

## **Irish National Workshop of the PACITA Project**

### **TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT**

#### **‘Connecting Society and Technology’**

**Venue: Science Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin 2**

**Date: 08th May, 2012**

#### **Theme 1: ‘Lite Touch’ Regulation of the Irish STI System**

Science impacts all aspects of society (i.e. political, economic, and cultural) and therefore science and society are inherently connected. These impacts can be positive but also negative and we need to ensure the credibility and integrity of the Irish science, technology, and innovation (STI) system. Public support and trust of science is not unlimited, but is conditional. Steps to promote research integrity and discourage misconduct within the scientific community are, therefore, crucial to the wellbeing of the system. Failure to do could have serious negative impacts through threatening the to-date investment in the Irish STI System, undermining the reputation of research in Ireland, as well as producing impacts that would be of questionable value.

‘Ethics’ appears to be a word that many (including politicians and policy makers) are uncomfortable with and those engaged in promoting the need for ethics are not finding a ready audience for their concerns and their ideas. There are real fears of the reputational and financial damage that could be caused by a ‘rogue scientist’ operating in Ireland. ‘Bad science’ is taking place in Europe and it would be naïve to believe it could not be or is not an issue in Ireland.

The government and the various institutions that administer the Irish STI system have a responsibility to ensure that research is governed in a proper fashion. ‘Light touch regulation’ of science will not work as it has not for the financial sector. But there is a widespread view that while significant scientific funding is continuing here in Ireland, similar investments in the research governance structures may be falling short. Instead individual research institutions are being relied upon to police themselves. Unlike many other European countries, Ireland lacks strong regulatory and governance structures to formally promote integrity and tackle misconduct.

## **Theme 2: Ethics and Positive Economic Impact are Complementary**

Lack of regulatory and governance structures are having a negative economic impact and are damaging our national aim to be at the forefront of European and global science. There is some anecdotal evidence that the lack of strong regulatory and governance structures is restricting the Irish ability to attract certain research investments – why would a renowned researcher, a research institution, or a commercial organisation engage in research in Ireland when they are unsure of the grounds on which their investment is made and the grounds on which the research is performed. This uncertainty is having almost certainly having repercussions for how Ireland is being viewed externally as a research hub.

A case in point is the legal uncertainty regarding embryonic stem cell research and the situation whereby Ireland does not have well defined legislation covering the area. Closing the Irish Council for Bioethics in 2010 is viewed as a retrograde step in that it was well positioned to assist policy-makers in mapping out the way forward for dealing with such difficult issues.

## **Theme 3: Immaturity of the Irish STI System**

The Irish STI system should be understood in the context of its relatively recent emergence. Many elements of the system have emerged in the past 20 years and often through ‘subterfuge’ – the elements were justified under the umbrella of supporting jobs creation. Subterfuge was necessary as it was perceived to be easier to request funding for ‘job creation’ rather than ‘science’ per se. Hence funding was sought for science by promoting it as an instrument for job creation rather than being of value to broader society.

This may well explain why to-date Ireland has almost exclusively focused on institutionalizing the relationship between *science and economy* while largely ignoring the relationship between *science and society*. The result is that in comparison to best international standards, Ireland has an impoverished engagement model whereby there are little formal structures for promoting open and transparent engagement between policy makers and various stakeholders (including scientists and citizens) on issues of science and technology. A further indication of the lack of maturity of the Irish STI system are the many decisions involving science and technology that continue to be justified in terms of economic impacts while largely ignoring important societal impacts.

## **Theme 4: Increased Participation and the Value of Societal Impact**

While it could be argued that the Irish policy-making approach on issues of science and technology is largely *analytical*, it would be difficult to view it as being wholly *democratic* as many stakeholder groups are not involved in decisions affecting them. There is a growing need to mature the Irish STI system so that it also focuses increasing attention on social impact. But many existing entities in the system are focused on economic concerns and appear ill- equipped to make this move. In addition, there is an inability or reluctance to place a value on *societal impact*. Any attempts to do so are overridden by the default concern for *economic impact*. This can result in a democratic deficit whereby many Irish institutions are falling short in fulfilling the principles of parliamentary

democracy. A symptom being the occasions when people feel they are not included in decisions that impact them and their heightened feelings of frustration sometimes manifest in more radical behaviour. Mistrust can also be an issue and is sometimes borne out of suspicions that some lobby groups are getting their voices heard and have undue influence whereas others are not. In such cases there is a need to create more open, transparent, and fair methods of participation on questions of science and technology.

### **Theme 5: Next Steps and the Need for Impartial Advice**

There is evidence that more participation leads to more democratic and better decision making. Impartial advice of a scientific nature must be provided to policy makers and the concerns of various stakeholder groups, including citizens, must also be taken into account when making decisions. There are concerns as to what might happen if we do not engage with citizens on questions such as fracking – little is to be gained by leaving local and national dialogue to more extreme or less informed views and then struggling to get acceptance among stakeholders for central policy. There is an onus on the state and its institutions to engage meaningfully in dialogue with stakeholder groups. This role would appear to be best filled by a trusted and impartial third party entity – separate from those entities charged with implementing policy.

Such an entity should provide evidence based advice to both policy makers and other stakeholders, including citizens. It should provide impartial advice based on international sources of knowledge, Irish sources of knowledge, as well as various stakeholder groups interested in the topic under consideration. It could utilise approaches such as citizen juries and citizens if and when required. It should take up the offer of our European colleagues to become part of a wider technology assessment community in order to leverage the capabilities, knowledge, networks, work, etc. openly available. The entity could strive to be reasonably cost neutral in terms of additional budget requirements, while saving on current expenditure on the services of international consultancies (e.g. Technopolis) that provide information to Irish institutions. The entity should leverage the intention of the PACITA consortium to run a public participation project in Ireland to deal with the topic of health care for the elderly.