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Half of Dutch scientists admit to questionable practices

National survey reveals scope of rule-bending, with 4 per cent admitting to fraud

By Erik te Roller in Haarlem

Around half of researchers in the Netherlands frequently engage in at least one of 11 questionable research practices, a survey has suggested.

The first results from last year's National Survey on Research Integrity show that 51 per cent of respondents said they had regularly engaged in at least one of 11 behaviours that were deemed to be bad scientific practice in the past three years. These practices included inadequate note-taking, insufficient admission of study flaws, insufficient mentoring of junior researchers and improper referencing of sources.

Furthermore, 4.3 per cent said they had fabricated research results at some point during that time, a behaviour that constitutes fraud, while 4.2 per cent admitted that they had altered data, which would be considered serious misconduct.

The survey was undertaken anonymously between October and December. It was intended to be sent to almost 40,000 academics in the Netherlands to ask them about their work practices. However, of the country's 22 academic institutions, only five universities and three medical centres supported the survey.

The team received just over 6,800 responses. Around half came from the supportive institutions, while the other half came from contacting scientists at other institutions directly.

Lex Bouter, professor of methodology and integrity at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and leader of the survey project, said he was "not dissatisfied" with the results. "Based on the answers of the 6,800 scientists, we were able to make reasonably reliable estimates," he said.

"As we did not find differences in the answers between these two groups, the answers seem to give a good picture of the situation at all institutions," Bouter said.

'Sophisticated method'

The results do not necessarily mean that the Netherlands is doing worse than other countries when it comes to research integrity, even though the amount of fraudulent behaviour seems to be higher than elsewhere, Bouter added.

"We think that by using the randomised response method, in which the respondents remain completely anonymous, we have obtained more honest answers," he said. "One small, similar study done abroad also showed 4 per cent of the respondents falsifying their results. The lower estimates of other surveys are probably due to not using this sophisticated method."

The survey team's ultimate goal was to discover a link between researchers' behaviour and work circumstances. It found that high publication pressure, as well as poor mentoring and supervision, were strongly associated with the occurrence of questionable research practices and research misconduct.

The survey also revealed that researchers were less inclined towards fabrication and falsification if they expected their work to be reviewed by peers. “We do not know yet, however, whether increasing funding and reducing publication pressure will lead to better research behaviour,” Bouter said. “Follow-up research will have to clarify that.”

Bouter’s team wants to repeat the study in five to six years’ time. “Then we will be able to see whether certain interventions at the universities and university medical centres have led to positive changes in behaviour—in other words, to greater research integrity,” he said.

Related Links

- [National Survey on Research Integrity 2020](#)
- [Preprint summary of results](#)

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