

# An Australian system for managing research misconduct

## Summary of Position

The Council of the Australian Academy of Science supports the establishment of a robust and fair national process for assuring the integrity of Australian research funded or subsidised by any public source, wherever conducted.

## Statement of Principle

The Australian Academy of Science maintains that research is a significant and valuable endowment that benefits the nation. The lives of many Australians are enhanced by the outcomes of Australian research, not least by the deeper understanding of the very nature of the world in which we live—using the expertise in many disciplines in the sciences, social sciences and the humanities.

Maintaining the integrity of research is a difficult task that involves various aspects such as peer review, extensive discussions, transparent scientific practices, commercialisation of research, reproducibility, funding arrangements, the public image of researchers, international partnership, and the readiness to rectify any errors in the records, whether unintentional or intentional.

## Statement of Context

Although Australia's current system—consisting of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, the Australian Research Integrity Committee (ARIC), Australian research governance more broadly, and factors influencing the conduct of research—attempts to be all-encompassing, there are deficiencies in several areas such as coverage, accountability and transparency. ARIC, Australia's assurance mechanism, also has deficiencies owing primarily to the narrow scope of its remit and the status of the recommendations.

Around the world, there is a growing trend towards implementing stronger policies to ensure research integrity. Many countries are establishing nationally coordinated bodies to provide an independent and reliable system of assurance. This movement is largely driven by incidents of research misconduct, which have prompted countries to take a more robust stance.

No country is the perfect example of the gold standard for research misconduct governance, and Australia has the opportunity to learn from other countries' experiences. Australia can lead in transparency around research misconduct on the global stage.

Due to public scandals about Swedish universities' failure to handle serious cases of misconduct, a law was passed defining research misconduct as fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism. A Research Misconduct Board now investigates alleged cases of serious research misconduct at publicly funded research institutes, and the findings are made public. These findings are legally binding for universities, which decide the consequences for the researcher(s). Sweden is not alone in reinforcing confidence in the research enterprise, as several other countries are also doing the same.

## The Academy's Position

Establishing a national oversight mechanism presents the opportunity to position Australia well in the evolving international movement to establish a fair and robust framework to assure management and investigation of research misconduct. It will protect researchers from allegations based on hunches and

prejudice but not from the thorough investigation should there be evidence to suspect allegations of research misconduct with substance. In turn, the people who pay for it, the Australian taxpayers, can be reassured that their money is invested in individuals and organisations committed to the highest standards of research conduct.

The Academy proposes enhancements to the current system:

1. A two-tiered system where there is (a) national oversight of major breaches of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (the Code) and (b) institutional oversight of minor breaches with all publicly funded research being covered by the Code and an oversight system wherever it is conducted. The oversight body should have the capacity to conduct or commission research on matters related to the oversight of misconduct.
2. A national oversight body is empowered to collect data and publish reports that can act to showcase good research ethics and practices and respects the diversity of organisations—universities, medical research institutes, government departments and agencies, business—and multi-jurisdictional legislative frameworks, obligations and cultures.
3. A national oversight body also be responsible for overseeing institutional management of serious breaches of good research practices in the form of fabrication, falsification or plagiarism that are committed intentionally or with gross negligence in the planning, performing, or reporting of research outcomes. Potentially serious matters will be reported to the national oversight body, either by the complainant or the relevant organisation, and the evidence supporting the allegation will be evaluated. If this triage shows there is cause to investigate, the case cannot be dismissed and the institution would be obliged to investigate it.
4. The national oversight body will be tasked with overseeing the conduct of investigation of serious breaches by institutions to provide public confidence that such matters are being conducted properly. Organisations conducting the research will still be responsible for conducting and resourcing investigations.

### [Statement of Authorisation](#)

This position paper was authorised by the Academy Council at its meeting of 11 October 2023.

### [Additional Documents](#)

[An Australian System for Investigating Research Misconduct – Proposal paper \(February 2022\)](#)

[Proposal for Research Integrity Australia – Questions and Answers \(February 2022\)](#)

[Research integrity reform: a light touch with teeth](#) – Professor Nicholas Fisk (February 2023)

[Trust in Science: clarifying the distinctions between research integrity, research misconduct, excellence and impact](#) – Dr Cathy Foley, Chief Scientist of Australia (August 2023)