

Summary of workshops at the EPTA annual conference 2002

Public Trust and Science

The aim of the workshop was to discuss some developments in society's relationship with science since the House of Lords S&T Committee's report on Science and Society published in February 2000. Discussion was stimulated by two presentations: one from Lord Haskell, who was a member of the House of Lords Select Committee and one from Baroness O'Neill who presented the 2002 Reith lectures.

Lord Haskell started by describing a paradox concerning science and the public. On the one hand, the public has great interest in – and expectations of – science. On the other hand, public suspicion of science has never been greater. Among the main findings of the House of Lords Committee were that the public had lost trust in science and that while they largely understood the risks posed by scientific research, they felt that the benefits tended to accrue to private interests. Lord Haskell explained that in trying to take account of public attitudes towards science the Government had introduced greater transparency into the regulatory system, placed increasing emphasis on consultation with the public and distanced regulatory bodies from the Government. He noted that such measures might not, in themselves, be sufficient to restore public trust in science. In particular he noted that further steps may be needed to regulate the media and to share the benefits of science between public and private interests.

Baroness O'Neill also saw public lack of trust in science as being the main problem, but did not consider that this constituted the 'crisis in trust' described by some commentators. She suggested that the media, and particularly the print media, played a key role in shaping public attitudes to science through inaccurate, sensational and sentimental journalism. Baroness O'Neill noted that journalists had largely escaped the moves towards greater accountability, audit and transparency that had occurred across other professions (including scientists and those in public life). She too felt that such measures alone were unlikely to restore public trust in science. Indeed, Baroness O'Neill felt they might even be part of the problem – for instance by overloading people with information that they had no way of assessing. She suggested that greater emphasis needed to be placed on improving communication between scientists and the public.

The presentations prompted a wide-ranging discussion of the need to increase public trust in science and the key role the media has to play in this. There was agreement that the aim should be to increase public trust in the system that regulates and conducts science rather than to try and encourage the public to place 'blind trust' in experts. As far as the media were concerned, the main culprits appeared to be print journalists. It was noted that scientists should take more responsibility for communicating science (either directly to the public or through the media), that greater regulation of the print media may be required and that EPTA members have a role to play in involving journalists in public debates about science.

Visions of the future

The aim of the workshop was to explore how 'the future' is conceived by a range of institutions and to consider how the concept could be put into practice in technology assessment.

Dr Phyllis Starkey, the Chair of POST, began by reflecting on what the future means to her as a politician. While 'a week is a long time in politics', politicians must react (and be seen to react) to short-term events, but also be true to their political ideologies which have built-in visions of a utopian future. Parliamentary TA organisations, therefore, must offer short-term actions, even while looking to the longer-term.

Robby Berloznik from viWTA followed with an outline of European Foresight, stressing that there was little difference between technology assessment and technology foresight. Both are needed, he said to make wiser and more strategic decisions on science and technology and to facilitate more effective communications between stakeholders.

Andrew Jackson, Deputy Director of Foresight in the UK's Department of Trade and Industry followed by setting out three types of future: those that are probable, those that are possible and surprises. The

response is to create a 'futures space' using scenarios to explore implications. Such debates must be carried out in public and involve the public wherever possible.

Discussion groups were convened on human-machine interfaces, the future of aviation and alternative vehicle fuels. Each considered the implications of their specific technology in relation to where and when effects would arise, the nature of those effects and issues arising; how they would look into the future and the information needs and constraints.

The workshop concluded with Andrew Jackson (Foresight) outlining lessons learned from the earlier rounds of Foresight in the UK. He pointed out keys to success which included: skilled panels with excellent group dynamics; clear and specific objectives; sufficient resources (including expertise in futures working and sufficient time); buy-in from those in a position to take the exercise further; effective communications targeted to specific audiences. Personal agenda and compromise should be avoided.