

Academic Conflicts of Interest and Research Integrity

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Disclaimer

- I wrote and administered UCL's 'Conflicts of Interest' Policy, researching the issues and others' policies in the process.
- However, I have very little direct involvement in or experience of 'Research Integrity' issues and have researched purely for this talk!
- All views are my own and often designed to provoke discussion!

I. Conflict of Interest

- Exists in any organisation where managers have discretion, autonomy.
- Greater in university because:
 - Academic freedom to create own portfolio
 - Discretion to ‘spend’ substantial public resource
 - Duty to train & develop young researchers
 - Little oversight, reporting
 - Multiple ‘interests’ allowed, encouraged.

How to manage (inevitable) Col's

- Declare:
 - Transfer 'risk' to university (or committee)
 - Conflicting interest understood by all.
- Manage:
 - Additional oversight (e.g. academic colleague or TTO)
 - Exclude from certain decisions if conflicts are acute.
- Restrict, prevent activity when conflict (or appearance of conflict) is unmanageable.

“Sunlight is the best disinfectant”

Col Safeguards

- Educate, clear guidelines, create 'office'.
- Annual disclosure (including 'nil return') from senior faculty and staff.
- 'Administrators' close to academic activity advise when they detect 'red flags'.
- Reliance on integrity & knowledge that being 'found out' is very damaging.

II. Research Integrity

- Primarily, falsification, fabrication and plagiarism of published research results.
- Consequences serious:
 - For researcher (if discovered):
 - Professional disgrace
 - ‘Excommunicated’ by funders, publications.
 - For university (if made public):
 - Embarrassment
 - Trust in overall research integrity.
 - For research community:
 - Waste, diversion of scientists and scarce science resource.
- But incentives to ‘misbehave’ are huge:
 - Publish or perish
 - Need to maintain profile for further funding.

‘There is a huge pressure on today’s academics and the ‘publish or perish’ culture creates far too many incentives for researchers to cheat – from cutting corners to fulfil a management-imposed publications quota - to fabricating results to win career-changing publication in a top journal’

Times Higher Education Supplement, 12th July 2012.

Detection

- Three ways in which misconduct surfaces:
 - At the time, by colleagues, superiors (or checklists)
 - At peer review
 - Later, when results cannot be replicated.
- All three require:
 - Someone to ‘blow a whistle’ to a designated individual.
 - Competent body (in UK, the university) to investigate the allegation.
 - Employer to decide on action.

Procedures

- Universities have clear & rigorous procedures *once allegation is made*:
 - Received by Head of Academic Affairs (non-academic), utterly confidentially.
 - Rejects malicious, trivial etc. cases
 - Thoroughly investigates substantive cases – on basis of ‘innocent until proven guilty’.
 - Fair: right to advocacy & appeal.
 - If proven then file passed to Human Resources, & research sponsor.
- Outcome secret - & frequency too unless sought under Freedom of Information’ request.

Dangerously Complacent¹ ??

- Huge reluctance to make allegation:
 - Academic solidarity (benefit of doubt)
 - Destroys relationship, trust
 - Danger that they ‘shoot the messenger’.
- University appears conflicted
- Damages powerful people – inherently political.
- High ‘burden of proof’.
- Formal process is ‘nuclear option’ – so often ‘managed’ informally within research group (with same rigour, fairness?)

¹ Michael Farthing, quoted in THES, 12th July 2012)

‘Usually the easiest thing to do is to give the fraudster a good reference and get him to move elsewhere. I know department heads and professors who were given good references to move on when they were suspected of fraud’

Peter Wilmshurst, NHS Cardiologist
in THES, 28th August 2008

Alternative approaches?

‘No papers are submitted for publication before they are scrutinised against a checklist, which includes determining that the presented data matches the primary data’

John Reed, CEO, Sanford Burnham Medical Research Institute

'I never had more than six people in my Laboratory ... even then I found it hard to check all their data while continuing to do something myself'

Prof David Colquhoun, University College London,
arguing against big laboratories.

“[the UK] contrasts with Denmark which has a central body for dealing with research misconduct., the Danish Committees on scientific dishonesty. These hear from people that people feel institutions have not dealt with properly ... Chaired by a high court judge”.

‘Cleaning up the act’ THES 28th August 2008

Closing thoughts

- Research misconduct occurs – the incentives are so great (*‘see Freakonomics’*)
- Impacts trust in institutions and science itself.
- Exacerbated by academic pressures and research as *‘big business’*.
- *‘Easy’* process for judging misconduct, *once reported*.
- But:
 - Difficult to detect, except peer-to-peer
 - Hazardous for *‘whistle-blower’*
 - *‘Nuclear option’* so probably under-reported.
- Better to focus on auditing pre-publication?