
14 December 2020

1 Synopsis

The Flemish Commission for Research Integrity advises institutions to endorse the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017) as the leading document with regard to research integrity and considers it undesirable to develop a novel national or regional code of conduct. The so-called “ALLEA-code” streamlines the norms all over Europe and is an important document in Horizon Europe.

2 The context: codes of conduct for research integrity in Belgium and Europe

In order to obtain clearly shared standards about research integrity, numerous *Codes of conduct* and other guidelines were worldwide developed for researchers. Some of them define science fraud and other kinds of research misconduct, while others enumerate the principles of virtuous research behaviour. The first worldwide consensus about research integrity principles was achieved at the World Conference on Research Integrity in Singapore (2010): the [Singapore Statement on Research Integrity](#) (2010). The [Montreal Statement](#) (2013) of the third world conference embodied an addition with specific recommendations relating to cross-border scientific cooperation. The codes listed here are those most frequently used in Flanders:

- The [European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) (ALLEA, 2017) is probably the most frequently used code in Europe and is a revision of the [ALLEA-ESF-code of 2011](#). In 2018 it was translated in Dutch: [Europese gedragscode voor wetenschappelijke integriteit](#).
- The [Ethische code van het wetenschappelijk onderzoek in België](#) (2009) [Ethical code of scientific research in Belgium] was elaborated by the four Royal Academies of Belgium and published by Belspo (*POD federaal wetenschapsbeleid*). This concise code forwards six principles functioning as the foundation of integrity in research: diligence, prudence, reliability, verifiability, independence and impartiality.
- Certain [research institutes in Flanders](#) have their own code of conduct, such as universities and the VIB.

3 National/regional codes or a European code?

When evolving the ALLEA-code it became clear that a single document would not be able to cover all nationally prevailing norms and good practices within Europe. The ALLEA-code describes the largest possible intersection and is therefore also understood to be a 'framework'-code that could be supplemented with national codes of conduct. The ALLEA-code is nevertheless sufficiently thorough and specific to stand on its own as a code of conduct. Some countries and research institutions have therefore endorsed the ALLEA-code as their national or institutional code of conduct for research integrity.

The Flemisch Commission for Research Integrity (VCWI) has reflected upon the question whether it would be desirable to revise the Belgian ethical code (Belspo, 2009), which is more generic and not yet addressing the open-science era, into a novel Belgian (or Flemish) code of conduct for research integrity. The commission, however, judges that it is more valuable that institutions would endorse the ALLEA-code instead of a novel code for the following reasons:

- The European code of conduct is recognised throughout Europe and consequently has an important advantage in its scope. Research integrity does not know borders. Ideally researchers can be expected to meet the same requirements irrespective of where they are currently working. It is, for instance when judging about potential integrity breaches in a (European) international research collaboration convenient to be able to refer to a shared evaluative framework. In this regard, the creation of an additional (national) code of conduct is suboptimal since this could introduce additional differences in national norms.
- The labour-intense process of creatively developing a new code of conduct would require a commission of academics to invest a substantial amount of time and effort, and ideally would also require support staff. Although this exercise would certainly be valuable, there are more important projects to tackle that would equally ask for an investment of these resources (evenly so within the domain of research integrity).
- The revision of the ALLEA(-ESF)-code initially originated as a response to a request of the European Commission to the scientific community in Europe. In the European *Horizon 2020* programme an endorsement of the ALLEA-code was included in every [Grant Agreement](#).¹ The transition from *Horizon 2020* to *Horizon Europe* meant for the ALLEA-code that it would become even more entrenched. From *Horizon Europe* onwards the code is embedded in the "[Horizon Europe Regulation](#)".² This means that the ALLEA-code has become a document of reference in the *Horizon Europe* regulations and, thus, is juridically stronger than a mere reference in a contract as it was the case in *Horizon 2020*. The inclusion of references to the ALLEA-code in the grant agreement model contracts for *Horizon Europe* is currently discussed, as well as specific references to the quality and reproducibility of data.
- The ALLEA-code was enriched in the sense that it does not only describe desirable practices/behaviour of researchers (senior researchers, authors, reviewers and so on), but it

¹ "In addition, the beneficiaries must respect the fundamental principle of research integrity – as set out in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. This implies compliance with the following fundamental principles [...] and means that beneficiaries must ensure that persons carrying out research tasks follow the good research practices and refrain from the research integrity violations described in this Code."

² "Article 15 [...] Entities participating in the action shall provide [...] a confirmation that the activities will comply with the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity published by All European Academies [...]"

also addresses research institutions and organisations.³ In the Dutch code of conduct, responsibilities are put together in the chapter '*duties of care*' and comprise among others research culture, training and supervision, data-management and procedures (addressing ethical commissions, counselors and a commission for research integrity). Thus, the ALLEA-code is not only a code that individuals should abide by but it is also a guide for research integrity policies of scientific institutions.

In this advise, the Flemish Commission for Research Integrity differs from the chosen path in the Netherlands, where the [Nederlandse gedragscode wetenschappelijke integriteit](#) (2018) [*Dutch code of conduct for research integrity*] specifies the norms for good scientific practice. The Dutch code is recognised by all Dutch universities, university medical centra and colleges and serves as the main document in the investigation of potential research integrity breaches. In a different way than our northern neighbours, the Flemish Commission (VCWI) would like to emphasize the importance of the European code of conduct and a broadly shared, harmonised European research integrity policy.

4 Advice of the VCWI

Several research institutions have already formally accepted or endorsed the European code of conduct for research integrity. The Flemish Commission for Research Integrity concretely advises...

- ... research institutions to endorse the ALLEA-code and publicly highlight this endorsement.
- ... institutions to actively pursue that every scientist and research policy officer has read this document while focussing especially on new researchers (starting PhD students, newly recruited members of academic staff (ZAP)), ombudspersons and policy makers. Signing this code of conduct can be part of researchers' contracts, for instance as a part of employment contracts.
- ... to use the ALLEA-code institution wide as a leading document when research policies are concerned (for instance as a guiding document for university research boards). Novel policy measures can be inspired and be verified by the code.⁴
- ... institutions to communicate structurally and transparently and to provide in training (especially for junior and incoming researchers) about the behaviour that is expected from researchers by referring to the ALLEA-code – research integrity has its proper place next to ethical and juridical expectations in this kind of communication.
- ... commissions for research integrity to wield the ALLEA-code as the primordial framework in assessing potential research integrity breaches.⁵

³ In the European SOPs4RI project a toolbox was developed so as to assist institutions to evolve their research integrity policy. This toolbox (9 topics) was recently described in a [publication in Nature](#).

⁴ The chapter "*Zorgplichten*" (*duties of care*) from the Dutch code of conduct is in that sense an inspiring checklist.

⁵ The Dutch code of conduct may in this regard well be a valuable instrument as it congrues with the ALLEA-code and, additionally, lists twelf criteria that can assist research integrity commissions to estimate the gravity and allow boards of institutions to decide on proportionale measures.

- ... research funders (such as FWO, VLAIO) and foundations to require in their stipendiary contracts that the host institutions endorse the ALLEA-code or that the researchers they employ have read and accepted the ALLEA-code.
- ... institutions to share their experiences concerning the ALLEA-code (both good practices and thresholds), including efforts trying to implement the above recommendations. The Flemish Commission for Research Integrity (VCWI) is willing to facilitate this process, for instance through the traditional VCWI meeting days.



Vlaamse Commissie voor
Wetenschappelijke Integriteit
Flemish Commission for Research Integrity

The VCWI overviews research integrity in Flanders (Belgium). This body of nine professors has a twofold advisory function: general advice (such as this one) and second advice on cases that have previously been handled by the CRI of an institution. In 2020, 20 institutions recognize the advisory role of the VCWI. The VCWI is a member of ENRIO, the European Network of Research Integrity Offices.

Flemish Commission for Research Integrity
Palece of the Academies, Hertogsstraat 1, 1000 Brussels
www.vcwi.be | +32 (0) 2 550 23 31 | secretaris@vcwi.be