**Conversations in Social Justice**



**The Social Contract of Research: Emerging from the Ruins of Empire**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 2. Episode 2.

*If universities are founded for the common good, what is the social contract of research? In this podcast Matthew Reason, Director of the Institute for Social Justice, is joined by Dr Erinma Ochu, a transdisciplinary biologist and storyteller from the iSchool at Manchester Metropolitan University and visiting racial justice fellow at The Ada Lovelace Institute. Their conversation explores the potential of community-university partnerships, achieving equity in research funding and the value of ‘the commons’ for knowledge exchange to rebuild social and cultural infrastructures.*

*'We have the power those who came before us have given to us, to move beyond the place where they were standing'* Audre Lorde

**Matthew Reason**

Hello and welcome to podcast episode from the Institute for Social Justice. This is part of our series of conversations in social justice. I'm Matthew Reason, I'm Director of the Institute for Social Justice and I'm really pleased to be joined today by Dr. Erinma Ochu. Erinma's a biologist and storyteller who works at the intersection of the arts, emerging technologies and information at Manchester Metropolitan University. And I'm really excited to have her here. Last week, she gave a talk to our postgraduate research symposium, which was really fascinating, particularly for the way it cuts across different disciplines and told the story of her own journey across disciplines from neuroscience to filmmaking and the arts. Today, we're going to explore a broad range of issues and ideas together, which I hope you'll enjoy listening to us. Ideas that I think are relevant to anybody who's working in the university sector, or as a researcher today. We've broadly titled this discussion around the social contract of research, and I'm really looking forward to Erinma joining in exploring some issues that come up from that. So welcome, Erinma. Thank you for joining me.

**Erinma Ochu**

Hi, there. Thanks, Matthew. Thanks for inviting me.

[Musical interlude]

**Matthew Reason**

We're interested in talking about what you termed in your talk for us last week, the social contract of research, and the civic duty of research in organisations such as a university. But I suppose, before we get there, I'm interested in some sense about where you think we are now, where are universities in terms of that social contract? Has it been lost? Or indeed, maybe it never even existed? What are the impediments in the way of that? So as a starting point, I guess, where are we now for you in terms of research and a social contract?

**Erinma Ochu**

I think it is a very big question. And I think it means different things to different people. But universities originally, are for the public good. And investments in a University and a University education and in research is for the public good. It's for public benefit. One of the big challenges now is, of course, we have kind of neoliberal times, where there's private interests in universities, students are potentially seen as consumers, they're paying for their education, it brings a new expectation. That complicates this matter of the social contract of research, and the extent to which universities are for social benefit. And so for me, in terms of research, if we're to look at the universities themselves, we can also look at public funding. And for me, one of the big challenges with public funding is that in the UK, for example, but similar elsewhere, it's not funding everyone from all spectrums of society. And you know, new report, UKRI have just put out their data dump on who they fund and who they don't and it's very clear that they're not really funding people from African and Caribbean heritage backgrounds, less so people from South Asian backgrounds, born in the UK as well. And so you know, that data is out there. That's problematic, because it doesn't match the population of the people that live in this country. And having gone through COVID-19, about to, you know, also go through the climate crisis, that means that a whole section of society are not being served. That's for me, where part of the problem is. But also there's an ask, if you like, that should come from society, in terms of what they want from a university, and how they realise those public benefits. The same problem exists, when you look at who gets to go to university, and the grades that people get when they come out of university, and then who gets to go on to get a job. It's a kind of continuous circle that is quite problematic. And so those are the kinds of questions that we have to look at. But then we have to think about, well, how do we rebalance that equity? How do we think about that in terms of social justice? And then how do we collectively take action and that bit of how do we collectively take action, is for me really crucial. And I would say that there are inroads in which both disabled scholars, black scholars, collectively come together to try and make a difference. So we'll see platforms like Leading Routes, which is a black led platform, which is trying to ensure that more black people get PhDs. But actually, then they should have more investment that comes from UKRI into that platform, because this is a community coming together to do the work of the state for the state on its behalf. The benefits are not shared. And the work is also not shared. The work is to some extent being done for free. So we have to really look at some of that very carefully and I can see that some are doing some work, and others are kind of saying a lot, but not doing very much. So you will have seen lots of universities put out their anti-racism statements. Every year, they'll do the Stonewall survey. But actually, what impact is it having? How can people be their authentic selves, if they managed to get into the university, and how can they demonstrate the value and the difference that we bring to those institutions in terms of how we do research, which might be different.

**Matthew Reason**

The whole kind of cycle of elements you talked about there from who gets to go to university in the first place, who then is doing a PhD and how that's funded, who then in terms of promotions, right up through, and we know that the figures around how few black professors there are in the UK, and particularly black female professors. So I suppose it's the question of that social contract is that in some ways, there's already a break between who the universities are representing, that doesn't match up with the world around us as much or at all at the moment.

**Erinma Ochu**

Exactly. And I think, you know, there should be a right to do research, whether that's academics or communities. You know, I work a lot with community partners, I've learned a lot from community partners. And I think that our community partners have different questions to ask. And they can challenge us in ways, perhaps, that we might be too comfortable to be challenged by our research funders. And really, new avenues for research can emerge when a community starts to ask questions. And that can take us in very different directions. But again, that needs to be invested in and we need to look at, well, what does that kind of research funding look like?

**Matthew Reason**

I am also thinking, it'd be really interesting to explore some of those community partnerships and community innovation elements in a moment, but about what are the impediments? What are the things which are maintaining these problems and these barriers? Because you're absolutely right. I mean, York St John, along with other universities, has its anti-racism charter, and it's Stonewall declarations, all of those. So what are the other impediments around the power structures and what gets rewarded in terms of research at universities? So REF, of course, rewards individual achievement, and publication rewards publication in particular journals and so on. And that I guess, also closes off research, publications behind paywalls and things like that. So I'm wondering if there's a another imbalance there between what is, in terms of our audit culture, what's recognised as quality research, and that doesn't match up with maybe more community or more participatory research processes as well.

**Erinma Ochu**

I mean, all of those kind of bureaucratic administrative challenges that creates systemic problems and structural ones, they mean that some people won't want to engage with that path, because you know, the labour just to get that stuff done. But also the different levels of support that people get to produce those REF case studies on quite, you know, short time time spans. But you know, for me, personally, I think, because I'm thinking, you know, back to the civil rights movement, back to the disability movement, back to, you know, queer perspectives, these are generational movements, and they span not seven year cycles, but 20, 60 years. You know, that's a different way of thinking about how to get things done, and to how to create change over generations. Those REF cycles aren't thinking about that kind of change. But they're also problematically framed. And they always imagined that it's the academic who comes up with an idea. But actually, the powerful thing is that someone who's not an academic is supported and facilitated to come up with their own ideas, to have investment and time to then also carry out the research around the questions that they want to ask, which will be different, as I said, from the ones that academics ask. And for me, that's the most joyous research. Just to give you an example, I worked with Creative Scene, which is, they're based in Dewsbury, they're Arts Council funded and Nancy Barrett, the director, she'd seen the work that I've been doing on citizen science and community science and she said, you know, you're doing this thing, we want that for the arts come and help us be our critical friend. And I was like, yeah, okay, I didn't know exactly what they wanted. But what was wonderful is that by working together, you find a way through it. And actually, Nancy had a very clear idea of where she wanted to get her organisation to in terms of the arts being part of everyday life. And then you know, wonderful output from that is that they'd produced a community book, 'Parking a poem in a biscuit factory' is now a book that's been produced from that project. And my credit on that is a tiny credit, which is a thank you for, you know, supporting the director through her journey. To me, that's how it should be. It shouldn't always be that we're credited as the author and the, you know, the editors of these things. Actually, the joyous thing for me was going along and having cups of tea and listening to their progress in, you know, commissioning an artist, Len Grant, to go out and take pictures and collect the stories and work with people. That was a pleasure, absolute pleasure, for me to learn about how they were doing what they were doing, and for me to share and transfer some of my knowledge into what they're doing. And often they'd reject it and say, no, we're not doing it like that, and that's great, you know, because that's how I learn.

**Matthew Reason**

That labour and that work, and the joy as well, of working with partners. I mean, it takes time, it takes time building up those relationships of trust. Thinking from my experience in the arts there is sometimes some suspicion in terms of the academic or the university and the worry that they will come in, they'll they'll do a study, they'll tend to be the most well paid person in the room compared to some of the payments and salaries within the arts, and then they'll take all the credit and go away again. And there's a fear sometimes, I guess, about an almost parasitic relationship. So to overcome that and to have a genuine relationship takes real time. And it's it has to be a two-way relationship, that awareness that actually there is as much to be learned from that community or that group and the knowledge they have as the other way around. I think that's that's the most rewarding partnerships I've certainly have been where there's a genuine sense that they're interested in knowing more about what they do, and working with me, but also there, they want to innovate and give value and give recognition to all the knowledge and expertise they have as well.

**Erinma Ochu**

And as you say, these relationships take time to develop. So that relationship with Nancy, she noticed when I was doing work, I was on a fellowship an art/science fellowship back in 2001, I think it was, at that time, she was working on a creative partnerships, a schools project. And so you know, 2001 to now, that's 20 years of knowing one another, and being interested in one another's work. If you were to ask me would I have done that work, knowing that it's not going to go into REF? I would say yes. If you were to ask other academics, would they have done that work? I don't know the answer. In some ways that's the difference.

**Matthew Reason**

So the difference is the difference of motivation in terms of why you're doing the work.

**Erinma Ochu**

Yeah, completely, I don't care if that work goes into REF, really. There could be a way at some point to write up how we did what we did. But actually, that work is the work of that organisation. People like Alan Irwin will say, how can scientists serve citizens? I absolutely ascribe to that, how can my work serve citizens? My knowledge, that knowledge becomes a value in the everydayness of that knowledge being useful. And that means that it's almost got to work its way into how people do things in their everyday lives, and I'm not going to be the best person to actually execute that. And so the conversation, you know, really it's about how we have conversations and share ideas and share practice. And of course, that value comes back to me, no one's asking me to submit a case study of what I've learned from communities. One of the first articles that I wrote, in coming back into academia, was a book chapter to credit and value what I've learned from communities.

**Matthew Reason**

The everydayness of knowledge, and actually, maybe that knowledge has its most value when it becomes everydayness, I think, is a really, really interesting phrase, I'm also aware that a lot of this work is often gendered or racialised, and that there is a tendency, I guess, within our, in our cultural and society, for those elements be done more by female academics or black academics who I guess have that as that they're aware of their own narrative and their journey of the importance of that. And I think that's something that certainly also looking at how roles are sometimes divided within the university and who takes on some different roles within a department, sometimes those are also gendered in different ways. And I think being aware of that is really important. What you're describing is something which I know that you've talked about in terms of the idea of a commons. And there's maybe an interesting distinction between the University which however open or however, widening participation, it wants to be is still in some ways about separating out and divisions between who's in and who's not in, in some ways and different ways. And a commons which by nature is is open to, to everybody to use the resources. I wonder if you could expand a bit on on the idea of the commons and where it comes from and why it's such an attractive idea for you in terms of knowledge and justice in research.

**Erinma Ochu**

I guess different people have talked about this and for me, where I encountered it was through Professor Carolyn Kagan, she's a retired professor in community psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. I encountered this in 2008, when I was getting involved in kind of community-University partnerships. And she'd already done this kind of work and so I was almost like the new kid on the block, who was trying to do this across three universities, because I'd come up with an idea of let's work with communities as universities. And she's like, well Erinma, there's a long history of this, you can't just come in and… but she did it in a very polite way that kind of challenged me to really think about how we're approaching this and how we build on past Community-University partnerships. And so you know, the work of Sarah Banks, but also CUPP who are based down at University of Brighton, you know, to make sure that we're taking into account you know, broader notions of people who were doing this already, and we're not starting from from scratch. But also that were really tuning in to what our local communities at the time wanted. And so part of that was to say, well, it can't just be dictated by what the university wants and how do you figure out what the community wants and needs? That needs kind of capacity and capability building before you even get to the notion of shared values and what can we do together. So we spent two years, many of us people like Sam Gray, who's still at MMU, he's our impact person now, we spent two years, kind of, I would say, working for the community, volunteering our time, listening, getting involved, being part of what the community were doing, to develop a relationship, but also to find, to see that, you know, kind of one size would not fit all, and that some people wanted culturally adapted capacity building, and others wanted kind of completely, you know, they didn't necessarily want to be part of a group, so people didn't want to be lumped together. So we had to really figure out how can this kind of work for different parts of Greater Manchester. But to get to the commons bit, it's this idea that you're working at an edge, and that you've almost got, I don't want to call it two different species, but you've got two different characters coming together. And in that coming together is where the possibility of shared values can emerge, new language, new ways of working, and usually, a university might come along to that edge and say, well, this is not like us, and we don't like you know, the way things are here and you wouldn't nurture that, because it just sits outside of what you do as an institution. But actually, if you make that part of your mission, to be this civic mindedly institution, that means you have to open up your resources. Whether that's thinking about, you know, the campus feeling like it can be open, or meeting rooms, and other resources, that you can offer out. You know, a powerful thing that that I would see was we might run events, and have food and things like this and invite people to come down. But on the back of that people would then say, actually, could you do the room booking for a couple more hours, because we've got a really important community meeting that we'd like to do. And could you also get cups of tea delivered at this time, and this is great, Erinma, but next time, could we also have it in Moss Side, because this particular cafe, we want to support it, and that's our local cafe, it'd be great if you put some investment there. So it's this reciprocity, it works both ways and by being responsive to those requests, that's how you're starting to develop shared values and shared kind of ways of working to balance in a sense that the imbalances that are there, so imbalance in equity. But also things, kind of calls that will come when people ask you for things, which are not the things that you think that people want. So and those things will be things like, I don't know, checking CVs or writing a letter of support for a funding application. That's not a funding application that we're on, necessarily, but it will support our community to do its own thing. So those kinds of requests. But also sometimes being asked Erinma, we want you to come along to something we don't know why, but we just want you to be there. And those moments are important too, can I give my time to be present? I can't always do it. But back then, it was really important if I was invited to something to see that I could turn up, it's not that I'm going there to make a speech but I'm going there to witness what's going on in that community. So often, if I was found, I don't know complaining about something, people would remind me Erinma, you know, come down to this next meeting and I would be in a room supporting people who were, you know, preparing to go and have job interviews or going down to the job centre, and I was supporting them to go through their CVs and things like that. And so actually, that's really grounding me. So being grounded, really. So getting to that kind of grounded level, where what you think people want, you get to what they actually want. And that takes time to get to that point. But also an equaling of power, you know, sharing power, sharing resource, that equitable moment really

**Matthew Reason**

Avoiding it always being a transactional exchange. To be present in the room and to listen and to see what comes from that, if anything. When you're talking there about the openness of the university, with colleagues we've been using the phrase, which isn't a great phrase, about the porousness of the campus or porous University. We have a project at York St John, it's been running for many years called Converge, which works with people in the history of mental health service use or mental ill health. And one of the major changes that has been the quite almost intangible shift where on the campus on Wednesdays and other days Converge are in the studios or in the classrooms and it's just become a norm for the campus to be opened up in some ways to other people from the community to come in and be present in different ways and I think that's kind of a very subtle kind of shift in terms of the university culture in terms of what the campus is and how it relates to the wider city of York, the wider people in the city. And that's something we're kind of interested in replicating and some other projects so I've got an ongoing relationship with a learning disability theatre company called Mind the Gap, and we're exploring ways in which we can open up our campus to their students and their artists. So they come and they audit modules or they come and they participate in workshops with our students. And if nothing else, it's to diversify, who are campus is for, who's seen on that campus, in that sense, and to open it up. And again, sort of, there's an image sometimes of universities being closed off places and to turn it around so it faces the city and is open to people to come in and use all sorts of different purposes.

**Erinma Ochu**

Building on that, I mean, maybe Manchester Greater Manchester is situated slightly differently. The university is part of the city, Manchester Metropolitan campus, it directly spills onto kind of people's back doors. And you know, if you if you go down Oxford Road, businesses and community outlets are all around there. And so it's very much integrated and intertwined. But having so many students, it's really important to think about how those students feel like they contribute and are part of the city. And so very recently, there's been this kind of civic duty, I don't want to say deal, but partnership between all of the universities in Greater Manchester, and the Mayor, so for us to work on common areas of interest, whether that's about the digital economy, or sustainability. And actually, it then kind of holds the universities a bit to account in terms of that civic duty. I do hope it really is about how the whole of Greater Manchester works together for its citizens and of course, its non-citizens, and that universities become a powerful driver for that social and environmental justice.

[Musical Interlude]

**Matthew Reason**

I guess the fear, or the cynicism, is that sometimes it's about collecting recognition or collecting badges or, you know, there's movements towards that, in what sense is a genuine shift or a genuine movement. I think certainly a university is an anchor institution with its and its community, it can't leave in that sense. And therefore that should tie it down into and into, and it belongs to that community in a quite profound way. At least hopefully, that's in some sense what we should be moving towards. I also wonder if as well as the commons in some sense the other connected idea is around the value and the particularity of the knowledge that is then produced within that commons and the value of co-produced knowledge, or the value of recognising different forms of knowledge in particular. And clearly, there's a social justice element to that in terms of we know the histories of what knowledge universities have traditionally recognised and valued and held up. And you know, the engagement with other forms of knowing whether that's practical or embodied or tacit. I'm thinking of Donna Haraway, who has the distinction between the view from above the kind of the academic knowledge, and the view from the body, the view from the ground, in some senses, different forms of knowledge. And I know that's something that you're also interested in maybe particularly also with different forms of indigenous knowing and other forms of that. So I wonder how does the commons relate to social justice in relation to knowledge as well?

**Erinma Ochu**

I guess this links back to the previous point about whether its people are doing things that's orientating them in the right direction towards a commons, as opposed to private companies kind of hoovering up what they can, and coming together to do that, because institutions, universities, are essentially also businesses. But I do think that Greater Manchester does have a history and our universities do have a history of having this civic duty and our mayor actually, in Greater Manchester, you know, when the pandemic happened, kind of really put his foot down. And said, actually, if we're going to have this levelling up, and being able to ensure that businesses and communities can operate through the pandemic, we need more investment. And so that's also a north/south divide across the country. And so I think there is something about this civic duty that sits within being a city and what that actually looks like and how you fight for your citizens. But to kind of go back to your point about kind of everyday knowledge: stories and storytelling, I think is really crucial. I've done a lot of work with artists, and at the moment I'm exchanging practice with some incredible artists who are doing great work, where they’re, again, they're working with technologies that might be used for some purposes, but they're using them to ask questions about the world that we live in, and using creative practice to explore that. And so, you know, for me, I think storytelling is a key one of passing on knowledge across generations. I've just been reading James Baldwin's ‘Last interview and Other conversations’, and you know it's really wonderful to read that he was listening to Bessie Smith's music as he was writing his novel, ‘No one knows my name’, whilst in Switzerland surrounded by a culture that didn't love him and wrote some of his best work. And so actually, you know, music and storytelling and the arts, these are kind of great ways into creating knowledge, sharing knowledge and thinking about what are our values, what is the world that we want? And who do we want to be part of that? How can we extend beyond our kind of academic disciplines to create what you might call friendship with other people. So, you know, sometimes the disciplinary way of working doesn't allow that friendship, whether it's between institutions, because we're competing for funding, or sometimes communities enable that possibility that friendship can be extended and we will try and figure out a way to get along. So for me, you know, one of the wonderful things has been people that I've met who have become friends. So friendship as part of that commons, if you like.

Donna Haraway, I mean, she's interesting, but you know, I wouldn't necessarily pick her as my standout person, when I've got the likes of Angela Davis and Ruha Benjamin and James Baldwin as scholars who've been operating in that mode, but also people now that I've met who are kind of community organisers like Anita Shervington who, you know, these are academics, scholars who are working in everyday settings, and we can have people as co-investigators on our on our research, it takes it in a completely different direction. So I think ways to do this could be, you know, how could I be a co-investigator, alongside my community partners, also, as co-investigators, and I have that on on some of my research projects, which I think you know, that's crucial. But how do you then institutionalise that inside UKRI that recognises that this is a way forward. And that's really important, because people like Addy Adelaine who, again, she runs her own organisation, she wrote this letter with ten black women, open letter to UKRI, that was saying, you know, you had this opportunity, you recognise that black people were dying from COVID-19, and you wanted to put across some funding and invest in that. But you know, you look at what's funded and not a single black scholar has been, or even a black scholar and community partners, have been funded on that fund. That's just wrong. And the fact that Addy, you know, sticks her head above the parapet and says this is wrong and corrals people together to say this is wrong and writes a letter that 1000s of people have signed, that is building a commons and a common knowledge about the hidden ways in which these structural challenges and the privileging of whiteness come about. And so we can look to UKRI and say, hey, this is wrong. And you know, we waited for a very long time to get a response from UKRI. But actually, we now need action, it's really crucial that action needs to come, because we're facing even more challenging times. Credit, you know, Addy is not going to get thousands or millions of pounds for doing what she does, she's done that labour for absolutely, for free, you know, that is free labour. But to me, that is crucial labour. And it should be reinvested in and there are 1000s of people like Addy across the UK who have been discounted by both the government, by our funders, and that's just wrong, because these are the people who've done that work. And that needs to be rewarded and to be recognised.

**Matthew Reason**

So you mentioned that in relation to the UKRI's COVID call and I think that alongside the climate crisis, are one of those issues that are highlighting inequalities in terms of who has been most affected by both the COVID pandemic, and who was most immediately first affected by the climate crisis. So therefore, it seems that those are also the areas which need the most kind of awareness that research needs to be conducted in a way that kind of has these elements of the commons and of social justice and of co-production, I guess, at their core, because otherwise the research isn't addressing the issues that are most immediately there. So I wonder if some more examples will be useful of research that you think does this well, in either of those areas, research that you think has that social justice at its core, and how that has, as a result, produced research that has reestablished a civic contract with the community and in particular, the communities who have been most immediately affected by these issues.

**Erinma Ochu**

There's lots that I could touch on, I mean, people like Dawn Edge at University of Manchester her culturally adapted work around mental health, you know, she developed relationships with the African and Caribbean population over time and partnerships to kind of do that work together and also build her research on the back of that, and, you know, make interventions and to get those interventions funded. That is like so crucial that you both develop those partnerships, and you get the funding and you also then co-author work with your community partners. I would you know, look at Dawn Edge's work where she's done that. I would look at people like Sarah Banks at Durham University and the ways in which she developed kind of ethical principles for community-university partnerships. So how do you ensure that it is equitable, and the best way to some extent to look at that is to reflect on how things worked and how decisions were made. And that means that then you can start thinking about, well, how do we go on to make decisions? The work that I'm doing now, to try and really rethink if I'm going to develop new research proposals, I've got funding from Wellcome and from NERC on this Engaging Environments project, and part of it for me is, how is it that we decide that we want to work together? And when do we say that we're doing a joint research proposal? What if, actually, some people are just working on their own projects, and you invest in the fact that people are doing that, and you share practice, and you exchange knowledge, and I'm working on my thing. So I'm working on a book at the moment on citizen science and whilst I'm working on that book, I'm also exchanging with artists who are kind of working with technology. That might lead to future funding proposals, but it might lead to them doing their own thing. I mean, they are doing their own thing. And so for me, it's that reciprocity, which is really crucial. And that moment when you both decide, okay, let's work together. And that has to come about in a way that feels right for the partner, and for the researcher. And it should be that people can say no. So one of the things that we brought into the Engaging Environments projects that I've also brought in my own research is that we have an evaluator, an independent evaluator, Tekiu, a knowledge exchange company, that creates a private space for the partners to discuss with the evaluator things that work and don't work. And then the PI, the lead researcher has to respond to those challenges. And so during the pandemic, I had to respond to what was coming out of the evaluation, to ensure that I could put in place actions that would reduce the impact of the Coronavirus on some over others. And, you know, to Hilary Geoghegan's credit, who's a professor at University of Reading, she's come back on the project, she's now back in charge, she's absolutely taking on board every single point that's come out of that evaluation. And part of that has been, you know, the researchers, we all need anti-oppression training, because the way that we've been trained in a disciplinary specialism doesn't mean necessarily as a scientist, or a social scientist, maybe social scientists might be a bit closer to this, that we're in a position where we know how to work with people whose lives have completely been devastated by something like a pandemic and you don't even realise that some of the things that you propose are not possible or feel oppressive, or will take people away from their families or their caring responsibilities. So it's absolutely critical in a kind of racially illiterate country, which Britain is, let's face it, our curricula are not diverse in any way, shape, or form, we don't teach about colonialism, for the most part, people don't have that knowledge. And so actually, we have to then rebalance that by thinking about anti-oppression. There's a lot that we need to do. But we need to create spaces to balance equity, to hear things that feel difficult and challenging, even for me, sound difficult and challenging and I have to then think, okay, what do we do, and actually often, the idea for what we do comes out of the conversation that the evaluators had, and it's all anonymous, so I don't know who said what, but it's really important and careful work to kind of craft this equity across these kinds of partnerships, because they're imbalanced from the framing of the research in the first place. You know, communities are best positioned to make decisions about their lives, but they often don't have the resources to follow through on some of those things that they would need to do to then be able to participate in research. So there's a crucial capacity building bit that needs to come ahead of co-creation.

**Matthew Reason**

That's really, really interesting. As you're speaking there, I'm thinking about a current project I have, which has an independent evaluator built into it. And I confess, actually, at the moment of writing that I wasn't necessarily sure of all the reasons why we were doing that. But the way you've articulated it there, I think, has been really useful in terms of thinking of some other ways in which we can we can think of that relationship to that. So that was that was fascinating. And I'm aware also, there's an interesting thing where you're talking the other image you used is that friendship which I think is also powerful. And one of my PhD students whose now a colleague, Catherine Heinemeyer, wrote in her PhD around storytelling, she wrote around friendship within that and I was just struck with that. But that also within friendship, you have the opportunities to say no. And the moment of decision making is often kind of obscure, you know, it happens naturally. But also at the same time as having that maybe to have that independent evaluator that moment of safe space, you're recognising that while it is built on trust, you shouldn't take that trust for granted. I think those two things together at once struck me. Anyway, I've learned something quite interesting and which will be immediately useful, I think for how I think about managing a project.

**Erinma Ochu**

That notion of safe space is key. And so Cindy Regalado, who's our evaluator, her PhD was very much focused around creating safe spaces in which knowledge, playful ways in which knowledge could be created and generated. But she also really looked at this cultural infrastructure, so how you build both the social and the cultural, which intersect with one another. And part of that is, you know, the relationships, the friendships, the processes, the ways that things are documented, the ways that decisions are made, and how that comes about, all of the things that we might sometimes take for granted because we might imagine that we're the ones who usually make all the decisions. And so you know, her work has been crucial. But she also introduced a decolonising element, which really starts with listening and creating a space in which people are not being judged for the things that are going on for them, whether that's the researcher or the community partner.

**Matthew Reason**

Yes, that's really, really interesting. And I am just also still thinking when you're talking there about friendships and decision making, is the current place where sometimes decisions are made in groups that don't have everybody within the room in some ways. And I suppose that's another thing for universities to be very aware of, is that decision making kind of gets held by smaller and smaller groups of people and to open that up would be really important. And I suppose that might be a closing section to talk about a bit about what do you think universities and maybe senior academics, like myself within universities, could or should be doing more of. A big question, I know and sort of wondering where that will go. But in terms of, you know, we hopefully want to engender, certainly within the Institute for Social Justice, we want to engender a social responsibility in the research we conduct, what would or could or should that look like and feel like?

**Erinma Ochu**

I mean, it's tricky one for me, because we're differently situated. So I can only really talk about what I would do. And you know, I'm not a professor yet. But at the same time, it doesn't stop me from doing certain things. And so I would encourage that, you know, if you're on panels and you believe in social justice, then you should be encouraging the funders who invite you to the panels to have community partners on panels making decisions that are going to relate to communities that they care and serve. I think that's absolutely crucial. That needs to be normalised. So you know, if there's a call, it should be normalised that we have community partners on panels. We should also be thinking about having more of an international perspective, you know, we need to have allegiance with most affected people, absolute solidarity with those people. Again, that means then we need to have international perspectives on panels, anything to do with sustainability, net zero, that's going to affect people in the what's traditionally called the Global South, those interests need to be represented, we won't best represent them born in Britain. And so you know, senior academics can think about their self-interest, put it to one side, and think about what's best for a planetary perspective. You know, people like Sylvia Wynter, talks about a planetary perspective, that's where we are, to think collectively as one planet, who's out of balance? I'd also say, you know, if you're thinking about who gets pushed through to apply for funding, is there a kind of hidden knowledge base around how that happens or those processes. People that are not showing up to the sessions where you talk about how to get funded, how do you reach those people who can't make it for whatever reason, to ensure that you are getting different people going through to funding. You know, I've suffered of being sifted out of funding that I really should be applying for. And so if you're a Research Dean, you know, that's my call for the Research Deans is to really think differently about who you're putting through to go for funding, because you're reducing the success of your organisation if you're putting through the wrong people, but also you're reducing the potential impact of that research with communities if it's not positioned from a situated perspective. I would say at my own institution, people like Professor Farida Vis, she set up, a bit like you've set up, a super network on anti-racism across our institution, we absolutely care about this. But the response didn't wait for money. People came together, and she instigated it. And that's a very different institution. And that's one that I'm proud to be part of and backing, that we really embed this across the whole of our institutions, on an intersectional perspective, you know, both anti-racism, absolutely anti-ableism, disability never gets a look in. So how we frame and how we position disabled scholars to be able to do the work they need to do and get the resources to do that, that's something that I need to get better at doing myself.

**Matthew Reason**

Thank you. I think, I think there's certainly things to think about and actually to do, from the very practical and very immediate, you know, if we carry on doing things the same way in terms of funding calls, for example, and that it's not surprising that nothing changes if we, if we always do it the same way. It's like the expectation of simply well, they didn't apply is is no longer at all an adequate response in terms of who gets funded or who gets promoted and things like that. And that cuts across for I think universities for recruitment, as well as for academic positions, and also recruitment for students as well. You know, in terms of that, if we carry on doing things the same way, then then nothing changes whatsoever. So kind of embracing and recognising that and then looking for ways of changing that seems absolutely vital.

**Erinma Ochu**

And you know, one thing people can do is, if you have precarious contracts, look who holds them and do something about them. At MMU they've absolutely, they've looked at those, they're doing something about it. And that's where it starts because if you're on a precarious contract, you often can't apply for funding. So it's like this carrot and stick situation. You need most funding, you need to have tenure, to be able to apply for the funding, maybe that needs to change. And we need to think about what it means to be an academic differently, and to be more mobile and to be a bit more nomadic, but those precarious contracts are absolutely one of the challenges and so is teaching, you know, I'm absolutely blessed that I've got research leave thanks to my head of school, Derek Bousfield, you know, but that needs to be scaled. It can't just be it works for Erinma. Again, Dawn Edge, she taught me, Erinma, it's great that this works for you, but how do you scale it and that scaling comes from collectivism, collective actions, you know, in York University, in Manchester Met, in Durham University is probably down the road for you, you know, at University of Reading, you know, absolutely now is the moment when universities are put to the test and how we respond to this pandemic and how we move out of it with the people that have invested in us and that's the public.

**Matthew Reason**

I think that's a lovely and powerful note to end on. Thank you very much for joining me I want to really thank Erinma for a rich and engaging and provocative responses. Certainly things which I'm going to think about and I think going to act upon and and engage with. So thank you very much to listening to this. It's been a great conversation, one of a series of podcasts we're doing and we look forward to following this up maybe in future discussions, but certainly, hopefully in immediate action, responses and engagement with these issues. So thank you very much for listening.

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