Review paper

GETTING IT ACROSS TO YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

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Abstract

Increasingly, research projects are expected to provide impact, and without a convincing impact statement, project proposals are now unlikely to get funding. This impact is not only for others in the scientific community, but also a wide range of stakeholders who are interested in knowing what a project has achieved. Getting it across to stakeholders can be achieved in terms of answers to the questions Why? Who? What? How? When? and Where?

Why - because researchers are spending other people's money and need to be accountable for this. Who - as well as other scientists, non-scientific stakeholder groups include industry and commerce, decision- and policy-makers, consumers and general public, as well as the media. What - in addition to traditional scientific presentations, for non-scientist stakeholders, emphasis should be on any practical applications of the research findings and relevance to perceived societal needs or problems. How - non-scientific stakeholders need a much more varied set of measures, beyond just scientific publications and presentations at conferences/symposia. Website, multimedia and social networks are now essential components of an effective dissemination strategy. When - regular events to describe progress with the research, such as press releases and newsletters should be combined with irregular meetings such as conferences, symposia, trade fairs and other stakeholder group meetings. Where - as well as events held at the researcher's institution, other locations for dissemination activities should be planned locally, nationally and internationally, especially trade and industrial fairs.

The increasing importance of research impact is resulting in many large-scale projects including partners with specific expertise in getting it across to stakeholders.

Key words: dissemination, impact, research results, stakeholders

Introduction

Traditionally research results were disseminated mainly through scientific publications and poster and oral communications at conferences - to other scientists. Thus, stakeholders (anyone with an interest in your research) were generally limited to other scientists. Circumstances have now changed and the scientific community needs to change its approach to communicating its research, to get it across to its stakeholders to ensure effective transfer of knowledge and innovations.

The fate of submitted research proposals is increasingly dependent on the ability of applicants to convince evaluators that their research will have significant impact that goes beyond the immediate scientific research community. A key example of this is the EU's main funding

source for research and innovation, Horizon 2020 (H2020). The importance of impact has been increasing with each new framework programme. Thus "There is a greater emphasis on impact, in particular through each call or topic impact statements... Applicants are asked to explain how their work will contribute to bringing about the described impacts" (Cross, 2014). Compared with FP7, the 'Impact' section of the application form is now the second section of the form instead of the third in FP7, and if two proposals receive the same score for quality of science, it is the 'Impact' section that will determine which proposal gets the higher ranking. Indeed, for 'Innovation Actions' the 'Impact' score is given a weighting of 1.5 to emphasise its importance (Cross, 2014).

Not only is the need for research to have impact on non-research beneficiaries increasing, but the impact of research on the research community itself is evolving with developments in digital technologies, global access to research data, open access publishing, the growth of social media in science and new trends in assessing scientific reputations (such as https://impactstory.org/ and http://www.altmetric.com/). The European Commission has recently described these new trends in scientific research, called 'Science 2.0' (European Commission, 2014). In years to come, these trends will influence the way you communicate with your research scientist stakeholders.

Therefore, for your research to have maximum impact on both your research and non-research stakeholders you need to develop skills in how to get your research output, in its many forms, across to all your various stakeholder groups. Getting it across to your stakeholders can be achieved in terms of answers to the questions Why? Who? What? How? When? and Where?

Why?

Because researchers are spending other people's, usually taxpayers', money to do research. Thus, research scientists need to be accountable for how that money is spent, and what the sponsor gets for that money. What is the impact that the research has had beyond the scientific community? What benefit for industry, policy-makers, the economy and society at large has the research achieved? A key factor for success with project proposals, such as those for H2020, is the expected impact that the research will achieve. Over 38% of the nearly €80 billion to be spent on research and innovation in H2020 (European Commission, 2013a) will go on solving societal challenges. That means research which will have impact to help find answers to practical problems, delivering practical applications and benefit for society. Without that impact on project stakeholders, the proposal won't get funded. Thus, the first calls for H2020 resulted in 16000 proposals (Cross, 2014), an oversubscription rate of nine times, giving a success rate of only 11%. Only those proposals achieving all the expected impacts will be amongst those 11%.

Who?

Stakeholders for the research can be grouped into several categories. Traditionally, the most obvious stakeholders would be other scientists doing similar research. However, the most important stakeholder to be kept in touch with how the research is progressing and the money is being spent is the sponsor of the research, to be provided with regular project reports. Other stakeholder groups could be summarised as a) industry and commerce, b) decision- and policy-makers, c) consumers and general public, and finally d) the media. Stakeholder dissemination strategy needs to be adjusted appropriately for each of these stakeholder groups. Industrial and commercial stakeholders are usually the most important to provide

justification for the research, and these stakeholders need to be developed and cultivated to ensure they retain interest in the research as it progresses. They will be looking for opportunities to convert your research findings and discoveries into new products or services for the market. Decision- and policy-makers, such as central and local governments, will expect your research to contribute to evidence-based decision-making. Consumers and general public will be interested in being informed on the impact of the research in relation to societal challenges, problems or concerns. The media is looking for a good story for its readership, which may not necessarily be the main story from the research. A good quality media reporter will check facts from an interview before any material is broadcast or published. Remember to cater for local, national and international stakeholder groups, which may require a separate focus or emphasis to the research information to be disseminated.

What?

For the non-scientist stakeholders the emphasis should be on any practical applications of the research findings and relevance to perceived societal needs or problems. The level of technical detail should be adjusted for the stakeholder group. Unless the research focuses on methodology, the methods are the least important aspect of the research to be described. The content should focus on justification for the research, the main research findings and their implications in relation to commercial exploitation, policy issues, public interest/safety/concern. The content should be written as far as possible in non-technical terms that would make the science accessible and understood by each stakeholder group. The content should also be presented attractively, and visual images (pictures, diagrams, simple graphics) have more impact than just text.

With 'Science 2.0' in mind, dissemination of research to the scientific community is increasingly going beyond just research publications and presentations at conferences. H2020 requires all H2020-funded research output to be published in open access journals (O'Dea, 2013) to ensure free access of the scientific community to H2020 results. The Commission is also introducing a pilot scheme to open up publicly funded research data 'to make the underlying data needed to validate the results presented in scientific publications and other scientific information available for use by other researchers, innovative industries and citizens' (European Commission 2013b). Already, the growing use of social media by researchers is making a wide range of types of information freely available through the internet. Examples are ResearchGate (https://www.researchgate.net) with nearly 3 million researchers in 2013, Academia.edu (https://www.academia.edu) with over 10 million academics signed up, Figshare (http://figshare.com), a cloud-based data management website and Slideshare (http://www.slideshare.net) for sharing presentations.

How?

This is the most diverse aspect of getting it across to stakeholders. Non-scientific stakeholders need a much more varied set of measures, beyond just scientific publications and presentations at conferences/symposia. A database of different stakeholder groups should be established and a dissemination strategy identified for each stakeholder group. Face-to-face contact is usually more effective than web sites, newsletters, brochures, email reports, provided individuals do not need to travel any distance to attend a dissemination event and are not going to be out of pocket regarding any costs. Thus, regular press releases and conferences, public debates, and individual meetings with key stakeholders should be planned. Dissemination activities requiring the recipient to take the initiative are much less

likely to be effective than those where the recipient is sent information to be kept informed. Thus, a static, unattractive web site describing the research is less likely to have as much impact as an electronic newsletter embedded into the text of an email: email attachments that need to be downloaded before opening are less likely to be read, for example.

A project web site should be designed to be attractive, easy to use, regularly updated and ideally with a range of multimedia sources of information available to cater for different groups of stakeholders. Multimedia approaches to disseminating research are now well developed, such as podcasts, webinars, videos, infographics, blog and discussion boards, particularly to cater for non-expert stakeholders, as well as social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn). Announcement of these could be circulated by email to individuals in the stakeholder database, or through the project website with RSS feeds which will ensure that stakeholders who want to be kept up-to-date with project progress are automatically informed of news and updates.

Meetings with decision- and policy-makers should take place at their offices rather than the scientist's. The same is true for industrial and commercial stakeholders. Policy briefings are effective mechanisms for getting research findings and their implications to decision- and policy-maker stakeholders. Information disseminated in English will reach the international scientific stakeholder community, though some institutions specializing in dissemination activities also publish information in several other languages to ensure that non-specialists in other countries can access the research findings.

When?

Press releases to describe progress with the research should be held at regular intervals rather than when there is a particular result to present. A press release or press conference every six months or year, depending on the pace of the research, should be planned, to include representatives of all the media (newspapers, magazines, radio and TV). Try to plan other dissemination activities so that there appears to be always something going on. For example, an electronic newsletter could also be every six months, but in between press releases, six-monthly/yearly policy briefings or annual conferences. The project web site needs to be kept updated every one-two weeks, and will soon attract regular viewers if it becomes clear that information of one sort or another is constantly changing - projects reports, other relevant news items, YouTube video clips, stakeholder group webinars, a regularly updated project blog, as well as its Facebook page and Twitter account, etc! That way stakeholders will feel more involved in the research and take greater interest in its findings, thereby leading to greater impact for the project.

In addition to these regular dissemination activities, conferences, symposia, trade fairs and other irregular meetings of the various stakeholder groups provide opportunities to advertise the project and its results through face-to-face contact.

Where?

In addition to events, such as conferences, symposia, workshop events, demonstrations, open days and press conferences, held at the researcher's institution, other locations for dissemination activities to non-scientific stakeholders should be planned locally, nationally and internationally. For example, trade and industrial fairs are excellent opportunities to interact with industry and commerce and expand the network of contacts. Local authority rooms could be used for consumer stakeholder debates.

Conclusion

As competition for research funds increases, so does the importance of a project's expected impact, not only on others in the scientific community but especially on non-scientist stakeholders. With the large majority of European research now being funded through strong competition for research funds, only those project proposals that can demonstrate, in addition to scientific excellence, an extensive and effective dissemination strategy will get funded.

Increasingly, this is testing the researchers' innovation skills in communication to the limit, so many large-scale projects now include partners with specific expertise in getting it across to stakeholders to increase a proposal's prospects of being funded - specific expertise in answering the questions Why? Who? What? How? When? and Where? After all, research should be done for the stakeholders' benefit.

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