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Transparency key to cutting dodgy research: Dutch expert

ERICA CERVINI THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM June 6, 2018

Questionable research practices are widespread, but they can be minimised to prevent further contamination of research culture, an international expert says.

Lex Bouter, a professor of methodology and integrity at Vrije University in The Netherlands, told a symposium at RMIT University last week that although deliberate fabrication of data was not common, minor cases of research misbehaviour were a big problem.

“This is not an exception any more,” he said. “Questionable research practices seem to be so common that it’s almost the norm.” Professor Bouter, an epidemiologist, said questionable research practices could include sloppy science and honest mistakes due to ignorance.

Some researchers, he added, did not think that cutting corners was a problem.

Other researchers “analyse(d) again and again” until they found positive results and then published a paper about them. Some cherry-picked their research to highlight the best data and bury the negative results.

“They (questionable research practices) are wonderful tools to get positive results. In fact, their only purpose is to get positive results,” Professor Bouter said.

He described these research outcomes as “false-positive results”.

Professor Bouter said surveys of researchers revealed that turning a blind eye to minor transgressions and insufficient supervision of junior staff were among the top five causes of questionable research practices.

He said the practices could be minimised with more transparency. Researchers needed to say clearly what their plans for research were before they started collecting data. The documents needed to be stored somewhere they could not be altered.

But Professor Bouter said the most important way to counter questionable research practices was for departments to have a more open environment where senior and junior researchers talked about their doubts and difficulties. The senior staff needed to explain that it was normal to make mistakes.

Susan Zimmerman, executive director of the Secretariat on Responsible Conduct of Research in Ottawa, noted that the vast majority of research misbehaviour was of a minor nature.

Ms Zimmerman, a lawyer, said the SRCR’s aim was to promote a culture of responsible research rather than having a punitive and legalistic approach.

One method the SRCR had found “extremely effective” in promoting responsible research was putting summaries of research misconduct on its website.

Ms Zimmerman said many people recognised themselves in the summaries. They may be the person who cut corners or the one who self-plagiarised without acknowledging they previously had their work published.

The summaries also indicated the outcome of the transgressions. Some researchers were issued with letters of reprimand, while others were deemed ineligible to apply for agency funding or participate in agency review processes for three years. Some had their awards terminated.

Next year RMIT will co-host the World Conference on Research Integrity, to be held at the University of Hong Kong.



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