

July 2021

Research assessments that promote scholarly progress and reinforce the contract with society

Event Report

Date: 25 November 2020

Presentations: **Ellen Hazelkorn**: *Science and the Accountability Agenda in the Age of COVID-19*

Comment: **Kostas Glinos** (European Commission); **Michael Hill** (DORA Steering Committee); **Martin Dominik** (Global Young Academy)

Moderation: **Roger Pfister** (Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences)

SUMMARY OF THE PANEL DISCUSSION

Questions and discussions focused on three areas:

- 1) How to strike a balance between funding of research to advance scientific progress in itself and public accountability in terms of societally relevant research by way of research assessments?
- 2) How to assess the societal relevance of research and who defines the criteria?
- 3) How should research assessment be done?

1) Curiosity-driven research and societally relevant research

There can be a false dichotomy between research driven by curiosity and research for societal benefit. However, all research that significantly adds to the scholarly record holds the potential of being translated into concrete value for society sooner or later, although not necessarily by those who originally carried out that research. In particular, innovation frequently stems from unexpected outcomes. However, public accountability means that all researchers should be conscious that they are part of society and understand both their contributions and responsibilities. Similarly, funding agencies, employers and research institutes need to recognise their responsibilities to provide appropriate support for all types of research and researchers. The challenge is in finding the right balance between both curiosity-driven (basic) research as well as research aimed at addressing current societal challenges both long term (e.g., climate change) and short-term (e.g., COVID-19). Diversity should be embraced as a key asset of society.

2) Assessing societal relevance

Research has both direct and indirect societal relevance, such as strengthening trust and accountability, enlightening discussions about the contract between science and society, and increasing scientific literacy and communication. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are examples of recognising societal challenges, as well as the need for international research and collaboration to solve problems. However, the questions remain as to who defines societal relevance and how to assess this. Should societal challenges be aligned with national and international priorities; how should the wishes of end-users of research outputs be addressed? In the sense that societal relevance can also be political, one could question impacts on (the perceived) objectivity of science; could the system end up being replaced by one with too much societal influence? Societal accountability covers a wide sphere of impact, hence there is a need to include researchers from the social sciences and people with expertise on social impact, as well as co-expertise between researchers and lay-people. This can in turn help to stimulate universities to engage in public engagement.

3) Performing research assessment

While evaluating research can provide interesting and useful information, it can also have harmful consequences if coupled with incentives that drive behaviours that contravene good scholarly practice or the advancement of society. Meaningful assessments will need to respect and be tailored to a specific context, provide an answer to a concrete question, and meet the aim of the assessment. In particular, one needs to recognise whether the aim is to look at individual researchers, teams, institutions, or countries, the relevance of research processes, outputs, or impact, the type of research project(s), and to what extent past performance or future potential is to be considered. The purpose of the assessment can also depend on what one is trying to promote, for example, recruitment, teaching or research, and how these may or may not empower people. Given that research not only tends to be collaborative but also interacts with a wider environment, the contributions of specific entities (and in particular of individuals) can be hard to identify and quantify in an assessment. Moreover, while standards of good scholarship might differ across research areas, outcomes and benefits do not respect disciplinary boundaries, which means that field-specific assessment may fail to adequately recognise and embrace multidisciplinary approaches.

Assessment of outputs confined to publications and patents does not tell the whole story and sometimes does not tell it well, but rather reflects the pressure to publish arising from the prevailing academic model. The assessment process needs to value what matters, specifically contributions to scholarship and wider society. This might include, for example: open access publishing; sharing of data codes and models; involvement and communication with citizens; choosing the most relevant papers and explaining why they are the best fit for a particular research proposal; policy engagement; enterprise and innovation outputs; and fostering the creative work of others. The [DORA website](#) features some examples of good practice in more broad-based research assessment. These include anonymising names and gender, distinguishing between technical and other types of impacts, and replacing a publication metrics-based approach with a narrative CV. Moreover, the [Hong Kong Principles on Research Integrity](#) recognise that scientific rigour and integrity are critical underpinnings of the research process, which research assessment needs to take into account. It is also important to consider the ownership of the assessment process. While the mechanism of assessment is still largely academic peer review, ownership of the assessment framework and metrics being considered has, in many instances, moved from academia to commercial entities (e.g. publishers) or funders and grant managers. This is concerning in that if management decisions follow the metrics, those who control the metrics control the management process. Given their influential role in the assessment process the research community needs to advocate for broader and more inclusive assessment approaches, that can truly enhance research culture in the academic environment.
