**From words to deeds: concrete actions to reward and assess societal impact**

Outcomes from the Recognition & Rewards festival

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Achieving societal impact through science communication and public engagement is increasingly recognised as an important aspect of research. However, it is not yet rewarded as such. On 13 April we organised a workshop at the Dutch Recognition & Rewards festival, to formulate concrete steps for rewarding societal impact. In this blog we share with you the main outcomes, and lay out the most important steps that can be taken tomorrow, in a year, and in five years.

*Three cases on integrating public engagement into academia*

In the workshop we focused on three cases, inspired by the struggles we face in our own work. Case 1 is that of the researcher-turned project manager. She oversees and implements the sci-com and engagement part of specific research projects (e.g., by translating research findings for societal stakeholders, and involving societal stakeholders in research) but for need of a more fitting academic position, is in fact hired as an assistant professor. Case 2 is the researcher who invests a lot of time in sci-com and public engagement. She would like to find structural solutions to combining such impact activities with required activities of a principal investigator (e.g., management, teaching), and to rewarding them adequately. Finally, Case 3 is the communication professional who sees that researchers need much more support in how to actively involve society in their research. She would like to establish the role of public engagement stewards, similar to data stewards, as a way of addressing this issue.

The three cases are united in  that they all require public engagement to become an integrated part of the academic system, not something you do on the side, as a hobby, in your free time. But how should we do this? What steps can we take? And who should be taking them? Here are three key steps – in no particular order – which came out of our workshop and the discussions we had before and after.

*Step 1: Formulate sci-com strategies & priorities with your team*

For societal impact to become an integrated part of the academic system, it needs to be structured and included in the strategic planning of your institute or research unit. Currently, public engagement happens “in the moment” and is often linked to a certain project. To be able to set up a well-working system for public engagement that involves appropriate rewards, we need to embrace team science.

During the workshop, a general piece of advice that came to the fore was to find like-minded colleagues (from within and outside your department/university), who can inspire you and brainstorm with you about possibilities. Within each team, department, or institute, ambassadors for public engagement should sit together with management to develop a strategy for societal impact within the unit. Minimally, this would involve discussing how societal impact can be an integrated part of academic work, what common goals are, and how tasks should be distributed in a team. By combining best practices and ideas from a wide(r) network, and using a team science approach, societal impact can be rewarded according to the needs that fit the team’s strategy.

*Step 2: Pilot different academic profiles*

Once a strategy has been formulated, it is clear what roles and expertise are required in the team, department or institution. For example, there can be a need for  a researcher with expertise in stakeholder participation, or a public engagement professional who supports a research group (see step 3). The cases we presented and the outcomes of the workshop make clear that HR and management have an important part to play in facilitating the creation of new academic profiles. The formulation of impact profiles or an impact career track is one way forward, but at many institutions the requirements for and assessment of these profiles are still poorly defined, to the extent that they exist at all. We therefore strongly encourage research teams, departments and institutions to pilot academic profiles that focus on societal engagement, allocating time and resources to implement such pilots, and to together create new forms of assessment and job descriptions. There are already a few examples of professors with an expertise in ‘participation’ and ‘translation’.

*Step 3: Invest in resources to facilitate public engagement*

There are several ways in which this step can be achieved. Here, we name two. First, in line with steps 1 and 2, consolidate knowledge about sci-com and public engagement in a hub where there is someone with a dedicated role, who can serve as a lynch pin between research support, communications and other relevant services. Such a public engagement steward can support researchers with setting up a public engagement strategy in an early stage of their research process. They can help define their (public engagement) goals, identify who their stakeholders are and who to engage with, support the development of approaches involving participatory research and dialogue.

Second, offer funding, mentoring and workshops to researchers to help them develop and hone their sci-com and public engagement skills. At the same time, don't reinvent the wheel. There are plenty of resources available, in NL and abroad. An interesting example of one such programme is the SciCom incubator at the Faculty of Science and Engineering of Maastricht University.

*Moving forward*

So what can we do tomorrow? As researchers, we can speak up, make a plan and talk to HR and management. As for those making academic policies, we can look at what’s going on at other institutions, learn from examples, and talk to researchers and support staff. Within a year, we can set up pilots, experiment, fail forward and share our lessons learned. In five years, teams of all sizes will have a clear strategy on societal engagement that delineates the roles and expertise that are required to make this happen. Depending on the chosen strategy, teams may include researchers with an impact profile, or public engagement stewards that provide support, or both. The National Expertise Centre on Science and Society (NEWS) will no doubt play a crucial role in sharing  expertise and experience.