Reviewer’s report

Title: Quality of reports of investigations of research integrity by academic institutions

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Reviewer: Bor Luen Tang

Reviewer’s report:

Grey and colleagues examined the investigation reports from 3 institutions on the integrity of a large number of publications co-authored by researchers from these institutions (integrity concerns on which were raised by the current authors themselves). Ticking against a quality and adequacy checklist published earlier by Gunsalus et al. (2018), the authors find the reports inadequate. Overall, the study could be of potential interest but there are issues that need to be addressed.

Technical issues:

1. It was stated by the authors that "…Overall, each report was considered unacceptable”. The basis for this conclusion, although not unintuitive, is still not particularly clear. Meeting all 26 items in Gunsalus et al.’s checklist is (arguably) a tall order, so what degree of compliance would be considered "acceptable"? Furthermore, would all items in that checklist have equal weightage? It would be helpful if the authors have, or could cite a publically available 'positive control', i.e., an exemplary investigation report which would be considered acceptable.

2. The case raise by the authors appears to be of a rather elaborate scale, with >200 paper involving multiple authors spread across 4 institutions. Several high profile cases of misconduct where reports are publically posted and which reports were more adequate in the terms specified by the checklist involved far less number of papers and perpetrators. Thus, in making inferences on "deficiencies in the quality and reporting of institutional investigation of concerns about research integrity", the authors should take the complex and elaborate nature of their case into account.

3. The authors noted that "Institutions 1, 2 and 4 investigated 38/49, 7/200 and 5/34 potentially affected papers, respectively". Was their conclusion of "Reports failed to address publication-specific concerns and focussed more strongly on determining research misconduct than evaluating the integrity of publications" based on these numbers? This point could perhaps be better clarified in 'Discussion'.

4. Further to the above, is it known as to why the other papers highlighted were not investigated or ignored (or are these simply not included in the reports for brevity)? This is an important point because from either an institutional or journal/publisher perspective, ensuring the integrity of the published literature would take priority. Logically, most if not all investigations would start off by a careful scrutiny of the papers concerned.
5. In concluding, the authors suggested that "A possible solution is the establishment of independent organisations with authority to undertake and report investigations..." This is already in place in some countries and the authors should refer to these and verify if these do indeed produce more 'adequate' investigation reports on record.

Other issues:

The process of research reported in this manuscript is rather unusual in that the authors had raised concerns on research integrity with the institutions in the first place, then obtaining and analysing their (presumably confidential) reports for adequacy. The authors have indicated that ethics approval for the work is 'Not applicable'. However, in using these other academics entities as means to a research end, I wonder whether a more neutral third party (such as the authors' IRB) should have been consulted on its ethical implications.

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