

PRESS RELEASE

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Global scientific community affirms its shared responsibilities for the integrity of science and its role in society

International Council for Science (ICSU) endorses a new booklet on Freedom, Responsibility and the Universality of Science

Maputo, Mozambique—in the light of recent high profile cases of scientific misconduct, the General Assembly of the International Council for Science (ICSU) today reaffirmed the universal values that should guide the conduct of science. The Assembly also explicitly recognised the key social responsibilities of the scientific community as laid out in a new booklet, which will be made widely available to scientists across the world.

The booklet asserts that: ‘all scientists have a responsibility to ensure that they conduct their work with honesty and integrity; to ensure that methods and results are reported in an accurate, orderly, timely and open fashion.’

Ultimately the integrity of science depends on scientists themselves and all scientists have a duty to expose fraudulent information and/or misconduct. Given the unique position of scientists as the gate-keepers of new knowledge in today’s knowledge societies, respect for these values is critically important if confidence in science is to be maintained.

With respect to the relationship between science and society, a number of responsibilities are ascribed for the scientific community as a whole, including ‘contributing to the wealth of shared human knowledge and promoting the use of relevant science to improve human welfare and sustainable development’. The booklet goes on to say that scientists are expected to be impartial, fair, respectful and considerate in relation to fellow human-beings, animals and the environment, and to acknowledge risk and uncertainty.

As the world continues to change, with science as a main driver, there are new challenges to the freedoms of scientists and an increased onus on the scientific community to articulate and embrace its responsibilities. The balance between scientific freedom and responsibility is not always easy to maintain. By extending its consideration of the long-established Principle of the Universality of Science to explicitly include responsibilities as well as freedoms, ICSU emphasises that this balance is critical both for science and society.

‘In many ways, what the booklet says is simple, but actually reaching agreement on these issues was surprisingly complicated,’ explained Bengt Gustafsson, chair of the ICSU Committee on Freedom and Responsibility in the conduct of Science (CFRS), which produced the booklet.

‘Hopefully now we have a starting point for the different parts of the scientific community to establish their own more specific guidelines, codes or practices, where these are lacking.’

John Sulston, a member of the ICSU Committee and winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine stated: ‘It is critical that scientific freedoms are preserved, but we all have responsibilities as well—both to our fellow scientists and the public at large. We must fully accept these responsibilities if public confidence in science is to be maintained and if the full potential of science is to be used to address the major global challenges that face society.’

The booklet ‘Freedom, Responsibility and Universality of Science’ and more on the General Assembly are available at: www.icsu.org/3_mediacentre/GA_29.html

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About ICSU

Founded in 1931, ICSU is a non-governmental organization with a global membership of national scientific bodies (114 Members, representing 134 countries) and International Scientific Unions (29 Members). The Council is frequently called upon to speak on behalf of the global scientific community and to act as an advisor in matters ranging from the environment to conduct in science. ICSU’s activities focus on three areas: planning and coordinating research; science for policy; and strengthening the Universality of Science. For more information on the Principle of the Universality of Science: www.icsu.org/10_icsu75/75ANNIV_Achiev_Universality.html