



Annual report Scientific Integrity Committee 2015

Scientific Integrity
Committee

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1 Preface

The Scientific Integrity Committee of Wageningen UR was appointed about three years ago in 2013, to investigate complaints about violation of scientific integrity and offer advice to the Executive Board. Since then the committee has walked a steep learning curve, because of a number complex cases. The Wageningen UR Integrity Code is quite clear that research at Wageningen UR should be done in accordance with the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice. In the case of actual complaints, good understanding is necessary of the research behaviour being questioned and within the process the interests of all involved need to be respected. By the end of the 2015, for most of these cases the committee has been able to conclude with an advice. In 2015 no new complaints have been submitted.

Handling complaints often brings other issues to the fore, which are not within the remit of the committee per se, but are important to safeguard scientific integrity within the organisation. The committee feels its responsibility to signal such issues to the attention of the Executive Board. It is pleased to find that this signalling role is being appreciated. Integrity of researchers is at the heart of the professional ethos of science. A Scientific Integrity Committee therefor can only be one element of the institutional fabric that ensures the scientific integrity of Wageningen UR researchers.

Most of the safeguarding has to be done within lecture rooms, laboratories, offices and through professional interactions. Yet, when scientific integrity is questioned, it is crucial that the organisation has a well-functioning Scientific Integrity Committee. As the new chair, I would like to thank wholeheartedly my predecessor, Prof Frans Brom, who chaired the committee from its inception and led the committee along the learning curve upwards. We also know already that our secretary Dr Janneke van Seters will move to a new position within Wageningen UR early 2016. We thank her likewise and especially for her fine eye for the details of formulations and procedures.

Prof Barend van der Meulen
Chairman

2 Complaints handling at Wageningen UR

Every person at Wageningen UR who is involved in any way whatsoever in scientific education and research is individually responsible for monitoring and safeguarding scientific integrity. The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice sets out the principles which every student, educator and researcher should adhere to: scrupulousness, reliability, verifiability, impartiality and independence. Wageningen UR has drawn up a complaints procedure for scientific integrity based on a model acquired from the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). It explains the steps that complainants need to take if they suspect a breach of scientific integrity.

For any question about scientific integrity it is possible to contact the confidential counsellors Prof Adri van den Brink and Prof Marcel Zwietering. If feasible, the confidential counsellor will attempt to mediate or find another way of solving the matter in an amicable fashion. He can also advise on submitting an official complaint.

Official complaints, regardless of whether or not a confidential counsellor was consulted, should be submitted in writing or by e-mail to the committee.

2.1 The guidelines underlying the handling of complaints

The committee bases its judgement about violation of scientific integrity on – but not exclusively - the standards of scientific integrity that are primarily deducted from The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice and the Scientific integrity complaints procedure Wageningen UR.

During the handling of a complaint in 2015, the committee was confronted with the report from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), VSNU and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) about Scientific integrity from 2011¹. It is unclear for the committee which status this report has with regard to DLO. Kees Schuyt, former chairman of the National Board for Research Integrity (LOWI), writes in his book² on scientific integrity, that: “The report Scientific integrity (2001) of the KNAW, VSNU and NWO can be seen as the ‘constitution’ of these organisations” (...) regarding the handling of complaints about scientific integrity”. Wageningen University is connected to this report via the membership of the VSNU. DLO however, is only affiliated with the LOWI. The CWI therefore suggests that the Executive Board verifies with LOWI to what extent DLO -because of its LOWI-membership- is also committed to this 2011-document.

2.2 Visibility of the committee and procedures

A webpage is available about Scientific Integrity at Wageningen UR within the Wageningen UR website, listing the relevant documents, procedures and persons³. This webpage is part of the information presented on integrity in our organisation, also containing information about non-scientific integrity issues such as the integrity code and other codes to be known by employees of Wageningen UR⁴. The composition of the committee is also shown at this webpage.

In 2015, specific action was taken to remove old versions of the Code of Conduct and to eliminate the redundancy in the organisation of the information supply via the website. Also, the exceptions for DLO regarding The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice were made more explicit in the information supply.

¹ <https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/publicaties/notitie-wetenschappelijke-integriteit>

² “Tussen fout en fraude”, 2014, Kees Schuyt

³ <http://www.wageningenur.nl/en/About-Wageningen-UR/Integrity/Scientific-integrity.htm>

⁴ <http://www.wageningenur.nl/en/About-Wageningen-UR/Integrity.htm>

3 Handled complaints

The committee received no new complaints in 2015. The committee has met ten times in 2015 and continued the procedure of two complaints that started in 2014.

The committee received a complaint on April 11, 2014 and decided to handle the complaint on April 25, 2014. The committee sent its advice to the Executive Board on August 5, 2014. The Executive Board decided to follow this advice and to declare the complaint unfounded. The complainant asked the LOWI for their opinion and the LOWI advised the Board on 5 March 2015. On 31 March the Executive Board decided to request the committee to reconsider the complaint. The committee sent its advice to the Executive Board on 1 December 2015. The Executive Board took the decision to follow this advice and to declare the complaint unfounded.

This procedure did not comply with the deadlines specified in the complaint procedure scientific integrity. This was mainly due to the complexity of the complaints. The committee always informed the parties concerned as good as possible about the crossing of terms.

On July 29, 2014, another institution received a complaint that was partly related to an employee of Wageningen UR. Both institutions decided to set up a joint committee to handle this complaint. This committee advised the Executive Board of the other institution on 18 February 2015. The Executive Board of the other institution decided to follow this advice and to declare the complaint unfounded.

4 Evaluation of the committee

On the appointment of Prof Frans Brom it was agreed that an evaluation of the committee should be executed in due time. Since the committee in its current constitution has been functioning for over a year, the committee considered this period sufficient to allow for a meaningful evaluation. Furthermore, the committee noted that the amount of work done this past year was higher than initially estimated. To secure the work of the Committee into the future, the committee considered it therefore the right time to evaluate its activities. On October 6, 2014 the committee therefore sent a request to evaluate the committee to the Executive Board.

The evaluation should provide clarification about the quality of the work of the committee and their advices to the Executive Board. Also, the relationship between the amount and nature of the work including support and the nature of the problems of complaints about academic integrity should be reviewed. Finally, the evaluation should clarify what type of support (executive secretariat, legal advice, external technical expertise) is needed in order to ensure a proper continuation at a high quality level of the work of the committee.

The evaluation was carried out in 2015 by an evaluation committee consisting of two members. The evaluation committee was provided with a self-evaluation document from the committee on the work, together with documentation of procedures, of (anonymized) statistics and other information about the handled and pending cases since the start. The evaluation focused on the quality of the work and the advices given by the Scientific Integrity Committee and on the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes.

The evaluation committee considered that the CWI has done a good job. The committee also concluded that the organization of the CWI work is well equipped for its task. However, it was noted that in case of a number of simultaneous procedures the capacity of the secretariat is small, which may lead to a delay in handling the complaints. It was also noted that deadlines are sometimes not achieved for valid reasons, which could undermine the credibility of the CWI.

The main conclusion was that CWI has produced high quality work with a high quality secretariat. The evaluation committee suggested to expand the committee with one extra member.

5 Other activities of the committee

5.1 World Conference on Scientific Integrity

In 2015 the third World Conference on Scientific Integrity took place in Rio de Janeiro. The committee was represented by its vice-chair prof Herman Eijsackers to present a submitted poster about "Integrity complaints as a strategic tool in policy decision conflicts." The poster is added as appendix 1. After the conference the committee contributed to the newsletter of the Netherlands Research Integrity Network (NRIN) a reflection on the conference.

5.2 Netherlands Research Integrity Network

In 2015, NRIN organised a meeting with the chairs of the committees scientific integrity of the various organisations in the Netherlands. This meeting was attended by the vice-chair, Prof Herman Eijsackers.

5.3 Internal communication within Wageningen UR

To inform the organisation about the scientific integrity procedures in place and to give an idea about the kind of complaints, the secretary of the committee, Dr Janneke van Seters gave presentations during the networking lunch for Wageningen UR staff, the regular meeting of the executive secretaries of the Sciences Groups of Wageningen UR and the Welcome to the management programme for the new managers of Wageningen UR.

In December 2015 outgoing chair Prof Frans Brom concluded his work for Wageningen UR by giving a presentation during the meeting of the Executive Board with the Board of Directors of Wageningen UR, addressing some recommendations for the organisation regarding scientific integrity.

5.4 Joint meeting with other bodies of Wageningen UR

The committee handles complaints about possible violations of scientific integrity of employees of Wageningen UR. During the handling of these complaints, the committee regularly discusses matters which are not directly related to a possible violation of academic integrity. In the opinion of the committee these matters should be addressed otherwise within the organisation. For instance: on matters affecting the general ethics policy or the quality monitoring of the research of Wageningen UR. The committee considered it useful to share these experiences with bodies whose task is to advise the Executive Board in these areas. In 2015, the committee scientific integrity therefore initiated a meeting with other bodies of Wageningen UR that are involved in the topic of scientific integrity. These bodies include the Ethics Committee, the Scientific Advisory Committee (*Wetenschappelijke Adviesraad*), the counsellors of the graduate schools and the confidential counsellors. The fruitful meeting of April 2015 was followed up by a second meeting in October. Relevant issues were discussed in these two meetings and actions were taken to safeguard the implementation of for example the status of educational outputs such as Master theses, a how-to for managers when a complaint is submitted against (one of) their employee(s) and improving the information about scientific integrity on the Wageningen UR website and Intranet.

6 Recommendations

During the handling of cases the CWI is confronted with issues that cannot be included in the advices of the CWI, but should be made known to the organisation. The CWI therefore includes these recommendations in the annual report as mentioned below.

6.1 Awareness of societal sensitivity of research

Several cases that the committee handled dealt with research that was societal sensitive. According to the committee researchers should be more aware of this sensitivity and this awareness should be reflected in their publications.

6.2 Moral and legal support of employees

Having a complaint against you attracts strong demands on a researcher. The committee advises Wageningen UR to pay much attention to the moral support of employees by for example managers. In addition the committee advises to make explicit that legal support can be given to the defendants.

6.3 Data management: both for research data and correspondence

During some procedures it became clear to the committee that good data management of both research data and correspondence with for example clients is not always carried out at Wageningen UR. The committee therefore advises the organisation to improve the data management and to make researchers aware of the importance of not only correctly logging research data, but also correspondence (including relevant e-mails) with for example clients.

6.4 Review procedures for DLO reports

During some procedures it became clear to the committee that the review procedures for DLO reports are not clear and if clear, are not always executed. The committee advises the Executive Board to establish clear peer review guidelines and to harmonize these amongst the DLO institutes.

6.5 Requirement of interest for complainant

Some complainants use the scientific integrity complaints procedure on another basis than the original intention. The procedure is for example used to fight political decisions, personal controversies or commercial interests. A way to circumvent these unwanted procedures might be to include a requirement of interest (belanghebbende-eis) for complainants. The committee advises the Executive Board to explore this possibility within the VSNU.

6.6 Confidentiality of information

The committee wants to stress that it is very important to clarify the status of documents that are sent outside of or within the organisation. When a document should be treated confidentially (e.g. progress reports, reports without formal status), it should clearly be stated on the document itself.

Appendix 1 Poster presented at the World Conference of Research Integrity



Integrity complaints as a strategic tool in policy decision conflicts.

Committee scientific integrity Wageningen UR:
Frans Brom (chair), Herman Eijssackers (vice chair), Fons Voragen, Akke van der Zijpp (all members), Janneke van Seters (secretary)

Scientist



I have found a novel pesticide working by another mechanism than the existing pesticides. It seems very promising because it appears to be more environmental friendly! I report this in detail including that we need more detailed information on its action mechanism to completely understand its functioning.

Political debate

We permit the usage of this pesticide, because it is scientifically proven to be 'effective'. For the sake of a clear-cut communication to the public we leave out all premises, assumptions and band-widths.



Not happy with the political decision

Representatives from different groups within society claim that the decision was based on an incomplete report that shows many flaws. Let's file a complaint regarding scientific integrity.



Struggle of the committee scientific integrity

To what extent do these complaints relate to scientific integrity versus socio-political consequences?
When do we have to decide on infringement of scientific integrity?
Is the mistake incidentally/repeatedly/ structurally?
Is the correction immediate/belated/partly?
And when does scientific discussion to improve has to become a quality check and assessment on scientific integrity

Considerations of the Board

- How can we protect our scientists?
- against juridification of the process
 - against a resulting tendency to fractal documenting
 - against the disproportionate workload to document a defence
 - against the emotional/mental impacts of complaints to (in)justly accused



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