

Pursuing the public interface

Workshop at the RELU conference on *Knowledge exchange*, Manchester Conference Centre, 18th January 2006.

Background

Many people besides academic researchers are involved in academic research. Other people who shape the research agenda and who influence research processes include funding administrators, civil servants and politicians governing science policy, and business or policy stakeholders with a vested interest in the topic at hand.

Involving stakeholders can be a good way of ensuring that research has an impact and reaches an audience beyond the scientific community. However, there is also a strong case for involving members of the public who do *not* have a vested interest in the research process. Listening to people who are not 'professional stakeholders', scientists, policy makers, funding administrators or research subjects can:

- Help to ensure that research reflects public priorities;
- Act as a 'reality check' for researchers; and
- Feed novel ideas and know-how into the research process.

As a rule of thumb, the earlier on in the research and planning process that people become involved, the more they can contribute. The Research Councils, the Office of Science and Technology and the Council for Science and Technology are amongst the official bodies that now recognise the value of 'upstream' public engagement in scientific research.

This workshop explained the rationale for public engagement, summarised relevant policy and funding initiatives, and compared different methods. The session was split into two parts. There were three short presentations and then about 40 minutes for open discussion.

The presentations

Tom MacMillan (Food Ethics Council) introduced the session. He drew a distinction between public engagement and the kinds of researcher-stakeholder knowledge transfer activities that were the main focus of the conference. He gave an overview of the rationales for public engagement and the policy context. He ended by highlighting the challenges and opportunities for public engagement in research that current policy interest in this issue creates.

Jasber Singh (PEALS, University of Newcastle) discussed the range of public engagement methods that have been used, drawing on his experience as a practitioner. A distinction is often drawn between methods aimed at informing decision-making (such as a citizens' jury or a consensus conference) and methods used in social science research (such as focus groups). He explained how, at PEALS, recent work was challenging this divide, promoting a model of co-inquiry, whereby participants in processes such as a citizens' jury become active agents in a process of producing knowledge, rather than being passive subjects to be researched. He highlighted a number of challenges to successful public engagement including the difficulty of capturing the nuances of participants' discussions and the danger that organised stakeholder groups or sponsors come to frame how the issues are seen. He talked about the recent NanoJury run by PEALS which sought to address the second of these difficulties by enabling participants to set an agenda entirely of their own to address alongside the predefined topic of nanotechnology.

Simon French (Manchester Business School) spoke about the RELU-Risk project – of RELU's portfolio to date, it is the project that pays the greatest explicit attention to public engagement. He presented some of his team's initial findings, which included a broad overview of a very wide range of approaches to public engagement. He explained that, up until now, there had been few attempts to assess or compare different approaches to public engagement – nevertheless, he argued, what evidence there was suggested that some well-planned public engagement was better than none, almost whatever the method chosen.

The discussion

The participants in the session ranged from people who were unfamiliar with the notion of

public engagement in science to people with experience or well-formed views of it. The lively discussion included contributions from across this spectrum. Some of the points to emerge were:

- When designing a public engagement process, it is important to weigh up the importance of having a process that is representative compared with a process that is inclusive – either can be important but they demand different approaches.
- It can be difficult to recruit participants, though participants are often paid for their time in order to address this challenge.
- 'Participation' fatigue is only likely to be a problem in specific communities that are popular amongst researchers.
- Public engagement processes can help to value 'lay' (non-scientific) forms of knowledge, though they do not purport simply to erode the differences between scientific and non-scientific knowledge.
- How does public engagement help decision makers? Potentially by bringing issues onto their radar and helping them to gain an in-depth understanding of the social context in which their decisions will be taken. Public engagement processes should not substitute for accountable decision-making and they are likely to be more effective at opening questions up, rather than closing them down.
- The precautionary principle can be a useful point of entry for decision-makers seeking to understand how deliberative processes and scientific evidence can combine to inform their decision-making. One can think of deliberative processes involving members of the public as a way of gaining social intelligence about the public acceptability of particular risks/hazards, though this is admittedly a narrow view of the role for public engagement.

Participants received a delegate pack that included a copy of the Food Ethics Council's *Just knowledge?* report and a list of resources prepared especially for the workshop.

Tom MacMillan

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