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Understanding researchers’ openness to external parties influencing academic research

Abstract: Ambiguity surrounding the effect of external engagement on academic research has raised questions about what motivates researchers to collaborate with third parties. This paper contributes to this debate by progressing beyond the idea that researchers engage with society simply because of direct benefits. We argue that what matters for society is research that can be absorbed by users. We define ‘openness’ as a willingness by researchers to make research more usable by external partners by responding to external influences in their own research activities. We ask what kinds of characteristics define those researchers who are most ‘open’ to creating usable knowledge. Our empirical study analyses a sample of 1583 researchers working at the Spanish Council for Scientific Research (CSIC). Results demonstrate that it is personal factors (primarily academic identity and past experience) that determine researchers’ ‘openness’ (to societal involvement). The paper concludes that policies to encourage external engagement should focus on both the academic formation stage and ongoing opportunities to engage with third parties alongside providing direct incentives and benefits within individual projects and funding programmes.