

The Ethics of Research Co-Production With Global South Partners in an Age of Government Automation and Algorithmic Visa Regimes: A View From the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Public authorities are increasingly deploying automated and algorithmic systems to support decision-making, often in the interests of efficiency and cost-saving. However, people in vulnerable situations often bear the brunt of errors that arise when these systems are at fault or used incorrectly. This paper presents a brief vignette and discussion illustrating how issues of data and algorithmic justice impact on co-produced geographical research, looking critically at the relationship between North–South collaboration and the UK government's use of algorithms to carry out public administration functions, specifically in the administration of visa applications by project partners from the Global South. The problem is outlined in the wider context of government automation, and questions for further investigation are raised concerning accountability and research ethics.

This paper offers a brief case vignette and contextual discussion of the relationship between North–South collaboration in geographical research and the UK government's use of algorithms to carry out public administration functions such as the assessment of visa applications from project partners based in the Global South.¹ After relating the vignette in Section 1, we examine the automated tools used by the Home Office (Section 2) and outline the problem in the wider context of algorithmic administration and some associated scandals (Section 3). In Section 4, we raise questions about accountability and research ethics for further investigation.

1 | Case Vignette

The co-author Westaway was project lead on an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded research project

entitled *Other Everests: Commemoration, Memory and Meaning and the British Everest Expedition Centenaries, 2021–2024*. This was a research network that engaged with the centenary of the post-war British Mount Everest expeditions of 1921–1924 (UKRI 2022). It brought together international scholars, archivists, curators, and learned and professional societies to critically reassess the legacy of the Everest expeditions and to re-evaluate the symbolic, political and cultural status of Everest in the contemporary world (Gilchrist et al. 2024). One of its key objectives was to develop the methodologies and partnerships that would enable the network to begin to research the hidden histories of the Indigenous high-altitude labour force on these early British Everest expeditions and establish relationships with research co-partners from the Greater Himalaya region. Westaway worked with the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) and project partners in India to develop *Other Everests* public engagement projects, including

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an exhibition in Kalimpong, West Bengal. The RGS-IBG has had a long-standing commitment to working with communities in the Global South and diaspora groups whose histories are contained within their archives (RGS-IBG 2025). He engaged with a group of young scholars from Kalimpong who specialise in researching and preserving colonial-era archives in and around this town and Darjeeling. All the pre-war British Everest expeditions departed from the Darjeeling/Kalimpong area, travelling via Sikkim to Tibet.

Westaway collaborated with these Indian colleagues to curate an exhibition in Kalimpong that would tell the story of the Indigenous high-altitude workers who facilitated these expeditions in the 1920s. The exhibition combined oral history and archival research that the Indian colleagues undertook in Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim, combining this material with archival images from the RGS-IBG.

To ensure equity of access to archival resources and curatorial expertise for these Indian partners, the RGS-IBG arranged for them to have online access to RGS-IBG digitised collections. Westaway also developed a two-day inaugural project workshop at the RGS-IBG's London premises to which they were invited. Given the nature of this archive, with its roots in late imperial British governance and colonial power structures, the visit formed part of the *Other Everests* and RGS-IBG's commitment to widening access to archival collections and the spaces in which they are held, and to extending the hermeneutics of care to include not just the collections in the archive but also the very communities whose histories feature in those collections.

Six Indian colleagues travelled from Kalimpong to Kolkata in late 2024 to apply for standard UK visas to attend the workshop, with letters of support from the RGS-IBG and University of Lancashire. Five of them had their visa applications rejected by the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) service in Kolkata working on behalf of the Home Office. UK visas are issued in Kolkata by VFS Global, to whom UK Visas and Immigration have outsourced their responsibilities (VFS Global 2026). The applicant who was successful, 'B', had travelled to Kolkata on a different day, prior to the other five, who travelled on the same day and received similar rejection letters that appeared to be standardised. The reason given for the five rejections was that these Indian colleagues were all deemed to be 'at risk of remaining' in the United Kingdom. The letters all stated that the applicants were rejected on the basis of having no dependents in India, even though one of them, 'R', is married and had submitted his marriage certificate. All five letters also included self-employment as a reason for rejection, even though one of them, 'T', is permanently employed as a schoolteacher and had submitted his government-issued proof of employment.²

This refusal to issue travel visas to Indian academic colleagues had the potential to undermine the trust required to deliver this type of collaborative research project with partners in the Global South. When developing the research proposal, Westaway had integrated ethical governance structures defined by *The Trust Code: A Global Code of Conduct for Equitable Research Partnerships* (TRUST 2023). This global code of conduct has been adopted by the European Commission on all their research funding portfolios, including the European Research

Council and by major scientific publishers like Nature Portfolio (TRUST 2021). It provides an ethical framework for working with partners in resource-limited settings from the Global South and is governed by four principles: fairness, respect, care and honesty. This formed part of the *Other Everests* project's endeavour to implement an ethical research framework that attempted to embed decolonial research principles (Gascoigne et al. 2025).

The refusal to issue visas impacted on the *Other Everests* project's ability to abide by the Trust Code in a number of ways. Firstly, the reasons given for refusal implied that Indian colleagues represented a 'risk of remaining' in the United Kingdom, in effect of becoming illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom. Article 15 of the Trust Code deals with the stigmatisation of research partners as a result of participation in research projects. Indian colleagues' visa rejection not only represented a professional setback and disappointment, but it also stigmatised them as being a potential risk for becoming illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom. As noted by Schroeder et al. (2025, 10), Global South academics are 'hit...particularly hard when global collaborations or conferences are most relevant to those from lower-income countries, and when the inequities intersect with, and even amplify, perceptions of disrespect'. An African researcher denied a visitor visa to attend a biodiversity conference in the EU wrote in the journal *Nature*: 'My experience left me feeling demoralized, embarrassed and insulted by the implication that I and people like me couldn't be trusted to attend a conference without outstaying our welcome' (Owusu-Gyamfi 2024). Querying the process is also difficult, as pointed out by the Royal Society (2023):

A lack of opportunities to communicate with UKVI increases negative experiences of the application process. Applicants and hosts said they have been unable to find a webchat or phone number to speak to a visa official to clarify issues, resulting in confusion and a more time-consuming process overall [...] The opportunity afforded by UKVI to raise a query online for £2.74 is perceived to be unsatisfactory, as it offers automated replies [...]

(Royal Society 2023, 17)

Secondly, the Indian colleagues were out of pocket on their travel and visa costs incurred in travelling to Kolkata to obtain visas. Research collaborations with Global South partners need to ensure that they do not impose costs on collaborators that they cannot afford and from which they do not derive any benefit. Governed by the Trust Code principle of 'Fairness', Westaway spent months trying to find sources of funding to reimburse this group of colleagues for their visa costs, which could not be paid for out of the AHRC project grant. Due to the refusal to issue UK visas, the planned in-person workshop in London had to be cancelled, denying Indian colleagues the opportunity to both experience the physical archives and to foster closer links with the project's Curatorial Advisory Board. The denial of academic mobility to this group of scholars from the Global South threatened to damage the trust necessary to co-curate the exhibition, delayed the project timeline and imposed additional obstacles to

the project's compliance with ethical guiderails put in place by the Trust Code.

Work for this article was done in collaboration with our Indian colleagues who were asked to share their perspectives in their own words and be included as co-authors of the piece. While they consented to their stories being told in the article, they decided not to be included as co-authors, raising concerns over the potential impact of this on future visa applications to the United Kingdom and the possibility of censure from the Indian Government. In the context of the harmful and discriminatory process and ethno-politics of the region, they did not feel comfortable being named. This has led to Global South scholars being spoken for by Global North scholars, undermining the ethos of the *Other Everests* project.

2 | Automation in Visitor Visa Decisions by the UK Home Office

Even before automation was possible, discrimination and exclusion were central features of global mobility systems and visa processes, being rooted in long-standing global hierarchies. The underlying sources of discrimination lie in political, legal and institutional structures that predate automation. The existence of automation and algorithmic processing can intensify these existing forms of bias while enabling governments to more easily escape public accountability and avoid transparency. Being on the receiving end of such processing can be bewildering, as noted by an academic with Egyptian nationality whose 9-year-old son was denied a visa to accompany her to the United Kingdom for her residency and completion of her doctorate at the University of Oxford:

When I viewed my son's visa refusal, I was shocked. I wondered, in agony, if an algorithm made the decision. I had meticulously provided all the required documents [...] To make sense of the refusal decision, I desperately thought it might be a mistake of algorithmic calculations or an AI software program, as I knew they are used to make residency selections in some countries [...]

(Murrey and Hassan 2024, 14)

Although we have not visited the visa centre in Kolkata ourselves, and do not know for certain how the decisions or letters were produced, there is sufficient evidence in the public domain to indicate that visitor visa decisions like these are being algorithmically processed via the Home Office's 'Complexity Action Routing System – Visits', or CARS(V). This system automates the categorisation of applicants. An inspector's report on the operations of this system indicates it operates under a Ministerial Authorisation 'providing for the more rigorous examination of applications from certain nationalities' using nationality-based risk profiles (ICIBI 2023). Combined with the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation by UK public bodies to make decisions around delivering public services with little transparency about implementation or judicial review of legality (Thomas and Tomlinson 2025), there is concern that visa

regimes may be prone to racial profiling that operates to restrict the mobility of scholars from the Global South (UN Office of the High Commissioner 2024).

The system used before CARS(V), called Global Visa Risk Streaming (GVRS), was withdrawn by the Home Office in 2020 when campaigners launched a lawsuit alleging it was discriminatory. But CARS(V) appears to operate in a similar way, also potentially resulting in discrimination. The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI 2023) found misuse of CARS(V) by Home Office staff, a misunderstanding of what the system is telling them and factual errors that 'did not reflect the true circumstances of the case' (35). Worryingly, the inspector notes that some staff using CARS(V) appear to believe that it is the only barrier preventing fraud or criminality, and if someone is let through who should not be, there is 'nothing that can be done'. This belief is wrong in law and in fact, thwarting the application of 'meaningful discretion' by humans (Elyounes 2021). It increases the propensity among human decision-makers to reject applicants who have been marked by CARS(V) as 'complex' in its nationality profiling. In 2021, the UK Government published an Ethics, Transparency and Accountability Framework for automated decision-making (ADM) as guidance for civil servants, which states:

Scrutiny should be applied to all automated and algorithmic decision-making. They should not be the go-to solution to resolve the most complex and difficult issues because of the high-risk associated with them. [...] Algorithmic risks include, but are not exclusive to: input data, including biased, outdated datasets; algorithm design, including flawed assumptions and bias logic; output decisions, including incorrect interpretation; technical flaws, including insufficient rigour in development and testing; usage flaws, including integration with existing operations; [and] security flaws, including deliberate flawed outcomes.

(UK Government 2023)

Given the ICIBI's findings and the case discussed here, it seems likely that CARS(V) carries several of these risks which have been borne out in errors that have impacted people adversely. Yet, to date, it is unclear what is being done to mitigate these risks. We are operating in an environment of information asymmetry where we do not know how these systems are developed, functioning, monitored and augmented.

3 | Fundamental Rights and Public Sector Automation

When restricted border regimes remove human intervention and scale up, there is a heightened risk of injustice. Though the extent to which these regimes are now using AI is unclear, the government's zeal for AI (UK Government 2025) means that it is increasingly likely to be deployed. Biases in the datasets used to train an AI tool come through in its outputs (Chiao 2019; Kusner and Loftus 2020), especially when it comes to ADM about migrants, who 'have been the main targets of experimentation when

it comes to the deployment of new technologies' (Ghezelbash and Kinchin 2025, 202). Institutions can outsource uncomfortable decisions to algorithms in black box systems, which can 'ignore relevant evidence that they have not specifically been designed to take into account' and 'unbeknownst to their designers, rely on morally inadmissible evidence' (Grant et al. 2025, 63).

The Public Law Project's (2026) database shows that the UK government has been using ADM systems since at least 2011. Of the 55 ADM systems in the database, 33 involve the Home Office—28 of them exclusively used by the Home Office and 5 also used by other agencies. The database gives a score of 'low transparency' to 27 of them, and 'medium transparency' to 6. Those rated as medium include the aforementioned GVRs 'visa streaming' tool withdrawn in 2020. CARS(V) is not yet on the database as of June 2026. More than 80% of the 55 tools in the database 'were only uncovered or more fully understood through the submission of Freedom of Information requests' (Public Law Project 2026).

The Home Office's practice of using algorithms to triage applications for visitor visas via GVRs was investigated by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants and the algorithmic transparency organisation FoxGlove (Threipland and Rickett 2020; Ozkul 2023). These two groups asserted that the process was inherently discriminatory because people with 'suspect nationalities' were given a higher risk score, triggering more scrutiny and this bias then became part of a feedback loop where the decisions were reused by the algorithm as inputs, strengthening the same discrimination in future applications. The Home Office refused to disclose a full list of the risk factors of the GVRs following Freedom of Information requests by the two groups, redacting for example a 'question tree' that would possibly have enabled the groups to understand the risk factors that the GVRs used (Ozkul 2023, 21). They launched a legal challenge against the Home Office, but in August 2020, before the court date, the government stopped using the GVRs.

The UK government has indicated that neither GVRs nor CARS(V) uses artificial intelligence, for example, in the answer to a written Parliamentary question by Minister for Migration and Citizenship Seema Malhotra MP in 2024: 'CARS(V) does not use AI and each visit visa application is decided on a case-by-case assessment against the requirements of the Appendix V Immigration Rules' (Malhotra 2024).³ This surety is surprising given that 'artificial intelligence' is not clearly definable and has an 'intrinsic ambiguity' (Lea 2023) which is so pronounced that there is an entire sub-discipline, Explainable AI, dedicated to tackling this problem (Clinciu and Hastie 2019). And with 'automated routing' in the name of the system, it seems odd to say that claims are assessed 'case by case'. Automated routing means that individuals with certain nationalities become more flagged, and therefore are more negatively scrutinised and rejected. The information about CARS(V) in the government's own Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard Hub, a public database implemented in 2023 to promote openness with respect to the tools being used by public institutions (UK Government 2024a), describes the system as 'a semi-automated workflow routing solution which identifies the likely complexity of visitor visa applications based on applicants' declared answers within the visa application form'

(UK Government 2024b). The page states that CARS(V) 'uses algorithms in their most basic form, it does not decide applications and does not use machine learning', and that CARS(V) is 'hosted on Microsoft database and interacts with the Proviso case working platform which is hosted on the FCDO IT platform Firecrest'. The Firecrest platform originated in 2010, initially built and managed by US-based multinational Hewlett Packard (GovTech 2010).

The Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard Hub also explains that CARS(V) has undergone an equality impact assessment and data protection impact assessment. It highlights the possibility of 'an application being given the incorrect complexity' and 'the automation not identifying the correct outcome in the same way that a caseworker might' but asserts this would not affect a decision. It claims that 'the routing outcome and decision outcomes are not related'. However, if automated routing flags the risk level, and humans are reluctant to go against it (e.g., believing that they could face a reprimand for doing so), then it would seem a routing pathway strongly influences the decision. Therefore, the claim that they are not related would appear to be misguided. It is doubtful whether the Transparency Hub could be seen as entirely impartial, given that it is part of the Government Data Service which is very keen to promote AI in public administration (UK Government 2025). Moreover, this is the same claim that the Home Office made about the previous system, GVRs (Ozkul 2023, 21). Finally, the government admits on the Transparency Hub page that 'there are risks of false positives' due to the use of CARS(V), but that these are mitigated against by a human decision-maker who assesses the application later in the process. The Transparency Hub says the routing is to ensure that the request goes to the right level and seniority of decision-maker; if 'complex' cases go to more senior reviewers, the argument is that this is more efficient. The confounding issue here is that nationality is synonymous with the ill-defined term 'complexity', so that routing triggers more scrutiny and the possibility that reviewers may see it as a fast track to visa rejection that they are unable or unwilling to challenge.

Regardless of the government's current position that CARS(V) does not use AI (notwithstanding the unclear distinction between ADM and AI), there is a strong direction of travel in public authorities to apply all types of AI to administration (UK Government 2025). Government rhetoric often characterises AI as objective and scientific, but as Crawford and Paglen (2019) point out, datasets used to train AI contain 'politics, ideology, prejudices and all of the subjective stuff of history' as 'the rule rather than the exception'.

People who are in vulnerable circumstances are likely to have less access to redress when governments deploy algorithms in ways that generate injustice (Thompson et al. 2024; Ghezelbash and Kinchin 2025). This can be seen in another example of a government using nationality as an indicator in an algorithmic system: the 2013–2019 Dutch childcare allowance scandal (Haitsma and Bouwmeester 2023). Here, the Dutch tax authority used an algorithm with a selection bias that led to parents with dual nationality being flagged as more likely to commit fraud, subjecting them to extra investigation. Such parents were also more often from minority ethnic groups. Because this flagging

happened automatically, departmental staff did not receive any details on the reasons behind it, making them unable to explain to parents why they were targeted and hence for the parents to seek appeal or redress.

Systems of automated public administration are rolled out on a huge scale and are costly to fix, which can make the impact of any errors or faults in their implementation and use widespread and long-lasting (Zouridis et al. 2020). Typically, these systems are aimed at delivering supposed efficiencies and cost-savings. They are often promoted by technology and compliance firms, opening up public administration to subcontracted services and platformisation, running the risk of regulatory capture, defined as when 'platforms exploit government's reliance on their resources' to increase their control over policymaking and regulations (Neudert 2023, 26). Government ministers view these automated systems as means of reducing reliance on human subjects. In 2025, UK Chancellor Rachel Reeves planned to cut thousands of civil service jobs (Morton and Howard 2025) while the Government was promoting the capabilities of AI to radically transform public administration. The irony here is that generating more data and performing more operations quickly results in larger quantities of data needing interpretation by humans. Reducing human oversight of ADM processes is likely to exacerbate adverse consequences.

In this administrative environment that is increasingly reliant on ADM the data subject is faced with little to no transparency, insufficient regulation (Murray 2024) and little practical recourse or redress. The British system of judicial review involves procedural obstacles that often bar cases involving automated and algorithmic operations by public authorities from reaching court (Thomas and Tomlinson 2025). In civil claims against a public authority in the United Kingdom, the claimant must pay for not only their own counsel but also potentially the government's costs, creating another barrier for people of ordinary means (Noseda 2021, 80). Access to justice in cases of errors in automated public administration demands not only extensive financial resources and courage, but also familiarity with one of the most complex and untested areas of law, and an ability to find out what the system actually does (Drake et al. 2022) from a government that avoids disclosure of how it uses even basic automation (Wallis 2021). In a study by Drake et al. (2022), participants said the British government appears 'actively hostile' to the means available for contesting ADM such as freedom of information, data protection and judicial review (265). Even where these obstacles are surmounted, the judiciary itself may be reluctant to find in favour of claimants when a large-scale system is involved because of the cost implications for government. Co-author Webster had her data protection claim against the UK tax authority thrown out of the High Court amidst arguments that it may threaten HMRC's entire cross-border data-sharing system (*Webster v HMRC* 2024).⁴

Beyond the United Kingdom, Canada's Chinook software—a 'half-baked automated interface'—led to a surge in francophone African immigrants' applications being denied in Québec (Chartier-Edwards et al. 2025). Often there is a rhetorical and performative ambiguity inherent in these implementations, where automated administration becomes a rationale in itself,

providing the illusion of control and camouflage for political decision-making (ibid.).

4 | An Algorithmic Re-Colonisation of Research?

Returning to the context of geographical studies, it is worth considering the ethical concerns that algorithmic bureaucracy raises for scholars who are attempting to co-produce research with colleagues in the Global South. Are opaque systems of automated public administration increasing the exclusion of Global South scholars from the intellectual commons (Gülel 2025)? Could the government's use of algorithms in ways that are less than transparent exacerbate these trends, limiting academic mobility and freedom of assembly?

There is a disconnect between what research funders require and what governments deem acceptable in terms of academic freedom of movement. Jazeel et al. (2022) note that 'if geography wants to forge a de- and anti-colonial disciplinary future, part of our work as geographers now must be to think carefully about how to critically engage with the discipline's spatial present' (516–517). This relies on collaboration and knowledge exchange between Global South and Global North researchers. As previously indicated, ethics frameworks like the Trust Code indicate that research partnerships with colleagues from resource-limited settings in the Global South should be governed by the principles of fairness, respect, care and honesty, and co-partners should not experience stigma as part of the research process. However, our ability to implement this ethos in our research is being challenged by the Home Office's use of automated and algorithmic systems to filter visa applicants.⁵ The impact of visa rejection on our Global South colleagues echoes the reactions of people who have been affected by other government automation scandals around the world: a sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement.

The issue of visa justice should concern all scholars who value collaborative and decolonial research practices but there is no doubt that in the current 'hostile' political environment in the UK regarding immigration, the issue of visa justice represents a 'wicked problem'; a problem that exceeds the capability of scholars, learned and professional societies, funders and higher education institution to address. The operation of current UK visa regimes that target people with particular nationalities through opaque automated means challenges our ability to undertake ethical and co-produced research with Global South partners (Royal Society 2023). We have raised awareness of this issue and submitted a response to the Co-Production Futures Inquiry (Vince-Myers 2025), and are in contact with the European Research Council funded PREPARED project (see Schroeder et al. 2025), which examines ethical frameworks for accelerated research in times of crisis such as global pandemics, and has reported to UNESCO on the issue of visa ethics (European Commission 2024). We welcome contact from colleagues regarding other systematic research that attempts to evaluate the impact of current UK visa regimes on the ability of the UK research community to satisfy both their ethical obligations and the funder-mandated requirements of their research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

¹ While we use the terminology ‘Global South’ and ‘Global North’ for convenience, we are aware that there is significant variation in these wide categories, including with respect to visa requirements. However, concerns around refinement of these concepts exceed our focus and available space.

² Our colleagues are only at the beginning of their careers. However, established, high-profile individuals have also been subject to this treatment by the Home Office, for example, the author Ibrahima Balde (Boffey 2025).

³ Two years later, a senior judge suggested that the Home Office relied on an AI-hallucinated document in an asylum case (Taylor 2026).

⁴ In a similar case in Belgium, the matter was referred to the European Court of Justice in December 2025 (Lamer 2025).

⁵ Other examples include dark-skinned British women having their passport photos rejected at a higher rate than lighter-skinned women (Ahmed 2020).

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