

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: Corruption of scientific integrity

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Institutions, including universities, are becoming larger, making it challenging for their administrators to support a feeling of sufficient control and oversight. The solution has been more data collection and reports, demanding a shift among academics from doing their job towards proving they are doing it. Despite the massive investment of the university and research resources into this effort, I have not met many administrators who were able to explain how this data accumulation is actively applied to improve the institutional aims or research agenda.

It is, and should, take decades to build a solid reputation as a scientist. It includes ethical thinking upon planning the studies, training to be as objective in observations as humanly possible, reporting findings with self-criticism and honesty, and not least admitting failures and shortcomings when they occur. The work must be of such transparency and excellence that it is accepted by respected academic peers. In short, the currency of a scientist is his or her integrity!

Over the recent years, I have noticed how several of the regulations imposed on the academic freedom likely have corrupted the scientific work, and worse, appear to be actively training the new generations of scientists to sell out their integrity. If this is allowed to continue, it may invite to dishonesty and potentially to fraud – the very same academic cancer the costly mountain of paperwork was supposed to prevent. Perhaps the best way of summarizing this kind of bureaucratic dilemmas dealing with science is Albert Einstein's statement that "We cannot solve a problem by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

One type of corruption is that many scientists are currently forced to fill monthly time-sheets for their projects. Modern multi-disciplinary research projects need timesheets as a necessary procedural standard needed to streamline the work according to Guggenheim (2006). In timesheets the scientist is requested to write the project-related activities on a daily or even hourly basis, and verify this by his or her signature. In practice, this is quite impossible to do honestly. Even if a researcher has the luxury of working on only one project, the days and weeks in academia are fragmented with teaching, supervising, meetings, and travels. On some days, the specific project gets an occasional thought or a related email, if

anything. Other days the researcher often works day and night. The designers of time-sheets might have understood this and the unofficial solution is to "spread out" the activities on the forms and report an average number of hours that has not been calculated in any transparent way. The meaning of the forms is lost in the process, and more importantly, the scientist is lying to meet the demand posed on him or her. If a scientist did the same with another spreadsheet, one with research data, it would be called 'fraud'.

Paradoxically, mentioning this problem in a forum of researchers who are managing projects with time-sheets created panic. They expressed outright fear that such a criticism of the funding system is likely to reflect back on the delicate and costly attempt of managing project finances, rather than inspire reflection among the funding administrators monitoring them.

Perplexed, I then asked local grant administrators if they could explain how timesheets benefitted research projects and increased their chances of success, how it was measured, and where I could find cost-benefit analyses of the substantial time invested by the many parties. The answer I received was that the laws and rules applying to our case came from the manuals of the European Commission and was implemented, despite simpler options existed, and followed without further thought or question.

Articles are currently acknowledged as the accepted main unit of measurement when evaluating the worth and impact of scientists, despite the known problems with doing so. The tainting of the scientist's integrity can arise when quantity rather than quality become the priority in academic assessments. The boom of new journals, particularly in Open Access journal, has made it easier than ever to publish anything with little or no critical peer review (Bohannon 2013). This makes it more important than ever for researchers to protect the scientific integrity and resist the temptation of cutting corners to appear productive. Sneaking into the author list of articles without factually contributing, is a tempting way to create some mass on the current academic scale. Sokol (2008) formulated it bluntly: "To claim authorship in an article to which one has made no contribution is to perpetrate a fraud on the reader." Being an abusive supervisor or principal investigator, milking early-career colleagues for credits as a co-author, is one way to do this. It is naïve to think that such behaviour goes unnoticed, and even more so to think that it would not be copied by new generations of researchers.

We must protect our present and future researchers from believing that they must sell out their integrity to accomplish a scientifically acknowledged career.

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Instead of trying to evaluate the scientist by the flawed quantitative methods with no apparent cost-benefit analysis for research communities, there should be attempts to celebrate good and useful academic qualities. People who infuse passion, who bind a department together, who risk their name and career by voicing unpleasant knowledge when it is morally right, who have the courage to go to a totally new direction, who have the practical wisdom that saves time and effort in an innovative way. These skills that spring from the original idea of a scientist must be more desirable qualities than the ability to optimally please an administrative system.

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Editor's comment

Scientific enterprise has developed to the point where it has started to impede its own effectiveness. The problem of the administrative burden and publication pressure has been discussed for years already, but the reforms to alleviate the problems are yet to be seen. The editorial board is thankful to the author for raising the issue and hopes that young scientist will have ideas, energy and courage to take action.