

Science, ethics and citizenship:

How might we improve the practice and governance of scientific research to enhance community benefit?

Workshop Report

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A workshop organised by

PEALS (Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences) Research Centre,

Newcastle University

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Summary

PEALS, in collaboration with the Institute of Social Renewal, the Institute of Sustainability, and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, hosted an international workshop on Thursday, April 30th, at the Centre for Life, Newcastle.

The workshop, organised and chaired by Prof Erica Haines and Dr Alexis Paton, featured three brief case studies that illustrated possible ways in which to build practical relationships between science, ethics and citizenship. The case studies were “Dilemmatic spaces: Engaging citizens with researchers in dialogue about the ethics of scientific research” from Prof Sarah Banks (Durham), “Ethical issues in access to expensive medicines” from Prof Judith Goodship (Newcastle), and “Capturing our Coasts” from Dr Jane Delany (Newcastle). Small group discussions, including early career researchers, as well as more experienced colleagues, were then used to explore the triangular relationship between science, ethics and citizenship both at Newcastle University and internationally, from interdisciplinary perspectives.

The well-attended event brought together local academics and members of the wider community, as well as colleagues from the UK more widely, Canada, Sweden and Italy. Further activities, to build on the success of this workshop, were identified for future development and funding proposals. One of these activities was a report outlining the key findings of the workshop.

Key Findings

There were several key findings from the workshop which highlighted new questions or concerns that should be explored further within academic debate. Participants in the workshop discussed how difficult it is to define the three key terms clearly, despite their initial ‘obvious’ meanings; participants were also undecided whether broadening ‘science’ to ‘research’, and thus being inclusive of all disciplines, made the task of identifying the relationships between the three elements easier or more difficult. These fundamental questions suggest why it is so complex to operationalise the relationship. Overall there were six key themes that the workshop identified for further consideration.

1) ‘Citizenship’ is a term with many different meanings, both in specialist language in particular fields, as well as in various lay uses.

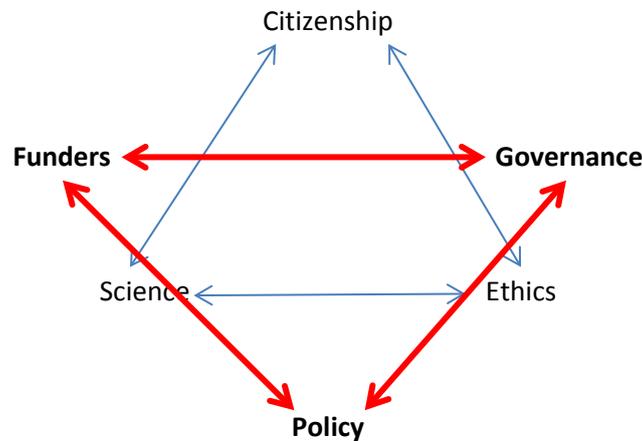
2) ‘Responsibility’ is a key aspect of the relationship between science, ethics and citizenship. This was understood in three ways within that relationship:

a) Science/scientists/researchers have a responsibility to citizens in both what they research and in conducting that research ethically; scientists have responsibilities as citizens as well as in their role as scientists.

b) Citizens have a responsibility to participate in scientific research, if possible, and to do so ethically.

c) Is there (or should there be) an ethics of citizenship?

3) There is a second, overlapping triad relationship that has significant influence on the relationship between science, ethics and citizenship: that is, the relationship between policy, funders and governance (see below). The impact that these two triads have on each other needs to be explored further to be better understood.



4) There is a policy and governance gap for ‘citizen scientists’. In particular can citizen science be regulated so that it is considered legitimate across all disciplines, and how is ‘ownership’ (of data, research findings, etc.) understood for co-produced research?

5) How, and should, institutions that engage in some or all aspects of the relationship between science, ethics and citizenship be held accountable? Especially since these institutions are an influential part of the relationship between policy, funders and governance.

6) Understanding and implementing the practical aspects and applications of the relationship is presently very difficult. What can be done to help clarify the relationship between all three areas and how can our understanding of that relationship result in further use in practice and/or policy?

Possible Next Steps

Participants at the workshop acknowledged that there were wider issues about the relationship between science/research, ethics and citizenship than this initial workshop could adequately address and were enthusiastic to continue the discussion further. Three possible ‘next steps’ were identified to continue the discussion and contribute to the wider academic and practice debates.

1) Organise a research network of interested participants who would like to continue sharing ideas, putting ideas into practice, receiving feedback, holding future workshops etc.

2) Submit a proposal for a special issue of a major journal (e.g. ‘Science, Technology and Human Values’) to develop and disseminate these discussions further

3) Organise, in conjunction with the research network, a larger, international conference to explore the relationship between science/research, ethics and citizenship and to address more systematically the challenges of developing practical ways of implementing the relationship to the benefit of wider communities.