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Towards a Common Definition of Research Integrity in ENRIO: Findings from a Normative Analysis

Helene Ingierd

The National Research Ethics Committees, Norway

The concept of research integrity holds different meanings across institutions, cultures, and countries. These variations may be linguistic or well-founded but can pose challenges in international research and in collaborative efforts to promote research integrity. This is the background for a study carried out by the European Network of Research Integrity Offices (ENRIO).

This presentation focuses on the normative analysis of research integrity conducted as part of the project. We employed the method of reflective equilibrium, which aims to reach justified normative judgments—judgments are considered justified when there is acceptable coherence between principles and particular judgments. We examined definitions provided by ENRIO members in relation to principles articulated in key documents—The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA) and The Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (WCRI)—as well as selected literature.

In analyzing the various definitions provided by ENRIO members, we found the following:

1. Considerable variation in norms and principles: Some definitions emphasize internal principles and norms, which relate to the specific rights, duties, and expectations of researchers and the aims of the profession. Many also include external moral principles that apply to all moral agents, not just researchers.
2. Differences in emphasis: Some definitions prioritize the handling of research misconduct, while others focus more on fostering a positive research environment and culture.
3. Variation in scope: There are differences in what aspects of research activity the term "research integrity" is included.
4. Individual vs. systemic focus: Definitions vary in terms of whether integrity is seen primarily as an individual attribute or as a concept that also encompasses characteristics of institutions, organizations, or the broader research system.

Based on our analysis, we propose a set of elements that a definition of research integrity should include. Overall, we recommend that ENRIO members clearly articulate the meaning of the term to avoid conflation or confusion, to effectively promote research integrity, and to provide guidance on addressing violations. More specifically, we recommend that a core definition of research integrity—when applied to individual researchers—should refer to the professional norms that constitute good research practice, and the norms that regulate relationships between researchers. A broader perspective on research integrity should also include reference to external norms concerning the relationship between researchers and individuals, groups, and society at large. This broader view expands the focus beyond the research process itself and addresses the responsibilities of other actors within the research system.

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