

————— 14 December 2020 — Language corrected 10 November 2025 —————

1 Summary

The Flemish Commission for Research Integrity advises institutions to adopt the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017) as the leading document in the field of research integrity and considers it undesirable to develop a new national or regional code of conduct. This so-called “ALLEA Code” streamlines standards across 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 clearly define the standards of scientific integrity, numerous codes of conduct and other guidelines for researchers have been developed worldwide. Some define scientific fraud and other research misconduct, others set out the principles of research integrity. The first global consensus on integrity standards was reached at the second 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 widely 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 [Code of Ethics for scientific research in Belgium](#) (2009) was drawn up by four Royal Academies of Belgium and published by Belspo (*Federaal Belgian Science Policy Office*). This concise code proposes six principles as pillars of research integrity: 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 the ALLEA code was updated, it became clear that a single document would not be able to grasp all nationally prevailing standards and good practices within European countries. The ALLEA code describes the largest possible intersection and is therefore also understood to be a ‘framework’ code that can be supplemented with national codes of conduct. Nevertheless, the ALLEA-code is sufficiently thorough and specific to stand on its own as a code of conduct. Some countries and research

institutions have therefore adopted the ALLEA-code as their national or institutional code of conduct for research integrity.

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

- The European code of conduct is recognised throughout Europe and consequently has an important scale advantage. Research integrity knows no borders. Ideally researchers are expected to meet the same standards regardless of where they are currently working. For instance when assessing potential integrity breaches in a (European) international research collaboration, it is convenient to rely on a shared evaluative framework. The creation of an additional (national) code of conduct is suboptimal since this could introduce additional differences in national standards.
- The labour-intensive 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 be valuable in itself, there are more important challenges 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 came in response to a request made by the European Commission to the scientific community in Europe. In the European framework programme *Horizon 2020* an endorsement of the ALLEA code was included in every [Grant Agreement](#).¹ In the transition from *Horizon 2020* to *Horizon Europe*, the ALLEA code became even more binding. From *Horizon Europe* onwards the code is a part of the "[Horizon Europe Regulation](#)".² This means that the ALLEA code has become a reference document in the *Horizon Europe* regulations, so legally 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 also addresses research institutions and organisations.³ In the Dutch code of conduct, responsibilities are put together in the chapter '*duties of care*' and cover among others research culture, training and supervision, data-management and procedures (including ethics committees, confidential counselors and a commission for research integrity). In this way, the

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 [...]"

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](#).

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 advice, the Flemish Commission for Research Integrity differs from the chosen path in the Netherlands, where the [Dutch code of conduct for research integrity](#) (2018) sets the standards for good research practice. The Dutch code is recognised by all Dutch universities, university medical centres and colleges of higher education. It serves as the reference document when investigating 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 adopted 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 seek to ensure that every researcher and research policy officer has read this document, with particular attention to new researchers (starting PhD students, newly recruited members of academic staff), ombudspersons and policy makers. Signing this code of conduct can be part of researchers' contracts, for instance as a part of employment regulations.
- ... to use the ALLEA code as a guiding document when institution wide research policies are built (for instance by university research boards). New policy measures can be inspired and tested against it.⁴
- ... institutions to communicate structurally and transparently about the behaviour that is expected from researchers by referring to the ALLEA-code – in such communication, research integrity has its proper place next to ethical and legal expectations – and provide relevant training (especially for junior and incoming researchers).
- ... commissions for research integrity to use the ALLEA code as the main assessment framework in assessing alleged research integrity breaches.⁵
- ... research funders (such as FWO, VLAIO and foundations) to require in their grant agreements that the host/recipient institutions follow the ALLEA code or that the researchers employed by their funding have read and accepted the ALLEA code.
- ... institutions to share their experiences concerning the ALLEA code (both good practices and barriers), 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 annual VCWI networking days.

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 twelve criteria that can assist research integrity commissions to estimate the gravity and allow boards of institutions to decide on proportionate measures.



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

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