

A view from Universities UK

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There are several groups at Universities UK involved in policy making. The issue of research fraud falls between the health committee and the research strategy group, which has hampered progress to date.

UUK's members comprise 121 heads of universities: membership and participation in activities are voluntary.

We also provide services to universities, including best practice, running conferences, supplying information to staff in institutions. But our main contact with universities is via vice chancellors.

Research fraud has been discussed over the past few years, but not in a very systematic way. And the discussions have tended to focus on concerns about the lack of evidence for the scale of the problem, the extent to which it needs to be handled at institutional level, the difficulties of doing this, and whose responsibility it is.

But however much we talk about the responsibilities of national and local organisations, learned societies, funding bodies, and individual employers, at the end of the day, they can only ever be responsible for promoting and nurturing a sense of integrity. The responsibility for preserving it lies with the individuals involved.

Therefore, if we are going to tackle this, we need to focus on how we can help institutions strengthen their understanding of the issues and their ability to handle them.

We need to:

- Generate better evidence of the problem to inform our own understanding
- Promote understanding of the issues
- Help managers and vice chancellors to improve guidelines in their institutions

We believe that setting up other national bodies risks taking the problem away from where it is actually located—in institutions, among supervisors, managers, and individual researchers.

We should be working with other parties represented at this seminar to generate and nurture a culture which fosters research integrity. But at the same time, we need to make sure that institutions have the right management structures and contractual arrangements, as well as access to other types of support they might need, in order to preserve research integrity.

Michael Farthing has agreed to help us, and we will be setting up a small group of vice chancellors, led by Michael, to look critically at how we deal with this. This will bring the work of the two committees together.

Comments

Employers' responsibilities

Richard Smith: "What happens when an institution agrees to retract a paper, and it is faced with the possibility that not only is that particular piece of research fraudulent, but that all the others are as well until proved otherwise? Usually, the person committing the fraud is fired and the institution washes its hands of further responsibility."

Eve Jagusiewicz: "I don't think the employer can be held responsible for resolving all the problems of the past; rather, the entire research community needs to think about how every piece of research is produced and assessed."

This approach starts to get into the realms of corporate responsibility and the associated costs that brings. Institutions have to size that up against all the other responsibilities they have, including towards other staff."

Peter Wilmshurst: "In institutions there are vested interests at work to make sure that fraud is kept quiet. Senior managers weasel their way out of any responsibility for investigating and try and stop it."

Assumptions of honesty and integrity

Peter Wilmshurst: "We assume researchers are honest, and it is very difficult to prove otherwise. On that basis, you could ask everyone to pay themselves what they are owed from a sack of money. We should start with the assumption that people are not honest."

Eve Jagusiewicz: "That is the nub of the issue, because at the moment we do assume that our staff are honest."

Michael Farthing: "We spend around £6 billion on research, which must be the largest sum of money of any major spend that is not audited systematically. The tax office assumes that we are not honest, and every year audits a sample of people's tax returns. Most financial dealings are internally and externally audited. Why aren't we doing this for research?"