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ASSAf: Putting the 'Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices' into practice

Following a Workshop on the Ethics of Scholarly Publishing on 11 April 2018, and with the collective goal of advancing research integrity in South Africa, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the Council for Higher Education (CHE), the National Research Foundation (NRF), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and Universities South Africa (USA) signed the joint Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices in Pretoria on 31 July 2019.

The signatories were invited by the South African Journal of Science to outline to the South African research community how they individually and collectively will be 'putting the Statement into practice'.

When requested to endorse and co-sign the joint *Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices*, the Council of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) was of the view that the value of such statements – in the absence of proper implementation, scrutiny, monitoring and sanctions – is largely symbolic. Although the Statement serves to frame the issues and to reinforce the commitment to ethical, high-quality and responsible research and innovation, joint and coordinated action by authorities and agencies is needed to implement the undertakings in a properly operationalised manner.

In what way does ASSAf act, monitor, support and advise the research system and the National System of Innovation more generally in the implementation of the Statement? There are three specific activities of the Scholarly Publishing Programme of ASSAf that directly promote the recommendations put forward in the Statement.

Firstly, the inception of the National Scholarly Editors' Forum (NSEF) – a forum for all scholarly journal editors in South Africa – arose from one of the key recommendations in ASSAf's *Report on a Strategic Approach to Research Publishing in South Africa*¹. In essence, this Report focused on how to strengthen both the quality and global visibility of scholarly articles published in South Africa, through systemic adoption of the 'Code of Best Practice in Scholarly Journal Publishing, Editing and Peer Review'² developed through the NSEF.

Secondly, during the launch meeting of the NSEF, participants supported ASSAf in taking the lead in the implementation of a globally unique system of quality assurance and research integrity assessment of those South African scholarly journals that are accredited and subsidised by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). This system took the form of peer review of journals grouped within broad disciplines and carried out by carefully selected peer review panels, drawn from the ranks of experienced scholars in and around the fields concerned in each case, as well as persons with professional publishing knowledge and experience.

Without the involvement of a well-functioning and highly participatory NSEF, these goals cannot be achieved. ASSAf is vested with the responsibility of maintaining and sustaining the Forum and acting on its behalf as mandated by the NSEF membership.

Thirdly, in 2019, ASSAf published a comprehensive report entitled *Twelve Years Later: Second ASSAf Report on Research Publishing in and from South Africa*³, which inter alia highlights three publication practices which could be regarded as questionable, if not unethical:

- Unacceptable levels of publication intensity by the editor or a member of the editorial board of the journal.
- Unacceptable publication intensity by an individual author in the journal.
- 'Publication cartels' in which two or more individuals (sometimes also members of the editorial board) author or co-author repeatedly in the journal.

Some of the questionable practices are the direct consequence of the 'perverse incentive' aspect unfortunately intrinsic to the otherwise excellent and successful DHET Research Outputs Policy for higher education institutions. As long as (a few) authors or editors are rewarded for publishing too many poor-quality articles, ways of 'gaming' the research subsidy policy will persist, unless the recommended new control measures³ are put in place.

The signatories to the Statement should join cooperatively and in a complementary manner in protecting the integrity both of our publication system and of the funding system, through proper quality assurance and research ethics monitoring.

It is of the utmost importance that ASSAf continues to play its specific, largely qualitative role in ensuring that scholarly publishing in South Africa is conducted ethically, without questionable behaviours on the part of authors or editors or publishers, and that this is made visible to the global audience of peers. Full adoption in the system of the NSEF's 'Code of Best Practice in Scholarly Journal Publishing, Editing and Peer Review' would to a large extent eliminate all or most of the instances of editorial misconduct that have been identified. It would also lead to a situation in which the editors and editorial boards of South African journals would be aware that their practices are being monitored and that deviations that emerge would require an explanation and could potentially have drastic consequences.

References

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