



Abiding by codes of ethics and codes of conduct imposed on members of learned and professional geoscience institutions and – a tiresome formality or a win-win for scientific and professional integrity and protection of the public?

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In 2012, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) formed the Task Group on Global Geoscience Professionalism (“TG-GGP”) to bring together the expanding network of organizations around the world whose primary purpose is self-regulation of geoscience practice. An important part of TG-GGP’s mission is to foster a shared understanding of aspects of professionalism relevant to individual scientists and applied practitioners working in one or more sectors of the wider geoscience profession (e.g. research, teaching, industry, geoscience communication and government service). These may be summarised as competence, ethical practice, and professional, technical and scientific accountability.

Legal regimes for the oversight of registered or licensed professionals differ around the world and in many jurisdictions there is no registration or licensure with the force of law. However, principles of peer-based self-regulation universally apply. This makes professional geoscience organisations ideal settings within which geoscientists can debate and agree what society should expect of us in the range of roles we fulfil. They can provide the structures needed to best determine what expectations, in the public interest, are appropriate for us collectively to impose on each other. They can also provide the structures for the development of associated procedures necessary to identify and discipline those who do not live up to the expected standards of behaviour established by consensus between peers.

Codes of Ethics (sometimes referred to as Codes of Conduct), to which all members of all major professional and/or scientific geoscience organizations are bound (whether or not they are registered or hold professional qualifications awarded by those organisations), incorporate such traditional tenets as: safeguarding the health and safety of the public, scientific integrity, and fairness. Codes also increasingly include obligations concerning welfare of the environment and sustainability.

This contribution is part of a series of presentations and papers by TG-GGP members in 2015 on a similar theme, including a paper submitted for the American Geophysical Union Joint Assembly meeting in Montreal, Canada, in May 2015 (Bonham and Allington). It will first describe common features of ethical codes/codes of conduct and associated complaints and disciplinary procedures, drawing on examples from the professional geoscience organisations which are members of TG-GGP. It will go on to examine the challenges associated with encouraging and policing compliance with such codes, especially where the need for compliance is not a legal obligation, but simply a condition of membership of that organisation.