



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



Trust in science – The perspective of Research Funding Organisations (RFOs)

This policy brief focuses on the perspective of research performing organisations (RFOs) and sets out policy recommendations developed by experts from various RFOs across Europe in a Policy Lab.

30 May 2025

INTRODUCTION

Trust in science is essential for societal resilience, informed decision-making and democratic governance. Although confidence in science remains relatively high across Europe, recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed its fragility, with fluctuations driven by misinformation, political influence and concerns about integrity and transparency.

Research Funding Organisations (RFOs) play a pivotal role in shaping trust by deciding which research is funded, how integrity is safeguarded, and how results are communicated. They act not only as financiers but also as architects of the research system, translating policy goals into research agendas, setting priorities, and embedding principles of openness, inclusivity and accountability. As such, RFOs are increasingly expected to act as intermediaries between science and society, ensuring that publicly funded research delivers societal value and fosters citizen engagement.

Within the IANUS project, a Policy Lab on RFOs brought together experts from national and European funding bodies to explore how trust in science can be strengthened from the funders' perspective. Despite their institutional diversity, participants identified common challenges and opportunities, underlining the crucial influence of RFOs in building trustworthy and socially responsive research systems. This policy brief summarises those insights and translates them into recommendations for action.

(a) Problem situation

The discussion regarding trust in science from the perspective of Research Funding Organisations (RFOs) revealed several key challenges. While survey data suggests that public trust in science remains relatively high in many European countries (e.g. 88% in Poland, 75% in Luxembourg), participants stressed that this trust is often fragile. It was frequently described as “uninformed trust” – a confidence based more on general reputation than on a deeper understanding of scientific methods or processes.

Social media and digital platforms emerged as major forces shaping public perceptions. Sensationalist and emotionally charged content often spreads more quickly than scientific evidence, undermining credibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these platforms provided fertile ground for disinformation and scepticism, discouraging many researchers from engaging publicly due to risks of backlash, polarisation, or even harassment.

Research integrity was seen as a central pillar of trust. While minor flaws rarely damage confidence, scandals or perceived conflicts of interest can trigger strong negative reactions. In this context, transparent funding decisions and robust integrity frameworks are crucial for maintaining credibility.

Administrative procedures were also highlighted as a double-edged sword. While designed to ensure accountability, excessive bureaucracy and over-regulation can frustrate researchers and erode trust between funders and the scientific community. Similarly, evaluation systems that prioritise citation counts and impact factors risk undervaluing societal relevance, ethical standards and responsible innovation.

Science communication represents another challenge. Researchers must communicate uncertainty without eroding their credibility, a task complicated by the flood of online misinformation and the public's demand for definitive answers. The politicisation of science adds further difficulties: in areas such as climate change and public health, scientists are often portrayed as ideological actors and activists, eroding public confidence in both their findings and their institutions.

The growing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in research introduces new risks. While AI can enhance efficiency, its opaque outputs and potential to diminish human judgement may undermine trust in research processes.

Finally, participants emphasised that RFOs play a decisive role in shaping research priorities. Funding agendas often favour economic and industrial objectives, with civil society interests underrepresented. This disconnect between public expectations and funded research can fuel scepticism and reduce the perceived societal value of science.

(b) Solutions to tackle the problem of trust in science

To address these challenges, Policy Lab participants proposed several lines of action across macro, meso and micro levels:

- **At the macro level**, participants stressed the need for structural reforms. Establishing European-wide guidelines for responsible and transparent funding practices, alongside consistent standards in research integrity, would reinforce accountability and protect against conflicts of interest.
- **At the meso level**, RFOs should refine their institutional practices. Simplifying application procedures and reducing bureaucracy would improve trust within the research community. Evaluation frameworks should be rebalanced to reward societal relevance, ethical conduct and responsible innovation, rather than focusing narrowly on quantitative indicators. Civil society actors should also be involved in shaping research priorities and funding calls, ensuring that funding programmes respond more closely to societal concerns.
- **At the micro level**, researchers themselves need stronger support. Mandatory public communication plans in funding applications would encourage societal engagement from the

outset of projects. Training and incentives in science communication and public dialogue are essential to equip scientists for engagement in a complex digital environment. At the same time, RFOs should recognise and reward researchers who contribute actively to transparent and inclusive knowledge-sharing.

In addition, the responsible use of emerging technologies requires careful attention. RFOs should provide guidance on ethical AI use and support dedicated studies on its implications for trust in science. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of sustainable research careers. Addressing workload pressures, mental health challenges and job precarity is critical for both the well-being of researchers and the credibility of the scientific system.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

From the description of the problem and the proposed solutions outlined, recommendations for action can be derived for various actors and levels of the science system. These recommendations address the question of what is needed to make research more responsive to societal needs:

- **Policymakers and the European Commission** should ensure transparency and integrity in research funding: This requires establishing EU-wide guidelines that embed openness and accountability across all funding processes, thereby reducing conflicts of interest and reinforcing public confidence in science.
- **Research Funding Organisations (RFOs)** should reform evaluation systems: By reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and shifting away from purely quantitative indicators, they can prioritise ethical conduct, societal value, and responsible innovation, ensuring that research outputs are both credible and socially relevant.
- **RFOs and Research Performing Organisations (RPOs)** should foster co-creation with society: Actively involving citizens, NGOs, and other stakeholders in setting funding agendas and evaluating proposals will help align research priorities with broader public interests and strengthen the legitimacy of the research system.
- **Universities, RPOs, and RFOs** should strengthen science communication: Applicants should be required to develop public communication strategies as part of their projects, while researchers should be supported through training and incentives to engage effectively with diverse audiences. This will improve transparency and counteract disinformation.
- **Policymakers, funders, and research institutions** should anticipate technological risks: By developing ethical guidance for the use of Artificial Intelligence in research and supporting studies on its impact on trust, the scientific community can ensure that AI is deployed in a transparent and responsible manner.
- **RFOs, HEIs, and RPOs** should support sustainable research careers: Addressing issues of workload, mental health, and job precarity is vital to sustaining researchers' well-being, maintaining high-quality outputs, and fostering mutual trust within the research community.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME INspiring and ANchoring TrUst in Science (IANUS).

COORDINATOR Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, Rotterdam, the Netherlands
Prof. Hub Zwart, zwart@esphil.eur.nl

CONSORTIUM ACUMENIST

Brussels, Belgium
ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI
Thessaloniki, Greece

ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM
Rotterdam, the Netherlands

FRAUNHOFER INSTITUTE FOR SYSTEMS AND INNOVATION RESEARCH ISI
Karlsruhe, Germany

LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE
London, United Kingdom

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY
Nijmegen, the Netherlands

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
Tartu, Estonia

KARLSRUHE INSTITUT OF TECHNOLOGY – KIT
Karlsruhe, Germany

SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME
Rome, Italy

RESEARCH COUNCIL OF LITHUANIA
Vilnius, Lithuania

FUNDING SCHEME

HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ERA-01-44: Societal trust in science, research and innovation

DURATION

Example: June 2022 – May 2025 (36 months).

BUDGET

EU contribution: 1.816.064 €.

WEBSITE

<https://trustinscience.eu>

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact: Julija Baniukevic, julija.baniukevic@imt.lt; Hendrik Berghäuser, Hendrik.berghaeuser@isi.fraunhofer.de

FURTHER READING

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**Funded by
the European Union**

This policy brief reflects only the author's view and the European Commission/REA is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.