



Public engagement guidelines for researchers, scholars and scientists

The purpose of these guidelines is to support the inclusive engagement of stakeholders in research, scholarship and science. Stakeholders include the researchers, scholars and scientists (hereafter referred to as researchers); the public and communities they serve, the media in all its forms, and the organisations in which researchers work: tertiary education organisations, Crown Research Institutes and other Crown entities, local and central government, independent research organisations, not-for-profit research organisations, and the private sector.

The guidelines are based on three principles: that society benefits from being engaged and informed about new knowledge and its application; that differing contexts of engagement bring different obligations; and that acting with professionalism and transparency are necessary to build and maintain public trust.

1. Engaged and informed society

Society supports the discovery and application of knowledge in order to advance and protect its citizens' wellbeing. This support occurs directly through publicly-funded research or indirectly through public commitment to laws and institutions that facilitate protection, application and use of knowledge in society's interests.

The ability to uphold the free flow of ideas and information, as well as fostering an open, informed debate on matters of public interest, is central to building and maintaining a democratic and inclusive society. Further, citizens expect to participate in discussion and debate on important public issues. A better-informed community, that is comfortable with research and new and innovative ideas, will have greater capacity and capability to critically assess and absorb new knowledge, and make well-informed decisions.

In these guidelines, knowledge and its application in the public interest (the interests of people generally) are interpreted broadly to reflect New Zealand's history and culture, and all perspectives that can contribute to the nation's future wellbeing. Opportunities for public engagement may differ between research disciplines, and can to some extent depend on the type of research, whether investigative, mission- or industry-led, or where there are important specific knowledge systems such as mātauranga Māori with the potential to enrich and add new dimensions to many fields of intellectual endeavour of value to society¹. Engagement can be seen as a shared responsibility where the research community, government funders, media and the public all need to engage to achieve results.

The public may also participate in shaping the context in which research questions gain relevance. Some research projects already use co-design and user participation. Many research studies seek to engage with communities and learn from them. Partnerships with Māori communities that extend well beyond the research project are more likely to result in benefits to the Māori communities involved as well as the researchers.

¹ The Royal Society of New Zealand is committed to entering into an ongoing discussion with Māori researchers and those engaged in research in Māori domains to explore such matters in a wider context than these guidelines allow, and to inform a review of these guidelines after January 2018

2. Context and obligations

Research in New Zealand occurs in a range of settings – tertiary education organisations, Crown Research Institutes and other Crown entities, local and central government, independent research organisations, not-for-profit research organisations, the private sector, and through sole practice and volunteering. Some researchers operate in multiple settings. Each setting has its own statutory obligations, revenue sources, operational environment, and contractual and employment arrangements, all of which affect the responsibilities and processes that researchers need to consider when engaging with the public.

For example, a characteristic of universities defined under the Education Act 1989 is that they accept a role as critic and conscience of society, which recognises the freedom of academic staff and students to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions, while acting within the law and at the highest ethical standards.

In universities and other settings, such as Crown Research Institutes and the private sector, the interests of society are often well served by legitimate protections, such as intellectual property rights, for certain sorts of knowledge.

The Official Information Act applies to a wide range of public sector agencies, including universities and Crown Research Institutes, and the Local Government Official Information and Meetings Act applies to local government agencies. The Privacy Act also imposes obligations on a wide range of public and private organisations.

Researchers may also be bound by a code of ethical conduct and are bound by any employment contract they have signed. They are also bound by any confidentiality or other agreements related to their research activities, irrespective of whether those agreements are signed only personally, only by their employer, or by both.

Regardless of setting, researchers have an obligation to work within the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) and its application to research as set out in Vision Mātauranga². Principles of Kaupapa Māori³ and Te Ara Tika⁴ provide important frameworks for the development of tikanga-based ethics and effective Māori engagement.

Even though many employers embrace the responsibility to provide support and resources for their staff to engage with the public, in some circumstances there may be tension between contractual arrangements and obligations, and the wider public interest. It is in the interests of researchers and their employers to have a shared understanding of the employer's policies and procedures for engagement, and how to resolve issues when they arise. Mutual trust and shared understanding are central to effective relationships.

3. Professionalism, transparency and trust

Researchers, as members of a professional community, have an implicit obligation to act in society's long-term interest through the integrity of their work and engagement. Researchers who fail to display professionalism may contribute to damaging the trust of the public in the value of research generally.

Engaging with the public in a way that builds trust through professionalism and transparency will benefit the wider research community, and in turn facilitate stronger relationships with the public and greater use of shared knowledge in the public interest.

² www.mbie.govt.nz/info-services/science-innovation/pdf-library/vm-booklet.pdf

³ www.rangahau.co.nz/research-idea/27/

⁴ www.hrc.govt.nz/news-and-publications/publications/te-ara-tika-guidelines-māori-research-ethics-framework-researcher

Guidelines

1. Engaged and informed society – researchers should:

- a. Recognise that informed public discussion and policy decision making occurs when the decision makers and the general public understand the context and have had the evidence, likely benefits and risks of different approaches summarised and presented to them.
- b. As appropriate for the nature and context of the research, provide opportunities for communities to be involved in the research itself, and the design and evaluation of public engagement as part of the research programme.
- c. Be prepared to interact or collaborate with others, both within and beyond New Zealand, holding relevant expertise or information in order to advance the shared understanding.
- d. Take advantage of available communications expertise to assist with their public engagement⁵.
- e. Consider engaging in a variety of ways, recognising those preferred by the intended audience for ensuring open dialogue.
- f. Present specialist knowledge in ways that can be comprehended by a wide audience, including avoiding complex technical language, wherever possible.
- g. Where confidentiality prevents specific information being disclosed, endeavour to present general concepts and information to assist public understanding.
- h. Provide clear statements on uncertainty in the available information, and any bounds on the level of inference that can be drawn.
- i. If there is a public benefit from an urgent response, be prepared to engage on the basis of whatever information is available, but emphasise that a preliminary view is being presented.
- j. When using electronic messaging or social media consider the impact of wider distribution of their statements by others, which may broaden the contexts in which part or all of such statements are interpreted.

2. Context and obligations – researchers should:

- a. Ensure they fully understand the consequences of any obligations placed on them in relation to confidentiality of, or restriction of access to, research data, results and their interpretation, and ensure those obligations are met during their public engagement activities.
- b. Seek advice⁶ on how to proceed, if they believe there is an unacceptable risk to the public interest from not disclosing information they hold, and where its release could breach a contractual obligation or create a risk of liability.
- c. Inform their manager or supervisor and, if also relevant, their client or communication channel if they believe their research results or professional opinion have been misinterpreted or misconstrued in a significant manner that is detrimental to the public interest.

⁵ e.g. from the New Zealand Science Media Centre, <http://www.sciencemediacentre.co.nz/>, or in-house communications advisors

⁶ e.g. from their employer, professional body, membership society in their discipline, senior colleagues, the Royal Society of New Zealand or their legal advisor, as appropriate to the circumstances

3. Professionalism, transparency and trust – researchers should:

- a. Observe the accepted norms of professional behaviour in the New Zealand research, scholarly and scientific community, for instance, as set out in the Royal Society of New Zealand's Code of Professional Standards and Ethics⁷ and Te Ara Tika⁸.
- b. Be sensitive to any cultural protocols of people or communities involved in the research or the public engagement.
- c. State whether they are speaking as a representative of their employer or another organisation with which they are affiliated, or as an individual.
- d. Identify relevant sources of research funding and declare any relevant contractual obligations, personal affiliations, interests or relationships which could create an actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest, or might call into question their objectivity.
- e. State the limit of their knowledge, and only comment to the extent that their knowledge or the information available to them allows their view to be informed.
- f. Be prepared to direct enquiries to other researchers whose knowledge is greater and/or more relevant than their own, or who have access to more comprehensive or recent information on the matter or issue.
- g. Always be realistic about the level of risks, benefits or impacts so as to minimise the likelihood of over-alarm, over-confidence, or over-expectation amongst the audience.
- h. If presenting a contrary view to other researchers, present a reasoned argument as to why their own views should be given weight, but be prepared to acknowledge evidence that is not supportive of their view or if theirs is a view held by a minority of researchers.
- i. In providing expert evidence in judicial or quasi-judicial situations recognise the need for impartiality by following the relevant court guidelines and appropriate code of practice in preparing reports, and giving evidence.
- j. Acknowledge the reliance that other people may place on their expressed view, and be prepared to communicate any significant change in it.

⁷ www.royalsociety.org.nz/organisation/about/code/

⁸ www.hrc.govt.nz/news-and-publications/publications/te-ara-tika-guidelines-māori-research-ethics-framework-researcher