



National Science and Technology Forum

S.E.T. for socio-economic growth

**Media Release:**  
**Individual responsibility, global impact – Release of the NSTF discussion report on ‘Ethics and professional integrity’**

23 April 2015

We live in a world constructed through science, engineering, technology and innovation (SETI). For the public, the ubiquitous nature only truly comes to the fore when something goes wrong – a church collapses in Nigeria killing hundreds of people. Or where there is the potential to dramatically change the world, such as genetic modification and the nuclear bomb. It is then that we ask the question: who takes responsibility?

Ethics is a topical issue, particularly in SA. The country ranks 67 out of 175 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (2014) by Transparency International.

“While it is in the hard sciences that the very difficult ethical issues exist, the humanities seem to be more interested in discussing ethics,” says Jansie Niehaus, National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) Executive Director.

Furthermore, scientific ethical issues can’t be decided by a legal system as seen by the release of Dr Wouter Basson, former head of the secret chemical and biological warfare project that existed during apartheid. “This highlights the ethical responsibility of individual scientists,” says Niehaus.

The NSTF has released a [discussion report on ‘Ethics and Professional Integrity’](#). (See side block.) Not only were the more traditional themes explored but discussion brought out further key areas. Below are some of the highlights:

- [Mr Dawie Botha from the SA Academy of Engineering](#) noted that corruption in the global construction industry is estimated to be thousands of billions of Rands. Consequently, a Global Infrastructure Anti-Corruption Centre has been established.
- [Dr Willem Hoffman from Tshwane University of Technology](#) noted that ethics means applying reason to everything you do ie being able to justify one’s choice. But ethics is more than facts

NSTF discussion report on ‘Ethics and professional integrity’

The National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) has released a discussion report ‘Ethics and professional integrity’. It is based on a one-day forum held in Gauteng on 19 March 2015. Issues discussed included:

- Plagiarism in Science/Technology (Dr Kevin Behren, Steve Biko Centre for Bioethics, University of the Witwatersrand)
- Professional integrity of engineers and other practitioners, codes of conduct/ethics, and professional associations (Mr Dawie Botha, South African Academy of Engineering)
- The role of Research Ethics Committees to establish integrity awareness in a university research context (Dr Willem Hoffman, Research Ethics Committee, Tshwane University of Technology)
- The Applied Ethics for Professionals Programme: Philosophy and Ethics Education (Dr Brian Penrose, Applied Ethics for Professionals Programme, University of the Witwatersrand)
- Definitions of Ethics as Philosophical Discipline (Prof

where ethical compliance is achieved via a checklist. He said that there is a need for critical reflection on how to respond when confronted with ethical dilemmas. While ethics has been a fundamental part of scholarship since ancient times, Hoffman said that it's assumed that people know how to be ethical. However, ethics needs to be explicit, talked about and a critical mass needs to be built.

- It was noted by Dr Lyn Horn from Stellenbosch University that SA does not have a national register of ethics infringements. This means that if a person is fired from an institution for an ethics breach, they can easily take up employment at another institution.
- [Dr Brian Penrose from the University of the Witwatersrand](#) explained how ethical arguments change over time. Examples include the arguments that justified slavery and apartheid – both now thoroughly rejected. He noted that in the discipline of ethics, social acceptability is not regarded as evidence. He further noted an ethical person is motivated by the fact that certain behaviour is ethically called for. However, it is not clear that any form of 'ethics education' can alter behaviour to become more ethical. Therapy, religious conversion or sensitivity training could potentially be more effective.
- [Prof Anton van Niekerk from Stellenbosch University](#) explained that ethics differs from morality in that it is based on intellectual reflection. Ethics is also different from the law where actions can be legal yet unethical. For example, the Immorality Act under Apartheid.

Anton van Niekerk, Centre for Applied Ethics, Stellenbosch University)

The [report and individual presentations](#) can be found on the NSTF web site ([www.nstf.org.za](http://www.nstf.org.za)) under 'Discussion Forums'. Video clips are also available.

#### Recommendations on ethics in SETI

A document on [recommendations](#) – taken from the NSTF discussion report 'Ethics and professional integrity' – is also available on the NSTF web site ([www.nstf.org.za](http://www.nstf.org.za)) under 'Discussion Forums'. The recommendations include:

- While progress has been made in establishing guidelines, codes, structures and procedures, critical reflection is required on how to respond to ethical dilemmas.
- Ethics should be developed as a fundamental concept in all tertiary curricula. At the same time, ethics education should be recognised as a specialist area.

Professional associations should develop codes of ethics for their members.

In existence since 1995, the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) is the stakeholder body for all science, engineering, technology and innovation (SETI) organisations in South Africa:

- Plays a powerful consultative and lobbying role in policy matters relating to SETI
- Organises related discussion forums to facilitate consultation
- Organises the prestigious NSTF-BHP Billiton Awards (co-sponsored by BHP Billiton since 2011) with outreach programmes with the Youth
- Runs projects in partnership with its members, including a bursary programme, initiatives to assist young graduates, disseminating news and information, as well as making bursary and career information more accessible to young people and schools.

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The **National Science and Technology Forum** (NSTF), established in 1995, is a broadly-representative stakeholder body for all SETI organisations in South Africa, which seeks to influence policy formulation and delivery.

The [NSTF-BHP Billiton Awards](#) are unique in SA, recognising the outstanding contributions of individuals and groups to SETI.

[www.sciencebursaries.org.za](http://www.sciencebursaries.org.za) - SET for life! This exciting web portal is a 'one-stop shop' for learners and students who are interested in pursuing a career in the sciences, engineering or technology.

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