

view from the top nicole föger

Integrity needs common values more than common procedures

The countries of Europe harbour a wide range of approaches to research integrity. There are differences in guidelines on good scientific practice, national structures on research integrity, procedures on how to handle allegations of misconduct, sanctions, and protection for whistleblowers.

The Scandinavian countries, for example, have led the way since the early 1990s in building up structures to handle research misconduct. They have the strongest frameworks in Europe for policing research integrity, and Denmark and Norway have national committees with a legal mandate to deal with misconduct cases.

Several countries, including the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, have national research integrity systems without a legal mandate. Others, such as Belgium, Italy and Luxembourg, lack national structures but are well on their way to developing them. Some countries have established independent bodies to govern research integrity; others deal with the issue from within ministries, academies or funders.

In countries where there is no national committee, control takes place at a local level, through universities and research institutions. This might work well at any given organisation, but it increases the possibility that cases will be handled differently from place to place. The best approach is to provide the appropriate structures and control at national as well as local level.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this diversity of approaches; each nation needs to find the structures that are appropriate to its culture. Even so, administration can vary but values should not: Europe needs a common understanding of good scientific practice. It is norms that should converge, rather than bureaucracies.

On this, there is still some way to go. In several countries, such as France and Slovakia, lone campaigners have spent years struggling against political obstacles, and even against other academics, to build up national structures with the responsibility and authority to handle misconduct cases.

This is why, even though rules and practices may ultimately converge, education is most important for research integrity. As Pieter Drenth, who chaired the working group that produced All European Academies' code of conduct on research integrity, once said: "We do not want to have a court; we want scientists to behave." My sense is that many European researchers concur with this sentiment, believing that scientists can and ought to regulate themselves.

To this end, many countries already include training to teach future researchers good scientific practice in their curricula. This should be universal, and also offered to scientists at all stages of their careers, as there is much anecdotal evidence that even senior scientists do not always know how to perform research in a proper way.

The European Network of Research Integrity Offices, founded in 2007, is well placed to assist the convergence of standards. There are 18 countries in the network, with more, mainly in eastern Europe, set to join in the near future. ENRIO aids the crucial tasks of comparing—and ultimately standardising—guidelines on good practice and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct at international level, pooling the expertise and experience of national organisations, and supporting and advising countries that lack a national structure for research integrity.

IT IS, OF COURSE, WRONG to think that research integrity is an issue that applies only at a national, or even continental, level. Research collaboration is now a global activity, crossing not only national and institutional boundaries, but also disciplines. Accordingly, discussion on research integrity is reaching a global level, with various major players, including the Global Research Council, launching their own initiatives.

There have already been efforts at a global level to establish common codes of conduct: the Second World Conference on Research Integrity in 2010 resulted in the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity, with participants from all over the world agreeing on its 14 principles. Another example is the aforementioned European Code of Conduct, established by the European Science Foundation and All European Academies in 2010.

Several countries implement these codes at national level, and many research organisations in Europe require the researchers they employ to sign a code of conduct. Much remains to be done at all levels, in all disciplines and in all regions. It will be a long journey towards a global set of rules and procedures for research integrity, but I strongly believe Europe is already well on its way.

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