

## INTEGRITY IN RESEARCH AS A NEW CHALLENGE FOR ACADEMIA

Interview with NOÉMIE AUBERT BONN,  
PhD candidate, Hasselt University, Belgium

**Question 1:** *“What is, in your opinion, the content of Research Integrity? Why this topic became, in the last years, a current preoccupation for Academia?”*

The content of Research Integrity... That's a difficult question. Research Integrity can have quite different meanings depending on where you are, which institution you're in, which discipline you represent, and especially which guideline you are looking at... In 2014, I did a study with KU Leuven where I looked at different guidance documents from research institutions across Europe, and I extracted what each guidance was targeting and mentioning. Surprisingly, it even happened that guidance from the same institution differed from one document to the next. For example, research integrity sometimes includes research ethics principles (i.e. respecting human and animal participants), but other times not. It is sometimes understood as taking methodology and soundness into consideration, but not always. Guidance sometimes stress how integrity should be protected to avoid personal damage and sentencing, and other times appeals to a moral imperative for the respect of the institution and science as a whole. In more executable terms, research integrity is sometimes paired with interpersonal relationships and behavioral misconduct, but often this is considered a distinct issue. Just last month for example, in response the #metoo campaign, a twitter debate proposed to count sexual harassment as research misconduct itself, with strong pros and cons to the idea... Describing the 'content of Research Integrity' is, therefore, not a very easy task.

What I might be more qualified to discuss is Research on Research Integrity... so if you ask me what Research on Research Integrity is looking at right now, I would say that we are looking at two things. What we know about issues surrounding failures of integrity (i.e., its causes, its consequences, its prevalence), and how we can change to promote research integrity. I will go a bit more in depth in question 2.

As to why the topic became a preoccupation in Academia? Most say it was a reaction to big scandals of research misconduct, scandals that attracted the interest (and criticism) from the media and the public. Then, I think there

was a snowball effect. Increasing awareness on the topic made us question its prevalence. Research on prevalence showed that misconduct and questionable practices of research are not only real, but also arguably frequent. Further research then highlighted that when integrity is trespassed, it has huge implications on science and society (financial, medical, changes in trust, etc.). This is enough to make Research Integrity a genuine preoccupation for the scientific community. But I would say that's not the whole story. I must admit that I am young and that I have entered 'Academia' less than a decade ago, but I am wondering whether there might also be a growing scrutiny of researchers towards their own work. Many people claim that, in the past decades, society and the public has become increasingly aware and critical of political decisions. Maybe researchers have, in a similar way, become more aware of the weaknesses and limitations of their work and are more and more willing to engage in protecting its core Integrity?

**Question 2:** *"Tell us something about the difficulties to cover the content of this new field of research. What are the most usual challenges of your work in this topic?"*

I don't know if I would say there are any more difficulties in Research Integrity than in other research topics. In fact, every researcher I have been speaking to is interested in the topic, funding agencies are becoming more interested as well, the topic is growing and more possibilities are constantly created... Despite the paradoxical competition and perverse incentives that this might engender in the future, I would say I feel quite lucky to be in that field of research.

Nonetheless, there is one thing that I find a little challenging as someone who focuses on the topic. When research on research integrity became a priority of academia (I would say about a decade ago), findings of prevalence of misconduct and questionable research practices scandalized the research community and immediately boosted interest on the topic. It was, indeed, one of the first times researchers realized that science was not the white endeavor it was claimed to be. But now over a decade after the keystone works shed light on these issues, I still find it difficult to locate executable (and executed) solutions. Maybe we feel that the topic still needs more visibility, or maybe executable solutions are still utopic, but I find that a lot of research on research integrity aims to describe the problem rather than target the causes that we found which may disrupt integrity. On a positive note though, some extremely brilliant advances from open science, from publishing groups, and from other scientific technologies are opening an array of new opportunities for change. So I keep my hopes up for tangible changes!

**Question 3:** *“Have students and researchers a positive perception on debating these topics? Why are they interested to talk about Integrity in Research?”*

From my experience, students and researchers of all disciplines have a huge interest in discussing and debating topics of integrity. I think part of their interest comes from the fact that every researcher can relate to issues that affect research integrity. Whether you talk to a philosopher, a historian, an engineer, or a medical researcher, they all undertook research and they all have their personal opinions about what it implies, what it demands, and how it should be performed. This inevitably makes them build opinions and interest towards Integrity and good research practices.

Furthermore, research is often qualified as a profession that requires an intrinsic interest for your topic and for knowledge. In fact, if what they're after is money, researchers are probably in the wrong specialty. And if what they're after is fame, I think they didn't choose very wisely. So I'd say many researchers are researchers because they genuinely care about their topic, because they want to move things forward and give back to society. In this regard, I have spoken to many researchers who also realize that what they need to do to secure their position is not always what will promote knowledge, advances, and translation. I thus think that this internal conflict makes them interested in research integrity, probably as an intrinsic drive to promote better knowledge.

**Question 4:** *“In your opinion, what could be the most appropriate way to integrate Research Integrity and correlative topics in our culture and our daily customs?”*

At the moment, a lot of research on research integrity focuses on training and awareness or on appropriate sanctions for misconduct. Without undermining the value of such research, I believe that research integrity goes way beyond compliance and awareness. In fact, what interests me, and what I think needs priority right now, is a reevaluation of the entire research culture, especially of how researchers are evaluated and promoted. I think that re-thinking how researchers become successful could help re-orient research towards a culture that values quality rather than quantity, or even a step further, towards a culture that promotes transparency before outcomes. I see training and guidelines like necessary and surely not effective painkillers, but I think that we have gathered enough knowledge to try to 'cure' the problem from within the system itself. Maybe this optimistic ambition will fade away after a few years in the field, but I certainly hope it won't ☺.