

AcPrac Case Study

Navigating the Challenges of Business Funding for Research

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Atlantic *Fellows*

FOR SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC EQUITY

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About AFSEE

[The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity \(AFSEE\)](#) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the '[Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change \(AcPrac\)](#)' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

Navigating the Challenges of Business Funding for Research

Abstract

In 2021, I received a research grant from a private global corporation to convene a group of academics and practitioners to produce a series of research outputs that addressed the impact of data localisation in emerging data protection regulation across three African countries. While the project was successful, its implementation presented challenges. Some of these included navigating the bureaucracy of academic institutions to forge partnerships with corporations; dealing with concerns regarding research integrity in the face of conflicting objectives in an academic-business collaboration; as well as navigating power imbalances within the partnership. This paper addresses these challenges to explore solutions for managing independent research funded by powerful corporations. I discuss the risks, benefits, and requirements for both parties to forge a successful partnership. The solutions proposed here include understanding the type and form of partnership that will achieve the research objectives of each partner; maintaining transparency and open lines of communication between them; securing professional assistance on issues related to intellectual property, confidentiality, and the publication of research findings, as well as the importance of trust and mutual respect for each partner's knowledge, expertise and overall contribution.

Introduction

In 2017, Phillip Morris International (PMI), the maker of popular tobacco brand, Marlboro, announced it was launching a \$100 million programme to fund research into illegal tobacco trade (PMI, 2018). The money was to come through the Foundation for a Smoke Free World, which is supported by PMI in its bid to end the production of combustible cigarettes for safer alternatives. Utrecht University in Holland was one of the early recipients of the PMI grant and Dr Vervaele, a law professor, was the lead researcher (Enserink, 2018). Both he and the University did not anticipate the global backlash they would receive for accepting a research grant from PMI. Despite guarantees of academic freedom that the university had secured from PMI, critics of the tobacco industry, including fellow academics, argued that PMI-funded research would advance the company's own interests and that there was an irreconcilable conflict between the latter and public health policy interests (Young *et. al*, 2018). The university had to decline the research grant. In a twist of irony for academic freedom, Professor Vervaele was banned by the University from speaking to the media (Enserink, 2018).

Corporations play a vital role in producing goods and services, creating employment, and adding social value. Through the course of history, they have been at the centre of social innovation. However, corporations sometimes prioritise maximising their profits over the wellbeing of people and our planet. Corporations have in fact manipulated research outcomes in the past to advance their own interests, despite evidence that theirs conflicted with the public's. This history creates a general feeling of distrust towards corporations -even when they pursue agendas with clear public benefits. The narrative around unchecked corporate power is increasingly shifting, and for equity-minded people, we must question whether for-profit corporations cause more harm than good (MSI Integrity, 2021). This includes interrogating how ethical corporate funding for research is, as well as whether research conducted under such arrangements could be done objectively, without compromising the integrity of the research process. Indeed, the PMI-Utrecht incident exemplified how academic-business collaborations have been problematically carried out to advance corporate interests.

In this paper, I discuss my experience as an academic engaged in a collaboration with a corporation. As I considered the implications of my funding application with my corporate partner, I was preoccupied with the questions outlined above. At the same time, public funding for academic research remains in short supply, and even more so for research with advocacy objectives on law reform, as opposed to peer-reviewed journal publications. As a result, business-funded research remains a viable avenue to address important public policy issues.

Due to this lack of public funds for more impact-driven research, I built working relationships with corporations that are also interested in my area of research: data regulation and the data economy. Recently, in trying to address my disillusion with academic research and its negligible impact in the field of law, I decided to focus more on commissioned research for law reform within my areas of expertise. Recognising that corporations have a vested interest in any law reform that would affect their industry, I actively pursued funding from corporations, particularly given that funding from independent resources was limited. I recognised the potential risks in adopting this approach, as the PMI-Utrecht debacle aptly demonstrates. However, I believe in the importance of collaborative research with those who are going to be affected by the

research outcomes, and that with the necessary safeguards in place for academic independence, we can protect research integrity in such collaborations.

This paper provides some insights from my personal experience on the role of academic and business research collaborations in influencing policy making. These reflections are important in understanding and protecting the integrity of research that helps shape policy, while working with the business stakeholders who will be tasked with complying with public regulation applicable to their industry. I offer reflections on different approaches to funding, how to navigate the complex relationship between academia and business, as well as how to collaboratively develop a research agenda and project that can potentially influence policy making. I address four main issues: 1) the nature and form of academia-business collaborations and the suitability of each for different research objectives, 2) the role of corporate power in influencing research outcomes; 3) how to navigate power and knowledge asymmetry in academia-business partnerships; and 4) how to safeguard academic independence in business funded research.

Nature of Academia-Business Research Collaborations

There is a long-established tradition of collaborations between academia and businesses, especially when it comes to solving scientific problems or developing new areas of technology (Lutchen, 2018). As a result, in North America for example, some large corporations locate their research and development operations within proximity of leading universities that specialise in the industry's areas of interest (Ibid). Corporations are also increasingly providing grants to early-stage researchers. Indeed, there has been a push to bridge the cultural divide between profit-making for corporations on one hand, and knowledge advancement and training within universities on the other (Ibid). We are now seeing a shift, whereby corporations accept that they need to be more social value-driven, and universities acknowledge the need to further demonstrate their social relevance and contributions to economic development (Ibid).

Governments across the globe are also recognising the importance of the latter. In a UK government report that reviewed strategic business-university research collaborations, several benefits were identified (Dowling, 2015). According to the report, 'for academics, these benefits can include the opportunity to address challenging research questions with real-world applications, see their research have tangible impacts

and gain access to new skills, data, or equipment. Companies can improve business performance through developing new techniques or technologies, de-risk investment in research, and extend the capabilities and expertise available to the firm' (Ibid). However, such collaborations present challenges too. For instance, given the tendency for corporations to focus on short term objectives in research and development, academics face pressure to prioritise such corporate funder's objectives within the broader research agenda. Also, given concerns around the independence and objectivity of a research project, any academia-business collaboration requires a robust risks assessment before implementation.

There are four types of academia-business collaborations: consulting, contract research, bilateral partnerships, and public-private partnerships (Pronk *et. al*, 2015). For consulting engagements and contracted research, corporate invitations are sent for academics to participate in the internal research strategy and execution of a company's research agenda (Ibid). For a corporation, the benefits of having an academic consultant include peer-reviewed outputs and access to in-depth knowledge, including to the consultant's academic networks. Also, this set up is potentially more affordable than research commissioned through corporate consultants. For academics, it is an opportunity to fund research, develop its practical applications, and train students through hands-on experience. However, the bureaucracy that comes with producing academic research can frustrate business partners in contractual or consulting engagements. This includes the time that it takes to produce research in academia -especially if tied to graduate research. The drawbacks of collaboration from the academic perspective can include differences in priorities (educational versus business-oriented) as well as restrictions on the type of partners eligible for collaboration (for example: steering away from those that may attract negative publicity because of their public stance on hot topics). Also, the confidentiality agreements in place can potentially undermine the academic freedom of a contracted researcher when there are certain forms of censorship and control over the intellectual property rights of a project.

Bilateral partnerships involve a mutual contribution of resources by both industry and academic partners. They can also involve the publication of findings in PhD theses or peer-reviewed journals. According to Pronk, bilateral partnerships 'provide industry

with direct access to focused research on topics that are relevant for innovation but that involve a need for prolonged fundamental exploration, a degree of risk and/or a requirement for expert knowledge that make them difficult to tackle in house within a company. For academia, bilateral projects enable research on application-inspired topics, often in close collaboration with industrial colleagues who are experts in research translation, which can be inspiring for students and staff alike' (Ibid). These features are similar to the fourth type of academia-business collaborations, known as public-private partnerships (PPPs). These involve several academic institutions and industry partners. PPPs are often funded through both public grants and private funding and are long term in nature. PPPs are like bilateral partnerships, providing similar advantages to both academia and the private sector with the ultimate benefit of research innovation.

While there are different forms of academia-business collaborations, there are also different types of projects within them; collaborations can involve knowledge generation, idea testing, technology development and problem solving (Dwyer *et. al.*, 2022). My research partnership with a multinational corporation was contracted with the aim of bringing together academics and professionals who specialise in data protection regulation to generate new ideas on how to balance competing state and cooperate interests, namely in how to regulate the cross-border flow of personal data while considering corporate interests for an unrestricted flow of data that can generate innovation in cloud storage.

Forging Academia-Business Collaboration

Developing a successful academia-business collaboration starts with building relationships between partners. While this is true for any collaboration, it is particularly crucial between academia and business because academics are not always seen as the most obvious choice for a research engagement, depending on the industry. In my area of work, which focuses on law and policy research, think-tanks and independent consultants have successfully positioned themselves as the preferred partners for corporations. As a result, academics need to invest more time in building relationships to address concerns around the often-extended academic timelines for producing research, while also aligning their agenda to fit with the proposed goals of the corporate partners. Where prior institutional relationships do not exist, the process of cultivating the latter

takes more time. Relationships are often built based on professional networks that develop over the course of a career. At times, facilitated introductions help nurture these relationships. However, to effectively develop and maintain them, the benefits of association must be visible to both parties. Experts in business are sensitive to being solely seen as funders without substantive contributions to a research engagement. Meanwhile, academics are concerned about being perceived as partners with purely theoretical knowledge, and limited experience in practical applications.

As such, it is important for both parties to recognise the added value that each brings. To achieve this, detailed background conversations are important. These conversations and forms of relationship building went on for over a year during the initiation phase of my relationship with the global corporation I eventually worked with. This phase can include individual conversations with leaders in business, attending meetings related to common areas of interest hosted either by the business or the academic institution. It is in these initial conversations that ideas around projects develop, and possible ways of funding and implementation are determined.

At the initiation stage of the research partnership, the power dynamics favour the corporate partner. This is primarily due to the need for any research project conceptualised to suit the needs of the corporate partner who contracted the research. As a result, the concessions made in the development of the research proposal to suit the needs of the corporate partner already start to shape the way the implementation will evolve and the level of independence that the academic partners will have in achieving the research objectives.

It is important to note that not all corporate partners fund individual researchers. In my case, I had to identify a centre within the university, which had institutional experience and worked broadly within my area of interest to serve as the grant recipient. Choosing an institution and complying with university bureaucracies has its own challenges. Corporate partners often prefer to work with institutions within universities for the purposes of accountability and access to the wider academic network within the university. However, this also means that the applicable costs for the research project rises. In my university's case, a standard 25 percent fee is payable from the research grant to the university as cost recovery. This additional fee means that universities and

academics are not necessarily competitive in the pursuit of corporate funding for research projects. In addition, universities often set the payable rates for their faculty members, which leaves little room for fee negotiation when approaching a corporate partner for funding. In some cases, well-established institutional processes can ease the administrative burden of meeting the university's financial rules. In other cases, such as mine, complying with institutional rules regarding fees payable was daunting and often led to disagreements with administrative staff regarding their interpretation. Accordingly, it is necessary to spend time understanding the rules surrounding the different forms of academia-business collaboration, because the guidance on remuneration can differ.

The corporate partner goes through rounds of drafting the research proposal, amending where necessary to suit their objectives and to have it fit within the scope of their timeline and budget. In the research proposal submitted for funding to my corporate partner, several versions of the proposal were reviewed for clarity and scope before the final version was approved for funding. The process took nearly three months. At this stage, the main research team members are chosen. While the academic has some degree of influence on who comprises the team, the corporate partner may veto the selection of particular faculty members if deemed necessary.

My research team included members of faculty as well as industry practitioners. While I managed to select the faculty members, I was nudged by my corporate partner, insofar as they questioned the expertise of some identified shortlisted candidates, and shared positive mentions of others who were not on my shortlist, when it came to business to be part of the research team. Making these concessions on that front is part of relationship management and gives the funder a level of ownership in the research process. However, it also means the academic side concedes some independence in research implementation.

Indeed, a key concern for universities in academia-business collaborations is the extent to which academic independence will be guaranteed in research and in the development of findings. While corporate partners appear eager to accede to requests for academic independence in the interest of protecting research integrity, they inevitably expect the project outcomes to be aligned with their strategic objectives. Corporate partners are often very transparent about the expected outcomes of research projects

during the relationship building phase and in while reviewing research proposals. Accordingly, academics need to acknowledge and accept that their independence in a research project is subject to these early agreements about aligned outcomes.

The Role of Corporate Power in Influencing Research Outcomes

Because of how corporations are implicated in creating inequalities, the existing corporate form is put in question, as it does not always consider public benefit and community interests, and instead, shareholders are often those with financial interests in the company (Adeleke, 2022). In response to this, research and advocacy efforts have promoted alternative business models that centre workers and communities in the governance and ownership of corporations to achieve more equity (MSI Integrity, 2021). It is within this context that I reflect on my choice to conduct research with funding from a powerful global corporation, whose market value exceeds the size of the economy of most middle-income countries, and as a result, commands a global influence that can affect the development of public regulation in significant ways.

In my partnership, I had to confront the tension between the need to harness the potential of the data economy for developing economies and the idea that the most prized asset in the age of capitalism and globalisation is our personal data. My corporate partner was one of the central figures being accused of monetising our personal data. The question I wrestled with was: if our personal data has become so monetised (in a world where advances in technology are moving rapidly, with our personal data commodified by big firms), what impact does this process have on our social relations? How does privacy - understood in terms of data protection - play a role in the emerging culture of fake news development, hate speech, and other growing inequalities taking place online?

We live in a time where most of our social relations and conversations happen through social media. On one hand, social media plays a significant role in how people's behaviours are influenced and shaped. It has created a pathway of economic opportunities for some, through the creation of online marketplaces and online content. It has also become a platform where people increasingly get their news updates from. On the other hand, data companies have new patterns of wealth accumulation, coming from opportunities to profile people based on online activities and influence consumer behaviour through targeted advertising (Braun & Eklund, 2019). Moreover, social media

is increasingly diminishing in-person interactions amongst people; it provides a degree of anonymity that conceals harmful practices such as hate speech, sexual harassment, revenge porn and other forms of technology-based harassment, as well as the promotion of fake news content to influence people's behaviour, opinions, and choices (Tukisov & Haggart, 2019). Data protection plays a crucial role on these social media spectrums and the emerging forms of information access and communication that is taking place online. While we often focus on the good, these are some examples of the broader consequences of living our lives online and the impact it has on social relations (Hayles, 2012).

Too often, leaks have turned up showing that companies are flouting data protection rules and the illegal mining of personal data by third parties continue to plague these companies (BBC, 2019). A recent study that assessed people's data and online behaviour found that the more data we leave online, the more data harvesters can accurately predict our personality (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017). The study shows 'the effectiveness of personality targeting by showing that marketers can attract up to 63 percent more clicks and up to 1,400 more conversions in real-life advertising campaigns when matching products and marketing messages to consumers' personality characteristics' (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2017). Users are often unaware of the privacy terms and conditions they accept and do not know the consequences or relationship between one programme with another. Given these layers of secrecy and complex legal terminology that are used to mask the true purpose of privacy agreements with users, there are legal considerations for how personal data should be protected and managed, including through restrictions in data access and by localising data storage.

Protecting personal information remains a critical aspect of the right to privacy and has increasingly become an area of global focus in this digital age (Nyst & Falchetta, 2017). Protection in this context includes establishing rules around a person or entity's collection and usage practices when processing of personal information. With the mass processing of personal data, the state and corporations' intrusions and infringement upon people's privacy have become increasingly sophisticated and complex. Also, technological advancements have made it more challenging to detect privacy infringements. Data protection regulations that give control to the individual in determining

which personal information can be held or processed by another, and transparency regarding the processing and holding of such information. It also requires an institution with the ability to monitor compliance with data protection and to impose sanctions for non-compliance.

When a multinational corporation at the forefront of personal data processing then decides to fund research that explores the unintended consequences of data regulation, no matter how well intentioned the agenda might be to help states see the need for an integrated data economy, it is bound to create unease with independent academics working on the project. This is especially the case where there are power and knowledge asymmetries within the academia-business partnerships, points that are discussed below.

Navigating Power and Knowledge Asymmetry in Academia-Business Partnerships

The importance of establishing research integrity in business-funded research cannot be understated. There is a lot at stake if there is evidence of subjectivity in the research outcome. These include the reputation of the researchers behind the project and public confidence in the independence of academic projects. To protect research integrity, the power relations between academics and partners in business must be considered.

Unlike taxpayer funded research which comes with minimal restrictions and deference to academic independence, business funded research often comes with an underlying expectation that the corporate payer is a joint partner in the funded research project. Given these dynamics, it is necessary to ask if an academic in this partnership operates from a weakened position of power in asserting their independence during project implementation.

I was particularly conscious of this considering my identity as an African academic working with a global corporation from the West. While there was a deliberate effort on the part of my corporate partner to only work with African academics and practitioners, I was nevertheless conscious of my burden of responsibility to lead a project that will not be undermined by queries of competency and dismal standards – assumptions that are unfairly associated with the Global South and Africa in particular.

I was also conscious that as a corporate accountability scholar, working with a global corporation that had a history of using its power to influence public policy, meant that I would be naïve to not consider the extent to which my project could aid the corporation's influence on public policymaking in some African states. While such influence is not necessarily problematic (given my conviction that our research approach will objectively show how African states could maximise the benefits of the data economy), it would be widely perceived as favouring corporate interests. This situation needs to be addressed carefully. To face such biases in perception, I deliberately appointed experienced senior academics to my project team. These were individuals who had established reputations as exceptional and independent academic scholars, who cared about the integrity of the research process. Each research output that was produced went through a peer review process, even though these outputs were not intended to become academic papers destined for journal publication. The peer review process ensured that the quality and integrity of the project was protected.

While implementing my research, two developments highlighted the power dynamics and knowledge asymmetry that exist in academia-business research partnerships. The first related to access to internal government research that is not publicly available. For one of the countries under research, the corporate partner referenced developments that were taking place in the country at a policy level that needed to be addressed in the research project but was not publicly known. This created pressures on how to address such issues when the research team did not have access or knowledge of these pending policy developments. The investment in the relationship development I discussed earlier during the early stages of the partnership was useful here to remind the corporate partner that we could only address issues that were in the public domain.

The second development concerned the corporate partner's attempt to veto some of the conclusions drawn in the research project. In what appears to be the corporation's concern regarding the motivation of state interests in advancing their data protection policies and whether other developments in states outside of Africa were influencing this development, the corporate partner objected on several occasions to the analysis made by one of the researchers on the team. As the team leader of the research group, I had

initially characterised the disagreement as misunderstandings in interpretation of the scholar's work. Yet, when neither the scholar nor the corporate partner refused to back down on their positions, I had to approach two additional independent peer reviewers to address the concerns and positions being taken by each party. Ultimately, a compromise had to be reached based on the review recommendations which made neither party happy but protected the integrity of the research output.

These developments ultimately show that even when academics operate from weakened positions of power, relying on existing tools within academia such as a peer review process can help navigate a complex relationship with a corporate partner to resist external pressures. The partnership also suggests that taking absolute stances in analysis can sometimes be problematic especially from a corporate standpoint and the viewpoint from practice help academics understand the importance of making a conscious decision to take a middle ground in their analysis where necessary.

My role as a gatekeeper for other researchers in the project I led was also important in addressing power relations. Some of the tensions I faced in the engagement with the corporate partner were not felt by the other researchers in the team because of my role in protecting them from queries and comments that could be distracting if read as an attempt by the corporate partner to influence the research outcomes.

There are other lessons to learn from my experience in the research partnership I forged especially in relation to safeguarding academic independence and these are discussed next.

How to Safeguard Academic Independence in Business Funded Research

To ensure a business-funded research project is devoid of external interference, the starting point is for both parties to be clear about their objectives and expectations. While a project's objectives are clear from the research proposal that is expected to be funded, there needs to be transparency regarding expectations as well. Academics and other non-corporate actors working with partners in business need to be open about what they perceive as the potential risks in a proposed research relationship and how to mitigate them. Research partners should not shy away from discussing the benefits of their collaboration and to leverage the strengths that each partner has. A successful

partnership will happen when the mutual interests of each party is openly discussed and acknowledged without understating the expectations of each party.

To achieve this, there needs to be open lines of communications to address updates and potential problems in research implementation. For large corporations, there can be a tendency to sign a research contract without a point person overseeing the implementation before delivery. Insisting on regular check-ins and providing a transparent update about decisions being made and emerging problems prevents surprises for the partners. This ensures both parties have a sense of ownership regarding the research project. In my case, the regular check-ins I had with my corporate partner's research manager ensured we had a shared sense of understanding of our objectives. We jointly dealt with issues that needed to be resolved. Our great rapport also enabled conversations around building on the research we started to further expand the project.

Research partners need to understand the type and form of partnership (consulting, contract research, bilateral partnerships, and public-private partnerships) that will achieve their research objectives. Bilateral and public-private partnerships occur at an institutional level with robust bureaucratic procedures to support the process. Consulting and contract research can happen at an individual level between a corporation and an individual researcher, and this form of engagement requires a careful consideration of the issues discussed in this note. These include the power relations between the partners, navigating the knowledge asymmetry, dealing with reputational risks at an institutional and individual level as well as ensuring the integrity and quality of research produced is not compromised.

To ensure academic independence is secured in a research relationship with corporations, it is important for academic researchers to secure professional assistance on issues related to ownership of intellectual property rights, confidentiality of the research and possible publication of research findings. It is preferable that a research contract addresses these legal matters before the agreement is signed. Ownership of the IP in a research project can be contentious and both parties need to be clear about who is the ultimate owner of the research.

In addition, a project's level of confidentiality (including public knowledge of its existence) should be discussed. This is especially the case where a large research team

is involved or where graduate students are part of the project. There may also be the rare occasion where a corporate partner prefers to be a silent partner and does not want their name associated with the research. In my research engagement, my corporate partner recognised the negative publicity that their name sometimes attracts. While they agreed that their association with the project would be public knowledge, they shared some reservations when it came to publicly participating at seminars I organised for the publication of the research outputs. They ultimately decided to participate however. It is not ideal for the involvement of corporate partners to be kept secret from the public. Requests to do so, coming from research partners, should undergo an ethical analysis before academics agree to such arrangements.

Finally, it is important for research partners to centre trust and mutual respect for each other's knowledge and expertise in the contribution they each bring to the collaboration. There is a great deal of research expertise that exists in industry and academics should not claim a monopoly over knowledge when it comes to their area of expertise. Rather than seeing corporations merely as funding agencies, academics should adopt a more collaborative approach to execute research projects. Indeed, my research project benefitted immensely from the thorough review and feedback my team received from our corporate partner for each research output that we produced. Giving a corporate partner the opportunity to review draft findings before finalising them requires a level of mutual trust that recognises the importance of the corporate partner's contribution, trusting that they will not abuse the review process in attempts to influence research outcomes. Corporations also need to be deferential to the professional rule of academic independence, but such deference can only be maintained where both partners recognise that research has more impact when theory is combined with practice.

Conclusion

Based on my experience collaborating with a corporate partner, business funded research is not necessarily always objective because there is a clear agenda when academics decide to pursue a particular line of research. There is an inherent power dynamic that is skewed towards a funder in most partnerships. For academics, the biggest advantage as a preferred research partner is the depth of expertise in producing quality and independent research. The value of this significant contribution by a corporate

ally will be dependent on the extent to which a corporation is committed to objective outcomes in a research project even when they conflict with the corporate partner's goals. Where the problem arises in relation to working with corporate allies is when the lines of independence are blurry between the academic's work and working to advance a corporation's goals.

This paper has shown that research collaborations between academia and business can produce independent and substantive research outcomes despite concerns around bias and the ethical nature of such collaborations. However, to achieve these, properly identifying the nature and form of collaboration is necessary to adequately deal with institutional bureaucracies associated with them. Research partners should also be aware of the power imbalances between academics and the corporate partner. Measures should be taken to guard against these imbalances.

Research outputs should undergo peer review to safeguard their quality and research integrity - regardless of whether it is a requirement. Partners should be transparent about their agenda and objectives with each other. They should consider each other as equal partners, who are each capable of contributing substantive knowledge. This can be done by fostering mutual trust and respect, as well as by striving for clear communication with each other to deal with issues that may arise over the course of the research period. These approaches give the partners a sense of ownership in the project, whereby neither party is solely seen as the funder or the implementer.

The reality is corporations will always seek an entry point to influence the areas of policy making that affect their industry. A pragmatic approach suggests that in order to safeguard public interest, ethical academics should not shy away from finding corporate allies who want to develop research projects that can have social value. Public funding for research will always be limited -especially in developing countries where there are competing needs for state resources. While there are alternative sources of funding with foundations and other charitable organisations, their funding model does not always suit academic research. Historically, corporations have been more willing to work with academics in implementing research projects. We should embrace these opportunities with the right safeguards in place and work towards finding corporate allies that can help us achieve our equity goals.

As social justice practitioners and academics, questions still linger regarding the decision to collaborate with global corporations as well as the terms of engagement with them. Given the power asymmetry that exists in such collaborations, it may be naively optimistic to think we, as academics, can set the terms. While there are no clear answers to these questions, we currently live within political systems whereby our socio-political differences affect our ability to build consensus on addressing global challenges such as inequality. We perceive those who have a different worldview from us as threats to our causes and there are minimal efforts to bridge such divides, with ever-increasing ideological gaps. This approach is not sustainable and distracts us from the important work of achieving social and economic equity. As an AFSEE fellow, I am committed to the vision we have laid out for our community, whereby equity can be achieved through bold, imaginative responses that are forged through collective action. Part of collective action is acknowledging the diversity of perspectives that exist, when it comes to resolving humanity's intractable challenges. However, we must find common ground with those whose circles of influence we can lean into. We must work together to achieve our objectives of social and economic justice for all.

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