Live Q & A | Doing Research Assessment in Indonesia

These are live questions and answers that were asked during the webinar, 'Bridging the research gap and improving development policies' held on 14 July 2020, based on the results of the Doing Research assessment in Indonesia. The answers have been edited for clarity, and to maintain anonymity. The answers are provided by the team that implemented the DRA in Indonesia.

Q. When you talk of the 'bureaucratic' nature of reforms or research processes in the HEIs, for example, what does that mean for the research?

A. It means research production are dependent on centralized ministries under the Ministry of Research and Technology formerly, and nor HEIs are under the Ministry of Education and Culture. All universities are subject to Ministerial regulation (top-down). Although there are efforts to carry out reform in the form of promoting university autonomy, such a culture shaped through decades has yet to transform as expected by the government and academics.

Q. Ministries and Government Agencies have Research and Development Units/Offices. How do you see their roles in the research actor configuration?

A. Such research units, while important, are mandated to carry out applied research for the unit they are under. We posit that sound policy making requires quality, academically rigorous research. Usually in such processes, peer review is crucial as it elevates the quality of analysis. Collaboration and intersections with academic/basic research is important, and this requires the coordination of multiple organizations and actors—in which clear policies that ensure this is mandatory.

Q. We have been campaigning to convince our fellow researchers to incorporate some degree of transparency into their research for the last three years. We have a concern that some research that we produced is less credible – we have a hunch that questionable research practices are extremely common here in Indonesia. We initially wanted to swamp the university administrators' mindset to swamp their focus in improving quality – not quantity of (metric-based) research outputs. However, we're getting really exhausted (nearly frustrated, even) since we've been facing enormous resistance from everywhere – even from our fellow junior researchers – making us constantly question whether our efforts were worth it. Would you say something that making us less pessimistic about the future of Indonesian research ecosystem?

A. We think we need to change our gaze on the 'structure' (regulations on research organizations), although we face it daily, into what we can do as active 'agent'. Collaborate with like-minded people. Build a network.

Q. By regulation, research based policy (*naskah akademik*) is required for every policy in central and local governments in Indonesia. How can this arrangement improve the quality of the interaction between policy and science in Indonesia?

A. The academic paper (*naskah akademik*) is a requirement for drafting laws in Indonesia. It is legally procured by the ministry suggesting the law draft, and they do so by either appointing a university or a team of scholars. In that, it is a government-commissioned research. Assuming that the government has the interest to obtain a critical analysis regarding law drafts, such an arrangement certainly encourages a science and policy connection. However, in situations of high-political pressure, such arrangements can shape client relationships between the commissioning ministry and the researchers.

Q. I'm wondering about the barriers to research production. If bureaucratic reforms are slow, it means there are at least some efforts going on. So, isn't it just a matter of time before the bureaucratic challenge goes away? Could the perception of bureaucratic challenges be a symptom of impatience on the part of researchers?

A. Based on our research, there seems to be deregulation (encouraging universities to generate their own income from the student market and the private sector) together with the re-regulation of universities (audit culture). The administrative load of research (collecting receipts, procuring vendors, etc) in human hours supersedes research labor. Data shows that funding is received through government grants (follows an annual budget year) could be received by the researcher on July, and the research report must be submitted within the same budget year or in November. This leaves three months for the researcher to actually do research.

Q. I totally agree with your point on 'linearity', where in fact policy problems are multi-disciplinary, even multi-dimensional. What is the current status of this 'linearity' requirement in higher education system in Indonesia?

A. This 'linearity' remains. For example, to upgrade to Guru Besar (or Professor), the reviewers would see whether educational background (S1, S2 and S3) is linear, and whether the works (through publication and all) undertaken focus on one expertise.

Q. How can 'audit culture' be approached to strike a balance between financial accountability of research funding and promote research engagement/productivity?

A. Financial accountability could be achieved through requiring a researcher to explain the justifications of the expenses as they would present their research findings. What we see in the findings is financial compliance: following the administration rules and purchasing goods and services as the regulation permits. This decreases the quality of data in social sciences.

Q. In your opinion, could this audit culture be merely one of 'symptoms' of an overall research system that is not conducive &/ lack of incentive to promote (good) research. The lack of incentive, conducive environment, as a result, then highlight some downsides like audit culture that turns into a reason for doing less research?

A. Audit is actually just one technology to create an efficient, accountable system that could be standardized and disciplined. It should not hold back research. But because it focuses more on financial accountability, rather than on quality. So maybe designing technology that focuses more on quality would do?

Q. Do hindering factors such as bureaucratization, mono-discplinarity only happen in social science research but not in natural sciences? What make different between both of them?

A. The issues of bureaucratization and mono-disciplinarity also apply to exact sciences and engineering. However, specialization is a strength in such sciences, such as bio-engineering and food sciences (although environmental sciences, as they also deal with people and committees, also find it challenging to carry out inter-disciplinary collaboration). In the social sciences and humanities, social problems tend to be inter-disciplinary while the way the sciences are structured in mono-disciplinarity.

Q. I have a question around the solution of research mentorship. What mechanisms exist for facilitating that mentorship? How accessible are those opportunities to Indonesian social science researchers?

A. Academic mentorship is currently encouraged through joint-research collaboration, scholarships for advanced degrees, visiting fellowships, to name a few. This could be achieved through government to government joint funding (such as Nusantara and Newton), or through university collaboration.

Q. Is the Report 45 that Fred just mentioned available online?

It should be on https://www.aipi.or.id

Q. In Indonesia, every local government has their own Research and Development agencies, however, it has never been capitalized. In fact, these agencies clearly tend to be overlooked. My assumption is that there is no support from the government itself to propel these R&D agencies to produce Evidence Based Policy Making (EBPM). My question is what efforts have been and will be utilized from central government and academic researchers to build an EBPM environment to improve policy-making in Indonesia?

A. There are researches that advocate this research-policy nexus, as well as building capacities for this purpose. For example, the Indonesian government has been working together with the Australian government through a 'Knowledge Sector Initiative.'

Q. What needs to be corrected in Indonesia's universities system to improve the academic ecosystem within university? In Indonesia a lecturer is required to do three tasks at once (teaching, researching, and community service) most of their time and resources are consumed for teaching, not to mention if he/she has a structural position at the University. Lecturers have very limited time for doing research.

A. The report has covered this topic, as have a few earlier publications. However, to make it clear-cut and to put it in a nutshell, the career progression in university needs a fundamental reform: of credits, of works. The system of '*kum*' needs to be revisited, if not abandoned. Collaboration needs to be promoted. The path for research vs the path for lectures should be balanced and an academic can chose which part s/he wants to undertake. Please do read the full report.

Q. 'Research is not a priority in this country' is a very strong message. When a directorate at the Ministry of Health initiates a collaboration with UGM, they prefer to use *kajian* rather than *penelitian* (research) since *penelitian* is the domain of Badan Litbang Kesehatan, and not the directorate. Any comment about interpreting the term research at the Ministry or by the bureaucracy?

A. Exactly, that reflects the problem. As research is never prioritized, it is never mainstreamed – and it is easy to be misunderstood, or mistaken. What I meant to say was research is not a national, country/government's development priority, unlike investment, infrastructure, etc.

Q. Can you guarantee that if we have more 'gender-equality,' then things will be better?

A. More diversity, we think, leads to more dispersed power among researchers. Fundamentally, equity or redistribution of power. Such concentrations of power take a gender, religious, ethnic, racial and many other social elements. Power imbalances do not end with gender-balance. What is needed is keeping the academia as diverse as can be.

Q. Should knowledge be common (goods), especially to address the issue of gaps in research quality across different countries to boost the quality and the use of evidence and knowledge to inform development policy and program?

A. Yes. Rizqy Amelia Zein is the advocate for this Open Science.

Q. Actually, frustration will be reduced if researchers, particularly in Universities, can join the consortium of national research priorities, especially for social sciences and humanities. It will become bigger and start influencing the policy of national agencies.

A. Dengan senang hati Ibu. Would gladly join. Thank you very much.

Q. I think, freedom of research is a policy that exists at the University when funds come from the state (apparently from the ministry of research and technology), but actually anything can be researched, it really depends on innovation, and funding can be from anywhere. But, that is not a national policy in research, especially social research.

A. Right. One must know exactly whom to talk to within the bureaucracy, because by only talking among researchers, we will never be heard. We have done it, slowly and surely.

Q. How has COVID impacted the funding support for some of the mechanisms that you describe? Is government support still available for social science research that is not directly related to the virus? Are these entry points still supported right now?

A. Research funding has been focused on Covid response. Due to the pandemic, other issues are currently deprioritized.

Q. The report mentions new restrictions to foreign researchers. Your report could also add that foreign research funders require clearances from LIPI to provide funding to local researchers. Would you think all these regulations or administrative steps are part of much larger trend against research support from outside Indonesia?

A. Thank you for the suggestion. We do not imply that Indonesia is against research support from outside Indonesia. By referring to restriction to foreign researchers, we argue that it potentially restricts international collaboration and thus deepening academic insularity that is already existing.

Q. Related to issues around international researchers and connections, is there more acceptability of regional connections, and participation in regional networks and consortiums? Does ASEAN have a role in promoting these collaborations (exchange programs, visiting researchers and so on to share within the region)?

A. ASEAN does have a role, especially with mobility programs. But the nature of international network and collaboration remains individually established and then the process of institutionalization will usually follow.