ENHANCING
RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Everyone involved in research has their part to play in upholding the principles of research integrity.

Rachael Gooberman-Hill and Andrew J T George, co-chairs of the UK Committee on Research Integrity,

discuss their role and the ongoing efforts to increase UK research integrity

The UK Committee on Research Integrity was set up in 2022 to deliver on a recommendation made by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee in 2018 in their report on research integrity. This report, and the more recent 2021-2022 inquiry into reproducibility, demonstrate the increased attention to integrity in research at a time when research has so visibly impacted on policy decisions and everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently hosted by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), with membership drawn from across the research system, the Committee sets its own remit, which includes research in higher education, public, government, third and private sector organisations. The Committee's role is to work with colleagues and organisations to promote research integrity across the UK and beyond. ARMA is a valued and influential element of the UK research system and one of many groups already engaged in discussions about research integrity.

WHAT IS RESEARCH INTEGRITY?

Research has integrity when it is carried out in a way that is trustworthy, ethical and responsible. Research integrity underpins results and findings so that people have confidence in them. Global recognition of the UK's research excellence, and public confidence in research are sustained and bolstered by high levels of research integrity. This excellence and confidence are underpinned by the practice of institutions, organisations and individuals involved in the research enterprise.

In the UK the principles of research integrity are laid out in the Concordat to Support Research Integrity, which draws on international frameworks. The five principles are: honesty, rigour, transparency and open communication, care and respect, and accountability. These principles cover a broad range of areas, and integrity is wider than either ethical practice or avoidance of misconduct. All those involved in research, including researchers, employers, publishers and funders have responsibilities relating to the principles.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

Current evidence gives us some useful signals about research integrity. Useful sources include surveys, university narrative statements, quantitative material relating to open research and publications including notes of concern and retractions. But none of these give us a clear picture of overall trends, not least as greater transparency can indicate the presence of welcomed closer attention to integrity and reporting of issues, rather than increased problems.

A recent report entitled 'Research Integrity: a landscape study' (commissioned by UKRI and carried out by Vitae in partnership with the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) and the UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN) in 2020) shows that researchers start out with a desire to do their research to high standards, but that local and systemic influences may impact on their actions. It is important to free up members of the research community to follow their motivation to conduct good research. Addressing systemic barriers and mechanisms that impede or discourage rather than enhance integrity, is central to the work of the UK Committee on Research Integrity.

But we also know that things do go wrong in research, often unintentionally. A mature system enables such mistakes to be discussed openly and addressed proportionately, safely and with dignity. Shining a light on good practice as well as recognising and talking about things that could be improved helps to further discussions and practice.

TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

As co-chairs we bring complementary perspectives, these include an attention to the research system and the values and influence embodied and enacted in it, and a focus on the virtues that are held by and acted on by individuals in that community. These approaches help us to take a step back and consider where the power to enable or hinder integrity rests, mechanisms that might be brought to bear on how to empower and support members in the research system.

The Committee seeks to understand the actions that can be taken to support and enhance integrity, through existing funding or assessment processes, or new initiatives and approaches across research. We noted with interest that the report of the Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy (2022) identified data governance (as data management plans) and ethics approvals (as detail of ethics approvals processes) as important assurance-related requirements that may be required but not usually assessed at the funding application stage. Instead, the report suggests that such information could reasonably be collected later.

This is a welcome approach that seeks to position assurance processes at the most relevant point in the research lifecycle by considering their purpose and value. The approach also helps us to move forward in how we think about assurance: away from paperwork and onto deeper principles. Attention to data governance requires understanding of data security, stewardship, openness and transparency; research ethics is more deeply considered though engagement with – and articulation of – ethical principles, including beneficence, non-maleficence and justice.

It's prime time for attention to research integrity in the UK. Integrity is everyone's business and we can expect even greater focus on the integrity of our research in the years ahead. Working together across the system, bringing integrity onto all agendas, noting when things go well, and offering a dignified and thoughtful approach when it doesn't go well are all important. These measures will promote integrity in an already mature research system, enabling UK research to retain its reputation for excellence and in turn safeguard confidence in research.

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

As outlined in the Concordat to Support Research Integrity

- HONESTY
- RIGOUR
- TRANSPARENCY AND OPEN COMMUNICATION
- CARE AND RESPECT
- ACCOUNTABILITY

PROFILE

PROFESSOR RACHAEL GOOBERMAN-HILL is co-chair of the UK Committee on Research Integrity. She is also Director of the Elizabeth Blackwell Institute for Health Research, and Professor of Health and Anthropology at the University of Bristol. With a background in Social Anthropology, most of her career has been in interdisciplinary research.

PROFILE

ANDREW J T GEORGE is co-chair of the UK Committee on Research Integrity. He is an immunologist who is on the board of the Health Research Authority and Health Education England as well as other educational and healthcare related bodies. Andrew is also Professor Emeritus at Imperial College London and Brunel University London.