



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



Trust in science – The perspective of Research Performing Organisations (RPOs)

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

30 May 2025

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. 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 policy labs, each focusing on a specific type of actor. This policy brief focuses on the perspective of Research Performing Organisations (RPOs).

POLICY RESULTS

(a) Problem situation

The discussion regarding trust in science has revealed critical insights relevant to policymakers, particularly concerning RPOs. Despite ongoing political and social challenges, public trust in RPOs remains relatively high throughout Europe according to RPOs' experts that participated in this policy lab. This trust is largely attributed to the perception that RPOs operate as neutral entities, focused on their clear mission without serving special interests. Participants noted that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in comparison are more affected by trust-related debates than RPOs, a difference they attributed to the more defined scope and mission of RPOs. Research and Technology

Organizations (RTOs), in particular, were recognized for producing more tangible research outcomes, which are easier for the general public to comprehend compared to the often theoretical work of universities. However, even these tangible outcomes can lead to societal debates that challenge public confidence in science, as seen with controversial technologies such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and nuclear energy.

A significant concern raised during the discussions was the funding structure of RPOs, especially application-oriented RTOs, which heavily rely on external funding especially from industry. Participants expressed worries that this dependence could compromise the methodological rigor of research, as the demands of contract research often require swift results. This environment fosters a culture of 'hype writing,' where researchers may exaggerate the significance of their findings to secure funding or public interest. The competitive funding landscape further exacerbates this issue, leading to inflated expectations and overpromising outcomes, which can ultimately disappoint the public. The increasing frequency of terms like "unprecedented" or "novel" in scientific literature reflects this trend, giving undue weight to findings that may not be adequately supported.

The stakeholder dynamics of RPOs, which focus primarily on industry and governmental agencies, were also highlighted. While this enables RPOs to address specific needs effectively, it raises concerns about the neglect of broader societal interests. Participants noted the importance of considering the wider public, as a lack of engagement with citizens in the research process can erode public trust in science. The discussion also acknowledged the role of social media in shaping public perceptions, with radical and emotional content often overshadowing serious scientific discourse. This environment complicates the public's ability to differentiate between credible science and misinformation.

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into scientific practices was another focal point in the discussion, with policy lab participants recognizing both the potential benefits and the risks, particularly regarding transparency and critical thinking. The increasing politicization of science also emerged as a pressing issue, with skepticism directed towards scientists' independence and credibility. Accusations of bias in research agendas, particularly on controversial topics like climate change, reflect a growing distrust that further complicates the relationship between science and society.

b. Solutions to tackle the problem of trust in science

To address these challenges, participants proposed several actionable solutions. RPOs should enhance their engagement with the public, moving beyond traditional science communication methods to foster a more inclusive dialogue with society. This proactive approach could help bridge the gap between research and societal needs, facilitating a trusting relationship. Additionally, both RPOs and research funders have a shared responsibility to integrate societal perspectives into their processes, ensuring that research aligns with public interests. Participants emphasized the need for scientists to adopt responsible practices when utilizing AI, supported by guidance from their institutions. Furthermore, scientists should engage in critical self-reflection about their roles, particularly when participating in societal discourse.

These findings underscore the importance of proactive measures to rebuild and strengthen trust in science, ensuring that research not only serves specific stakeholders but also addresses the broader needs of society.

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:

- **Research Performing Organizations (RPOs) should enhance their engagement with the broader public to better meet societal needs and interests:** This involves giving civil society actors a more significant role in stakeholder management and expanding research

processes beyond industrial partnerships. Approaches such as citizen science and multi-stakeholder engagement in living labs should be integrated into RPOs' key performance indicators, necessitating structural changes including a more diversified funding base.

- **Research funders must also prioritize the integration of civil society needs into funding decisions:** By fostering dialogue with civil society, funding bodies can better identify societal needs and incorporate them into funding program designs. Involving non-scientists in the formulation of research questions can help align research more closely with genuine societal concerns and address criticisms regarding bias in scientific paradigms.
- **Both universities and RPOs should emphasize the opportunities and risks of social media in science communication within the training of young scientists:** As social media plays an increasingly critical role in this field, raising awareness of its non-objective and polarizing nature can empower researchers to use these platforms more effectively and professionally in their work.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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

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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**

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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.