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Handling alleged research misconduct across Europe: a comparative overview of national systems

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Introduction

European countries address research misconduct allegations through diverse frameworks, although most share core principles like honesty and accountability. These variations include differences in procedural structures, oversight entities, definitions of misconduct, and whistleblower protections, factors that can complicate cross-border collaborations and raise fairness and trust concerns. We aim to create a comprehensive overview of how scientific misconduct is handled across Europe, comparing similarities, highlighting discrepancies, and exploring ways to enhance research integrity through mutual learning.

Methods

We collected publicly accessible documents, including national research integrity guidelines, institutional policies, and relevant legal statutes, and organized the data into 61 fields (e.g., appeals procedures, investigative bodies, definitions of misconduct, whistleblower protection, and transparency requirements). Where data were incomplete, we plan to contact Research Integrity Officers via email or online interviews, enabling a detailed depiction of each country's system.

Results

Preliminary data from 44 countries show that every country has ways of handling alleged research misconduct, going back to as early as 1992. Among these, 70% have an internal appeals committee, while 30% have no formal mechanism beyond the initial decision. Judicial appeals are possible in 93% of countries, though about 7% report such cases are rarely pursued. Around 32% have a national body for appeals, while 68% rely on institutional or judicial routes.

Regarding who can appeal, 52% allow both the accused and the complainant to challenge rulings; 23% permit only the accused; and a small number include the institution or leave the matter unspecified. Around 55% operate a hybrid system (mixing institutional autonomy with national oversight), 41% have a decentralized model, and 5% are centralized.

Half the countries define misconduct broadly (covering Fabrication, Falsification, Plagiarism, plus questionable practices), 41% focus on FFP only, and 9% lack a formal definition. Roughly 30% explicitly distinguish between serious misconduct and lesser questionable practices, while 36% make no such distinction, and 34% only allude to it.

About 36% provide clear, legally backed whistleblower protections, whereas others only mention basic safeguards or omit them entirely. Half publish anonymized national statistics on cases annually, while the remaining half do not. Confidentiality requirements vary: 45% enforce strict confidentiality, and 9% do not mention it.

Implications

These findings illustrate differences in how European countries define misconduct, conduct investigations, manage appeals, and oversee the process at the national level. By refining these observations with input from Research Integrity Officers, we aim to clearly compare diverse approaches. Identifying both commonalities and points of divergence can facilitate dialogue, support international collaborations, and highlight strategies that could enhance fairness and trust in European research integrity frameworks.