Cultivating an ethos of openness through research integrity

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Regardless of the rhetoric about more openness in academic research, institutions appear to be failing to address some of the deeper issues. In order to stave off the steady rise of regulation and monitoring and to present a coherent alternative to instrumental views about research, it falls to researchers themselves to define the ethos of openness. **Andrew C. Rawnsley** *discusses the moral substance of claims about openness and how research integrity could ground these discussions.*

Between 2010 and 2012, I was fortunate to be part of the advisory board for the Jisc/British Library sponsored project *Researchers of Tomorrow.* The remit of this project was to focus on information-seeking practices and research behaviour among doctoral students born between 1982 and 1994 (or 'Generation Y') and not considered to be 'digital natives'. The report, which was published in Spring 2012, is a useful resource in a number of ways. Those with an interest in supporting open-access, public engagement, or impact, should be familiar with the key points of this study. Two years later, some of the headline results are still surprising:

1. The majority of Generation Y doctoral students share their research outputs *only with their work colleagues*;

2. Students were not aware of or did not completely understand what open access means, with considerable confusion between open access and open web sources or social media and an assumption that open access publishing is not peer-reviewed or of lower prestige;

3. Widespread lack of clarity and understanding about copyright and intellectual property rights.

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What the final report of the project brought into focus for me was the tension between the rapid changes in the research environment wrought by the stream of new policies and conditions to which researchers and research institutions are now subject; and a broader sense of unease within institutions about how best to address them. With such a proliferation of imperatives on what researchers *should* be doing; how research is managed; how research is supported; and how research should be used, researchers find themselves in a potentially bewildering environment.

One of the immediately striking features of the *Researchers of Tomorrow* project was the way in which pertinent

aspects of the study highlighted the tension between:

- *the way research is actually done in the modern HE institution, particularly within the traditional, and still dominant, understanding of a doctorate;*

and

- *the changing conception of the purposes and benefits of research outside of the HE institution, as this is relevant for the way research is funded and regulated, to policy-makers within the sector; and to the public understanding and support of research more broadly.*

Now is not the time to rehearse the ways in which instrumentalism dominates the HE landscape and there are plenty of pointed critiques in this area already, some on this very blog. I note simply that, regardless of the potential benefits and risks of research policies aimed at creating 'socio-economic impact', the possibility that researchers and institutions might be *ill-equipped* to deal with the complexities that arise from trying to put such policies into practice is something that ought to be of immediate concern to those who support students and researchers. Whilst the analysis of instrumentalism has often been framed in terms of alternative discourses about what higher education and/or research *is for*, the case for a positive view has usually been made on the basis that academic culture is fundamentally one of discussion and debate. However, the specifics of *how* such discussion and debate can be supported and flourish remain unclear. It is one thing to rely on a broad appeal to the inherent 'good' of education; another thing to articulate this vision effectively in the current environment. More problematically, the *Researchers of Tomorrow* project outcomes suggested that this task is not as self-evident as it might appear. Is the depiction of an academic culture thoroughly steeped in an "open" and discussion-led ethos an accurate depiction of how academic culture *actually* operates? If not, then what are the *internal*, as well as external, limitations?

The *Researchers of Tomorrow* project suggested a number of areas in which to look. For instance, access to the right journals, or lack thereof, was high on the list of priorities for junior researchers. In attempting to cope with not finding what was required, a high proportion of those researchers opted to refer only to abstracts of source material rather than full text; moreover, junior researchers were more likely to work with secondary or tertiary material than with primary texts. Thus, it is also likely that junior researchers were accessing abstracts of secondary or tertiary material, restricting themselves not only to any limits already imposed on the sources by previous interpretations, but risking superficial understanding of such interpretations by recourse solely to abstracts. This is hardly a strong basis for an academic practice aiming for *informed* discussion and debate.

Clearly, we do not know how prevalent such practices are, but it should be recognized that this is far from ideal. Misunderstandings about the prestige or quality of open access journals and confusion about their distinction from other web resources suggest that junior researchers would also be less likely to use open access routes as a way to obtain primary or full-text material. It was also noted by the advisory board that the inclination of junior researchers to not share their work, or to confine their activities very narrowly to pre-defined modes of inquiry, suggested that junior researchers tended towards a pre-dominantly conservative approach in their work. Why the researchers studied in the project were inclined to such conservatism was inconclusive, but one interpretation that seems reasonable is that this attitude was attributable to the UK model of doctoral study and to the kind of support and advice that junior researchers received.

Effectively, then, regardless of the rhetoric about more openness in academic research, institutions appear to be failing to address some deeper issues, if the findings of the *Researchers of Tomorrow* project are indicative of the up and coming academic generation. We have an HE system which, rather than encouraging openness, tends towards narrowness, largely because our model of doctoral study and the academic career path make narrowness an advantage. Whilst there has been some critical input about narrowness at the policy level, the policy rhetoric around openness remains largely instrumental in nature, focusing typically on a perceived lack of transferability of skills, and the research infrastructure creates few incentives to think otherwise. There is also considerable conflict between imperatives at the policy level. To challenge this situation, we need to consider what a richer sense of openness

might entail beyond the discourse of instrumentalism, but also avoiding comforting clichés about the inherently open-minded and discursive practices of academic life.

Here I would like to try to set out one avenue of exploration for what might be involved in cultivating a richer sense of *an ethos of openness*. My aim is to approach things from a different perspective, not to be proscriptive, but to challenge existing perceptions and assumptions. A caveat: I am not a social scientist but an ethicist, and thus my interest is primarily with the moral substance of claims about openness in academic life and the dominant assumptions about academic practice which ground them. It is my conviction that to develop openness in the broader sense, one must also cultivate *integrity*, and vice versa. To do this within the context of research, we must explore those aspects of 'open access', 'impact' or 'public engagement' activities in research that are connected with what is referred to as '*research integrity*'.

What does an emphasis on 'openness' in research entail and how might it be connected with research integrity? One point of departure is that openness requires *a change of attitude and resulting actions on the part of researchers and* the *institutions* in which they work. 'Openness' is a moral concept and, as such, an *ethos* of openness needs to be encouraged for any real benefits, beyond crudely instrumental ones, to be achieved. Such an approach also supports the ideas and principles of 'research integrity'. To this effect, we need to look for the commonalities between the openness agenda and the research integrity agenda 'on the ground' rather than at the level of policy.

Fundamentally, the principles of 'research integrity', as of research ethics in general, are about having a sound basis for ethical decision-making. Such principles provide a framework for reasoning or, more practically, a way of navigating through a highly complex and messy research environment. Understood in this manner, the principles of research integrity provide a basis for coping with the deeply entrenched competing interests and factionalisms – often overlooked by those who make positive claims for the merits of discursive and debate-led academic practice– as well as the structural defects of a research environment that restrict and limit the very ideals and standards that policy rhetoric claims to be putting in place. As it stands, we have little to go on in determining how well-equipped researchers and institutions really are to cope with these complexities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many institutions simply muddle through the messiness. However, we do know, via reporting of research misconduct and problems with publications that such instances are often the result of researchers and institutions being ill-equipped to cope with increased pressures and demands or, worse, of abuses of power and influence. Whilst the instances of proven misconduct based on deliberate choices to deceive are the ones that usually garner headlines, it is those instances where carelessness, corner cutting, ignorance, or arbitrary misuse of authority, are involved that are potentially more unsettling. Research integrity, broadly conceived, addresses the attitudinal and behavioural aspects of research practice, some of which are most certainly 'flawed'; *and* the flaws in institutions in which research practices are embedded; *as well as* the flaws in the broader research policy environment which incentivize poor and questionable practice.
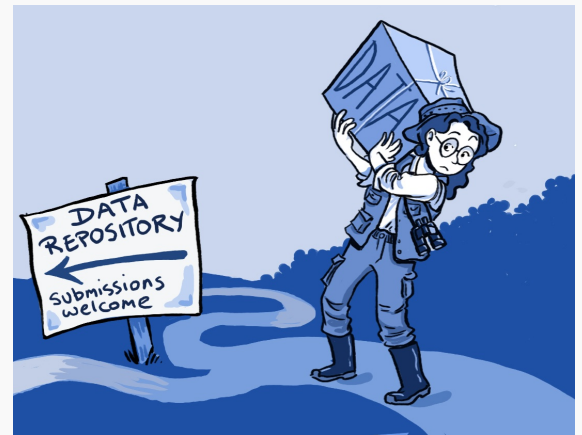
Two aspects of this are illustrated in key findings of the *Researchers of Tomorrow* study. Firstly, that open access and an externally-facing, open research environment is expected at the policy and funder level and, yet, there is poor awareness of the nuts and bolts of *being open* on the part of researchers. Institutional structures of funding, training, supervision, and assessment ultimately impede the development of an appropriately open ethos due to the models of research education and routes for research careers currently available. Secondly, basic regulatory systems, which have a significant effect on the way in which research is managed, are poorly understood by researchers themselves and, in many cases, by their institutions. Moreover, the regulatory and policy patchwork is poorly implemented in itself, as shown by recent studies in this area.

As such, we need to aim for a more nuanced view of what research integrity is really about. Recent policy about research integrity focusses on increased vigilance, driven by a perception that the UK is inadequately prepared to deal with research misconduct when it arises. However, it is vital to avoid treating the idea of research integrity as *merely* or *principally* about misconduct. It is counterproductive to see the answer to misconduct in regulating,

restricting, or increased monitoring researchers' behaviour. Unfortunately, this is certainly what the term 'research integrity' means to many policy makers and institutional managers. The regulatory approach that results from this view is a simple one, *audit* linked to funding conditions. The effective institutional response is thus to implement monitoring which facilitates audit. However, this is likely to be ineffective in the long run at addressing poor practice or misconduct. What is at issue is not the trustworthiness of the majority of researchers, but the structural flaws which encourage poor practice, on the one hand, and narrowness and lack of awareness, on the other. It is a problem of attitudes and behaviours *and* of institutional systems in which such attitudes and behaviours are shaped.

Those approaches which rely merely on regulatory-like policy and compliance will fail ultimately to be effective. The compliance-driven approach equates with procedural 'transparency'. For research to be trustworthy, it must be open in a richer sense than that invoked by policy designed to achieve it, because the ethos of openness and integrity is not about procedure but about *attitudes* and *awareness*. To cultivate this sense of openness one must appreciate that research is conducted by *people* and, as such, attempts to encourage openness and integrity must focus on *the personal.* The principles of research integrity provide actual flesh-and-blood researchers with a way of coping, but in order to function in this way the principles must become part of the practice of researchers, which means embedding integrity into the aims, designs, methods, and communication of research practice. With that practice come the experience, ambitions, hopes, fears, preferences, and interpersonal relationships that flesh-and-blood people bear. No procedure can address those personal factors effectively.

This is most relevant for readers of this blog because the aim of coherent and effective research integrity policy and institutional support, should be, first and foremost, to encourage clear and coherent communication about 'what researchers do' and 'how researchers do it' on the part of researchers themselves and those who support researchers, as well as a willingness to discuss and share these insights widely, on the part of institutions. This deeper

and more meaningful change in the way researchers and organisations communicate is essential if increased regulation and oversight by external bodies is to be avoided. This fundamental aspect connects the open access, engagement, and impact agenda with that of research integrity.

Efforts to increase international co-operation in research integrity recognize this. Focus has been on putting in place guidelines for both researchers and institutions to deal with problems before they arise through clear communication and explicit statements of both personal and institutional responsibility. Consistently in such guidelines, research integrity hinges on open discussion in which local norms, practices, values, and assumptions are made explicit*.* From the perspective of open access and impact, it is notable that this is most keenly felt in negotiating how research outputs will be used, whether in authorship and publication, or in wider forms of dissemination.

It is my view that, as well as seeing the open access agenda as intimately connected with research integrity, it is also time for us to think more carefully about what *a dissemination ethics* more suited to the wider range of dissemination activities now undertaken by researchers and institutions might look like.

In order to stave off the steady rise of regulation and monitoring and to present a coherent alternative to instrumental views about research, it falls to *researchers themselves* to define what the ethos of openness is. A self-critical assessment is essential about how the models of research, into which we currently strive to fit our activities, hinder rather than encourage benefits that go beyond the narrowly instrumental; and about how the ideal of discussion and debate is limited by prevalent attitudes and assumptions. As was apparent from the *Researchers of Tomorrow* project, there is no shortage of enthusiasm for doing research even within the current high-pressure climate. However, the terms on which research is and continues to be conducted are increasingly imposed from the outside

rather than emanating from research practice. It is up to researchers to reclaim what they do and to define the openness agenda for themselves. In this respect, it is crucial that researchers do not opt for the simpler view that identifies 'research integrity' with yet another policy imposition. Research integrity, broadly conceived, provides a rich resource to draw on, since matters of integrity and openness are *intrinsically* part of research practice and not imposed from elsewhere. It is better, then, that *researchers themselves*, and staff who support them, find the means and language to articulate this rationale more clearly, as part of a broader ethos of openness.

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