

Hjördis Czesnick

Entering a Culture of Research Integrity

Recently, the deadline to implement the new Code of Conduct “Recommendations for Safeguarding Good Research Practice” by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) has passed. For several years now, virtually all research institutions in Germany have intensely reviewed their statutes on responsible conduct of research (RCR). For some, research integrity (RI) and RCR might still seem like empty buzzwords due to an inflationary use in news reports. However, RI should not be seen as a topic that research institutions have to address to receive future funding by the DFG – instead, it is one of *the* most important topics in the research world as it is directly related to the trustworthiness of research results. This in turn is related to political rhetoric on the use of taxpayers’ money, and recent debates on massive cuts of research funding. News on cases of plagiarism, the reproducibility crisis, retracted papers, bad working conditions and power abuse, to name some recent headlines, can serve as a justification to question the provision of public funds for research.



Several types of responses to address the issue can be observed: Some deny structural problems (pointing at a few individual “rotten apples”). Others scandalise and accuse institutions of being inevitably biased in investigations. Our approach at the German Research Ombudsman (“Ombudsman für die Wissenschaft”) is the middle road: focusing on professionalisation, prevention and working on a slow but steady cultural shift within research institutions. Based on our experience, the majority of people strives to behave ethically, but lacks know-how on RCR and on how to cope with the multiple pressures in research. That is why teaching RCR is so important: knowing about ground rules and discipline-specific RCR guidelines as well as ethical decision making in leadership positions will shape our behaviour.

One starting point of outstanding importance when establishing a culture of RI is to take reports on (research) misconduct seriously. Whistleblowing, especially when done anonymously, has a very bad reputation – against all empirical evidence that the vast majority of reports are filed with good intentions and very few reports are of a “Machiavellian” type. The “European Network of

Dr. Hjördis Czesnick
Ombudsman für die Wissenschaft (German Research Ombudsman)
Jägerstr. 22-23, 10557 Berlin
office@ofdw.de
www.ofdw.de

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Dr. Hjördis Czesnick is Head of Office of the German Research Ombudsman (the committee „Ombudsman für die Wissenschaft”) since 2016.

Research Integrity Offices” (ENRIO) has recently published a “Handbook on Whistleblower Protection in Research” [1], which is directed towards researchers but also institutional leadership and funders. It illustrates that creating an environment in which people feel safe to speak up about research misconduct or power abuse is of utmost importance. If serious reports come to the attention of authorities, all possible efforts should be made to investigate the matter and to protect all persons (potentially) affected by the malpractice described. As it says in the handbook: “The confidential, fair and legally compliant proceedings

will reveal the nature and gravity of the allegation and potential appropriate sanctions.” While impartiality towards both the reporting persons and the accused is key, leadership also carries a duty of care towards members of their institution – especially when coercion or (sexual) abuse are being reported. Reports on retaliations against reporting person(s) should be taken equally seriously. Nobody will deny multiple dependencies in research, the importance of reputation as well as the impact of reviews and even just gossip. A negative review, even an informal phone call, can severely damage another person’s career.

In Germany, ombudspersons and ombuds offices serve as first contact points for researchers who need advice, who have observed something questionable and who are considering to report. Ombudspersons are seeking to increasingly professionalise, to get training and to receive a confidential second opinion on their assessment (for example, offered by the German Research Ombudsman). The Network of Ombuds Offices in Research has recently published a handbook [2] which serves as a primer to ombuds work and is the first of its kind. Also, more and more workshops for ombudspersons are being developed.

All these developments indicate the ongoing cultural shift we hope for: questions and reports related to RCR are sincerely welcomed and addressed. The aim is to create an institutional environment in which researchers of all status groups can openly discuss best practices and observations on deviations without fearing negative repercussions.

Referenzen

- [1] European Network of Research Integrity Offices (ENRIO) (2023): ENRIO Handbook on Whistleblowing in Research. <https://zenodo.org/record/8192478>
- [2] Netzwerk der Ombudsstellen in der Wissenschaft (2023): Handreichung für Ombudspersonen an hochschulischen und außerhochschulischen Forschungseinrichtungen. <https://zenodo.org/record/8081268>