

**Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills**

**A vision for Science and Society: a consultation on developing a new strategy for the UK**

**Response collated by the ESRC Genomics Forum on behalf of the Genomics Network, October 2008**

The ESRC Genomics Network (EGN) is a major investment by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), dedicated to examining the development and use of the science and technologies of genomics. The EGN spans five of the UK's leading universities, and involves over a hundred researchers. It is one of the largest social science investments in the ESRC's current portfolio. The EGN partners are:

- Cesagen (based at Lancaster University and Cardiff University)
- Egenis (Exeter University)
- Innogen (University of Edinburgh and the Open University)
- the Genomics Forum (University of Edinburgh)

**Summary of key points**

The EGN welcomes DIUS's support and enthusiasm for Science and Society activities. As a flagship UK investment in research on social aspects of the contemporary life sciences, we would make the following comments regarding the proposed Science and Society strategy:

1. The role of the arts, humanities and social sciences needs to be better integrated into the vision for Science and Society
2. Public engagement and outreach should be embedded in scientific and academic research activities rather than professionalised
3. Increased public engagement with science does not necessarily lead to increased public trust in science
4. Existing scientific ethics protocols should be supported
5. Institutional affiliation and funding sources continue to be relevant to scientific credibility
6. Equity of access to new communications technologies must be considered in planning public engagement mechanisms for the future

## Comments

1. The role of the arts, humanities and social sciences needs to be better integrated into the vision for Science and Society

The EGN welcomes the inclusion of social science, the arts and humanities in the scope of the vision for Science and Society (page 3). However, the role of social science, the arts and humanities in Science and Society activity needs to be better integrated into the final strategy, as these disciplines are not mentioned again in the consultation document following the scope statement. This is of particular concern as at least three of the four national and global challenges identified at 1.2 (page 6) as driving the vision for Science and Society have very strong socioeconomic components and cannot be understood adequately without the contribution of the social sciences: namely, climate change, global terrorism and world population growth. The relationship between Science and Society has been a focus of research in the social sciences for many years. It continues to be heavily funded by the ESRC and other UK research councils, and is recognised by the UK's leading universities, including Cambridge, Oxford, Edinburgh, Imperial College and University College London. The EGN represents a flagship investment in this field. The proposed vision must incorporate the insights offered by the social sciences, arts and humanities at the Science/Society interface if it is to achieve its ambitious but urgent goals. As a starting point we would urge more detailed referencing of current social science, arts and humanities research in the Science and Society strategy document.

2. Public engagement and outreach should be embedded in scientific and academic research activities rather than professionalised

The EGN warmly welcomes the support and appreciation for high-quality public engagement activities demonstrated throughout the consultation document. However, we would be wary of 'professionalising public engagement' as suggested at page 20. Professionalising public engagement runs the risk of making Science and Society activity less authentic for participants, and making it more difficult to tailor engagement programmes to unique scientific issues as they arise. For these reasons, professionalising public engagement may even have the effect of diminishing public interest and engagement in science. Maintaining a grassroots, bottom-up approach allows scope for the innovation and flexibility that will engage hard-to-reach audiences and help to address novel problems. Further, public engagement may best be considered an integral and embedded part of research activity, rather than a specialised profession. Achieving a research culture in which public engagement is treated as an embedded component of scientific and academic work may be promoted by rewarding exemplary Science and Society activities and programmes, and we welcome the attention to rewarding good practice in the consultation document at 5.23 (page 34). At the same time, we must recognise that many talented researchers will require support in undertaking engagement activities, which may best be delivered by dedicated, skilled and passionate public engagement and communications

specialists. We welcome, therefore, the focus in this vision at 3.6 (page 15) on creating new cross-sector ‘bridges’ or ‘brokers’, of which the EGN represents an example.

### 3. Increased public engagement with science does not necessarily lead to increased public trust in science

The EGN wholeheartedly supports public engagement with science as an essential part of democratic decision-making in this area, as evidenced by our own numerous engagement activities. However, we would caution that public engagement does not necessarily increase public trust in science and scientific institutions, nor necessarily lead to public acceptance of new scientific and technological developments. Public confidence in and enthusiasm for science are by no means a simple consequence of public engagement, education and information. Indeed, knowledge can increase distrust as well as overcome it, and intensify as well as ameliorate controversy. The failure of the ‘deficit model’ of public understanding of science is noted in the consultation document at 2.7 (page 11). It is crucial that this point is taken into account and addressed throughout the Science and Society vision. Genuine two-way engagement requires the acknowledgement that members of the public, policymakers and scientists will not always agree on what constitutes scientific validity or societal value, and that they often have different ways of thinking about and judging risk. It means listening to and respecting public concerns, and being willing to respond to such concerns with changes in research programmes and institutional behaviour.

### 4. Existing scientific ethics protocols should be supported

The EGN recognises and fully supports the importance of robust ethical protocols in maintaining public trust in science. However, rather than introducing a generic code, such as the ‘universal ethical code’ proposed at 5.5 (page 28) in the consultation document, we would draw attention to the detailed and refined ethical codes that institutions have developed over many years of experience of scientific and academic research. The vast majority of scientists and researchers adhere to these codes, and there is no evidence that a universal code would prevent those few breaches that do currently occur. Rather, we need to promote robust ethical oversight at the grassroots level, by supporting institutions to respond rapidly and flexibly to new scientific and ethical challenges as they emerge.

### 5. Institutional affiliation and funding sources continue to be relevant to scientific credibility

The EGN recognises, as discussed at 5.11 (page 30), that there is a systematic relationship between the public credibility of scientists and their perceived independence. However, we would disagree with the consultation document at 2.8 where it suggests that ‘Confidence in science should come from a shared understanding of the nature of the scientific process and depend less on the perceived affiliation of the scientist’ (page 11). In our view, it is unrealistic to suppose that scientific advice can transcend affiliation in some straightforward way. This is recognised in institutional processes in the sciences, as in virtually all

professional fields, for the declaration and management of conflict of interest. Affiliation thus remains an important reference point for non-specialists when deciding how far to assign credibility to scientists, and which of them to credit when (as is often the case) they disagree. Although the consultation document claims at 5.12 that ‘There is no reason why the way science is conducted, governed or communicated by the private sector should be or be perceived to be any different from the public sector’ (page 30), it acknowledges at 5.14 (page 31) that the public and private sectors are inherently different in how they make decisions and to whom they are accountable. Rather than seeking to downplay these differences, what is needed are clear protocols to manage potential conflicts of interest effectively and transparently, and robust public debate about how funding affects science and how science should be funded and regulated.

6. Equity of access to new communications technologies must be considered in planning public engagement mechanisms for the future

The EGN recognises, and is excited by, the significant role that new communication technologies can and do play in public engagement and dialogue, as discussed at 4.15 (page 23). However, it is equally important to recognise that not everyone has access to these technologies nor the skills to use them, as acknowledged at 5.18 (page 32). As social scientists we would stress the strong socioeconomic component in disparities in technological access. Age, education level and geographic region are all associated with internet access in the home, for example. In fact, ‘minorities and those currently excluded’ (page 23) are some of those least likely to have access to new communication technologies. It is therefore important that new communication technologies should not be privileged in public engagement to the detriment or exclusion of other means of engagement. Moreover, socioeconomic and other disparities in access to communication technologies must be addressed if the UK is to reach its full scientific potential, as envisioned in this draft strategy.

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