



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



Trust in science – The perspective of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

This policy brief focuses on the perspective of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and sets out policy recommendations developed by experts from various HEIs across Europe in a Policy Lab.

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INTRODUCTION

Societal trust in the research system and confidence in its outcomes is vital to ensure the EU's contribution to attain the Sustainable Development Goals and to achieve the European Green Deal targets. The IANUS project strengthens warranted trust in science, research and innovation at a systemic level by encouraging participation in research as a co-creative and inclusive process, sensitive to societal values, concerns and needs. IANUS envisions researchers as engaged and acknowledges their mission of helping society deal with urgent global challenges.

A key objective of the IANUS project is to translate the insights, knowledge and concepts generated into accessible and effective recommendations for the future governance of science, technology and innovation (STI) and the design of STI policies. To ensure that, the IANUS findings are translated into tailor-made policy recommendations for key organisations involved in shaping science and innovation systems. The development of policy and governance recommendations was carried out in parallel streams, each focusing on a specific type of actor. This policy brief focuses on the perspective of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

POLICY RESULTS

(a) Problem situation

The discussion on trust in science has revealed critical aspects specific to HEIs. Despite recent political and social crises, public trust in HEIs is still relatively high across Europe according to HEIs experts that participated in this policy lab (henceforth: participants). In the Netherlands, for example, biannual national surveys tend to rank politicians at the bottom in terms of trust and scientists at the top. However, participants observed that this kind of data is not necessarily indicative of perfect

societal trust in scientific institutions, because from their experience and from data gathered during EU projects like MoRRI and SUPER_MoRRI, public distrust is still growing.

The issue, then, seems to shift from scientists being the top-trusted source to generalized public distrust, so that if, comparatively, trust in science and scientists is still high, overall trust in institutions is still decreasing. The participants convened that this might not only be dependent on surveyed audiences but also on the responsibilities of the scientific world, which often lacks openness and transparency. These tendencies are further exacerbated by the perceived inaccessibility of academic language and jargon. As a result, people have no choice but to 'blindly' trust scientists and scientific knowledge as it is communicated on the outside, because in most cases they won't be able to fully understand it or to evaluate it by themselves.

Another major issue stemmed from how performing science has gone from being a privilege to being a job in its own right. While this has contributed to democratized knowledge, it has also demystified science to the point that many professionals within HEIs do not fully grasp the responsibility they hold toward civil society. Confronted with an increasingly precarious job market and dwindling funds, academics scramble to publish as many papers and gather as many grants as possible, often paying a huge price in quality, research-impact, and replicability of results. The increasing over-specialization of scientists and the pressure to produce results at all costs is reminiscent of the issue previously underscored by the work within WP3, which the team has named 'the neoliberal university model'.

Poor science communication was also underscored as an increasingly timely issue for HEIs. The participants observed that scientists should do a better job at communicating the social construction of knowledge, that is how science can be contextual and constructed through time, constantly changing and evolving. On the contrary, the public often has the impression that science is 'objective' per se, and this is often dependent on how the media portrays science and academia. When people cannot access research papers and briefs, they will investigate the most available source to them and that is often the information presented by media outlets. These kinds of communication channels have a very important role in how people trust science, but they are often imprecise, so HEIs need to develop better relationships with media professionals and curate a more accurate representation of the production of knowledge. Additionally, the participants stressed that their task is to be objective and balanced when speaking with the media. Yet, many scholars desire fame and notoriety, highlighting the importance of educating people within HEIs on how to communicate and avoid making unbalanced or personal claims when speaking as a scientist and not as a citizen.

Finally, the participants highlighted the issue of poor handling of misconduct cases. According to them, there is often a lack of full accountability and rigorous consequences for those scientists that perform their mission poorly. While it is a scientist's job to "make mistakes" and "improve by making mistakes," that is difficult to understand for lay people. As a result, universities tend to respond with institutional silence in cases of research misconduct, because they want to maintain HEIs' reputation rather than investigate the researchers who perform poorly to the full extent. Yet, this often has the opposite result, as the public still sees the research misconduct case reported in the media and sees that the institutions are unwilling to take on responsibility, with the result of further jeopardizing trust in science and HEIs.

b. Solutions to tackle the problem of trust in science

To address these challenges, participants proposed several actionable solutions. These concern first and foremost HEIs' role in civil society. Relationships with the media should be strengthened, making science more accessible to all through better science communication, able to explain not only research results but also the constructed nature of the scientific process. Additionally, HEIs should also engage in public communication and stimulate citizen science through national organizations and projects to help bridge the gap between society and academia. This will also help academia learn from new perspectives, improve, and produce results that align better with the needs of civil society.

Another central take-away was that the key to gaining trust or being trustworthy is transparency and accountability. This resonates with the results already underscored by IANUS' WP5, which

highlighted the prime importance of Open Science (through access to research, better transparency, and accountability) in addressing conflicts of interests. Transparency and accountability were seen as areas in which HEIs can and should do “much better.” In order to tackle issues of misconduct and personal responsibility, the participants suggested better auditing and controls be put in place by both HEIs and policy-makers. Additionally, they also foresaw the creation of a supportive structure for researchers at universities in general. This notion effectively dialogues with findings from other WPs within IANUS and refers to the idea that the responsibility of dealing with research misconduct should be at the organisational level rather than mostly at the individual level. Participants thus advocated not only for punishing individual researchers liable for research misconduct, but also for implementing the necessary structures within the organisations that support researchers to prevent them from choosing the wrong path.

Overall, participants observed an increasing number of threats to the scientific production of knowledge, from a shifting political climate to pressures within institutions and the role of digital media in fueling skepticism and misinformation. As a result, quality management of research processes and outputs is paramount, as is the handling of incidents through consistent safety precautions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

From the description of the problem and the proposed solutions outlined, we derive the following recommendations for action. These recommendations address the question of what scientists can do to make research more accessible and trustworthy to society, as well as handling threats to integrity both within and outside of HEIs:

- **Better citizen science:** Citizen science and further approaches of integrating societal stakeholders into research processes should be stimulated at all levels, through national and international coordinated actions, funding projects and seminars to allow scholars to get the expertise on how to run citizen science within their specific HEIs. Good citizen science will help bridge the gap between society and academia by involving citizens in the design of research and in research analysis and dissemination, allowing HEIs to better understand the needs of civil society and produce research that is better aligned with them.
- **Strengthening relationship with the media:** With the increasing predominance of digital media and AI, quality science communication is paramount. HEIs and single scientists should work hand in hand with media practitioners and science journalists to communicate how science and research are conducted and help educate society.
- **Improving research quality:** More robust quality standards and quality assurance measures should be implemented at all levels, starting with crucial stakeholders like research performing organizations (RPOs), funding organizations and academic journals and publishers. Possible consequences for misconduct and poor research quality should be foreseen. Performance metrics should also be revised not to penalize HEIs with smaller funding and to ensure quality is preferred over quantity.
- **Prevention is the best cure:** Better quality management should be developed at the HEIs level, improving the environment in which research is taking place. The current focus on recognition and reward should be accompanied by a stricter focus on accountability and responsiveness.
- **Never waste a good crisis:** In case misconduct still happens, the best course of action is to tackle the accident openly and transparently. This can prevent miscommunication and preserve trust in HEIs in the long run. Additionally, accountability will help scholars learn from their mistakes and keep each other on the straight track.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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