

Universal ethical code for scientists: conclusions from consultation

We approached our consultation on whether there is a useful role for the proposed *universal ethical code for scientists* with a genuinely open mind. We were pleased to receive a good number and range of responses, and are grateful to all those who took the time to respond. A list of respondents and a copy of the *universal ethical code for scientists* itself are attached in the Annex.

Overview

On balance, the proposed *code* was warmly received and there was a general agreement that it could be a useful catalyst for stimulating debate and raising awareness among scientists of their ethical, professional and legal responsibilities. Two main roles were identified:

- Educating and training new scientists.

Recent developments in GCSE and A level curricula, which require students to develop a greater understanding of the way science works and that are in part intended to increase young people's interest and engagement with science, mean that the code could provide a useful resource for teachers and students.

At the university level, the code could contribute to taught courses on research ethics and methods at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Several universities gave us examples of courses that they offer where the code might be used.

- Informing and supporting the development of more specific codes.

The consultation confirmed that many organisations have codes of conduct and ethical frameworks in place that are specific to their own needs. The code could form a checklist of minimum standards for the content of more specific codes and could also sit alongside a supplement.

For example: the Royal Academy of Engineering used the code to inform the development of their Statement of Ethical Principles for professional engineers; several professional bodies said that they would post the code on their website and bring it to the attention of their members; and one University told us that they will be amending their own policies to bring out the expectation that scientists should 'seek to discuss the issues that science raises for society'.

Our consultation had suggested some more formal roles for the code, such as forming part of graduation ceremonies, being linked to employment and research contracts, or being adopted by institutions or individuals as a public statement of their working methods. There was almost no support for these proposals. The general view was that there is little to be gained from introducing an ethical code into formal structures unless it can be enforced, and it is very difficult to see how enforcement mechanisms could be applied to such a general code. We also observe that the code does not seem to have had the power to attract strong allegiance in the way the Hippocratic Oath does for medics, perhaps because of its general nature.

We received some relatively minor comments on the content of the code and on its title (particularly on the use of the word 'universal') and judge that, while it may be appropriate to revise the wording of the code in the future, it should continue to be promulgated as it stands. It would, however, be useful to produce material to sit alongside the code that illustrates how its

broad principles might be seen in practice. Indeed, this may be essential if the code is to be used in an education and training context.

Recommendations

We judge that there is sufficient support for the code that the Office of Science and Technology (OST) should now move to actively promote it, taking advantage of the interest that has been generated through our consultation. OST is in the process of exploring how the code can be used with government scientists, with the work due to report in September 2006. It would be unfortunate to lose the momentum that we feel has started to develop by waiting until after September 2006 before taking any further steps.

We therefore recommend that OST should look now to promote the code's role as a focus for reflecting on the ethical, professional and legal responsibilities of scientists. We make three separate recommendations and point out that the successful implementation of any one will be at least partially dependant on progress made with the others.

1. OST should publish the *universal ethical code for scientists* and promote it through the general and scientific media.
2. OST should work with organisations that i) support school science education ii) support the development of under and post graduate education, to identify how best to bring the code into curricula, including identifying what support materials might be needed.
3. OST should work with networks of universities and professional bodies to encourage the review of their own codes and frameworks against the *universal ethical code for scientists*.