



VETBIONET

Veterinary Biocontained facility Network for excellence in animal infectiology research and experimentation

Deliverable D4.6:

Creating 'Safe Spaces' for research and animal ethics debate

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Executive Summary

VetBioNet (Veterinary Biocontained facility Network for excellence in animal infectious disease research and experimentation) project is a facility access, research and service provision project that focuses on supporting high quality research in animal infectious disease. VetBioNet is an infrastructure project which is focusing on supporting innovation in animal infectious diseases research. This is facilitated through the provision of cross-cutting research activities and transnational access (TNA) to high quality veterinary biocontainment facilities across Europe. VetBioNet comprises of institutes in 27 locations across Europe and has a range of associated partners and collaborators.

VetBioNet is supporting the development of process and policies that can support animal infectious disease research as well as innovation in the area of research tool development. These services span across a wide range of needs that including aspects of ethics, training and engagement approaches and tools. Some of the work of VetBioNet has examined issues such as biosecurity, research impact, material and data sharing, animal research policy issues and the application of the 3Rs. A further issue that is important to support good practice, researcher wellbeing and ethical practice in animal research is the need to provide spaces and activities that support reflective learning. As such this report explores the nature of what might be described as safe spaces that are created to support reflective and critical examination of research approaches and culture. This issue of safe spaces in animal infectious disease research is discussed in order to encourage both the network and individual institutions to examine how these spaces can support the wellbeing both researchers and also support the application of best practice and the application of the 3Rs.

This is to ensure only animals that cannot be replaced are used and when animals are used in research the number is reduced and the experimental procedures are refined going beyond regulatory requirements. This discussion of spaces for reflectivity and the need for dialogue is examined in the context of our collective global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, post-pandemic experiences and the way this experience has and may have affected research working practices.

A range of insights and initiatives have emerged from this recent work, with important aspects identified that relate to creating spaces for reflexivity and dialogue. As such one of the activities of the cross-cutting work of VetBioNet was to create some spaces for discussion of good practice approaches and ethical aspects of the zoonotic and epizootic disease research. A series of internal fora were used for discussion and reflection which were incorporated in VetBioNet activities and meetings. These 'safe spaces' were the places where all types of staff from the partner institutions could discuss issues, and share good practice approaches and aspirations. Some approaches for engagement and tools to support reflection were used and these activities also fed into a range of VetBioNet activities.

This report sets out a discussion of internal activities and identifies key components that can support the creation of safe spaces within research networks and institutions. First, overarching VetBioNet activities are discussed and then the development of activities and space are discussed, specifically the role and use of (a) VetBioNet Meetings, (b) Stakeholder meetings, (c) Online annual meetings used during the pandemic, (d) Researcher training, and (e) Post-COVID in person meetings. The use of a series of tools and approaches are also discussed from the use of 'The Chatham House' Rule, the Ethical Matrix, JamBoards, Voting systems, 'Ethics in Research' Cards and in person engagement exercises.

From these experiences a set of key components for creating 'safe spaces' were identified. These key components are:

- (i) Facilitation;
- (ii) Spaces;
- (iii) Solidarity;
- (iv) Challenge;
- (v) Empowerment; and
- (vi) Sustaining Dialogue

These key components can inform the cross-cutting activities of the future VetBioNet work and can inform other research networks. These elements have fed into the VetBioNet activities and they will inform the creation of important reflective and engagement activities of the sustained activities of VetBioNet which will take place in 2023, 2024 and beyond.

VetBioNet Team involved:

The VetBioNet membership supported the development of this report. This report is authored by Kate Millar ¹

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1. Introduction

VetBioNet (Veterinary Biocontained facility Network for excellence in animal infectious disease research and experimentation) project is a facility access, research and service provision project that focuses on supporting high quality research in animal infectious disease. VetBioNet at the heart of its work is an infrastructure project which is focusing on supporting innovation in animal infectious diseases research. This is facilitated through the provision of cross-cutting research activities and transnational access (TNA) to high quality veterinary biocontainment facilities across Europe.

VetBioNet comprises of institutes in 27 locations across Europe and has a range of associated partners and collaborators. This comprehensive network of well-established high-containment (BSL3) research facilities, research organisations and public and industry partners brings together a unique set of internationally recognised experts in the fields of zoonotic and epizootic diseases.

VetBioNet is not only facilitating access to research facilities and research activities but is also supporting the development of processes and policies that can support animal infectious disease research as well as innovation in the area of research tool development. As well as supporting the provision of transnational access services the VetBioNet partners provide a series of crossing services and research activities that support the wider research community. These services span across a wide range of needs that include aspects of ethics, training and engagement approaches and tools.

A key component of the VetBioNet work is to explore cross-cutting issues that relate to the working practices and the wider responsibilities of those professionals who work in the zoonotic and epizootic disease research.

Some of the work of VetBioNet has examined issues such as biosecurity, research impact, material and data sharing, animal research policy issues and the application of the 3Rs. A further issue that is important to support good practice, researcher wellbeing and ethical practice in animal research is the need to provide spaces and activities that support reflective learning. As such this report explores the nature of what might be described as safe spaces that are created to support reflective and critical examination of research approaches and culture. This issue of safe spaces in animal infectious disease research is discussed in order to encourage both the network and individual institutions to examine how these spaces can support the wellbeing of both researchers and also support the application of best practice and the application of the 3Rs. This is to ensure only animals that cannot be replaced are used and when animals are used in research the number is reduced and the experimental procedures are refined going beyond regulatory requirements.

This discussion of spaces for reflectivity and the need for dialogue is examined in the context of our collective global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, post-pandemic experiences and the way this experience has and may have affected research working practices.

2. Research Culture and Safe Spaces

2.1. Research Culture and Safe Spaces

There has been notable discussion in recent years not just about what research should be undertaken and by whom, but also discussions concerning how research should be conducted, implemented and how positive working environments can or should be created.

This discussion of research culture and research environment has focused on a number of issues including the role of research ethics, research integrity, EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion), researcher wellbeing and researcher's responsibilities to their research participants and subjects.

A range of insights and initiatives have emerged from this recent work (e.g. Nosek et al, 2015), with important aspects identified that relate to creating spaces for reflexivity and dialogue. As such one of the activities of the cross-cutting work of VetBioNet was to create some spaces for discussion of good practice approaches and ethical aspects of the zoonotic and epizootic disease research.

A series of internal fora were used for discussion and reflection which were incorporated in VetBioNet activities and meetings. These 'safe spaces' were the places where all types of staff from the partner institutions could discuss issues, and share good practice approaches and aspirations. Some approaches for engagement and tools to support reflection were used and these activities also fed into a range of VetBioNet activities.

This report sets out a discussion of internal activities and identifies key components that can support the creation of safe spaces within research networks and institutions. These key components are:

- (i) Facilitation;
- (ii) Spaces;
- (iii) Solidarity;
- (iv) Challenge;
- (v) Empowerment;
- (vi) Sustaining Dialogue

These key components can inform the cross-cutting activities of the future VetBioNet work and can inform other research networks.

2.2. VetBioNet Activities

In order to support the activities of the network through 'safe spaces' a number of possible approaches and tools were proposed. It was hoped that certain approaches would be appropriate for supporting reflectivity and discussion, but some mechanisms were not fit for purpose. Initially it was hoped that a dedicated online section of the VetBioNet intranet platform would work as a secure collaborative workspace for a safe dialogue space, working as a space where individuals can post and receive comments acting as a type of dialogue forum. However, it was clear from the early discussions at the VetBioNet annual meetings that either in person or virtual spaces with real-time interaction was seen as the way to support dialogue and each other as researchers as well as creating a space to encourage reflexivity. Opportunities to develop an online forum in the private area of the website were explored but the functionality was not seen as optimal for the type of space that was needed and what was understood to be a 'safe space'. What emerged from the early work and investigation into options was that other channels emerged as more effective 'spaces' for the exchange of ideas, concerns and wider reflections on practice. What also emerged during the COVID period was the need for a trusted space where time could be used effectively. As such the notion of a collaborative trusted space is not best served by an internal online 'chat space'.

Before and during COVID times, the use of online intranet spaces for idea exchange was examined and there was seen to be an overload of static chat spaces, fileshares and twitter-like comment exchange spaces. These e-chat spaces and static online approaches were deemed to lack the value and utility that was needed to support reflexivity.

So creating 'Safe Spaces' was deemed to be best served using live facilitated internal meetings, including dialogue and reflective sessions in training and designated workshops spaces. These key features that were determined to make these spaces successful are set out in Section 3. Before discussing these features some of the tools and events used to support the creation of safe spaces in the VetBioNet work are set out below.

VetBioNet Meetings

In order to highlight the role of the members of workpackage 4 who would be presenting and running the ethics-related activities, a series of activities and spaces were created during and around the early annual and stakeholder VetBioNet Meetings. A series of rules were established about the nature of the facilitation and how any responses to discussion sessions would be handled in terms of data protection issues, anonymity and confidentiality. The notion of 'Chatham House' rule was also introduced for some sessions, in other words VetBioNet participants could discuss the content of the meetings but were asked to not name the person who had raised a point or asked a question. The aim of this rule is to support dialogue and reflectivity by allowing individuals to speak without being concerned about any comment being associated with them and that they would be named. From the early sessions and activities in the network any responses, questions, statements were deemed to be collected as a service to enhance good practice in animal infectious disease research, these responses were not data. Only activities that had gone through ethical review were deemed to be data that could be published, e.g. such as the MS Teams survey that supported the work on understanding impact conducted in 2021. So in the early activities, clarity about the nature of facilitation and trust was important.

Initial Stakeholder Meetings

The development of an ethics forum and safe spaces has been developed within the VetBioNet Meetings. The need for spaces and tools to facilitate ethical reflection was initially discussed at the first VetBioNet Annual Meetings in Tour and the Stakeholder meetings in Brussels and this was followed by further discussion within the development of training.

In order to support the creation of spaces for discussion and to facilitate participation from across the network, in person voting pads were used. For the stakeholder meetings this was seen to be important to encourage all participants to contribute. In discussions of policy and research priorities where there are more than eight or so people participating it can be easy for individuals not to feel they have a voice so an anonymous voting system can capture some attitudes and preferences from all present. These types of systems do not support all types of participation but can be a useful tool to empower a wider range of actors. Other tools that were used to structure discussions of the ethical issues were tools such as the Ethical Matrix (Mepham, 2000; Millar and Mepham, 2001) which is an ethical tool that helps researchers to map and characterise the ethical aspects of their work. See Table 1 on that shows the structure of the ethical matrix that has been used.

This voting pad engagement tool and the ethical matrix were among some of the tools used in the pre-COVID activities of VetBioNet discussions and help to create initial safe spaces for discussion.

Ethical Matrix for Animal Infectious Disease Research			
	WELLBEING	AUTONOMY	FAIRNESS
Animals in Research	Animal welfare	Behavioural Freedom	Intrinsic value
Production Animals	Animal welfare	Behavioural Freedom	Intrinsic value
Researchers	Satisfactory income and working conditions	Professional Freedom	Equitable working conditions and IPR opportunities
Farming Industry	Satisfactory income and working conditions	Managerial freedom	Equitable conditions and trading systems
Society	Safety, protection and social harmony	Informed democratic choice	Affordability and access to food

Table 1: Ethical Matrix specification for Animal Infectious Disease Research

Online Annual Meetings during COVID

The development of ethics safe spaces has been an ongoing discussion and the need for spaces and tools to facilitate ethical reflection and discussion was already acknowledged as a prominent issue in animal research but the needs to create these spaces appear to be more prominent during the COVID pandemic period (2020 – 2022).

In response to the challenges of working and coming together, online meetings were organised by EAAP. During these meetings, the spaces to examine key issues and encourage dialogue was facilitated through a number of 'safe space tools'. For annual meeting online voting organised systems were organised by INRAE. The WP4 team organised online, real-time sessions and also developed and circulated some 'safe spaces' surveys. For these surveys members of VetBioNet could post issues and ranking priorities. As in the pre-pandemic activities individuals can respond differently to online meeting activities with some individuals being passive or reluctant to put forward their views. To support wider participation and a sense of solidarity a range of online smaller break-groups, online surveys and doodle and posting boards were used, including software such as Google JamBoards were used. Examples of these approaches are illustrated in Figures 1 – 4.



Safe Spaces: Opportunities to share, discuss, support and reflect (Survey)

Building on your input yesterday, this is a further safe spaces discussions session. Please can you prioritise:

1. Creating a level playing field in Europe, supporting international mobility of researchers and research
2. Building a culture of care: Learning from each other
3. Sharing good practice on animal welfare approaches in challenge tests: Bedding and environment provision
4. Advancing a level playing field in Europe for cross-border collaborations on projects
5. Research staff wellbeing at a time of COVID: Supporting and Protecting Mental and Physical Wellbeing of staff at the time of a pandemic
6. Reproducibility crisis? Discussing Validity and Reproducibility in Animal Infectious Disease research
7. Quality and uses of public information (e.g. statistical reporting, NTSs)
8. Supporting better species-specific evaluation of projects
9. Discussing the value and challenges of conducting animal research: How do I discuss my work with others?
10. How should my institution/company be transparent on animal research?
11. Facts, news, and fake news related to animal research and alternative methods: Different approaches to engagement
12. Dilemmas in setting humane endpoints: Sharing approaches

VetBioNet – AM3 – December 17th – 18th 2020



Figure 1: Support Reflectivity through live online discussion sessions

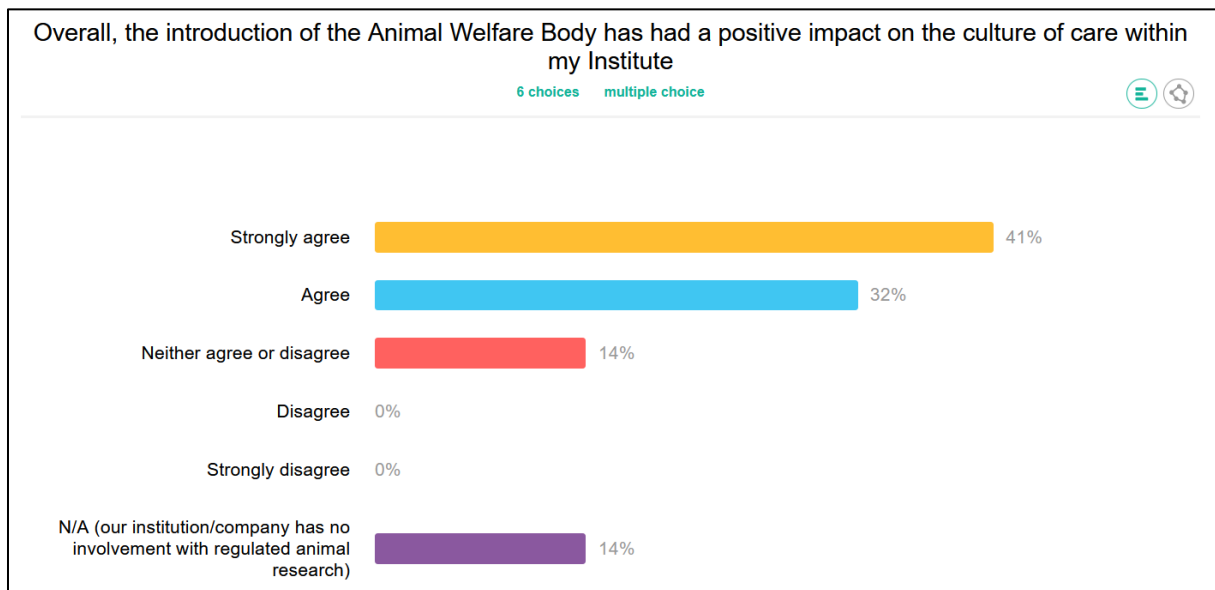


Figure 2: Example of anonymised online survey conducted in real-time at the meetings

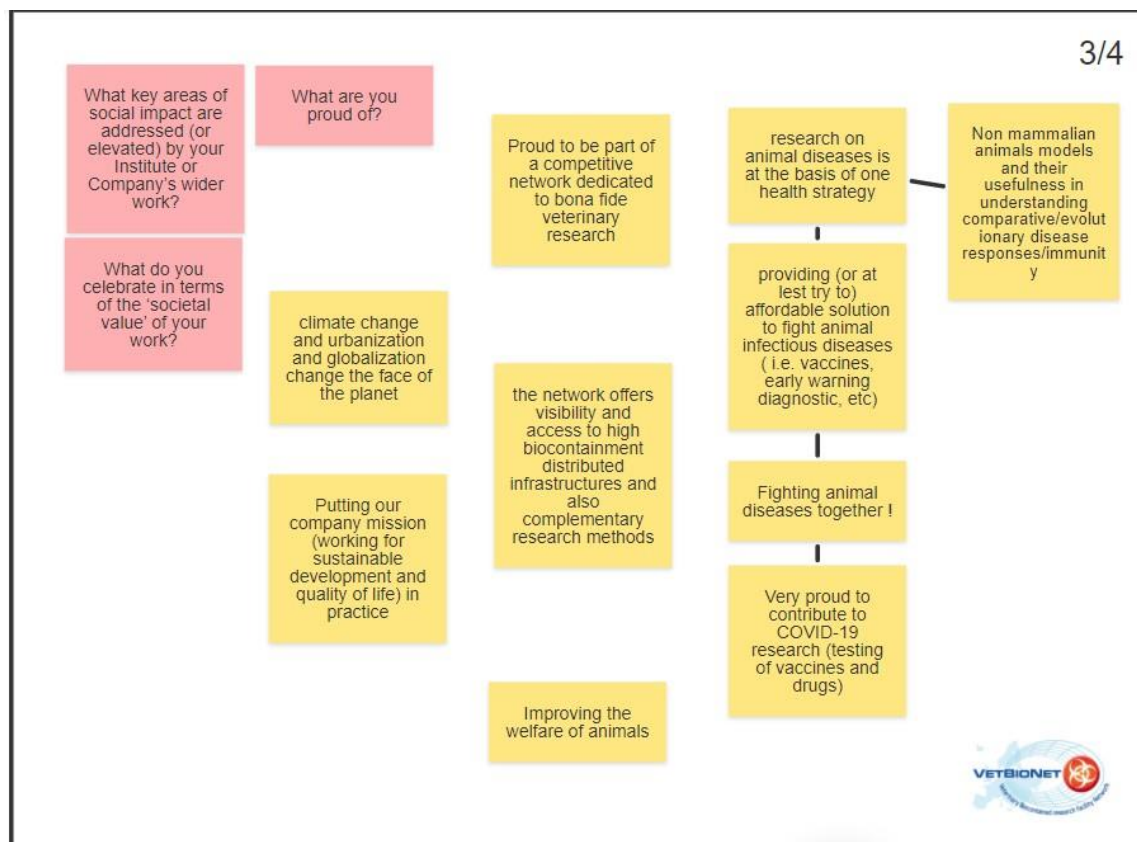


Figure 3: Example of using INRAE live e-Postnotes Supporting Reflectivity though discussion session

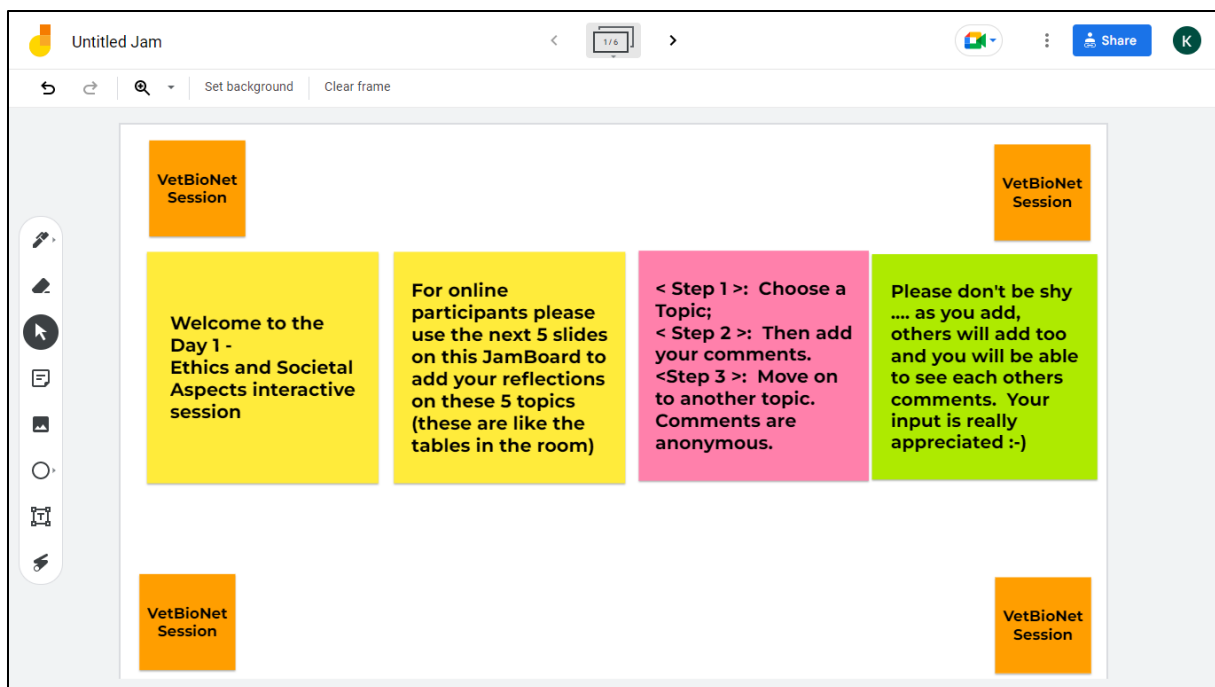


Figure 4: Example of using Live JamBoards Supporting Reflectivity though discussion session

VetBioNet Researcher Training

Feedback from the training that was provided through VetBioNet pre-COVID highlighted that as well as raising awareness, providing knowledge and developing skills, these training sessions also provided much appreciated 'safe spaces' to discuss a range of issues that relate to research practice and research culture, ethical standards as well as issues of bias, inclusion and participation. Recognition of the value of these training spaces beyond the core learning outcomes contributed to the decision to develop novel online training activities on ethics, 3R and research planning for animal infectious disease research TNA as a Summer School in July 2021. The feedback from this event indicated that this was an effective space for learning and as key reflective spaces.

This understanding also supported the further inclusion of training activities around Experimental Design, 3Rs and ethics held in association with Moredun and INRAE in Tours. The reflective component of this training is asking the participants to think about not just the learning outcomes but their learning journey in terms of their development needs assessment (DNA) and how the training challenges their approach to their research. The Figure 5 shows the announcement for the early career training.



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VetBioNet Summer School

Animal Infectious Disease Research: Good Practice Approaches, Ethics & 3Rs by Design

Free Online Training: 12-14 July 2021

Are you an Early/Mid-Career Infectious Disease Researcher?
Would you like some **free training** to develop and improve your skills
and awareness relating to good research practice? **Then register now.**

Programme Summary

Monday 12 – Applying Good Practice Principles

Speakers – Dr Maria-Isabel Thoulouze INRAE; Prof. Kate Millar and Dr Michelle Hudson-Shore, University of Nottingham.

Tuesday 13 – Biosecurity; Experimental Design

Speakers - Dr Hugh Simmons APHA; Dr Derek Fry University of Manchester.

Wednesday 14 – Ethics and Good Practice by Design; Research Funding & Networks

Speakers - Prof. Adrian Smith norecopa; Dr Norbert Stockhofe-Zurwieden WBVR; Prof Kate Millar, University of Nottingham

Figure 5: Summer School Training as a reflective space


Post-COVID Meetings

Building on the sessions and activities run during the challenging COVID months, some topic specific activities were run. For example there were sessions that highlighted aspects of research wellbeing as well as animal wellbeing. These sessions or discussion spaces focused on the need to think about researchers mental and physical health at a time when workloads were challenging and demands were ever changing. Alongside this, new tools were being used in the new hybrid and face-to-face meeting that could be run. One tool the 'Ethics in Research' cards developed at the University of Nottingham in 2022 were used in several sessions and distributed amongst the members.

The events in late 2022 and 2023 (e.g. Brussels in 2022 and the final meeting in Tour in February 2023) were run in person and so a number of group activities and 'safe space' reflective sessions could be run. These were deemed to be very productive as they allowed challenging discussions of issues, priorities and what next for VetBioNet. These sessions built on the previous years and were only possible as the types of activity, the nature of trust, familiarity with the format and a sense of solidarity were present. These last few sessions highlighted the importance of some key characteristics of the sessions but also identified the importance of having sustained activities that made individuals and the collective feel comfortable to take part in these reflective discussions. A number of examples of the tools and the types of activities are illustrated in Figures 6 to 10.

Figure 6: Using 'Ethics in Research' Cards to support Reflectivity (Example of four cards and the back of cards showing the different types of categories)



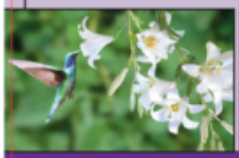


Dialogue activity with Cards

Please look at the 'Participants and Stakeholder' Cards:

- Can you pick one or two important cards?
- Are any 'Participants and Stakeholder' cards missing?

Biota



Research can involve many different species. Biota are the fauna and flora of an ecosystem, ranging from microbes to plants to mammalian species. Many species can be studied as part of the wider biota.

What are your responsibilities to individual organisms or a species?
Which laws or guidance apply to your research work?

PARTICIPANTS AND STAKEHOLDERS




VetBioNet – November 2022


Figure 7: Showing an example of how the 'Ethics in Research' Cards were used to support Reflectivity



People



Yes we are professionals but ..

Do we consider these wellbeing aspects?

Does this area of research create novel stresses for researchers?

Do we or should we have processes to support ourselves and each other?

Can we suggest aspects for future


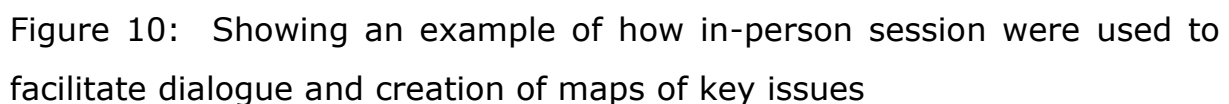
VetBioNet – November 2022


Figure 8: Showing the spaces created to talk about animal infectious disease researchers' wellbeing considerations

Figure 9: Showing an example of how in person session were created to allow the mapping of key issues



3. A Framework for Supporting Safe Spaces

From the experience of creating a wide ranging set of activities and the creating these 'safe spaces' as well as taking into account the perspectives of the VetBioNet members, number of features of what constitutes safe spaces emerged. These are referred to a set of key components that are important when one considers developing and running 'safe space' activities or events. These key components are:

- (i) Facilitation;
- (ii) Spaces;
- (iii) Solidarity;
- (iv) Challenge;
- (v) Empowerment; and
- (vi) Sustaining Dialogue

These key components are discussed briefly below and it is proposed that researchers or project coordinators consider these aspects when developing their own reflective spaces.

3.1. Key Component 1: Facilitation

In order to make create any 'safe space' activity and ensure it works, there needs to be clear and well-defined facilitation. Of course, clear planning and organisation of any activity is an important component of a successful event. All activities should be well prepared with a structured agenda or timetable, appropriate materials and information about who and how an event is facilitated are all core elements of success.

The role of the facilitator needs to be clearly set out. The facilitator needs to have knowledge of the subject area and be experienced in facilitating discussions that relate to sensitive or controversial topics. The facilitation process also by its nature and process needs to establish and maintain trust.

All of these aspects highlight the need to think carefully about the role and experience of the facilitator.

3.2. Key Component 2: Empowerment

When creating a safe space it is important that the space considers important aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion. It is important that all participants can contribute freely and fairly and that voices are not 'cut-off' or suppressed. Some individuals can find it easier to contribute verbally than others so it is important to use direct approaches, such as polls, JamBoards, writing post-it contributions, or using voting to allow everyone to feel empowered and collect the diversity of contribution.

3.3. Key Component 3: Solidarity

When creating a safe space one aspect which can affect whether individuals are willing to reflect and examine issues can be whether or not they feel a sense of ownership or relevance in the topic that is being explored. This can also extend to the group that they are working with, whether the safe space group members have a sense of collective need to work with this safe space. This can be described as sense of solidarity across the group, if there is a sense of solidarity in the activity that is being conducted in the safe space this can support greater openness, reflexivity and engagement in the session.

3.4. Key Component 4: Challenge

These spaces are described as safe spaces but it is also important to consider how participants can engage in dialogue and reflection on challenging issues. Challenge within these spaces are important to encourage deeper reflexivity. This can come from within the group but other tools can be useful. These can be ethical frameworks such as the Ethical Matrix or other principle-based tools. Tools such as the 'Ethics in Research' Cards can act as prompts as with this tool each of the 130 ethics cards has a question asking the individual or group how they are meeting an ethical standard or protecting a group or entity. Sometimes using a case study or thought experiment can also be challenging and provocative. All of these approaches are intended to pull the participants beyond the standard comfortable conversation to support their exploration of what matters and why, and to discuss what can and should be done.

3.5. Key Component 5: Spaces

When considering how to create effective 'safe spaces' a key component is the nature of the space. Some of the important aspects of how to create an appropriate space can be: (i) the quality of physical or online space, (ii) the familiarity of the space and the members of the space and (iii) the processes and ways of working within the space.

In terms of the quality of physical space, the type and nature of physical or online space can notably affect how individuals and group interact with each other. When creating person-to-person spaces it is important to consider the layout of tables, the sense of 'openness' of a room, how many people may be sitting around a table and whether that may be imposing.

For electronic spaces it is important to create a sense of connectedness with cameras on and there should be the option for small group discussions, in breakout rooms.

How familiar a person is with a space or the members of a group can affect participation and willingness to engage, so if sessions are held at larger meetings and project conferences then it can be advisable to hold any 'safe spaces' session later in the programme so that participants can feel more adapted to a new space. How a session is organised and run and what rules or approaches are used to structure the discussion can also notably affect reflexivity and participation. Being clear about the rules of the discussion session are important for creating a safe space, such as does anonymity or confidentiality apply, will the discussion be recorded and written up, etc.

Apply approaches such as the Chatham House rule (Chatham House, ND) where "participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed" in the safe spaces group. These 'rules' can help to create a feeling of security where individuals are comfortable exploring issues that are concerning or uncomfortable.

3.6. Key Component 6: Sustaining Dialogue

Building in opportunities to return to issues or topics with a familiar group can support more meaningful dialogue. This can be done by working with the same group over a longer period of time. Creating a one off 'safe space' can be very productive for individuals and a group, but creating a series of 'safe space' activities over a time period, can help to create an environment where a greater depth of reflexivity and participation can occur.

A sustained dialogue can support wider mindfulness and ownership of important and, or challenging issues which may be beneficial and rewarding for the individual and the collective. This in turn may also lead to greater opportunities for action and change.

4. VetBioNet Dialogue, Reflection Safe Spaces and Next Steps

Drawing on the issues and analysis set out there are a number of aspects that can be taken forward. First, a range of engagement, ethics and good practice activities and events have supported the VetBioNet work programme.

This report sets out the nature of the “safe spaces” internal activities and identifies key components that can support the creation of safe spaces within research networks and institutions.

These VetBioNet documented activities and space show the diversity of both activities and the tools that are available. VetBioNet has used (a) VetBioNet Meetings, (b) Stakeholder meetings, (c) Online annual meetings during the pandemic, (d) Researcher training, and (e) Post-COVID in person meetings. These events have been run before, during and after the COVID pandemic and lessons have been learnt from these experiences. This report also set out a number of approaches and tools with some specific highlights that include: the use of ‘The Chatham House’ Rule, the Ethical Matrix, JamBoards, Voting systems, ‘Ethics in Research’ Cards and in person engagement exercises. From these experiences a set of key components for creating ‘safe spaces’ were identified and these should help others create these important spaces.

These key components are:

- (i) Facilitation;
- (ii) Spaces;
- (iii) Solidarity;
- (iv) Challenge;
- (v) Empowerment; and
- (vi) Sustaining Dialogue

Most importantly, these key components can inform the future cross-cutting activities of the VetBioNet as the partners sustain the network and collaborative research activities.

All of the activities set out in this report have fed into the successful activities of VetBioNet and this work will inform the creation of important reflective and engagement activities of the sustained activities of VetBioNet from now, in 2024 and beyond this.

5. Acknowledgements

Thanks goes to members of the WP4 team who have contribute to the range of activities over the years. In particular thanks goes to the VetBioNet members as well as an acknowledgement of their important and much needed contributions.

Notable thanks goes to the WP4 team members and the supporting contributions of Dr Vanessa Ashall, Jess Smith, Josh Cantrell, Natalie Wallis and the significant contribution of Dr Michelle Hudson-Shore across some of the activities highlighted in this report and also her work across WP4 (University of Nottingham, UNOTT).

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