

International Collaboration: Expansion, Regression, and Diversification

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Academia thrives on openness, intellectual exchange, cross-border mobility, and collaboration. Yet considerable challenges increasingly confound the long-established culture and praxis. Student mobility and academic exchanges, in particular, have become constrained by visa restrictions and delays, discriminatory border practices, and limited post-study opportunities, intensifying collaboration asymmetries while shifting and reshaping the established center-periphery paradigm. The Global Compact in Research Collaboration offers a solution for pursuing more equitable, sustainable, and meaningful academic and research partnership for global development.

The academic community thrives in environments that encourage openness, intellectual exchange, and cross-border mobility and collaboration. Scientific breakthroughs and progress have often depended on collaboration and networks that transcend national boundaries, bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise to address shared challenges and enhance opportunities.

It has been well established that problems such as climate, migration, energy, the environment, and health are intricately interconnected and transnational in nature. Thus, they demand collaborative approaches that integrate multiple forms of expertise, diverse methodological perspectives, and context-sensitive knowledge systems.

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar world, a new era of collaborative spirit appeared to have dawned with enthusiasm for global cooperation. For decades, this global regime espoused a set of principles that, while never perfectly realized, provided a framework for relative stability and cooperation. Within this framework, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were developed as a set of guiding principles that would unify the world around a set of shared development aspirations, cast in 17 goals and 169 targets. At the time of their development in 2015, it was assumed that the SDGs would not only underpin political and economic relations but also enable an expansion of global academic exchange, scientific collaboration, and knowledge production across borders. However, this is now in doubt, as considerable challenges increasingly confound the assumed culture and praxis.

Restrictions to Mobility

Student mobility and academic exchanges fuel international collaboration. According to [UNESCO](#), of the total global higher education enrollment of about 269 million students, some 7.3 million study outside their home country, with most studying in

the UK (26 percent), the US (21 percent), Australia (13 percent) and Europe. But considerable shifts in enrollment trends are now evident in most of these historically major host countries.

Visa restrictions, prolonged processing times, discriminatory border practices, and limitations on post-study opportunities have intensified barriers to academic mobility. For academics, obtaining research visas, conference permits, visiting scholar appointments, and work authorizations has become more difficult, uncertain, bureaucratically burdensome, and expensive. Such developments disproportionately affect students and academics from the Global South, many of whom already face financial, institutional, and geopolitical disadvantages.

International research collaboration depends heavily on mobility, trust, and sustained intellectual exchange. Yet these restrictions carry profound implications for global knowledge production and engender epistemic inequality. When Southern scholars face obstacles, this exclusion not only marginalizes individual researchers but also weakens the diversity and richness of global scholarship. Universities benefit immensely from the intellectual contributions, international networks, and research outputs generated through collaboration with Southern scholars, yet these institutions often remain insufficiently vocal in challenging policies that undermine these very partnerships.

Limited Collaboration

The consequences of mobility extend far beyond individual careers, professional advancement, or personal academic trajectories. Academic and scholarly mobility is not merely an issue of moving researchers, students, and knowledge workers across borders; rather, it constitutes a central mechanism through which institutions, societies, and nations build intellectual capital, advance innovation, and intensify their

capacity to respond to increasingly complex global realities. Barriers to mobility generate implications that are systemic rather than merely personal.

These restrictions threaten humanity's collective ability to confront challenges that are inherently global in scope and cannot be adequately addressed within isolated national boundaries. The challenge is not one of mere representation or fairness, although these remain important concerns; it is also a matter of intellectual prowess and global problem-solving competence. The exclusion of Southern scholars narrows the range of perspectives, experiences, practices, and knowledge informing research and policy discussions. Excluding these academics also risks reproducing forms of epistemic dominance in which particular regions continue to define priorities, methodologies, and interpretations for the rest of the world. Knowledge production then becomes less diverse, less inclusive, and ultimately less capable of addressing complex realities.

Reduced Development Partnerships

Research partnerships have been supported and mediated through funding from development partners. The changing geopolitical dynamic is such that these are diminishing significantly. Governments are placing greater emphasis on safeguarding sensitive knowledge and protecting critical technologies, sometimes leading to restrictions on collaboration or increased scrutiny of international partnerships.

Development assistance, research funding, international scholarships, and collaborative grants are facing mounting pressure as governments redirect resources toward domestic economic recovery, security concerns, border control, and strategic geopolitical interests. Good examples are Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, which have supported a multitude of development cooperation in the past but are now cutting back—and heavily.

In 2022, only 1 percent of bilateral aid from DAC countries went to R&D and only 0.2 percent to research institutions. This comes after the official development assistance for R&D fell from US\$2.7 billion in 2018 to US\$1.7 billion in 2022—a 40 percent decline.

Shifting Center-Periphery Dynamics

These trends are deeply misguided. The emergence of increasingly multipolar centers of knowledge in recent decades suggests that the traditional linear center-periphery model has become progressively inadequate for explaining contemporary global realities, with new centers emerging and relationships shifting. The future of global scholarship and innovation is likely to be shaped not by a single dominant center but by a diverse

constellation of actors whose contributions, perspectives, and capabilities have become paramount.

While historical asymmetries remain significant, the assumption that the Global South can be indefinitely sidelined or rendered dependent is therefore becoming increasingly untenable. If the underlying intent of recent actions is to further marginalize, isolate, and subordinate institutions and actors from the Global South, those pursuing this course may be in for a rude awakening. Countries and institutions that were once viewed primarily as recipients or consumers of knowledge are increasingly becoming important producers, innovators, and agenda setters in their own right.

This transformation has been accelerated by expanding higher education systems, technological advancements, digital connectivity, increased research investments, South-South cooperation, and the growing international visibility of institutions outside traditional Global North academic centers. So, the very prohibitive policies and practices that perpetuate the extant paradigm and sustain the predominance of the Global North—whether deliberately or unintentionally—probably will not serve the long-term interest; indeed, they undermine it. A more malleable and pragmatic approach seems prudent in response to the changing reality, as more realignment, fragmentation, and “rupture” loom large and the Global South becomes another key, competitive, and competing hub.

A Global Compact

For institutions and researchers in the Global South, these developments present both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, fragmentation in the global order may limit access to traditional networks and funding sources. On the other, the emergence of new power centers and alternative partnership frameworks could open pathways for more diversified and equitable forms of collaboration. South-South and South-South-North partnerships, for instance, may gain renewed relevance as scholars and institutions seek to build networks that are resilient in the face of geopolitical uncertainty and global rupture. The recent announcement of Brazil to provide 2,600 scholarships to African postgraduate students with an aim to strengthen academic exchange, research collaboration, and scientific cooperation is one case in point.

The [Global Compact in Research Collaboration](#), that was unveiled in April 2026 at an international conference in Ethiopia, offers the best way forward, as it represents an equitable, fair—and meaningful—partnership framework alternative that can supplant the transactional and extractive practices rampant in the world of academic and research collaborations today.

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