processes by which research, researchers, and research organisations are evaluated. Current research assessment methods rely heavily on publication-based metrics such as citation counts, and often fail to recognise the wide array of contributions made by researchers. Over 800 research organisations, funders, assessment authorities, professional societies, and their associations have agreed on a common direction and guiding principles to implement reform in the assessment of research, researchers, and research organisations, outlined in the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment published in July 2022 which provides an outline for reform and implementation.



More Information:
https://www.coara.org

BCGE Signature Project co2libri

The project makes knowledge, theories, and research practices from the "Global South" visible within Berlin's research landscape. Scholars and intellectuals from marginalized regions or from ethnic or religious minorities often remain invisible in academic discourse. The project participants—a global network of researchers, artists, and activists—seek to engage with knowledge and theoretical contributions from the "Global South." Their goal is to create a more globally equitable approach to how knowledge is produced and what is recognized as knowledge. The project is led by Prof. Dr. Kai Kresse of Freie Universität Berlin and the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Prof. Andrea Fleschenberg dos Ramos Pinéu and Prof. Dr. Claudia Derichs of Humboldt-Universität

zu Berlin. It collaborates with international partners in cities including Nairobi, Beirut, Delhi, and Vienna.

More Information:
https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/en/commitments/international/bcge/projekte/signature/colibri/index.html

BCGE Signature Project CritUP

The project promotes international academic exchange on critical theory in order to address existing asymmetries in global knowledge production. To this end, it is developing the transnational publication platform critup.net, among other initiatives. In light of a global wave of authoritarian politics, CritUP places a particular focus on identifying current threats to academic freedom in order to better respond to them. As part of this effort, a network of expertise is being established for German and European journalists seeking independent and critical voices from South America and Türkiye. Researchers and institutions from Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Türkiye are involved in the project. It is led by Professor Robin Celikates (Freie Universität Berlin) and Professor Rahel Jaeggi (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin).

More Information:
https://www.critup.net

BCGE Signature Project PRODIGY

The project establishes an international knowledge exchange platform focused on maternal mental health. It involves the development and documentation of specific therapeutic approaches, the creation of teaching materials, and the support of experts who will define and ensure quality standards in research. The project follows a participatory approach involving patients and the public. It is embedded within existing South-South-North collaborations of the Berlin University Alliance (BUA) with researchers, institutions, and governments in Jordan and Vietnam, as well as with partners at the University of Oxford and McMaster University in Canada. The project is led by Professor Malek Bajbouj (Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin), Professor Daniel Strech (Berlin Institute of Health), Professor Michael Zürn (Freie Universität Berlin), and Professor Isabel Dziobek (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin).

More Information:
https://www.berlin-university-alliance.de/commitments/international/bcge/projekte/signature/prodigy/index.html

DAAD Global Center GLACIER

GLACIER (German Latin-American Center for Infection and Epidemiology Research) is an international project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office through the DAAD-programme Global Centres for Health and Pandemic Prevention. It aims to level regional disparities in Latin America by strengthening surveillance and response to emerging infectious diseases and developing new vaccines and therapies. The project forms a multidisciplinary consortium made up of 9 countries and more than 30 institutions. It connects educational and research institutions, the private sector, foundations, and ministries from Germany, Mexico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador,

Panama, and Guatemala with a wide range of political and health care systems. GLACIER operates under the joint leadership of the Charité Institute for Virology – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, specializing in pandemiology, and the Institute for Medical Immunology of the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (MLU) in association with the Leibniz Institute for Plant Biochemistry (IPB), specialized in immunology and bioactive compounds. The core partner institutions in Central America are the leading universities in the region; the University of Havana (UH) and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), each of which houses central research and training laboratories.



More Information:
https://glacieronehealth.org

DAAD Global Center G-WAC

The German-West African Centre for Global Health and Pandemic Prevention (G-WAC) is a research and training Centre hosted by the College of Health Sciences at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana. The Centre collaborates with the Technical University of Berlin, Charité- University of Medicine Berlin, the University of Bonn, and the University of Bayreuth, Germany. G-WAC is in its second funding phase with the strategic aim to strengthen passive, integrated epidemic One Health surveillance systems using low-cost, scalable methods suitable for low- and middle-income countries. G-WAC is funded through the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) using funding from the German Federal Foreign Office for the establishment of the Global Health and Pandemic Prevention Centre at KNUST.



More Information:
https://g-wac.org

DAAD Global Center TRAJECTS

The Transnational Center for Just Transitions in Energy, Climate, and Sustainability (TRAJECTS) receives funding as part of the DAAD program Global Centers for Climate and Environment with the financial support of Germany's Federal Foreign Office. At the Transnational Center for Just Transitions in Energy, Climate, and Sustainability, locally embedded, yet globally aware perspectives meet to address the urgent transitions necessary in the field of fossil fuel and land management to protect the climate and environment. With this goal in mind, the center applies research and teaching oriented to demand and policy issues. In its analysis of the two principal processes of socio-technical transitions, the center also adopts interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches. TRAJECTS has hubs around the world with its main one in Colombia, and two in South Africa and Germany. In addition, it boasts a global network of over forty institutions from civil society, academia, and public administration, to think tanks and businesses. As such, it aims to become a leading actor for sustainability worldwide, especially in the areas of teaching, research, and policymaking.



More Information:
https://trajects.org

Literature

This position paper draws on the discussion of the BCGE Beyond Excellence in International Research Cooperation in November 2025. It also builds on literature on North-South cooperation in research in particular as listed in the following bibliography. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but it can serve as a guide for those wishing to explore some of the topics discussed in this paper in greater depth.

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About the Berlin Center for Global Engagement

The Berlin Center for Global Engagement (BCGE) is the joint platform of the Berlin University Alliance (BUA) for promoting research collaborations with partners in the Global South; for engaging in science diplomacy; and for reflecting on current trends of internationalization. The center supports the BUA in achieving a new level of quality in internationalization specifically by including countries that have traditionally been underrepresented.

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