

The Democratization of Research? Bridging the Academic and Policy Divide in Global Migration and Refugee Research

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Introduction: The Global Migration Conversations

This report presents insights from 50 scholars, policy makers and practitioners regarding the relationship between academia and policy in interventions in displacement and migration research. It derives from an interactive panel discussion which took place in Barcelona as part of the annual conference of the European Network on International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion (IMISCOE) on 4th July 2018. IMISCOE is the largest European network of scholars in the area of migration and integration. It unites over 500 researchers from 38 institutes specialising in studies of international migration, integration and social cohesion.

The Barcelona workshop is itself one of a series of thematic Global Migration Conversations that are being held in locations including Nairobi, Delhi, New York, London, Beirut and Brussels in 2018 and 2019. They are organised by the London International Development Centre Migration Leadership Team (LIDC-MLT), a team of researchers that has been formed to develop a shared-strategy for finding and supporting migration research by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Organized under the auspices of the IMISCOE, the conversation tended to focus on the perspectives of scholars and policy organizations located in Europe. The thematic scope of their work was nevertheless global. Drawing on data gathered during this and previous events, this report highlights thematic and practical avenues for future mapping, research, public engagement and impact in relation to bridging the academic-policy divide in migration research and under what conditions such 'bridging' is more or less desirable.

Understanding the drivers, dynamics and impacts of migration in the contemporary world requires a broad-based and interdisciplinary approach which is cognizant of the increasingly complex and multi-scalar drivers and experiences of migration. Despite this, Migration Studies has suffered from a prolonged Balkanisation with academic and policy makers largely failing to step across disciplinary, theoretical, methodological and geographical divides to learn from one another.

The Barcelona Migration Conversation sought to seize current opportunities and appetite for collaboration to feed into the co-production a shared research and policy agenda on migration.

The Global Migration Conversations adopt an inclusive, consultative approach to assessing the scope, achievements and challenges of the existing portfolio of migration research to identify strategic opportunities and priorities for further research and to highlight best practice in impact.¹ The observations provided in this report thus do not seek to be exhaustive, but rather to identify some key themes which will feed into a broader 'global' migration research agenda. The full outputs of this will be published in 2019. This report aims to stimulate ongoing discussions among participants and to feed into future

¹ For more information on the team and its methodology and to join the conversation, see the project website (www.soas.ac.uk/lidc-mlt).

Conversations. The events took place under Chatham House rules. As such, all references are generalised.

What is the Academic-Policy Divide?

The importance of academic work preserving its independence from policy categorizations has been a recurring theme in the Migration Conversations held thus far (see, for example, report on the LIDC-MLT Nairobi Migration Conversation). However, have also stressed the need for research to feed into policy and practice. Participants have tended to agree that while the divide between academia and policy is important, it should also be bridged from time to time, especially to respond to situations of humanitarian need as in contexts of displacement and migration. Academics position themselves at different points across this 'divide' in what is perhaps better described as an academic-policy 'continuum'.

Policy impact is highlighted as important for research participants to feel that their contributions are serving a purpose; it is also vital for feeding back what works and what does not in migration policy. However participants were keen to underline that impact and change are not just about policy but also e.g. changing minds and practices.

There was a perception that often academics are more problem-focused whereas policy makers speak the language of 'solutions'. But integration between policy, practice and academic should, it was stressed, happen not just at the end of research, but throughout. This includes the process of developing research questions, conducting research in the field and analyzing and disseminating information collected. The adoption of such a collaborative approach requires researchers, policy makers and practitioners to maintain an ongoing dialogue and working relationship. In the Barcelona Conversation, a number of opportunities and obstacles were raised in relation to this collaboration. The challenge, also identified in earlier conversations, that research is often framed around a pre-determined policy agenda which it serves simply to 'colour in'. In this context, not only are participants barred from shaping the research process and the findings of the research, but often so too are academics and practitioners.

'Policy makers want solutions, not problems. Their search for solutions is as intractable as migration itself. We have to move away from a solution framework.'

— Migration scholar

Migration and Refugee Research Funding: Mind the Gap

One key obstacle to collaboration between academia and policy identified at the event is a lack of funding for effective partnerships across space and time. Participants raised several issues in relation to the persistent gaps in migration and refugee research funding: what is not being funded and with what consequences.

It is tricky, one scholar explained, to coordinate equitably between institutions located in different countries when research funding calls are often pre-framed within national

parameters. EU funding, one participant commented is good in this respect, but then it can also be overly prescriptive.

Where funders put out specific calls for research to ‘fill identified gaps’ it can lead to effective targeting of neglected areas but it also excludes others. In Migration Studies, specifically, where research funders focus their calls on current migration flows, this means that there is a dearth of forward-looking work and a lack of knowledge when the next major migration flows occur; ‘we will be ignorant of that context’, explained one participant. One participant highlighted poor responses to the current crises in Venezuela and Syria as cases in point. Research funding, in other words, should be proactive as well as reactive.

Moreover, some forms of change are more measurable than others and funders should be aware of this when assessing impact.

‘The UK impact agenda is not about dissemination or communication; it is about measurable change. And it is difficult sometimes to determine/measure this change.’

– Migration funder

Diversity of Funding Models

The diversity of funding models and different requirements can lead to confusion among applicants. Co-funded models (where two funding bodies each commit a certain proportion of funds) are welcome but also problematic, explained one participant, since they introduce a double lot of ‘constraints’ which often have little to do with the quality of the research being pursued.

Participants agreed that it is important to allocate and distribute funding in a fair manner. However, as it stands, funding for migration research is very competitive, allocated on an acute scarcity model in relation to demand. One participant estimated that only 5-10% of funding applications are successful in the UK in this field. This creates an element of competition between stakeholders rather than collaboration. Moreover, the quality of research funding evaluation varies considerably. Funders could do more to fund good research, explained on participant, by investing in the proper evaluation of research proposals.

‘In relation to competition, it is important to recognise that our field is very competitive and vision of avoiding competition might not take us to a better place. It is possible to be competitive but within a collaborative environment such as that provided by the IMISCOE family.’

– Migration scholar

Longitudinal Work

A lack of longitudinal data – both quantitative and qualitative – is a big problem for policy makers and academics. One successful example that was given is the Mexican Migration Project², but there is little by way of comparison in other regions within Africa, for example.

Often funding cycles are time-dependent which is a barrier to pursuing long-term collaborative research. The timelines of UK grants (3-4 years) is quite short. This also applies to ERC research which, after sorting out all the administration, provides for about 3 years of research time. Short-time horizons combined with legal requirements that researchers do not keep the details of collaborators/participants means that connections/partnerships which have been built to pursue longitudinal work might be lost.

Participants called for more investment in longitudinal collaborations to enable greater depth of knowledge and engagement. Longitudinal work is expensive and has therefore been hit in Europe by the austerity agenda imposed by certain governments; some have made less research funding available or frozen budgets in this area.

Participants also pointed out a lack of attention to historical research bridging policy and academia. As one participant put it, 'we're fixated on the now!'. One positive example given from the audience concerned a project looking at migration over the last 500 years which involves 15 PhD students.

Creating PhD scholarships and integrating them into big projects was highlighted as a good means of promoting collaborative and comparative research.

Power Imbalances

Funders should do more, commented several participants, to support scholars in the global south. This was a message that was also raised in our Delhi and Nairobi Migration Conversations. The point was raised again that would-be partners in the global north struggle sometimes to build partnerships and collaborations with colleagues in the global south as people do not necessarily have the right academic or disciplinary background. Funders should be aware of this when assessing the 'quality' of collaborations. While some funding such as the Global Challenges Research Fund mode is predicated upon finding partnerships, the ways in which this has been done is highly instrumental with colleagues based in 'good' or 'visible' global southern institutions inundated with calls to collaborate. Smaller or less visible stakeholders and institutions meanwhile miss out on opportunities. At the same time, southern partners usually receive a smaller proportion of the funding which means that there is a lack of trust and genuine partnership. Southern partners have come to accept that some degree of exploitation is to be expected. This needs to be challenged.

Migrant and refugee voices also need to be represented in the processes of research development, although participants pointed out that in a highly institutionalized context it is

² For more information, see the project website (<https://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/>).

sometimes not clear how to integrate them – especially during the research development phase – without falling into tokenism. Working with refugee organisations or migrant-led organisations in this context is key, but it is sometimes difficult to know where to turn if one is outside of that community. PICUM (the Platform for Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants) was highlighted as an example of a network that unites European migrant organisations and which has successfully engaged with academics on a range of research topics. Several participants pointed out that migrant organisations were notably absent from the IMISCOE conference, stressing that their lack of presence and voice made the conversations poorer and marked a missed opportunity for forging future collaborations and partnerships. The LIDC-MLT has sought to engage migrant and refugee organizations in its other Conversations.

‘We are talking about migrants and refugees but they are not part of this discussion and not visible at the conference.’
– Migration scholar

Building Friendships and Sustainable Relationships

Collaborations are based on face-to-face and interpersonal connects. They take time and resources to develop or else risk failing. For example, for the GCRF call, UK funding bodies gathered about 500 people together but that was too many people to be able to develop networks and there was not enough time, stressed one participant. Again, the large number of participants at the IMISCOE conference (over 1000) was in some ways overwhelming and in itself a barrier to meaningful networking, claimed a student participant: ‘we need regular spaces and ongoing engagement, not just all or nothing big conferences once a year’. Visiting programmes for academics to spend time within policy and practice organizations and vice versa is one way that collaborations can develop over time.

Academic Engagement Across the Policy Cycle

Participants discussed the fact that academic research does not always recognise the significance of policy *cycles*; we talk about policy in too broad terms. Meanwhile, as stressed above, the focus on reactive research that speaks to policy in real time can lead to a dearth in high-quality longitudinal work that anticipates or speaks to future trends. More research is needed on how research can inform policy at different stages of the policy cycle. Policy engagement should not be a ‘tag on’ at the end in terms of pathways to impact, but as a parallel engagement that is integrated at all stages of a research project’s planning, delivery and dissemination. In a review of hundreds of proposals on migration research, one participant explained, most claimed to speak to policy but only one focused on the process of *how*. The question of ‘how’ requires mapping how policy is shaped and change is made at the local as well as national and international level. ‘It’s not all about guidelines and changes in laws’, as commented one participant at the Nairobi Conversation.

'It is important for academics to be cognizant of how policy is made, what can be usefully gathered, how to influence (impact) on policy agendas. This needs a more meaningful connection between academics and policy makers, at earlier stage in the research process to facilitate more effective partnerships.'

– INGO Participant

Participants from both sides of the policy-academia divide nevertheless also reiterated the point made in the Nairobi Conversation that we need to safeguard funding and resources for non-policy relevant work that helps us to unlearn fixed assumptions and refine our understandings of phenomena linked to mobility and migration (see also below).

Bridging the Arts and Social Sciences

A range of obstacles were identified to effective collaborations between policy makers and academia across the humanities and social sciences. Often funding is split between the arts or the social sciences meaning that it can be difficult to integrate the two. Approaches to accessing funding and who they fund may also vary. The ESRC-AHRC was welcomed as an example of funders working together to promote policy-relevant research across the arts and social sciences but, again, the point was made that more short-term grants would be useful to spark networking and collaborations and fund the time-intensive process of preparing projects. The John Fell Fund at the University of Oxford is one example of such preparatory funding. Preparatory funding is especially important for artists who, unlike their academic counterparts, often lack a regular stipend. Moreover, artists may work alone and find it harder to access spaces of institutional support to take projects forward. Funding could be made available for artists to engage more in academic spaces e.g. artists in residence programmes – to foster collaborations.

Advanced calls anticipate the challenges of preparing research proposals in some ways in that they pre-announce calls so that researchers have the chance to plan their applications; two-stage applications also mean that Councils can gauge interest at an early stage. However again, the time-intensive stage of preparation could be better resourced, including resources for international collaborations to travel to come together to plan their work in person. The value of face-to-face contact cannot be overestimated, participants stressed even in our technologically developed age.

Technology

Online fora could nevertheless be used for better networking to 'match make' possible partnerships and collaborations. Lone artists, for example, could upload their personal profiles for consultation. As it stands, most social scientists or policy makers looking to collaborate would struggle to know where to look for possible partners. Events such as those organised by the LIDC-MLT are important for such networking and it is important for this engagement to continue online through network building (and crucially, network maintenance) after the events.

Technology could also be used to visualize and map data that currently exists and identify gaps. As it stands, one participant stressed, it is difficult to get an overview of data that is there which can lead to duplication.

A lack of comparative datasets is a clear obstacle to comparative work. Information on migratory movements be stored as quantitative data in one country context, for example, may be stored as visual data in another or be recorded in songs rather than literature. Multi-sited comparative work in this context is complex. There is also a need for funding to develop and theorize means and methods of comparison across these data gaps and across the arts and social sciences.

'Funding to build networks is sometimes available but less common is funding to sustain valuable networks and partnerships once made'.

– Migration scholar

Avoiding Duplication but Finding Space for Replication and Thematic Clustering

Duplication is another challenge for collaboration among scholars, practitioners and policy makers. In the UK, Research Councils have databank policies and researchers are obliged to develop a data management plan. These detail how they will manage their data and how they will use it. So, in theory you should be able to find out what has been done previously and avoid duplication of research. However, in reality this is not easy to do. Using existing data to inform current research is difficult to do in practice as the parameters for the research might be different. This is particularly the case when using ethnographic data. It is very difficult to build on research which you have not done yourself. It is important to be part of research groups in order to be able to do that – e.g. IMISCOE research groups. Again, in this context, more funding and support is needed for longitudinal engagements and to keep networks and online resources and hubs up to date. Too often snazzy research project websites end up in an 'internet graveyard' where they are inaccessible and of no use to policy makers. Where they are not kept up-to-date or abandoned they also risk misinformation.

Often different actors are trying to collect the same data. There are efforts by research councils to avoid duplication but does not work all the time. You can have a cluster of research on a single topic, for example, which is drawn from different perspectives. The IMISCOE network in itself is an example of this since it has thematic working networks. The IASFM (International Association for the Study of Forced Migration) is another. Academics can learn from INGOs in terms of working in thematic and regional clusters to avoid duplication and promote mutual learning and knowledge exchange.

'The ESRC's Mediterranean project's original call to fund 3 or 4 projects was expanded to fund eight projects. Seven of these focused on Malta, and by the time the research started, migration flows had changed and you had seven projects chasing the same refugees. This is not positive duplication!'

– Representative from NGO

Duplication is different to replication, one scholar stressed. Indeed, there may be some benefit in repeating studies, as in the natural sciences, to observe differences or similarities and to test reliability of data. 'As social scientists we're not so good as quality control,' stressed one academic. 'There is perhaps an over focus on originality as the cost of interrogating the rigor of evidence.' This requires us to abandon the constant quest for originality in research design and subject.

Participant Involvement in Dissemination

'We need to be mindful of spaces of dissemination and think about dissemination in non-academic spaces such as in detention centres, in museums, think about where we should be in space and how that shapes our dissemination.'

– Migration scholar

Several participants raised the issue of funding for dissemination that went beyond the academic and policy 'echo chamber'. Participants spoke of positive experiences of engaging with the public through museums, for example. More resources are also needed for researchers to feed their findings back to participants which may require extra travel and a second stage of consultation. This is especially difficult for PhD students, stressed one student participant, who have limited funding and time. How, they asked, can the very individualistic model of the PhD be adapted to foster more collegiate and collaborative approaches to research?

The Politics of Policy and Public Engagement

Finally, it was stressed that distinguishing between research which has impact, and your role in generating that impact, is sometimes difficult to do. It is important in this context not to be too solution-driven: policy makers are keen to simplify solutions but it is important to present them with challenges so that they do not over simplify.

'The identification of research priorities is more and more in the hands of policy makers, if we do research on something which is not a priority then we do not get funding. We do not get to define priorities anymore. This is dangerous for critical thought and for academic freedom.'

– Migration scholar

Participants discussed the fact that accessing funding is depending on fitting research questions into the remit of certain policy zeitgeists or of using certain legalistic terminology or buzz words that obscure the complexity of lived realities and governance processes. One participant commented that the situation is different in Switzerland. Perhaps because Swiss councils relatively more money, they opined, they have a more 'sectoral approach' and are not so policy-driven. In the Netherlands, meanwhile, a participant stressed that there is currently a big push on academics doing 'socially relevant research'. They cited a government poll involving 200 000 people which asked citizens them what they wanted researchers to work which was then funded through a 50-million-euro project. The Netherlands is not, they commented, as focused on 'impact' as defined in the UK, but driven by imperative of conducting socially relevant research. Another participant commented that the same processed of 'democratizing research' is happening in Australia where it is referred to as 'citizen engagement and data collection.'

'There is a hierarchy of engagement – migrants, refugees, artists, museums etc. But what about vigilante groups? Anti-migrant groups? Do we engage with them?'

– Migration scholar

Engagement of the general public in research has been highlighted as desirable in previous Migration Conversations. However, in Nairobi and Delhi, the issue was also raised that increasing xenophobia towards migrants could shape governments' willingness to fund research focused on migration and migrant populations at home and abroad. When we talk about public engagement, how do we approach the question of the far-right, participants at the Barcelona Conversation questioned. (The question was fresh in people's mind since at the time of the event, the city of Barcelona received a boat carrying refugees that was refused by the Italian government. Participants at the conference debated what should be done, and whether to make a public statement, with no solution).

While politicians and policy makers are unquestionably influenced and shaped by anti-migrant sentiment, academics are divided on whether it was the duty of researchers has a duty to engage with these groups. One participant explained that they felt that though it may run against our 'personal convictions we do have to engage with these groups, migration research is not just about migrants. [We] need to square up to this. We do have a responsibility to engage with the public.'

Meanwhile another participant stressed that while they agreed that research should be public facing, the expectation to engage with the public as 'public intellectuals' or opinion shapers had gone 'too far'. 'We are trained to do research but not to write op eds, engage with journalists, infographics etc.', the commented. Platforms such as the online research communication site *The Conversation*, were highlighted as examples of good practice in bridging academia and public facing communications. 'There is potential to improve our communication', opined one participant, 'to make our research more accessible and to a broader audience. But we must be wary of situations where mode of communication

trumps the actual research that has been done.’ We need, as another participant put it, to ‘think about different means of speaking and communicating, including visually through collaboration with technology and the arts.’

Conclusion

There was a sense from participants in the Barcelona Conversation, as in past Migration Conversations, that migration research is increasingly policy driven and dominated by institutions which are funding and setting the agenda. Maintaining the independence of researchers from policy makers in this context, was seen as key. The debate, as one panelist commented, should be about *meaningful* impact, not maximizing impact – *learning* and not leadership. Migrants themselves must be included in this conversation. Co-production of knowledge in migration research is often not a two-way process and policy and academic research operationalize co-production in different ways.

‘We need to find a language to engage with the public. Who do we engage with, what is the most effective way of engaging with them?’

– Migration scholar

For policy makers, co-production is usually about working with end users, for academics it is often about how you frame research problems. Policy makers and academics often work parallel to each other with little interaction; the two schools approach the issue of impact in different ways. In this context, sustainable and well-resourced collaboration is important; however, the politics of migration research and the role of academia’s engagement with the public debate is clearly an area of great debate and something the LIDC-MLT should continue to look at going forwards. There was furthermore a stress that the zeitgeist of technology and focus on communication should not lead to an over-simplification of answers. It is important to recognise, especially in the current context in which migration is a politically contentious and divisive issue in public opinion (e.g. Brexit) that the more politicized an agenda, the greater the space between researchers and policy makers.

There are pros and cons of using pre-existing policy categories in this context which academics must weigh up when embarking upon research. As a way of avoiding such limitations, we need, as one scholar participant put it, ‘to think about how research agendas are formed and who is included and excluded’. This sensibility has been theorized by academics including by relating to the risk of ‘mythological nationalism’ – that is perpetuating policy categories and normalizing borders by using pre-existing categories e.g. countries, labelling migrants as either ‘migrants’ or ‘refugees’. More research could still be done to theorize the challenges and opportunities of researching migration *as a process in itself*. This is in some ways the work of the LIDC-MLT going forwards.