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AFRICA

First continental research integrity network launched

Maina Waruru 02 June 2022

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The African Research Integrity Network (ARIN), a partnership to promote ethical research practices across the continent, was officially launched on Tuesday after years of operating as an informal body of practitioners. This work is much needed in Africa which, along with some other regions, faces huge challenges with research integrity.

The network will nurture and promote the mainstreaming and upholding of ethics in research, and will draw members from both universities and non-teaching institutions.

In accordance with its constitution, it will operate with interim officials, many of them founding members who include research professionals and ethicists, the network's convener, Francis Kombe, told the 7th World Conference on Research Integrity hosted by the University of Cape Town in South Africa from 28 May to 1 June.

"We will be guided by African perspectives, values and principles of inclusive thinking in our operations, and our main objective will remain to sustain dialogue on research integrity on our continent," the Kenyan research ethics specialist told a plenary session on 'Fostering Research Integrity: Perspectives from African researchers', at the launch.

The association will be registered in different countries where nodes will be established, Kombe added, noting that operationalisation of ARIN's constitution will commence, allowing for setting up of its structures.

He challenged researchers to embrace the network and take the initiative to join and start branches in their countries. Africa needed such a body to help spread the message that integrity ought to be a top priority in research discourse.

Professor Wayne Towers of North-West University, South Africa, who headed the constitution working group of ARIN, told the conference: "We want to start recruiting members immediately and all researchers on the continent are welcome to join us as we work towards having this first network of its kind in Africa."

Africa lacks research integrity structures

At the event, it emerged that African countries lack adequate structures to develop and institutionalise research integrity standards, and suffers a shortage of research ethics professionals – there are too few even to manage required oversight bodies.



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Even where countries have scientific research and development bodies, the organisations lack offices dedicated to enforcing integrity in the conduct of research, and often do not have well-developed national guidelines to govern ethics.

Instead, the responsibility of ensuring research integrity is left to committees set up within university departments and faculties for the purposes of ensuring ethics are adhered to, the conference heard.

It also emerged that, while many universities teach research ethics as a unit at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, few of them offer masters or doctoral programmes in the field, for various reasons, resulting in a shortage of personnel to manage ethics bodies where they exist.

Low funding problem

Professor Amos Laar, a bioethicist at the University of Ghana, said the problem could be linked to low funding of research and development (R&D), which remains below 1% of GDP in most African countries. This left few resources to set up the necessary enabling institutions.

“In Ghana, for example, allocation for R&D in 2014, according to records, stood at 0.4% of gross domestic product, meaning that most of the work done in various fields is externally funded,” he told the conference.

This has led to an underdeveloped national ethics infrastructure. There is also an urgent need for capacity building in the field which, again in most cases, is being done in partnership with or with support from external funders and partners.

The work of policing research misconduct is left to ethics committees within universities, with some universities having multiple ethics review boards.

“This, by itself, has created another problem – the need for trained staff to run these boards.” Yet, universities were not committed to establishing postgraduate programmes in ethics since, most of the time, these were in conflict with their financial goals, Laar explained.

Continued reliance on donor funding for research, he cautioned, could compromise transparency in the way research is done, since funders would not prioritise integrity over execution of research work.

Research misconduct rife – survey

In the absence of national ethics guidelines, this duty was left to individual institutions and investigators, resulting in a weak and disjointed integrity landscape – as happens in Kenya – according to Professor Edwin Were of Moi University in Kenya.

This, he told the conference, led to widespread cases of misconduct as exemplified by the findings of a recent study he led in Kenya, which found that as many as 68% of respondents had engaged in some form of misconduct, while 36% admitted that they had engaged in the more serious breaches of fabrication, falsification or plagiarism.

Partly to blame for the problem was the uncoordinated nature of ethics management, which can only be remedied by the establishment of a robust ethics oversight office in every university.

“Continued research misconduct, however, adversely affects our global ratings. We, therefore, need to seriously invest in research integrity if we want to become part of the academic market,” said Were.




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Where's the support?

Institutional weaknesses in universities and lack of integrity support structures significantly contributed to unethical conduct, said Professor Ntobeko Ntusi of the University of Cape Town, agreeing with his fellow speakers that this was a major problem.

While unethical practices were evident across categories of scholars, unending pressure to publish heaped on early career researchers was a major contributor to breaches of integrity.

Contraventions occurred at all stages of research, sometimes aided by poor research funding that led to poor quality work, poor quality data analysis, poor peer review and bias in publishing.

One way to tackle the challenge was by implementing the **Hong Kong Principles** on research integrity, strengthening teaching of research methodologies as well as postgraduate supervision.

“Encouraging open-access publishing, promoting values of honesty, transparency, equity, accountability and rigour will help entrench observance of ethics,” Ntusi concluded.



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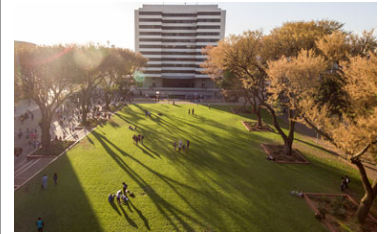
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