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Beyond economic growth – the case for researching alternatives

As the ESRC, the UK's leading social science funder, moves to deprioritise research on economic models beyond growth, Imogen Hamilton-Jones and Catarina Heeckt defend the academic legitimacy and societal relevance of post-growth thinking. In a time of ecological crisis and economic inequality, the authors argue that closing off inquiry into alternatives to GDP growth is not just anti-scientific but dangerously regressive.

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The head of the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has [announced](#) that the funding body will deprioritise research on degrowth as part of its 2025 – 2027 Strategic Delivery Plan. According to [a blog](#) published by Executive Chair, Stian Westlake in July, the decision marks “a new commitment on ESRC's part to the promotion of economic growth” in line with its statutory obligations as a government-funded body. But the announcement has sparked a strong [rebuttal](#) from leading ecological economists and researchers for being ideologically motivated and “anti-scientific”.

The controversy raises urgent questions about the role of academic inquiry at a time of mounting and re-enforcing social and ecological crises. As global decision-makers remain wedded to an economic system that is failing to deliver for people or planet, we need to explore alternative and unorthodox approaches.

Degrowth: part of an ascendant movement to re-think economics

In his justification of this new stance, Westlake specifically takes aim at degrowth and reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of its core principles. The crux of his argument seems to be based on the common but flawed conflation between the UK's recent economic stagnation and degrowth. The former reflects a failure of our prevailing growth orthodoxy to deliver the prosperity it promises – it is unplanned, undemocratic, and causes disproportionate suffering to the most vulnerable social groups. In stark contrast to this, degrowth proposes a planned and equitable downscaling of environmentally and socially harmful economic activity, to make way for a new definition of prosperity for all within planetary boundaries. Degrowth is not about austerity or recession. It is about **reimagining our economic ambitions** beyond GDP, prioritising wellbeing, sustainability, and social equity.

Far from being an esoteric research interest, degrowth is part of a broad movement of growth-critical and growth agnostic economic thinking – from **Doughnut Economics** to the **Foundational Economy** – much of which builds on long histories of academic inquiry from disciplines like Ecological and Feminist Economics. To develop this rich academic field, we urgently need more high-quality research into the specifics of how we would actually transition our economic systems at scale, what the implications might be across a wide variety of policy fields, and how such changes would affect broader socio-political and cultural power structures.



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This demand comes not just from academics but also from policy and practice. Post-growth ideas have gained significant political momentum in recent years (see **our own** research in the context of European cities). The IPCC's 6th Assessment Report **repeatedly** referenced literature on degrowth as a potential pathway for achieving climate goals. In 2023 the European Parliament hosted a **Beyond Growth** conference attended by 7000 activists, policymakers and civil society representatives, as well as the heads of the European Commission, Council and Parliament. This momentum is matched by consistent **polling** showing that the public is not just receptive to such fresh thinking but actively looking to governments to prioritise prosperity beyond GDP.

In the UK, experimental post-growth policy interventions are proliferating. **Community Wealth Building** is becoming standard practice in local councils from Preston to Cambridge to Islington;

wellbeing economics indicators are taking centre stage in Scotland; Wales has seen a new emphasis on **Future Generations** (decentring economic growth in decision-making). These local and regional efforts are transforming lives and livelihoods and showing that it's possible in practice to challenge the growth orthodoxy upheld by the current Labour government in Westminster.

We are living through febrile political times and there is a palpable societal yearning for alternatives to the status quo. This has opened up space not only for parties like Reform but also for parties whose platforms increasingly embrace post-growth thinking, like the Greens. As the current Labour government's efforts to "kickstart growth" fall flat, we need thinking that can push us beyond the artificial scarcity mindset generated through centuries of capitalist hegemony and towards new societal visions of abundance that will allow us to re-make the economy without sowing further division.

More than ever, we need academic research to critically explore and develop these alternatives, and to push open the horizons of public debate.

A regressive step for research

In this context, Westlake's assertion that the ESRC should set "a high bar against funding applied projects that advocate for degrowth, steady-state economics and similar agendas" is deeply concerning. Justifying the decision, he sets out the ESRC's (and UKRI's) statutory obligation "to have regard to the desirability of contributing (whether directly or indirectly) to economic growth, or an economic benefit, in the UK".

But who gets to define the meaning of "economic benefit" here? Who exactly are the beneficiaries? We would expect that the UK's largest funder of social and economic research would entertain the possibility that benefits to ordinary people and our planet might actually be best delivered by critically interrogating our societal fixation on growth.

Westlake recognises that "(...) social research has a valuable role to play as an accelerant of progress, helping to achieve our technological aspirations and driving prosperity." But by assuming that there is a broader academic and societal consensus around what we should count as "progress" and "prosperity" this perspective seems to be actively shutting down the considerable, and we believe essential, debate surrounding the meaning of these terms.



Research, by its very nature, must remain open to diverse perspectives especially when those perspectives challenge the

status quo.



As pointed out by Tim Jackson, director of the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, the same legislation Westlake uses to justify an overarching focus on economic growth also speaks to sustainability, wellbeing, and inclusiveness. To actively deprioritise research that explores these dimensions is not only ideologically driven – it is, as Jackson puts it, “**anti-scientific.**”

Julia Steinberger, professor of ecological economics at the University of Lausanne, echoes this sentiment, warning that shutting off lines of inquiry could be “**disastrous for UK science.**” Research, by its very nature, must remain open to diverse perspectives especially when those perspectives challenge the status quo.

Elsewhere in his **recent writing**, Westlake appears to agree with us on this:

“[i]t is right to hold [the ESRC] to account on [...] diversity of thought. If the research projects in a particular field cluster overwhelmingly on one side of an important argument that is genuinely contested, that seems like a problem to me. [...] In general, we should demand a high burden of proof for claims that the science of a given issue is settled, and we should be mindful of the tendency of committed believers to seek to shut down debates in which considerable uncertainty still remains. Sometimes arguments and positions that are temporarily thought to be ‘on the right side of history’ turn out not to be so.”

It seems that encouraging a “diversity of thought” on economic systems is something of a blind spot for Westlake. This doubling down on economic growth is clearly not merely motivated by a narrow reinterpretation of the ESRC’s supposed statutory obligations but also at least in part by a personal dislike of degrowth thinking and the fact that “economic growth is something of a personal obsession” for Westlake. In this he seems to be very much aligned with the political zeitgeist in the UK – echoing Keir Starmer’s insistence that “**growth must become Labour’s obsession**” which might explain why pursuing GDP growth has once again become an end in its own right, without anybody really seeming to care too much about how we get there or what it is all for. At this point it may be helpful to remember that our current fixation on economic growth as a core measure of societal progress is a relatively **recent idea**, enabled by Simon Kuznets’ invention of GDP in the 1930s before becoming the dominant organising principle of our lives in the post-war period.

Today, economic growth is often presented by its advocates with quasi-religious zeal. The same tone coming from the mouths of degrowth activists or academics would likely be dismissed by the likes of Westlake as a sign of cultish radicalism, naivety, or anti-scientific dogma. So we must call

out the ESRC's renewed fixation on growth for what it is: an ideologically motivated attempt to restrict economic thinking to the broken status quo.

Westlake does not engage with the mounting **scientific evidence** that decoupling GDP growth from emissions is failing. In fact, he barely references our accelerating climate and ecological breakdown, which, alongside the social harms of growthism – from poverty to labour exploitation to the housing crisis – would surely be more worthy objects of our intellectual attention.

The role of research in cultural transformation

Academic research plays a vital role in popularising boundary-pushing ideas and helping them enter the mainstream. It provides the frameworks needed to advance alternative cultural politics – ways of seeing and being that enable us to imagine a different path.

There is a vibrant field of research on degrowth, post-growth and economic transitions – much of it enabled by high-profile bodies with EU or national government funding. **REAL**, for example, is a €10 million project funded by the European Commission's ERC Synergy grant to investigate post-growth provisioning, politics, policies and practices. The ESRC itself has previously funded research into economic alternatives to growth by organisations like **CUSP** (the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity) or **DEAL** (the Donut Economics Action Lab).

Whether you're interested in housing cooperatives or monetary policy, post-development or care work, regenerative agriculture, geopolitics or philosophies of the good life, there are post-growth perspectives being developed, critiqued and worked through by researchers across the globe.



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Our own **British Academy-funded research** makes a modest contribution to this work by exploring the role that cultural politics plays in explaining the backlash around progressive urban mobility policies in Europe. Through participatory workshops our project will bring together communities

polarised by the green transition to collectively re-imagine what post-growth urban futures could look like.

Defending the Right to Imagine

We live in a time when public debate is fragmented by social media and alternative political thinking is squeezed into the margins of UK party politics and broadcast media. Academic research has an important role to play in documenting, exploring and critiquing alternatives, without shying away from the reality that people may well disagree about the best way forward.

The late anthropologist David Graeber **reminds us** that “the ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.” Degrowth and the important academic debates it generates are allowing us to reimagine our relationship with the planet, with each other, and with the future. To deprioritise funding for this sort of research is to close the door on possibility, to stifle innovation, and to retreat into an economic orthodoxy that has repeatedly failed to deliver on its promises.

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