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INTERVIEW

Responsible research governance is a matter of education

Short title	Responsible research is a matter of education
Long title	Responsible research governance is a matter of education
Authors	Miltos Ladikas[1]
Author affiliation	[1] Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS), Berlin, Germany
Author bio	Dr. Miltos Ladikas is senior researcher at the Institute of Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany. He has studied Social Psychology (London School of Economics M.Sc., PhD) with a focus on societal aspects in technological developments. Since 1996, he has held research positions in UK and Germany specialising in science and society issues. He has coordinated a number of international projects in the areas of science and technology policy, technology assessment, ethics of scientific developments, public perceptions in science and technology, genetically modified foods and access to pharmaceuticals. He advises the European Commission, the European Research Council, the European & Developing Countries Clinical Countries Partnership, and a number of National Research Organisations, on social-ethical issues in Science & Technology developments. His current work focuses on Global aspects of Technology Assessment, Responsible Innovation, Ethics in Science and Technology Policy, as well as, Science Diplomacy.
Author social links	ORCID
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Can ethics in science be global and why is this topic relevant currently?

One of the main recurrent debates in the Global Ethics research team[1] has been whether ethics can be at all "global". My opinion is that not only it could but it should. Notwithstanding the significant differences that we easily witness in cultural, social norms and behaviour, we are faced with a strongly interconnected and interdependent world. Developments in one country have immediate and direct effect outside their geographical borders, not only within its region but also on a global scale.

Nowhere is this effect more evident than in the area of Science and Technology (S&T). Any S&T development in one country is likely to be anticipated (and reproduced) in many other countries around the world in no time. This is due to both the speed of movement of knowledge and people in S&T areas, but also due to the increasing number of multilateral research programmes at global level.

This is the main reason why we need to work towards a common understanding and analysis of the ethics issues in S&T. If the scientific language is common, then the values that make this possible should also be common. Reaching a consensus on a common definition of ethics at global level is not the main target of this effort. The aim is to identify the common values that could guide our practical effort to incorporate an ethical decision making in S&T that transcends national S&T systems.

Could global guidelines for ethics go beyond the backdrop of different value systems and varying levels of public perception of risks and benefits?

First of all, we should remind ourselves that common ethics guidelines already exist. See for instance, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association, etc. These cover the whole world and have been agreed upon by almost every country on Earth. With this in mind, we could say that global guidelines can go beyond individual countries' particularities.

In S&T, one could argue that research ethics and research integrity guidelines are by default similar around the world. In research ethics, informed consent is an obligatory process anywhere in the world while research fraud (e.g. plagiarism, manipulating experiment results) is identical in every research integrity guidelines.

What hasn't been done so far, analysing the values systems that are behind the existing S&T ethics and assessing their incorporation into public debates (whether these are led by professionals or by lay people) and eventually in the decision making system of each country. We have attempted to do this in the GEST project with the aim of uncovering the commonalities that can eventually create a "global ethics" in S&T.

[1] This refers to the research project "Global Ethics in Science and Technology" see, https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-14693-5

Novel technologies are a matter of ethical concerns in many countries e.g. if we speak about public surveillance, or robots in healthcare. How can a policy address such concerns on a global scale?

Naturally global issues require global solutions. And that global solutions require global governance. The equation is simple but the realisation is far from it.
It is very complex and very difficult to instigate policy initiatives at global scale. Experience of the UN system shows that it is very slow moving by default, while the issues that it sometimes deals with, require immediate action (think of climate change, for instance). The situation is usually resolved by the creation of voluntary obligations that is far from perfect, since it only takes one major country to disagree in order for the effectiveness of the whole system to collapse. As an example, let us say that the current effort to ban human DNA editing is accepted by every country, except one country. The "edited" humans that this country will produce in the future, will move, travel and pass on their special genetic inheritance to all humankind, therefore, making the almost-global agreement utterly ineffective.

In summary, there is no easy answer to the problem of global policy but we should nevertheless strive for it, as there is no alternative. The equation "global solutions = global policy" has no alternative.

Thinking of policy recommendations for effective international collaboration: How is it possible to promote responsible governance in science and technology?

Responsible governance is a matter of education and this is within our grasp. No one wants to be "irresponsible" in what they do but what entails "responsibility" is a matter of debate. This is exactly what we try to achieve in our group: a global debate on ethics and responsibility. Once we agree on the basic constituents of these concepts, we can incorporate them in educational material that cover all stages of a researcher's career development.

But the first step is to bring everyone that matters on the same table and this is a vast undertaking by itself. We are continuing our work in global ethics by starting an initiative of getting together S&T government think-tanks that have the knowledge and the ability to instigate such a global debate (see here). Our work is thus continuing and gathering pace.