



UCL POLICY BRIEFING – JUNE 2014 AUTHORS

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Communication:** convey the big picture through personalised stories and dialogue
- **Policy:** engage in co-production
- **Training:** establish professional practices and norms appropriate to societal needs
- **Leadership:** establish a professional body for climate science
- **Self-reflection:** be aware of personal biases

Time for Change? Climate Science Reconsidered

A policy briefing on the report of the UCL Policy Commission on the Communication of Climate Science

Introduction

The UCL Policy Commission on the Communication of Climate Science, chaired by Professor Chris Rapley CBE, brought together experts from psychology, neuroscience, science and technology studies, earth sciences and energy research to consider why the communication of climate science is so difficult and complex and what steps the climate science community could take to improve communication. It made 5 key recommendations on **communication, training, policy, leadership and self-reflection.**

Communication

There is a need for the general public and climate scientists to engage in constructive dialogue, and for climate scientists to convey a big picture that provides a context for the discussion of new scientific results and their consequences. The authentic and personal voice of climate scientists in this process is essential for the general public to establish trust in the findings of climate science.

The climate science community is very broad and lacks a coherent unified voice. Climate science is complex and its results are unwelcome, inconvenient, and contested. Simply providing more 'facts' will not resolve disagreements over climate science and climate change. Dialogue, rather than debate, offers the means to identify common purpose and foster constructive, evidence-informed discourse.

A climate science 'meta-narrative' is required that delivers the results of climate science clearly and coherently in a way that is both accurate and engaging. This will require multiple narrative threads to reflect the complex nature of climate science and to connect with different audiences. Such a narrative should make clear the limits of certainty and knowledge. Its development by climate scientists should increase the transparency of the scientific process and strengthen public participation within it. The authentic and personal voice of climate scientists in delivering this narrative is important.

Policy

Rather than assuming a role of “truth speaks to power”, climate scientists should assume a role of “co-production”: where they can contribute their expertise alongside other experts to inform policy formulation and the decision-making process.

There is a need to reframe the public discourse in a way that circumvents existing entrenched positions to engage climate scientists and other experts with policymakers to evaluate the scientific evidence and determine the appropriate responses. Policy issues raised by climate science are complicated by many factors – such as decisions on energy, food and water supplies, quality of life, equity, resource affordability, security, sustainability and societal resilience.

Furthermore, the uncertainties of climate science can distract from the need to take action. Efforts to understand the climate system better are important but should not be allowed to divert attention and effort from decision-making and policy formulation based on what is already known and can be addressed. Adopting a ‘decision pathways’ approach for policy formulation can help to address uncertainties through the identification of multiple policy options and decision points. Climate scientists can also engage more effectively with policymakers by encouraging and informing discourse on tractable, ‘no or low’ regret policy options which address different benefits on different timescales, starting with the near term.

Climate science can inform, but should not arbitrate, policy deliberations. Responsibility and accountability for decision-making and policy formulation should lie with the relevant policymakers. Decision-making should occur through a collective process of co-production in which all interested parties, including policymakers and scientists, have a role. Progress will require a willingness and openness on the part of policy stakeholders as well as climate scientists, to commit to such an approach.

Training

Training and development of climate scientists should address strengthening the transparency of the climate science process, and the degree of public participation within it. More specifically, the objective is to equip the community as a whole with the skills to fulfil a range of roles from ‘pure scientist’ to ‘honest broker of policy options’.

The professional normal values and practices of climate scientists need to be reconsidered to match society’s expectations and needs. There is an important role for universities and funders in improving the training of climate scientists: effective action will be required on their part to support and deliver the necessary training. In expanding their skills and expertise to better match societal needs, climate scientists can benefit from working with social and behavioural scientists and with experts in public engagement and communication.

Leadership

A professional body for climate scientists should be established to provide a unifying purpose, with four key roles:

- **Representation:** to represent the interests of scientists and of society
- **Voice:** to provide the means for the climate science community to develop and communicate the climate science meta-narrative
- **Standards:** to define professional norms, values and practices and provide guidance to improve the training and development of climate scientists
- **Outcome:** to support climate scientists to engage in co-production of policy by providing clear routes for engagement between the climate science community and policymakers.

Climate scientists are finding themselves ill-prepared to engage with the often emotionally charged public discourse on the evaluation and use of their science. The demands of contemporary society mean that there are five key roles which climate scientists should collectively fulfil (although not all individual scientist should be necessarily expected to fulfil each and every role): ‘Pure Scientists’, ‘Science Communicator’, ‘Science Arbiter’, ‘Issue Advocate’, and ‘Honest Broker of Policy Alternatives’.

The establishment of a professional body for climate science would provide a means of representing the interests of climate scientists; supporting enhanced training to help them fulfil these roles; and developing norms, values and practice better tuned to the circumstances in which climate science finds itself.

Self-reflection

Active critical self-reflection and humility when interacting with others should become the cultural norm on the part of all participants in the climate discourse.

The public discussion of climate science is as much about what sort of world we wish to live in as it is about material risks to human wellbeing. People’s feelings, beliefs, inner conflicts and world views strongly influence the way they receive and assimilate information. Disagreement within climate discourse is more to do with differences in values and world views than about scientific facts. Being aware of how others may develop beliefs and opinions and how they themselves evaluating evidence and make judgments of others would help all those engaged in the climate discourse to move beyond entrenched positions.

FURTHER INFORMATION ON *TIME FOR CHANGE?*

The report of the UCL Policy Commission on the Communication of Climate Science provides a much fuller discussion of the issues summarised here and can be downloaded along with additional materials and further information on the Commission, from www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/Policy_Commissions/Communication-climate-science/