

Accountability workshops 2022

Opening the conversation

In Spring 2022, workshops were held to enable participants to share diverse ways of thinking about accountability for research integrity, about who is accountable to whom, for what, and why through the research lifecycle. Accountability is a key principle of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, and yet there is little discussion about what it means in practice. The workshops opened a conversation amongst and between stakeholders, and the UK Committee on Research Integrity will continue to provide spaces and opportunities for exchange particularly in the run-up to the Concordat review due next year.

The interim Chair of the [UK Committee on Research Integrity](#), together with the newly appointed co-chairs, hosted the two workshops to discuss accountability in relation to research integrity. The 28 participants included early career researchers, senior leadership and research policy professionals from across the UK and represented research organisations, funders, publishers, societies and academies, and government. The discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule, to encourage this exploratory discussion in a safe space. We thank the participants for openly discussing the challenges they face while also being open to exploring opportunities for change.

Participants have agreed for this overall summary to be shared with the UK Committee on Research Integrity (now fully constituted) and made public.

1. Key points from first workshop

Discussion touched on many areas that could be addressed in our collective work to further develop our research environments and cultures. Some key areas were identified to inform the second workshop. Each area will mean different things practically depending on what stage of research is being discussed, and which stakeholders are involved.

- The need to **define accountability** in a manner that allows stakeholders to advance a shared vision, and to find ways to **describe success** that allow for progress to be measured.
 - What does accountability mean in practical terms and what can stakeholders each do to advance a shared vision?
 - How do we recognise and reward forms of research practice that relate to integrity?
 - If there isn't a 'one size fits all' solution to identifying and assessing success, then how do we support success?
 - How do we benchmark and how do we know what 'good' looks like?
- Using a **systems-thinking** approach when identifying levers that will increase accountability, and recognizing that there is variance across the system and different approaches that have not necessarily been shared (e.g. industry vs academia).
 - Are there things that are fundamental to the research system and that are driving particular behaviours?

- How do we identify what levers may bring about change, and how do we test and evaluate these?
- There is variance across the system e.g. industry, academia, research. What can we learn from different approaches?
- How can funding and career progression be aligned with the behaviours and type of research which produce the most rigorous research?
- Acknowledging **transparency** as a necessity for accountability, but a challenge both in terms of bureaucracy and what is possible at different stages of the research lifecycle.
 - How can we incentivise and normalise transparency without increasing bureaucracy?
 - If transparency at each stage of the research life cycle is different in terms of what is possible then where can efforts be focused best?
 - How should that transparency translate across cultures and countries?
 - How can we be transparent with members of the public?
- The importance of **reporting** to ensure and demonstrate accountability. The need to consider this through all parts of the system, from creating psychologically safe and clear routes for individuals to report issues, to being transparent about existing reporting and what happens as a result.
 - Reporting about integrity happens in different forms, is there a need to ensure greater transparency in reporting, e.g. to show where existing reporting goes to, who it is seen by and what happens on the basis of reporting?
 - How can reporting be interpreted and made of value?
 - How do we ensure that work to implement the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, including through reporting, is not siloed within research organisations?
 - How do we increase reporting by creating psychologically safe and clear routes for individuals to raise concerns?

2. Key points from second workshop

During the second workshop, participants split into six groups - funder, publisher, academic, academic leadership, research integrity professional, and a mixed group of societies, professional bodies and regulators – to discuss activity already underway and what actions they could take to be more accountable for research integrity, and what others in the sector could do to support them.

The following is a summary of some of the key points and suggestions from participants. The workshop did not attempt to reach consensus within or between groups, and so inclusion here is not an endorsement from all participants or from the UK Committee on Research Integrity.

The view from societies, professional bodies and regulators:

- Professional bodies play a powerful role as convenors, both within disciplines, between disciplines and beyond academia, and could provide spaces for disciplines to talk about what research integrity means for them. The academic groups also recognised this role and suggested that societies might be able to facilitate regular meetings to discuss issues and problems.
- Societies and professional bodies create accountability through codes of conduct, and have a role to play in continuing professional development. Some believed there may be scope to focus more on research integrity, particularly for mid-career researchers.

- There are disciplines where “lifelong professional development” is well embedded and one participant suggested it would be valuable for work to be done to define what it takes to be a ‘good researcher’ across all fields.

The view from funders:

- Funders saw that they were accountable not just through terms and conditions, but also for communicating about research integrity, to help make it tangible for those involved in research, and to promote discussions about research integrity throughout the system.
- Moves towards implementing narrative CVs are an important way some funders are shifting the focus of what activity should be recognised and rewarded – away from publications and towards a broader picture of research activity.
- There is still work to be done to define research integrity and what it does not include, mapping its boundaries and the landscape in the UK, as well as considering how best to measure it and setting a baseline against which progress can be measured. Some proposed more research on research to understand what is working amongst the myriad approaches to improving research integrity.

The view from publishers:

- There is a lot of (seemingly) good activity by publishers to support research integrity that could be better shared beyond the industry, as well as thinking more about evaluation of the impact of initiatives.
- Publishers can be inconsistent in their approach but there is room for more join-up in pre-competitive spaces, as demonstrated by COPE and STM. There would also be benefits in working more collaboratively with funders, institutions, societies etc to share knowledge about research integrity and consider the culture underlying its main principles – this collective approach is crucial to ensuring a healthy research ecosystem, as well as smaller things each can do to contribute.
- Other players in the sector (funders, institutions and academic communities) need to adjust their evaluation practices away from focusing on publishing specifically as the core output of research, and also from ‘high-impact’ publications, as well as finding better ways to reward open research practices so these are seen as positive for research careers.

The view from research integrity professionals:

- There was recognition of the role research integrity professionals can play in creating safe spaces to share issues, concerns, and practices. This needs to work alongside appropriate auditing and spot-checks but as part of creating a culture where openness and honesty is easy and safe, and issues raised are dealt with to improve research, not as part of a punitive system.
- More could be done to provide appropriate training, workshops and discussions that draw in all staff involved in the research process, rather than focusing only on academics; and embedding this in inductions.
- Funders need to do much more to be consistent in their approaches and policies. Streamlining accountability requirements would greatly improve institutions’ ability to support those involved in research. This view was also articulated by academic leaders, and societies, professional bodies and regulators.

- One suggestion was that government and funders could take a more active 'train the trainer' approach to support compliance: working with research integrity professionals to explain what are the key elements that are important to research organisations as the controlling body.

The view from academics:

- Academics can be accountable through their different roles (research, teaching, training, leadership, administrative etc) by being explicit and vocal about research integrity issues in each domain, including with society and discipline bodies.
- There is a lot of good practice from individual disciplines that can be explored by academics with consideration as to how to mainstream this across different activities. The UK Committee on Research Integrity could encourage more interaction between disciplines.
- Senior researchers can be accountable by using their visibility to lead from the front as champions for the highest levels of integrity. This is hard and can take a lot of time but role models are needed, particularly from those with more power.
- Major funders could consider ways to emphasise through their funding that time should be spent on doing high quality work, rather than seeking more short-term 'flashy' results. One suggestion would involve considering the number of grants an individual can hold, or the number of publications they should publish (recognising this may not work in all disciplines).

The view from academic leaders:

- Academic leaders have influence with sector bodies to ensure that research integrity is on the agenda. They can push for action such as, for example, developing a formal mechanism via Russell Group, Conservatoires UK, UUK, GuildHE etc to have annual discussions identifying key issues that could go to the UK Committee on Research Integrity.
- There is a need to frame research integrity as a positive process that gives research longevity and reach, rather than being framed as an audit process.
- Major funders could put integrity at the heart of peer review, asking questions such as does this propose that this research will be performed with integrity? What are you doing to ensure the reproducibility of this work? Is it transparent what you are doing? Are there any issues in relation to research integrity that have not been considered?
- There was a suggestion for a forum around screening and dealing with misconduct cases. For example, a forum on the publishers' side to discuss the issues around retraction.

Looking ahead

The UK Committee on Research Integrity will be using the ideas generated in these workshops to continue the conversation with both participants and the broader sector. Accountability for research integrity is held institutionally and individually and there is a clear appetite for further conversation within the stakeholder groups, but also sharing between. Convening these discussions is a key part of the committee's [strategic plan](#).