

Exploring Research Integrity Policies and Practices in “the Houses of Science” – **ETHOS**

Research integrity and responsible conduct of research have moved to the forefront of the political agenda, driven by a number of high-profile scandals; in Denmark for instance the Penkowa case and recently the so-called ‘meat scandal’. Research integrity is increasingly seen as both an individual and institutional responsibility, effectively addressing all stakeholders in the research process and even reaching far beyond, impacting society’s trust in science (1). The ‘anti-vax’ movement – which has gained further ground during the COVID-19 pandemic, still finds its roots and some of its main arguments in a prominent research misconduct case relating vaccines to autism. To address these scandals and perceived problems of integrity, policies and guidelines have been developed both on supranational, national and organisational levels, specifying desired academic practices and procedures. However, we still know very little about integrity practices ‘on the floor’ of the academic institutions. The ETHOS project aims to explore how the everyday lives and practices of researchers are affected by policies and norms. By identifying tensions in the processes of turning integrity policies into practice in academic environments, the project aims to explore how integrity actually emerges in academic practices and their institutional context and how academics ‘live with integrity’ in their daily work. Through three distinct, but interrelated work packages, the project seeks to answer the overall question:

How do the academic and public discourses shape the problem of research integrity and how do such problematizations affect academic practices and perceptions?

Literature on research integrity has recently expanded rapidly, but has so far been narrowly focused and undertheorised (2, 3). Often, integrity is approached from assumptions of ‘rotten apples’ (individual pathologies) (4) or ‘rotten systems’ (perverse incentives, policy pressures etc.) (5). These approaches have provided vital insights, but are limited in both their scope and their prescriptive power. Recent studies have demonstrated that Danish national and organisational policies on integrity encounter implementation problems, due to both misaligned perceptions and policies (6) and translational difficulties at the department level (3). The latter study, conducted by Degn, found that department leaders perceived the problem of integrity to be ‘in the system’, but the solution to these problems to be ‘in the culture’. ETHOS aims to investigate these two particular tensions: (i) the translational tensions between the different levels of the science systems; and (ii) the tension between how factors leading to research integrity challenges on the one hand, and solutions to those challenges on the other are being located

Theoretical approach

The central assumption underpinning ETHOS is that research integrity can metaphorically be perceived as the *structural integrity* of the “houses of science”, i.e. the ability of a structure to hold together under a load, without collapsing or deforming. This metaphor invites us to think of research institutions as structures consisting of many components, its integrity being defined as its ability to hold together under external, as well as internal pressure. The project is based on Scandinavian institutionalism, focusing on how institutionalised structures and practices shape how ideas are translated. Translation refers to the process of turning an abstract idea into e.g. a policy or a guideline, and how actors make it their own by adapting it to local traditions, norms etc. (7). ETHOS will explore integrity procedures’ implementation in existing research endeavours, to understand how elements of research practices promote or hinder the uptake of integrity policies in local contexts.

WP1: Locating causes of and solutions to integrity challenges (Degn and NN (post.doc 1))

WP1 explores discussions of research integrity in scholarly and political contexts and identifies how these set the scene for local translations, thus answering the research question: *How does research integrity emerge as a problem and which solutions are proposed?* We will conduct large-scale text analyses of scholarly literature and European policy documents (e.g. Codes of Conduct, international policy statements, legal documents). Following a novel methodology, recently developed to explore similar concepts (8), a combination of qualitative coding, quantitative code, theme analysis, and natural language processing will be used to explore how integrity emerges as a problem in the literature and policy documents, and which solutions are linked to it. Focus will be on discrepancies over time and between different actors’ perceptions of problem causes and solution responsibilities. Similar analyses will, in the final stages of the project, be conducted on material gathered in WP2 and WP3, thereby tying the WPs together.

WP2: Policy mapping (Degn and Horbach (post.doc 2))

Building on previous work of Degn (3, 9), WP2 consists of a policy analysis, delivering an overview of relevant national and local policy instruments regarding integrity and analyse them in terms of how integrity, its

causes and related responsibilities are framed. The research question answered in this WP is: *How is research integrity translated as a policy concern?* The empirical focus will be on integrity policies in Denmark, but comparable analyses will be carried out for Norway, the Netherlands, and the UK. These countries constitute interesting cases, because they represent research intensive economies, though with diverse research cultures and diverse levels of institutionalisation of integrity procedures. Subsequently, interviews with stakeholders (24 in total) involved in drafting the documents will be conducted. Asking about the rationale behind particular policy measures and topic framings, the aim is to get a rich understanding of how local translations emerge at the policymaking level.

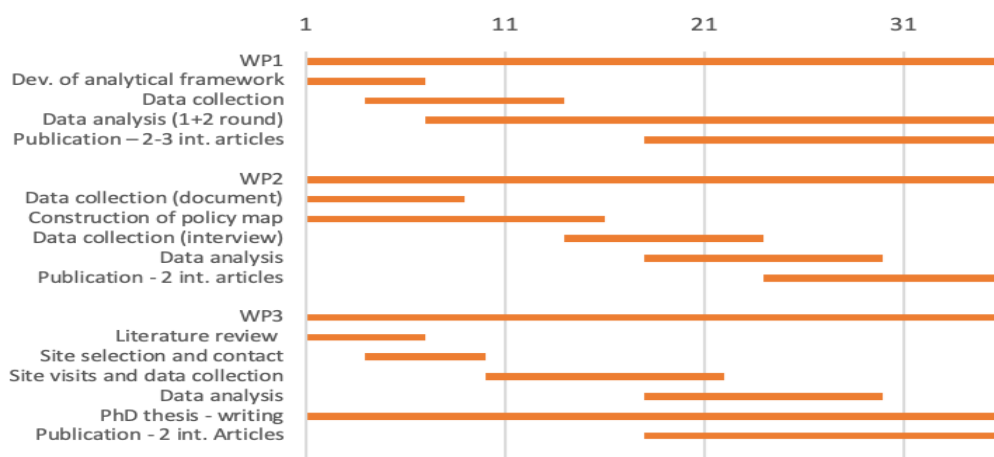
WP3: Complementary ethnographies (PhD project)

WP3's goal is to explore the research question: *how does integrity emerge in the daily practices of 'work-floor-level' academics?* The WP is planned as an independent PhD project, which will extend the work in WP2, and explore how academics, in and through their daily practices translate the policies mapped in WP2. Methodologically, everyday practices will be explored through ethnographies in four selected research groups, one per country examined in WP2. Research group selection will be informed by WP2's policy mapping, diversifying parameters such as national and organisational context, discipline, level of RI engagement, and history of RI issues within the country/organisation. Following on the ethnographic fieldwork, several workshops will be organised at the case study institutions to feed project findings back into the organisation and to allow for mutual learning and exchange of best practices between the institutes.

Impact

ETHOS aims to contribute to (i) proper theorising in the context of research integrity and further studies in this fast-developing field, and (ii) providing practical guidance to organisations and academics on how to align formal policies with daily research practices. Through the establishment of a dedicated research group, the project serves as a stepping stone for further research applications focusing on how research integrity emerges in and influences academic and organisational practices; a perspective largely absent in the literature.

Project timeline



References

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