

BBSRC and EPSRC joint response to the 'Nanodialogues: Engaging Research Councils' project

Introduction

In the wake of the GM debate, nanotechnology has been used as a test case for investigating the advantages of engaging the public early in the development of technologies. The Research Councils have been involved with three public engagement projects about this area of science in the last two years. These projects have not identified any particular societal issues unique to nanotechnology, but they have shown the difficulty of engaging people about science that is far from application.

The Research Councils work closely together through Research Councils UK and have complementary approaches to public engagement. BBSRC and EPSRC worked together for one project on nanotechnology and BBSRC was involved in two further activities: a citizen's jury called NanoJury and a public discussion event about bio-nanotechnology. NanoJury, to which BBSRC contributed some funding and which was run by the Policy, Ethics and Life Sciences Centre at the University of Newcastle, produced two recommendations relevant to the Research Councils related to continued public dialogue and openness in funding procedures. BBSRC took those recommendations forward in areas covered by its remit by developing a small exhibition and holding a public discussion meeting during the Edinburgh Science Festival in April 2005, and becoming involved with EPSRC in the Nanodialogues project. The discussion meeting at the Edinburgh Festival generated some interesting dialogue about safety and regulatory issues relevant to many new technologies, but was poorly attended. A similar problem arose during the Nanodialogues project, where although public participants were incentivised to attend there was very large drop out rate which affected the project's success.

The Nanodialogues project

The Research Councils aim to use a variety of techniques to gather information about public attitudes and concerns about their funded research. The Nanodialogues project, led by Demos, was a series of four experiments in public engagement about nanotechnology and was part funded by Government. BBSRC and EPSRC were involved in the second of the four experiments, which set out to answer two questions:

1. What are the sorts of questions that are likely to determine future public response to nanoscience and nanotechnologies?
2. What should public engagement with early technologies look like and how can Research Councils build public value into their work?

Demos devised a deliberative dialogue process, with opportunities for participants to meet scientists and Research Council staff, to address these questions. Participants were recruited from the Swindon area in two groups, one of full-time mothers with young children and the other young professionals with an interest in technology.

Recommendations

The report, which is published on Demos' website (<http://www.demos.co.uk/>) includes a number of recommendations and highlights some tensions. As is usual with these processes the participants welcomed the opportunity to engage, and supported good communication and more public engagement about nanotechnology. Participants recommended that public engagement should be embedded within Research Councils' decision-making structures. This is exactly what BBSRC aimed to achieve by creating Strategy Panels to advise its Council and Strategy Board. One of these Panels, the Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel

(<http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/about/structures/panels/society/>), advises upon and guides our public engagement strategy. The Panel comprises leading educationalists, social scientists, ethicists and those with expertise in consumer, animal welfare and environmentalist issues. The Panel has considered the report of the Nanodialogues project and endorses this response. More recently, EPSRC created its Societal Issues Panel, a high-level, strategic advisory body which provides a forum for advising on the societal, political and regulatory environment in which EPSRC operates, and its impact on the council's policy and operations. This Panel provides a route to embed public engagement within the decision-making processes of EPSRC.

The Research Councils' role in setting the research agenda is considered in detail in the report. BBSRC has considered these issues previously in its response to the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission's report 'What shapes the research agenda?', which includes information about where and how public views feed into the process. BBSRC and EPSRC acknowledge that setting research agendas is not a linear process and that it can be difficult to directly visualise the outputs of public dialogue exercises in policy and strategy as it develops. Since the Nanodialogues project a new nanotechnology research strategy has been implemented and EPSRC has appointed Professor Richard Jones as a Senior Advisor for Nanotechnology (he is also a member of the Societal Issues Panel and Chair of the Nanotechnology Engagement Group). Part of this role will include working with EPSRC and the Societal Issues Panel to identify public engagement opportunities, including future public dialogue, as research areas move towards application and where prioritisation of direction is needed. The Panel recently commissioned a review of best practice of other organisations that actively connect their strategic decision making processes with the general public and will share the outputs of this with other Research Councils through RCUK.

We note the recommendation that the Research Councils should engage the public about our function. Both BBSRC and EPSRC hold annual Open Meetings to encourage public feedback and discussion with Council members and senior officials about policy and operational issues. The Councils will take this recommendation forward through discussion at future Open Meetings.

The report commends forums that allow discussions of ethics and public value as part of the scientific decision-making process. Both Councils have mechanisms to enable broader issues to be considered during decision making. BBSRC recently held a workshop that brought together life scientists, physicists, chemists, computer and social scientists with research council officials to discuss opportunities in synthetic biology research. Inclusion of social scientists meant that public values were part of the discussions about future possible research trajectories. This type of workshop, where scientists from many fields are brought together, is an evolving format for BBSRC and one which will be applied to other areas of science. The EPSRC IDEAS Factory brings together researchers from many disciplines, including arts, humanities and social sciences, to stimulate highly innovative and more risk-accepting research activities, and is being developed further to bring societal and ethical views in to discussions as research projects are generated.

The excellent and varied public engagement activities undertaken by Research Council-funded scientists are noted in the report. Both Councils encourage their communities to engage with the public. BBSRC requires its funded scientists to undertake 1-2 days a year on public engagement, and provides guidance and resources to enable scientists to engage. BBSRC also has a small grant scheme for those wishing to devote more time to engagement. EPSRC currently invests £4 million per annum providing a range of training, guidance, support and

opportunities for its research community to enable them to conduct high quality and effective public engagement with relevant partners.

The report highlights the familiar tension regarding industrial involvement: people are happy that science is useful and contributes to the economy, but concerned that agendas are driven by commercial interests. BBSRC explored this tension with some public dialogue work about diet and health research. That research highlighted transparency and openness as key to public confidence in industry's role in setting the public research agenda.

The last section focuses on how public views are taken into consideration by the Research Councils. The Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel will be considering BBSRC's decision-making structures in the light of this and other relevant developments, including the publication of the Demos pamphlet 'The Received Wisdom'. This pamphlet is co-authored by Professor Alan Irwin, deputy chair of the Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel. The Societal Issues Panel was, in part, formed to provide a clear route for consideration of public views within EPSRC. They are currently considering this issue in detail.

Evaluation

This Nanodialogues experiment was evaluated by Dr Jason Chilvers. The evaluation report was welcomed by the BBSRC's Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel, and includes recommendations about devoting sufficient time and resources to developing stimulus material, and about directing participants to targeted secondary sources of information. It notes that participants should have some control over the agenda, and although that was the aim with this experiment, it was obvious from feedback that was not properly communicated to participants. The evaluation also notes the participant drop out rate, and suggests that the subject matter may have been too esoteric to engage participants; whilst this may be true, as a funder of basic research this challenge is equal across much of BBSRC's and EPSRC's remit. The evaluation commends the involvement of scientists, and that the scientists discussed issues with each other as well as with non-specialists, which helped to break down the expert/lay divide. The report concludes with a comment that the value of this experiment lies in its reflection within the Research Councils about the role of public engagement that will be taken forward in future discussions of the BBSRC's Bioscience for Society Strategy Panel and the EPSRC's Societal Issues Panel.