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Epistemic politics of research funding: a social network analysis of knowledge production

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ABSTRACT

Unequal power dynamics in knowledge production and dissemination are central to decolonisation debates, shaping whose knowledge is recognised, funded, and circulated. Knowledge produced in the Global North is often treated as universally applicable, while knowledge from the Global South remains marginalised through publication practices, citation patterns, and funding structures. To consider how this dynamic is reflected in grant-funded collaborative research, we analyse ESRC data from 2015-19. To examine relationships between Global North and Global South institutions we employ social network analysis informed by Bourdieu's (1988) concept of academic capital, Alavi's (1973) critique of postcolonial elite capture, and Alatas' (1974) captive mind thesis. We show that ESRC funding networks reproduce colonial geographies of knowledge production by privileging Northern institutions and a small group of Southern partners. They also reveal patterns of extraction, whereby Northern institutions concentrate prestige and influence, while Southern actors facilitate access but exercise limited autonomy over knowledge production.

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Introduction

Inequalities in knowledge production and dissemination are at the core of vibrant debates on decolonisation, which highlight the marginalisation of diverse voices and knowledges, and call for 'resistance against epistemic violence and injustices constantly perpetrated by the Global North (GN) through the hegemonic imposition of its intellectual and cultural ideas' (Balogun and Woldegiorgis 2025, p. 7). Knowledge created and disseminated in the GN is portrayed as being universally applicable and acceptable while knowledge produced in the Global South (GS) is marginalised by means of publications, citations, and funding applications. Even in fields focused on GS countries, for example development studies and African studies, knowledge production and dissemination are dominated by GN scholars and institutions and by 'peripheral countries of the GN'

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(Schech 2012, p. 969), including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, as already highlighted over ten years ago. Open-access journals and data sharing, proposed as solutions to address the unequal relationship in knowledge systems, still perpetuate knowledge colonisation. Control and organisation of data often remain concentrated in GN countries, while universities in the GS frequently lack the resources to access these costly services (Mwambari *et al.* 2022, Lynch *et al.* 2023). This ‘coloniality of knowledge’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023, p. 3) operates by centring Western knowledge and othering Indigenous knowledge, and goes hand in hand with enduring colonial power in entrepreneurial activities, governance mechanisms, and policy decisions (Fasakin 2021, Tripathi 2021, Demetriou *et al.* 2023).

Our paper augments critical research on the continuing inequalities within knowledge production and dissemination between GN and GS. We focus on inter-institutional relationships; where institutions in the GN receive more research funding, vis-à-vis their counterparts and collaborators in the GS. Because funding options are limited, GS researchers actively seek funding from the GN by assimilating to select theories and methodologies and collaborating with GN funders (Chankesliani 2023).

These tendencies underpin hierarchies in knowledge production. We explore them through data from a key funding institution for research on economic, social and human behaviour in the UK: the ESRC or Economic and Social Research Council. The ESRC is a compelling case study given their regular partnerships with The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF). This nexus seeks to ‘encourage and support new and existing partnerships between UK and developing country researchers, national and international development agencies, and policymakers in both North and South’ (GCRF 2017, p. 1). Using publicly available ESRC data on grants, excluding fellowships, we created a dataset of collaborations that received funding between 2015–19. We analysed this with social network analysis (SNA) tools and a conceptual framework informed by Bourdieu’s (1988) notion of hierarchical academic capital, Alavi’s (1973) critique of post-colonial elite capture, and Alatas’ (1972, 1974) ‘captive mind’ thesis.

Social network analysis (SNA) assesses institutional influence through patterns of international collaboration. Such social ties matter because they shape behaviour and facilitate the flow of information and resources (Cartwright and Harary 1956; Coleman *et al.* 1966). SNA is therefore particularly useful for analysing outcomes that depend on social capital (Bourdieu 1984), access to influential networks, and the nature of collaboration between actors.

A key insight from our analysis is that ESRC funding networks reproduce uneven geographies of knowledge production through GN and GS collaborations that privilege Northern institutions and a select few Southern partners. The outcome is a colonial arrangement where the UK claims global research leadership assisted by subordinate collaborators in the GS (Noxolo 2017, Flint *et al.* 2022). As such, the network reveals patterns of data extraction and exploitation, given the focus on measurable impact and ‘value for money’ for the UK taxpayer (Noxolo 2017, p. 343).

The remainder of this paper is organised in four sections. Section Two draws on key literature on unequal knowledge production and dissemination, to interrogate power relationships between GN and GS countries. Section Three explains our use of data and our methodological approach. Section Four presents our empirical insights. The final section is a discussion on how inherent and continuous inequalities within knowledge production originate from the existing funding system; and how this might be overcome.

Hierarchies within knowledge production

In the critical literature on unequal knowledge production between the GN and GS, epistemic hierarchies are reproduced through theory, methodology, and institutional practices. We review these arguments to build the case for analysing coloniality through the social network structure of research funding relationships, noting that SNA offers a methodological contribution to the study of epistemic injustice.

The GN-GS divide

Historical developments within the frame of colonisation have shaped the research landscape in which GN research agendas dominate. To portray understanding as scientific, this hegemonic research agenda relies on describing specific theories and methodologies as objective, as shown in the case of economics (Collyer 2016, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021, Falola 2022). Despite being ideological, economic theories ‘present themselves as neutral’ (Kvangraven and Kesar 2023, p. 1726), obscuring the fact that capitalism and the success of GN countries have been based on settler colonialism, and slavery. Dominant theories underpin persistent power imbalances, such as when international financial institutions advance discourses of the GS being inferior to the GN (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015). Moreover, theories from the GN are presented as universally applicable; local histories are thus ignored, as are social and cultural contexts (Harding 1992, 2002, Falola 2022). This intensifies the core–periphery dichotomy, found in many disciplines where the knowledge flow takes place from the GN to the GS (Collyer 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021, 2023).

The practice of ‘helicopter research’ (Adame 2021) exemplifies how contextual experiences and insider or local perspectives are marginalised, when researchers from the GN travel to the GS to conduct research without collaborating with local academics or communities, thus interpreting insights gained from research participants within their own epistemic understandings (Haelewaters *et al.* 2021). This perception has resulted in many disciplines undermining research, voices, and lived experiences of those from the GS (Hammett and Hoogendoorn 2012, Giwa 2015). Such practices are counterproductive; viewing knowledge produced in the GS as less acceptable, whether explicitly or tacitly, leads to less objective research insights. Instead, the viewpoints and theories of the GN colonise the actual experiences and ignore nuances of a research phenomenon.

A key example of disempowering insiders by ignoring contextual specificities and adopting a paternalistic approach can be found in the randomised control trial or RCT methodology popularised by development economists (e.g. Banerjee *et al.* 2016). For instance, the recipients of the 2019 Nobel Prize, received acclaim for conducting field experiments where human beings and their interactions with interventions – ranging from microfinance to mosquito nets – are treated as controlled elements, while disregarding contextualised knowledge and structural causes, thus leading to inadequate policy solutions. Rather than engaging with structural drivers such as power relations, inequality, and global economic systems, RCTs prioritise small-scale, individualised interventions, thereby oversimplifying the complex and interconnected causes of poverty (Mader *et al.* 2019, Kvangraven 2020).

Power imbalances between the GN and the GS in knowledge production are replicated predominantly through dynamics of publication, dissemination, and funding, key

indicators for promotions (Haelewaters *et al.* 2021, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023, Balogen and Woldegiorgos 2025). Because individual academics are authors, reviewers and editors for journals and funding applications, they 'shape and are shaped by knowledge produced within' (Lundine *et al.* 2019, p.1). To publish their work in high-ranked journals, they must not only produce knowledge aligned with dominant methodologies and theories as authors but also gatekeep, as reviewers and editors, determining acceptability for journals and funding applications. This mutually generative relationship underpins the ascendancy of certain research fields and academic profiles, reproducing socially constructed biases and excluding a broad range of scholarship, particularly research conducted by academics from the non-Western world, women and non-white scholars (Kasozi 2017, Lundine *et al.* 2019, Liverpool 2021, Flint *et al.* 2022).

Journals associated with the highest impact and international recognition are generally controlled by academics based in the core of the Anglosphere or Europe, influencing the type of questions asked, the framing of problems, and potential policy solutions (Murphy and Zhu 2012, Crawford *et al.* 2021). This dynamic often means that GS scholars are published and cited less in publications by the GN, even when the research directly concerns their own countries (Kasozi 2017, Liverpool 2021). This is due not only to GN researchers predominantly citing themselves and other GN publications but also to GS scholars overwhelmingly citing articles from the GN (Collyer 2016).

These discussions highlight how a certain research profile is expected for progress in academia and how topics of relevance to the non-Western world and non-white scholars are systemically ignored, resulting in 'epistemicide' of diverse knowledge systems (Hall and Tandon 2017, p. 6) and policies which ignore large parts of society. Systemic inequalities are produced and reproduced by the processes of the system. The question then is: how is research funding allocated within the social sciences and do funding practices alleviate or intensify existing epistemic and institutional inequalities? Given the dominance of GN funding bodies, we focus on funding flows to the GS and examine how GN-GS collaborations reproduce or challenge unequal relationships.

Hierarchies within research funding

The GN/GS divide is reflected in funding applications where funding is 'affected by unequal power dynamics rooted in global coloniality that manifest itself in the prioritization of outsider's perspectives over local needs' (Koum Besson 2022, p. 1). The research funding process can be divided into three elements: the call for proposals, peer review, and panel assessment.

Calls for research proposals often reflect the dominant research agenda, compelling GS academics to realign their own interests with a universalising, 'neutral' focus to secure funding (Koum Besson, 2022). Funding outlets are scarce in the GS, making access to GN funding and visibility crucial, often resulting in 'self-censoring or using problematic terms to have renewed success with obtaining money' (Last 2018, p. 214). Prior to applying for funding, GS institutions often agree to data extraction to make themselves visible as aspiring recipients of funding (Collyer 2016, Lynch *et al.* 2023). Lynch *et al.* (2023), for instance, show how because aid organisations from the GN request access to data from African library systems, these libraries share and shape data in line with GN expectations in anticipation of future funding. Through 'data neocolonialism' value is extracted from

the GS, with ‘Western rationalities [being] embedded in data relations’ (Lynch *et al.* 2023, p. 911).

Perhaps a more pernicious issue is that of ethics dumping (Schroeder *et al.* 2019). Research governance frameworks such as the *Equitable Research Partnerships* have recently mobilised to address this problem in which research designs, data collection, and risks are offloaded onto Southern partner institutions while Northern institutions retain intellectual ownership, publication rights, and reputational reward. These issues are the focus of the *Global Code of Conduct to Counter Ethics Dumping* and the *Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings* (Schroeder *et al.* 2019). While such steps are welcome, as we show below through network analysis, asymmetries in research are not primarily an issue of individual research relationships and researcher behaviour. Codes of conduct cannot address the structural conditions, visible in funding network topology, that make ethics dumping a rational strategy for Northern institutions when prestige accumulation is prioritised over equitable partnership.

Biases in knowledge production and dissemination also determine the evaluation of research funding: those most published and cited tend to review funding and sit on assessment panels (Kandiko Howson *et al.* 2018). Reviewer background has an impact on who gets awarded funding; for instance, academics of colour were often ‘overlooked in terms of funding’ (Last 2018, p. 216). Despite wider recognition that inherent biases shape knowledge production, journal editors and funders often describe their decisions as ‘objective’, overlooking subconscious biases and systemic inequities (Lundine *et al.* 2019, p.1) and resulting in an underrepresentation of women and people belonging to a minority ethnic background (Morley 2014, Rollock 2019).

While double anonymous review processes are intended to mitigate such biases, their effectiveness remains limited, as reviewers continue to operate within dominant epistemological frameworks and evaluative criteria (see Gatwiri *et al.* 2025), and anonymity is not always guaranteed in specialised or closely networked fields (Nobarny and Booth 2017). Moreover, funding calls often ask for biographies and statements about team expertise, which might reveal backgrounds and/or institutions. In some funding schemes, including those of the ESRC, proposals are assessed through a partially anonymous process in which reviewers have access to the applicant’s profile, while their own identities remain concealed. However, the persistence of coloniality in research evaluation is not primarily the result of overt discrimination. Anonymity may mitigate individual reviewer bias, but does not obliterate the persistence of methodological norms, disciplinary orthodoxies, or established citational communities that shape perceptions of scholarly quality and legitimacy.

Finally, assessment panel members are often selected based on their seniority and importance within the field; many panellists have previously received funding by aligning with its dominant structures. Bol *et al.* (2018) describe this as a Matthew effect, operating through mutually reinforcing processes: on the demand side, candidates who won prior awards are evaluated more positively than non-winners, while on the supply side, researchers with previous funding success select themselves into applicant pools of subsequent contests at higher rates than unsuccessful researchers. Such dynamics are not unique to the GN-GS divide and reflect broader hierarchies within academia, but they are intensified at the global level, where dominant perspectives are disproportionately shaped by institutions and researchers based in the GN.

Ostensibly these institutions and researchers based in the GN reflect the purported excellence captured in university rankings. These have grown in importance, particularly in recent decades, and like academic journals are dominated by Western research universities, even though a select few institutions from China and Japan now feature regularly in the top rank. While rankings have enabled some institutions in the GS to gain visibility, their underlying metrics and evaluative frameworks remain structured around Anglo-American models of excellence. As argued by Ordorika and Lloyd (2015), rankings can be understood as a neocolonial mechanism that privileges English-language publications, citation metrics, and Western epistemological standards, positioning them as markers of academic excellence while systematically devaluing locally oriented research. This not only entrenches global hierarchies of knowledge but also compels institutions in the GS to conform to externally imposed norms to gain recognition and resources. Rankings create an illusion of objectivity and universality, despite the underlying assumptions and mechanisms being based on the perspectives of a few (Ordorika and Lloyd 2015). Particularly, the tendency to see US and UK elite universities as the benchmark reinforces the knowledge-production hegemony evident in journal publishing and in the dominance of topics and methodologies employed in this context, marginalising research subjects relevant to the GS (Amsler and Bolsman 2012; Ordorika and Lloyd 2015).

Even when GS institutions or researchers receive support from GN funders, this predominantly occurs through collaborations with GN institutions. In such partnerships, the GN researcher is often regarded as the holder of scientific, acceptable knowledge (Pollack and Eldridge 2015) serving as the principal investigator, while GS researchers are relegated to tasks such as data collection, sampling, and facilitating access to research participants (Collyer 2016, Last 2018, Balogun and Woldegiorgos 2025). They are less likely to receive credit or co-authorship, and research participants often do not see the results of the research, as findings are published in expensive, inaccessible journals and in English, a language which is not widely used in many GS communities (Aramesh 2017, Ger *et al.* 2019). Within health studies, it has been shown, for instance, that even when exploring issues in the GS, the decision-making power over resources and the research agenda lies within the GN, resulting in knowledge produced by local scientists not being seen as legitimate or credible and in the universalisation of the local context (Parker and Kingori 2016, Koum Besson 2022). This evinces how GS researchers are often brought into the partnership when its overall outline and approach have already been defined, thus ignoring their input in key strategies of projects (Boshoff 2009, Kok *et al.* 2017, Asare *et al.* 2020).

Since the primary allocation of resources still lies within Western institutions, these processes have arguably led to new forms of colonisation where GS academics and institutions seek to assimilate to cultures and practices from the GN. Meanwhile, data is extracted without sufficient recognition, resulting once again in the loss of identity diversity through the erasure of local knowledges. To tackle the dominance of Western institutions and move beyond giving a voice to marginalised communities, calls for 'more participatory and responsible research' (Giwa 2015, p. 2) and equal as well as fair collaborations have been growing (Pollack and Eldridge 2015).

Such initiatives are noteworthy for including diverse voices that generate valuable insights into the inequalities arising from knowledge production processes in the human and natural sciences (Parker and Kingori 2016, Koum Besson 2022). They

expand theoretical discussions on decolonising knowledge production and creating epistemic freedom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023, Balogun and Woldegiorgis 2025). But less attention has been paid to how funding allocation within the social sciences is shaped by these systemic biases. This gap is the focus of our study, in which we depart from discursive analyses of epistemic hierarchies. Instead, we operationalise coloniality to sharpen the focus on the political economy of knowledge production.

Operationalising coloniality and the political economy of knowledge production

To uncover the political economy of knowledge production within ESRC's funding landscape, we employ SNA to map relationships between institutions, revealing how power and resources are distributed across the network. SNA is well established in the sociology of science, where scholars explicitly used network-based methods to examine patterns of collaboration, communication, and influence. Early studies included co-authorship and citation studies and showed how scientific communities are structured through dense clusters of interaction (Cole and Cole 1973, Mullins 1973; Hargens 1975). Later work in collaboration networks (Wagner and Leydesdorff 2005, Newman *et al.* 2006) further demonstrated how network structures shape authority, centrality, and the distribution of expertise within scientific fields. This tradition underscores that knowledge production is shaped by relational structures, institutional ties, and the positioning of actors within networks.

Although SNA is not commonly used to analyse questions of political economy, this is beginning to change. As Broom and Tchillingirian (2022) note, the analysis of networks is an opportunity to dissect how policy is formulated by illuminating the relationships between actors. Cusicanqui's (2012, p. 101) observation that colonial knowledge systems possess an inherently arboreal structure with 'centers and subcenters, nodes and subnodes' connecting Northern academic preferences to their Southern counterparts is relevant here for its description of a network topology. In highlighting this, Cusicanqui (2012, p. 103) observes that decolonial knowledge critique must acknowledge material and economic baggage, that is rather than privilege the 'geopolitics of knowledge', to engage with the 'political economy' of knowledge.

While SNA has been criticised for oversimplifying complex relationships (Borgatti *et al.* 2014), it can unveil underlying power dynamics in networks, as captured in the international political economy scholarship on 'epistemic politics' (e.g. James 2024, p. 835). There are two dimensions to epistemic politics: the first has direct relevance to our study as it interrogates the politics of knowledge and expertise which are constituted by institutions and practices, particularly universities and funding bodies, which produce and disseminate knowledge. The other dimension bears relevance indirectly, as we draw attention to the contested politics of how funding practices and networks mobilise, control, and create knowledge.

To reveal these dimensions, we employ a conceptual framework guided by Bourdieu's (1988) conception of the academic field as a site of hierarchical capital accumulation, Alavi's (1973) critique of postcolonial elite capture, and Alatas' (1972, 1974) 'captive mind' thesis. Go's (2013) interpretation of Bourdieu's work (1984, 2008) and its interconnection with postcolonial thought, is especially relevant for highlighting that concepts

such as 'field', 'habitus', and 'capital' have their origins in Bourdieu's early engagement with colonialism, foregrounding the asymmetrical, hierarchical nature of academic knowledge production. A field is a social environment where individuals navigate implicit norms and compete to acquire resources; habitus refers to the dispositions of enduring perceptions, thought patterns and actions developed based on experiences and one's positioning within the field; and capital is the resources used to construct and reinforce habitus. For Bourdieu (1990), there is a need to understand the things which affect how we produce knowledge, otherwise the progress of knowledge itself might be hampered. Extending Go's (2013, p. 51) argument on Bourdieu's 'theory of colonialism', we integrate the respective insights of Alavi (1973) and Alatas (1972, 1974) on gatekeeper power and perceived epistemic authority.

Alavi's (1973, p. 61) seminal theory of the 'overdeveloped postcolonial state' explains how colonial-era bureaucratic structures persist, creating a local elite that mediates between global powers, that is, former colonisers, and the marginalised majority. This theory of the overdeveloped postcolonial state can be applied to research institutions in the GS, which remain structurally dependent on former colonial powers. As shown in the previous section, publication, dissemination and funding is largely determined by GN institutions, resulting in GS institutions seeking to access capital within their field. The field, consisting of 'acceptable' theories and methodologies formulated in the GN, is constructed and reinforced by economic capital, constituted primarily by funding resources that exist predominantly in the GN, by cultural capital, acquired through affiliations with elite institutions that establish habitus within the field, and by social capital, through access to influential networks within the GN.

This gatekeeper power upholds a dependent relationship; GN researchers are viewed as producers of theoretical and methodological knowledge and GS scholars as providers of empirical data lacking epistemic authority. Using this conceptual framework, we can conceptualise ESRC funding as a field in which institutions compete for resources and legitimacy, with UK universities dominating due to accumulated capital. Funding reinforces the existing colonial structure of academic knowledge production, legitimising UK institutions as global knowledge authorities that control what is recognised as genuine knowledge (Alatas 1972, 1974), a dynamic reflected in network centrality metrics that can be analysed in terms of social and economic capital.

Our operationalisation of coloniality through a social network analysis of funding relationships is a methodological contribution that renders epistemic colonialism visible and measurable. Using ESRC data allows us to identify which institutions occupy hub positions, which relay Northern epistemic authority southward, and which remain structurally peripheral, respectively through deploying SNA tools to measure closeness centrality, betweenness centrality, and thematic clustering.

Our analysis considers how UK funding institutions, perhaps inadvertently, advance 'epistemic colonialism' (Flint *et al.* 2022, p. 77), whereby GS institutions participate in international research under the leadership of GN institutions, reflecting the theorised dependency within funding structures (Alatas 1972, 1974). Despite funders increasingly being aware of inequalities within partnerships and recognising this in their call for research, the structure and set up of schemes often undergird the inequalities inherent in GN-GS collaborations. Grieve and Mitchell (2020), for instance, reveal how the Global Challenges Research Fund advertises that they 'promote meaningful and equitable relationships

between UK institutions and developing country partners' (p. 2), and yet, prioritise institutions which have established an international research profile and have gained experience in gaining funding. Consequently, we find a relatively small group of overseas institutions, particularly those from the GS, are often recurrent recipients of this type of funding. To understand these asymmetries in knowledge production, we identify disparities in grant awards between institutions in the GN and the GS by means of the ESRC as a case study.

Data and methodology

The ESRC is part of the British government funded UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). A key funder for research on social and economic issues, the ESRC has regular interaction with the Global Challenges Research Fund, and thus with partnerships in the GS. To analyse the extent to which institutions in the GS receive research funding, vis-à-vis their counterparts and collaborators in the GN, we constructed a dataset using publicly available data from ESRC on funding awards from 2015–19. Our dataset included all awards involving a lead institution or collaborating institution outside the UK. To retain a focus on institutional collaboration, we removed fellowships from our dataset. From the resulting dataset of 9,507 projects, we prepared a list of lead and collaborating institutions, including data on each relationship such as the name and country of each institution, project title and award value. From this we built a network graph, modelling each institution as a node and the relationships among them as unweighted directed ties from lead to collaborating institutions to model the distribution of funds. Ties are unweighted because, while award value data were available for the lead institution, data were not available on the distribution of funds to collaborating institutions.

To aid visualisation of the network, GN and GS institutions were coded distinctly, using International Monetary Fund (IMF) categories of countries as either advanced economies or emerging and developing economies. The IMF does not have a strict definition of 'advanced economies' but uses criteria based on income as well as other characteristics, including economic diversification, and integration into the global financial system (IMF 2025). Though simplifications such as 'GN' vis-à-vis 'GS' are problematic given the intersectionality of hierarchy, classification, and power (e.g. Barros Leal Farrias 2024), we partially mitigate the shortcomings to this binary approach by identifying specific countries and avoiding generalisation.

Social network metrics were calculated using the Python library NetworkX to systematise analysis of relationships among institutions in the ESRC-funded project network. A strong core–periphery structure features a dense central cluster surrounded by dispersed nodes, indicating hierarchy. A weaker structure shows less clustering and more evenly distributed nodes, with similar centrality scores across institutions. Network-level metrics capture overall structure. Following Faul (2016), equitable collaborative networks exhibit high reciprocity and high density: institutions both lead and participate in collaborative projects, and a high proportion of potential ties is realised. Limited core–periphery structure combined with similar centrality scores indicates an absence of concentrated funding power. Each of these indicators was measured to assess patterns of collaboration and distribution.

A second set of metrics measured the individual institution centrality, the position of each institution in the network: outdegree centrality, that is, the number of projects in which an institution served as a lead; closeness centrality, that is, the proportion of all connected institutions reached by directed ties from a lead institution via the shortest path; and betweenness centrality, that is, the proportion of times an institution appeared on the shortest path from a lead institution to collaborators. All metrics were normalised by the number of institutions in the network (see Borgatti *et al.* 2024, for extended definitions). Examples of how each metric is derived are provided in Figure 1.

The network metrics selected allow for the identification of structural power in the interactions: out-degree indicates the breadth of an institution's influence; closeness centrality, the extent to which an institution dominates the interactions as a whole; betweenness centrality, the extent to which an institution is positioned in a strategically valuable brokerage position. A fourth common measure of network centrality is eigenvector centrality, defined as degree centrality weighted by the centrality of a node's immediate neighbours. While this potentially provides a more nuanced measure of network domination than closeness centrality, it is more difficult to interpret with directed ties and differs little from closeness in this case ($R = .81$).

Subsequently, a modularity analysis was undertaken to distinguish groups of more closely related institutions, likely indicating a research specialisation and a disciplinary basis for more or less influential groups. Institutions were clustered into groups based on distinctive patterns of relationships among them, using the widely adopted Louvain clustering algorithm in NetworkX, which groups institutions with similar patterns of ties. Louvain clustering starts with assigning each node to its own cluster and iteratively assesses whether distinctiveness from other clusters is increased by adding an adjacent node to a given cluster rather than to another. For example, in Figure 1, clustering node 1 with 7 and node 2 with 4 would create more clusters with stronger internal connections and weaker connections between clusters (i.e. higher modularity) than clustering

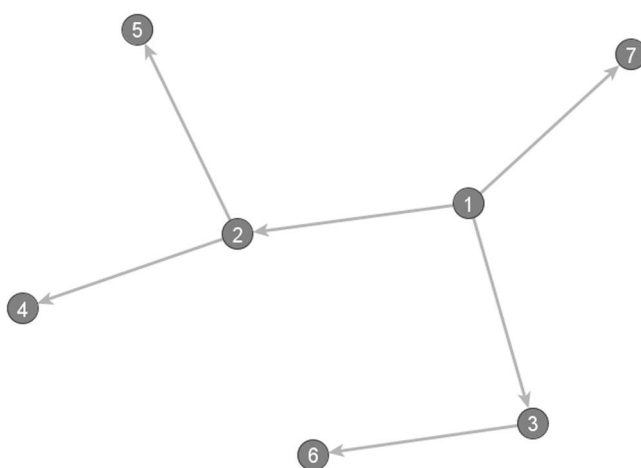


Figure 1. Institutional network metrics utilised.

(1): Highest outdegree – 3 immediate outward connections. (1): Highest closeness centrality – 3 outward paths of 1, 3 outward paths of 2. (2): Highest betweenness centrality – on the shortest path between 2 pairs.

1 with 2. Further, clustering node 3 with the first pair and node 5 with the second would further enhance the distinctiveness. This method is ideal for uncovering modular structures in large networks without requiring prior assumptions about cluster size or number (Borgatti *et al.*, 2024). The analysis generated 19 clusters, each visualised using separate colours to indicate a group of institutions with a similar pattern of collaboration.

The disciplinary specialisations were further indicated by an analysis of funded project titles. We identified distinct groupings within the 1,507 funded projects using a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic model, which groups semantically similar word combinations. LDA topic modelling draws on a dictionary of commonly associated English words to assess the likelihood that one project title refers to similar activities as another (Smith 2026). This analysis revealed 12 distinct keyword groupings, labelled with the assistance of DeepSeek generative AI. These groupings represent distinct common themes among the funded projects.¹ Finally, we used pairwise Pearson correlation analysis to identify statistically significant associations between the distinctive collaboration clusters and the project title groupings.

From these analyses we tabulated distinct project clusters. For each cluster, the most central institution was identified using closeness centrality. None of these were GS institutions, so we also identified the most prominent GS institution within each cluster. We classified the most prominent GS institution within the cluster as the one with the highest betweenness centrality, reflecting Alavi's postcolonial dependent gatekeeper role. Where a cluster contained no GS institution with betweenness centrality, we classified as most prominent the one with the highest closeness centrality. Additionally, for each cluster, we calculated the number of projects, the total funding, the number of institutions, the proportion of those institutions from the GS, the centralisation, that is, the extent to which the cluster was centralised around a single institution, the main GS country within the cluster, the proportion of GS institutions from that country, the proportion of project titles with explicit references to the GS, and the LDA-derived themes that were statistically and significantly associated with the cluster.

The data cannot disaggregate nationality from institutional affiliation; this limitation facilitates an emphasis on institutional power rather than individual identity.² Colonial hierarchies arguably persist as Southern scholars move North, reflecting the same resource asymmetries seen in our network. While migrant scholars may bring regional expertise, funding logics incentivise applications that maximise success rather than equity.

Notes

1. Sustainable Communities; Social & Political Dynamics; Learning & Wellbeing; GCRF & NGO Collaboration; Innovation in Wellbeing; Sustainable Urban Futures; Resilience & Inequality; Law, Migration & Governance; Inclusive Growth & Healthy Ageing; Impact Accelerator Fund; NPIF DTP IAA ABC funds; IF-IAA-ESRC funds.
2. Manning *et al* (2023) draw attention to the complex nature of individual identity in their study of peacebuilding and transitional justice in Cambodia, emphasising the importance of moving beyond categories such as gender, race, and nationality to consider how individual biographies advantage certain individuals to shape interventions.

Funding bodies as postcolonial sites of power

We operationalise coloniality in ESRC's network using three metrics: closeness (Bourdieuian recognition), betweenness (Alavi's gatekeeping), and thematic clustering (Alatas' dependency). We explain below how the systematic nature of such patterns underlines the nebulous distinctions between colonial hierarchies and global partnership.

Closeness: a monopoly of prestige

The concentration of funding and high closeness centrality of UK universities illustrate the unequal distribution of capital within ESRC funding. [Figure 2](#) shows a clear core–periphery structure among institutions in international collaborations. Outdegree centrality (lead roles) indicates that most funded institutions are in the GN, with only nine GS institutions occupying intermediary positions and forming a semi-peripheral layer. In terms of in-closeness centrality, the highest-ranked GS institution is the University of Cape Town (ranked 30). Overall, funded projects cluster in a GN core (blue), with GS institutions (red) concentrated in the periphery. Funding aggregates, however, refer to the total project that funding collaborators are involved in and does not necessarily reflect the distribution of funding among project participants.

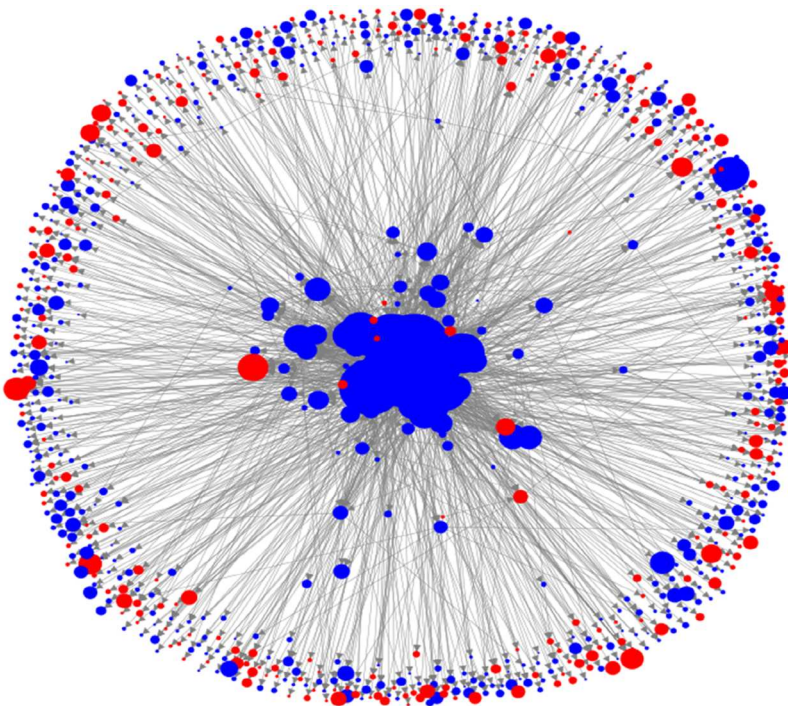


Figure 2. International collaborative ESRC funded projects.

Note: Blue circles represent GN institutions; red, GS. Circle size represents aggregate ESRC funding received by an institution during the period. Directed ties represent a relationship from a lead institution to a collaborator. The visualisation employs the NetworkX spring-embedded algorithm with default settings, placing the most central nodes in the visual centre.

Table 1. Network characteristics.

Characteristic	Value
Reciprocity	0.13
Density	0.002
Core-periphery ratio	0.40
GS/NS outdegree similarity	0.49
GS/NS closeness similarity	0.19
GS/NS betweenness similarity	0.01

Note: Reciprocity is the number of reciprocated ties divided by the total number of ties in the network. Density is the proportion of ties relative to the total number of possible ties between institutions. The core-periphery ratio refers to the proportion of institutions with out-degree at least two standard deviations above the mean relative to all outgoing ties. Centrality similarity is calculated as the mean GS metric divided by the mean NS metric. The maximum possible value for each metric is 1 (Wasserman and Faust 1994).

Table 2. Highest ranked institutions by closeness centrality.

Institution	Country	Funding £000 (2015-19)
University College London	GB	160,707
University of Oxford	GB	96,162
University of Manchester	GB	84,466
University of Birmingham	GB	33,671
University of Edinburgh	GB	79,882
University of Sheffield	GB	90,862
University of Bristol	GB	69,676
King's College London	GB	59,760
University of Sussex	GB	34,918
University of Durham	GB	35,966

Table 1 indicates that the network is highly unequal in Faul's (2016) terms, with a strong core-periphery structure, low density and reciprocity, with GN much more central than GS institutions on all measures.

The UK institutions receiving the highest funding largely correspond to the highest ranked universities within the UK, even after excluding prestige universities. Table 2 lists the most central institutions in the ESRC internationally funded project network, in terms of closeness centrality. All high ranked institutions are UK-based and largely belong to the Russell Group, except for the University of Sussex. The Russell Group universities are considered among the most prestigious universities in the UK, showcasing the degree of monopolising prestige not only in comparison to GS countries but also in comparison to non-Russell Group universities.

Gatekeeping, betweenness, and intermediary power

The monopolising of prestige is reinforced by the fact that GS institutions are more prominent in terms of intermediary positions in the network than GN institutions, as measured by betweenness centrality, indicating the proportion of ties where an institution is both a collaborator and a lead institution. Table 3 lists the six GS institutions that are in this position, with betweenness centrality greater than zero. Half are from South Africa. A further three GS institutions have zero betweenness but high closeness centrality, indicating their role as independently funded lead institutions. Only a few elite GS institutions dominate ESRC partnerships, reflecting Alavi's 'intermediary bourgeoisie', who control access to resources while reinforcing dependency (Alavi 1973,

Table 3. GS institutions ranked by betweenness centrality.

Institution	Country	Funding £000 (2015-19)
University of Cape Town	ZA	31,722
University of the Andes (Colombia)	CO	11,981
Stellenbosch University	ZA	1,694
Rhodes University	ZW	3,531
Addis Ababa University	ET	6,627
University of the Free State	ZA	789
University of the Witwatersrand*	ZA	17,716
University of Ghana*	GA	22,316
Makerere University*	UG	10,739

* Zero betweenness centrality but highest in-closeness centrality among GS institutions outside the *University of Cape Town*.

p. 59). Several GS institutions are in partnerships but with no betweenness centrality (e.g. University of Ghana). This means that though they receive funding they lack structural influence in shaping collaborations. The low betweenness centrality of GS universities suggests that they rarely serve as intermediaries in knowledge flows, mirroring their broader economic and political marginalisation (Alatas 1972, Alavi 1973).

The structure of ESRC-funded international research reveals two key gatekeeping positions that reinforce hierarchical relations in global knowledge production. The first is occupied by elite UK institutions, which act as primary gatekeepers of funding. Often members of the Russell Group, they lead most collaborative research clusters and define the parameters of funded projects. A second position of gatekeeping is held by GS partners. Though they tend to lack agenda-setting power, they serve as conduits for data collection, logistical coordination, and local legitimacy. Their position enables project implementation but not structural transformation of the research architecture. Thus, they function as subordinate gatekeepers, translating the priorities of funders and GN institutions into local contexts without the power to challenge the broader asymmetry.

Since UK universities dominate closeness centrality, it reinforces their ability to control knowledge flows. We explore this further with the Louvain community detection algorithm to identify natural collaborator clusters in the ESRC funding network. The resulting clusters were analysed for geographic and thematic patterns, with GS representation quantified as a percentage of the number of nodes in the cluster. This approach allows us to assess whether GS institutions are peripheral or integrated into core collaboration networks. Figure 3 presents the results of Louvain clustering, which groups institutions in the network based on similar patterns of connections with other institutions, as described earlier, with each colour representing a distinct cluster. This analysis reveals that Northern institutions, like colonial bureaucracies, act as gatekeepers and Southern partners remain structurally peripheral, with mean betweenness being just one-fifth that of the North. Although the core is divided, with the Glasgow-led and Leicester-led purple clusters prominent with multiple partners in the core, UK universities dominate clusters with high centrality, suggesting they act as primary gatekeepers between the ESRC and multi-institution collaborations.

The cluster attributes presented in Table 4 evidence that GS institutions are not dominant within any cluster. The mean cluster involved 43 institutions in 41 projects, with an aggregate value of £34.6 million. Clusters were centralised around the most central

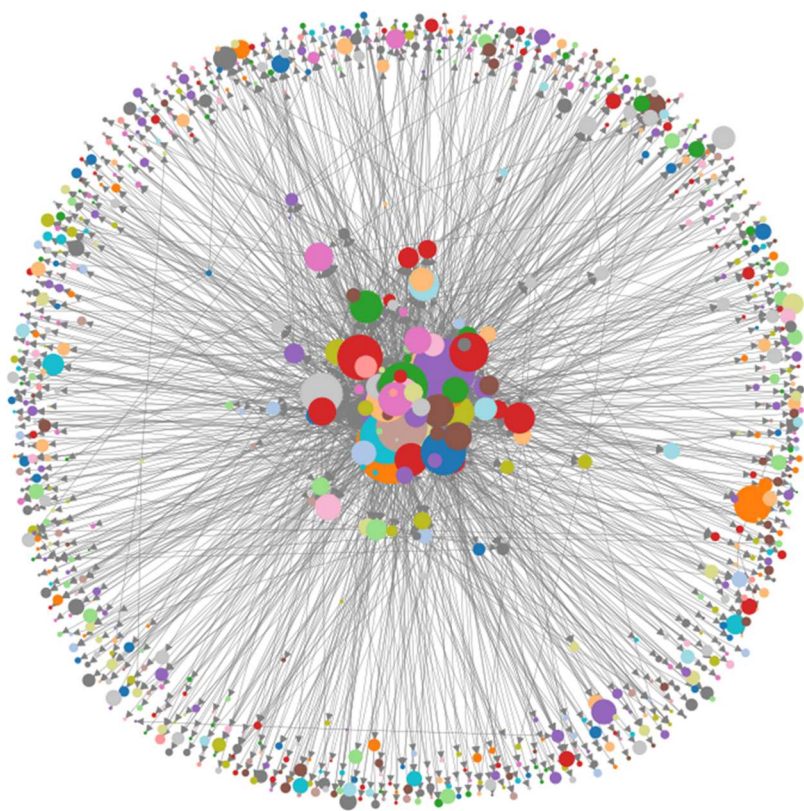


Figure 3. International collaborative ESRC funded projects – Louvain clusters.

Note: Colours represent distinct Louvain clusters. Circle size represents aggregate ESRC funding received by an institution during the period. Arcs represent a relationship from a lead institution to a collaborator. The visualisation employs the NetworkX spring-embedded algorithm with default settings, placing the most central nodes in the visual centre.

institution, with a mean score of 0.61 (on a 0–1 scale). On average, 34% of institutions in each cluster were from the GS, and 29 percent of institutions were from the same country as the most central GS institution in the cluster, most frequently India which accounted for 8 of the 19 clusters. Additionally, just 20 percent of projects had an explicit GS focus. GS institutions are thus a minority of each cluster, with one exception: the blue cluster, centred on the University of Cambridge, comprised 34 institutions, 59 percent of which were from the GS, mainly from India and centred on the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi. This cluster was involved in 28 projects, with an aggregate award value of £85

Table 4. Cluster attributes descriptive statistics.

	Mean	St Dev	Min	Max
Institutions	42.9	16.1	18	77
Projects	41	22	9	89
Aggregate funding £000	34586	33726	4358	162184
Centralization	0.61	0.19	0.28	0.96
GS %	34	11	9	59
Main GS country / institutions %	29	16	15	8
GS project title %	20	8	6	37

Table 5. Correlations among cluster characteristics.

Variable	–1	–2	–3	–4	–5	–6
(1) Institutions	–					
(2) GS institutions %	–0.17	–				
(3) Main GS country / institutions %	–0.71**	–0.09	–			
(4) Projects	0.84***	–0.15	–0.59*	–		
(5) Aggregate value	0.65*	–0.19	–0.55	0.70**	–	
(6) Centralization	–0.68*	0.07	0.53	–0.52	–0.21	–
(7) GS title %	–0.52	0.56*	0.2	–0.69**	–0.54	0.18

Sig. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Note: GS Title is the percentage of projects in the cluster with an explicit reference to a GS country or region in the project title.

million. It was also slightly more centralised than other clusters (0.64), indicating a high degree of reliance on the central institution.

Table 5 explains this further with correlations among cluster characteristics. Clusters with more institutions tend to have more projects, greater aggregate value, and are less centralised around a single institution. Strikingly, clusters with more projects have not only greater aggregate value but have fewer GS participants. Clusters with a higher proportion of GS institutions tend to have an explicit GS focus.

Funding and prestige remain concentrated in the GN giving credence to a Bourdieusian framework of asymmetrical capital in which UK universities dominate and Southern institutions are ‘junior partners’ but not equals. SNA measures such as betweenness centrality indicate that GS institutions positioned between the core and the periphery act as secondary gatekeepers, facilitating access to collaboration networks but lacking control over their structure, and having limited influence on how projects are shaped.

Epistemic dependency and extraction

An outcome of the gatekeeper power is that thematic funding preferences align with global policy discourses rather than locally formulated research priorities. Clusters with more explicit focus on GS themes have a greater proportion of GS participants (Table 5). Thematic clustering further reveals epistemic extraction, with GS scholars confined to Eurocentric agendas. 16 of the 19 Louvain clusters were significantly associated with distinct themes, mostly positively associated with Social & Political Dynamics (6 clusters), Sustainable Communities (4 clusters), and Law, Migration, and Governance (4 clusters).

The prevalence of certain themes across clusters could indicate Northern epistemic dominance. Put differently, GS issues are being studied through Western paradigms rather than locally developed theories. Themes such as Sustainable Urban Futures and Social & Political Dynamics are selected by Northern funders using a top-down approach rather than locally driven research questions. This mirrors the claim from Alatas’ (1969 cited in Alatas 2022, p.17) that the GS is primarily a site of data extraction rather than knowledge production. While funding reaches GS institutions, research agendas and theoretical frameworks are largely controlled by elite UK universities. Most collaborative projects involving the GS align with Eurocentric themes, displaying key aspects of Alatas’ (1974) discussion on autonomous knowledge and critiques of the ‘captive mind’ where academic funding structures advance Northern theoretical frameworks through epistemic extraction in the GS. GS institutions have low closeness centrality and low

epistemic agency, whilst included, they are not agenda-setters. Research partnerships are those prone to extractivism, where data and local expertise are used but theoretical framing and high-impact publications remain UK-centric.

Discussion: mechanisms of dominance and decolonial interventions

International division of knowledge labour provides for contrasting roles for scholars in the GN and GS (Collyer 2016). Our analysis, based on SNA, shows that ESRC funding operates as a hierarchical academic field dominated by UK institutions where GS institutions tend to occupy peripheral positions in the network, with only nine such institutions located near the core. The nature of these network flows reveals patterns of epistemic extraction, whereby research agendas draw on Southern data while maintaining Northern theoretical control.

Can research funding networks be decolonised? Yes, but only with interventions that address three mechanisms driving systematic exclusion and bias in academic research, as identified through the ESRC's funding network. These mechanisms are (1) the concentration of prestige in GN institutions, (2) the gatekeeping role of certain GS institutions, and (3) thematic clustering which imposes Northern frameworks for the extraction of Southern knowledge.

A primary mechanism of dominance is the concentration of prestige in a small group of UK institutions, particularly elite Russell Group universities including Oxbridge. These institutions dominate the ESRC funding network with economic, cultural, and social capital amassed over decades and centuries, often from colonial exploitation. As Mullen (2021) shows, many prestigious British universities directly benefited from capital flows linked to slavery and colonial commerce. These often underpin the endowments, infrastructure, and reputational capital fundamental to continued dominance in contemporary research landscapes, especially in a marketized higher education environment. In network terms, this translates into high closeness centrality, signalling their disproportionate power in setting research agendas and attracting collaborators. A decolonial intervention requires redirecting funding from historically wealthy institutions to underfunded ones in the GS and the UK. This would counter structural inequalities in academic funding, which shape the power to define legitimate knowledge, who produces it, and how it circulates across institutions, languages, and through resources.

A second mechanism of dominance is the gatekeeping practices in the ESRC funding network. UK institutions, especially elite ones, exert what Strange (1987) might refer to as the structural power of knowledge, expressed in mechanisms that control which topics are prioritised, who is invited to collaborate, and what constitutes a valuable research output. GS institutions are often compelled to align with these frameworks, reinforcing a dependent division of academic labour, where they provide access to field sites and empirical data, but have limited opportunities to set the research agenda. Though GS institutions are present even in central positions in the funding network, this can be seen as a reflection of instrumental and not structural power. These institutions, represented by elites in the GS who are proficient at liaising with Northern partners to capture funding, lack the capacity to influence the broader architecture of funding, themes, or evaluation. Their brokerage reflects constraint and strategy. They depend on Northern funding and criteria, whilst pursuing resources, visibility, and prestige in

global academia. These elites resemble the class Alavi (1973) describes as mediating external interests while maintaining domestic dominance.

In the context of research networks, elite universities in the GS can act as knowledge brokers, facilitating access to local contexts while aligning with Northern research priorities. This dual positioning helps explain why such institutions can appear central within networks while remaining structurally subordinate. Their centrality derives from their ability to intermediate, rather than to redefine, the terms of collaboration. Limited structural power means that even well-networked Southern institutions remain subordinated, operating within a structure set by Northern funders and universities. Decolonial interventions must seek not just resource redistribution, but transformations in the very architecture of knowledge production to interrogate how the terms of research are set, and how thematic and institutional legitimacy is constructed.

Another mechanism of dominance is thematic clustering within the ESRC's funding architecture. This represents a subtler, yet powerful mechanism of epistemic governance. Our analysis shows that certain themes such as Sustainable Urban Futures, Innovation in Wellbeing, and Social and Political Dynamics, attract significantly more funding and project activity. These themes are shaped by the agenda-setting power of funders and institutions in the GN, often detached from GS contexts. This results in a form of epistemic clustering, where research priorities are guided by Northern frameworks, with Southern institutions encouraged on the condition of alignment with such predefined thematic concerns. Such arrangements position Southern scholars as data providers and contextual experts, but not authors, redolent of a 'captive mind' (Alatas 1972, 1974), whereby research in the GS is derivative, responding to paradigms set elsewhere.

Decolonial intervention here would mean redistributing agenda-setting authority, allowing Southern institutions to define thematic priorities based on locally grounded needs and epistemologies. This could take the form of funding streams specifically led by Southern consortia, Southern-majority review panels, or thematic calls rooted in historically marginalised frameworks and indigenous knowledge systems. Without such structural realignment, thematic clustering will continue to serve as a quiet instrument of neocolonial knowledge extraction.

Conclusion

Our study shows that international research funding, exemplified by the ESRC, reproduces colonial knowledge hierarchies. Combining social network analysis with a decolonial framework, we demonstrate how prestige, gatekeeping, and thematic control reinforce UK institutional dominance. While ESRC funding enables international collaboration, these mechanisms can also marginalise and instrumentalise GS partners. Reflecting on these implications, we outline pathways for change. While funding bodies might come across as neutral arbiters of excellence, they also bear responsibility for persistent global epistemic injustice.

There are opportunities to remedy this injustice. For instance, the concentration of prestige that we identify could be addressed through the implementation of quotas and more specific attention to non-elite institutions in the GS. Another mitigation strategy could tackle the problem of gatekeeping through reconsiderations around project design trajectories. More involvement from GS partners at earlier stages of research projects

would reduce the agenda setting role of lead researchers in the GN. And more equitable participation would also mitigate the epistemic extraction that occurs when GS issues are analysed through Western paradigms instead of locally developed theories.

While our analysis has focused on pre-Covid years comprising 2015–19, future research could assess how opportunities to collaborate might have changed given new work patterns since the pandemic. This is salient because development assistance within the UK has in recent years become notably constrained. Further research could also expand on our study and use qualitative research methods to engage with content of projects, given that our study only covers this aspect through titles and abstracts. Additionally, our analysis is limited to funding flows, not outcomes or outputs. When such data become available, they will certainly deepen our understanding of epistemic politics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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