

# Working Papers on University Reform

Working Paper 26

## **Translating ‘research integrity’ into policy and practice – HEIs leaders as political and academic mediators**

By Lise Degn

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## **Working Papers on University Reform**

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## **Introduction**

Higher education sectors all over the world are changing, due to both external and internal pressures stemming, for example, from changes in governance arrangements, funding schemes and increasing competition. Following these changes, new questions arise concerning the norms and practices that influence academic work. In certain parts of academia there is talk of a science crisis (Baker 2016), and the responsible conduct of research is debated heatedly across the world.

The present paper explores how the recent focus on 'research integrity' and responsible conduct of research influences the organization and practices of higher education institutions, and how leaders and managers navigate the pressures that come from inside and outside of their organizations, for higher performance and greater output while maintaining focus on responsible conduct of research.

The paper reports initial findings from a study of how 'research integrity' has travelled into Danish research institutions, namely the universities and university colleges. In 2014, a national 'Code of Conduct for Integrity in Research' was formulated (UFM 2014), which emphasized repeatedly the joint responsibility of researchers and research institutions, and the obligation of these institutions to formulate local policies and integrate integrity principles into doctoral education. The question, however, is how this responsibility is interpreted and turned into practice in the higher education institutions.

## **Background**

Research integrity and the responsible conduct of research is being debated heavily in academia, both as a consequence of what some call the 'reproducibility crisis', particularly in psychological research, but also as a result of highly publicized 'scandals' in science, such as the plagiarism cases in Germany (Abbott 2015), the Wakefield case in the UK (Rao & Andrade 2011) and the Penkowa case in Denmark (Callaway 2012).

However, in recent years the debate has focused less on the 'headline-grabbing cases of scientific misconduct' (Martinson et al. 2005) and more on what has come to be known as questionable research practices or QRPs, which can be described as 'the steroids of scientific competition, artificially enhancing performance and producing a kind of arms race in which researchers who strictly play by the rules are at a competitive disadvantage' (John et al. 2012).

QRPs have been studied more intensely over the past decade, but due to their opaque character and their conceptual vagueness, scholars have not come to definite conclusions about the prevalence of QRPs or their implications.

The academic debate on research integrity and QRPs is paralleled by a similar debate in policy making circles. To address the presumed proliferation of QRPs, policy makers, institutional and multiple other actors have produced Codes of Conduct for the science system (see e.g. ALLEA 2017).

This is also the case in Denmark, where the 'Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity' was published in 2014. The Danish Code was produced by a committee, comprising highly esteemed researchers from various scientific fields, and representatives from Danish research councils (UFM 2014). It was highly influenced by similar, international codes of conduct and declarations, e.g. the Singapore statement (2010) and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, which was constructed by the European Science Foundation and ALLEA, the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities, in 2011.

A key aspect of the Danish code is that it states on several occasions that it 'will only gain full impact when researchers adhere to the document and when public and private research institutions integrate the document in their institutional framework' (UFM 2014: 5). The individual research institutions thus play a key role in the implementation of the code and in the local translations of the more general guidelines:

Thus, the standards are meant to be further developed by institutions in accordance with specific practices predominant within the individual

field of research.[...] It is recommended that further specification, policies and procedures are developed at the institutional level. It is specifically recommended that institutions take responsibility for continually informing their research staff about policies and procedures that are in place at the institution (UFM 2014: 7).

The question addressed in the present study is how this process plays out and how the research institutions go about the task of translating and transforming general norms and guidelines into institutional procedures that are intended to shape day-to-day academic practice.

The central argument of the paper is that to be effective, the norms and principles of the national code need to be translated and made sense of in local practices, and that local leaders and managers play a crucial role in this process. The key question then becomes how this is done and with what implications?

Another key aspect of this study – and an area which is underexplored, not only in a Danish context - is that it addresses the expansion of the higher education sector, and explores how institutions, that are new to research, implement norms and standards of research integrity as a part of their ‘culture-building’.

## **Theoretical framework**

As the above research questions indicate, a framework that is sensitive to the dynamic processes of policy implementation is needed for the present study. A central assumption is that the path from national (or global) policy to local, organizational practice is far from linear, and can be seen as a continual translation process, where the ‘original’ idea or policy is transformed when it emerges or is ‘introduced’ into a new context (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996, Czarniawska 2009, Sahlin and Wedlin 2008).

To investigate these processes, the concept of *translation*, as it is understood in what is known as Scandinavian Institutionalism (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; 2005;

Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Czarniawska 2008; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008) is developed and applied in the analysis of institutional documents from all Danish research institutions. Some of the key concepts and understandings of Scandinavian institutionalism are unfolded in the following sections.

### ***Travelling ideas***

Scandinavian institutionalism is mainly concerned with exploring and understanding how ideas, and more specifically policy ideas, e.g. about efficiency, accountability, strategy, or integrity, move across time and space, and how this travelling process affects both the idea and the context it enters into. The main focus is on how ‘ideas are translated into objects (models, books, transparencies), are sent to other places than those where they emerged, translated into new kind of objects, and then sometimes into actions’ (Czarniawska 2009).

Scandinavian institutionalism draws on several sources of inspiration, most notably perhaps on Actor Network Theory (Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 1986). However, its foundation in sociological new institutionalism (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) is arguably the most important to understand the methodological underpinnings of the theoretical lens and the relevance it holds for the study of how integrity ideas are translated into policies and action at Danish universities and university colleges.

The argument in classic new institutionalism is that demands for institutional legitimacy (the logic of appropriateness) drive an organization to mimic other successful organizations within their field. This imitation can be based on coercive, mimetic or normative isomorphism. Scandinavian institutionalism, and the translation approach, is occupied with nuancing this ‘traditional’ new institutionalist notion of isomorphism. It does so by bringing the actors back into the analysis of the spread of ideas and the key in the translation perspective is therefore agency.

The argument is that actors are instrumental in the reception, transformation and translation of ideas, rather than passive recipients of policy ‘instructions’ and thereby

abstracted processes of isomorphism. Ideas are seen as dynamic constructs, which are subject to change when attached to other ideas (Carstensen 2010). Within this framework, integrity can be seen as an idea that travels and transforms as it is attached to other ideas within specific contexts.

### ***Idea carriers***

A key concept in the translation perspective relates to ‘who’ carries the idea into the new context. ‘Idea carriers’ are actors who ‘package’ and carry organizational (or other) ideas into a context without applying the content of the idea (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996: 36, Albæk 2009). Such carriers are often (and increasingly) professional consultants, but can also be policy makers, local authorities, professional associations and academics, who carry a concept, a standard or similar ‘packages’ into an organization without actually acting as the ones ‘unpacking’ or implementing the idea.

In the present study, the concept of idea carriers is used to analyse how the idea of integrity is carried into the specific organizations. That is, the Danish Code can be seen as a ‘package’ that is carried by specific carriers into each organization.

### ***Materialization through language, documents, and practice***

A key element of the translation approach, and of the analytical setup of the present study, is that *translation* is seen as much more than a linguistic exercise; translation refers to ‘displacement, drift, invention, mediation, creation of a new link that did not exist before and modifies in part the two agents’ (Latour 1993, quoted in Czarniawska and Joerges 1996). Central to this is also the material dimension of the translation approach, i.e. that ideas are materialized through the translation process.

The argument is that ideas travel by being translated into an object (a text, a model, a picture etc.), which is translated (sometimes) into an action, and that if this action is repeated and routinized, it becomes institutionalized and thus taken for granted

(Czarniawska and Joerges 1996). However, when an idea is objectified, i.e. translated into a material form, it may travel, either by way of intent or not. So in order to explore how the national code and its ideas travel, we must analyse the material translations made by local organizations and actors.

### ***Sensemaking***

To provide a more explicit focus on the cognitive structures, mental frames and identity constructions of individual and collective actors, and how these influence the translation processes as they continue through the organizations, the concept of sensemaking (Weick 1995, Mills 2003) will be applied. The sensemaking perspective focuses on the continual organising done by actors as they ‘try to put together ideas and actions that come to them, in their never ending activity of sense making’ (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996, 15). The sensemaking framework thereby ‘allows the individual and collective actors to emerge as more agentic and as co-authors of their own environments, as opposed to constrained by institutional (ideational) forces’ (Degn 2014).

Sensemaking refers to the ongoing creation of meaning, i.e. of recognizable stories, that encompass many of the inputs that individuals and organisations are met with on a daily basis. What the sensemaking perspective offers to our investigation is an eye for the *cues* that sensemakers pick out of the stream of input that they are met with, and the *frames* used to put these cues together and create a viable, and meaningful story of the present (Weick 1995).

### **Research setting and design**

To explore these issues, a qualitative research design, used document analysis to explore and compare the institutional policies relating to integrity and responsible conduct of research.

The Danish university system comprises eight institutions of varying size and composition; a landscape which was established following a large-scale merger process in 2007. In addition, seven university colleges (UCs) are included in the study, as a reform in 2014 gave these institutions a right and responsibility to perform practice-related and practice-oriented research.

All Danish university and university college websites were searched for official policies, and all institutions were contacted to obtain documents that are not available online. This paper primarily presents findings from this document study, but the initial interviews are also used here. In order to explore how these policies have been developed, and what considerations were in play, interviews with selected informants have also been conducted (see case selection considerations below). Further interviews with selected research leaders and managers will be conducted to investigate how the local sensemaking processes influence translations of the integrity idea. These interviews are planned for autumn 2017.

### ***Case selection considerations***

The selection of cases for further exploration via interviews was based on an ambition to map as many qualitatively different translation processes as possible. Variation is not meant as a quest for a representative sample, but to capture the multitude of factors that might influence translation processes. The key is mapping differences rather than testing propositions (D'amour 2008; Marton and Booth 1997).

The selection of cases is designed as an iterative process where the document study will guide the case selection by pointing to the variation of the institutions that are of interest to the study at hand.

## **Analysis**

In the following section, initial analyses of the collected documents are presented. The structure of the analysis follows the theoretical framework by focusing on the

concepts presented above, i.e. materialization, idea carriers and with translation as the summative concept.

### **Materialization**

The integrity idea is investigated firstly by looking at the degree of materialization that the translation process entails at the studied institutions. To this purpose, a ‘policy map’ has been produced, see Figure 1, which visualizes the diversity in the materialization processes in the studied institutions. To investigate the materialization process, the universities and UCs were categorized according to the degree of translation (vertical axis) and their degree of institution building (horizontal axis).

The degree of translation refers to two dimensions. Firstly the *specificity* of the documents, i.e. a high degree of specificity means that the documents are highly adapted to the local, institutional context; a moderate degree of specificity means that they are very close to the formulations of the national code; and low degree of specificity means that, for example, they only refer to the rules of the research practice committee (praksisudvalg). Secondly, the *number of documents* is a dimension of the degree of translation, i.e. whether a high number of sub-policies have been formulated, or if just one overall document exists.

On the other axis, the degree of institution building refers to the institutionalization process within the individual university and UC. This category comprises dimensions such as the establishment of permanent research practice committees (which assess and decide on cases about responsible conduct of research), ‘named persons’ arrangements, (obligatory) doctoral courses and other courses.

As Figure 1 illustrates, three clusters of universities emerge, displaying varying patterns of translation. In cluster 1 (Universities A, B, C and D) there are high degrees of translation and of institution building. Naturally there are variations within the cluster, but overall these universities have all developed institution (or faculty)-specific policies about responsible conduct of research; they have several sub policies, e.g. for data management, or for specific disciplinary fields; and they have a

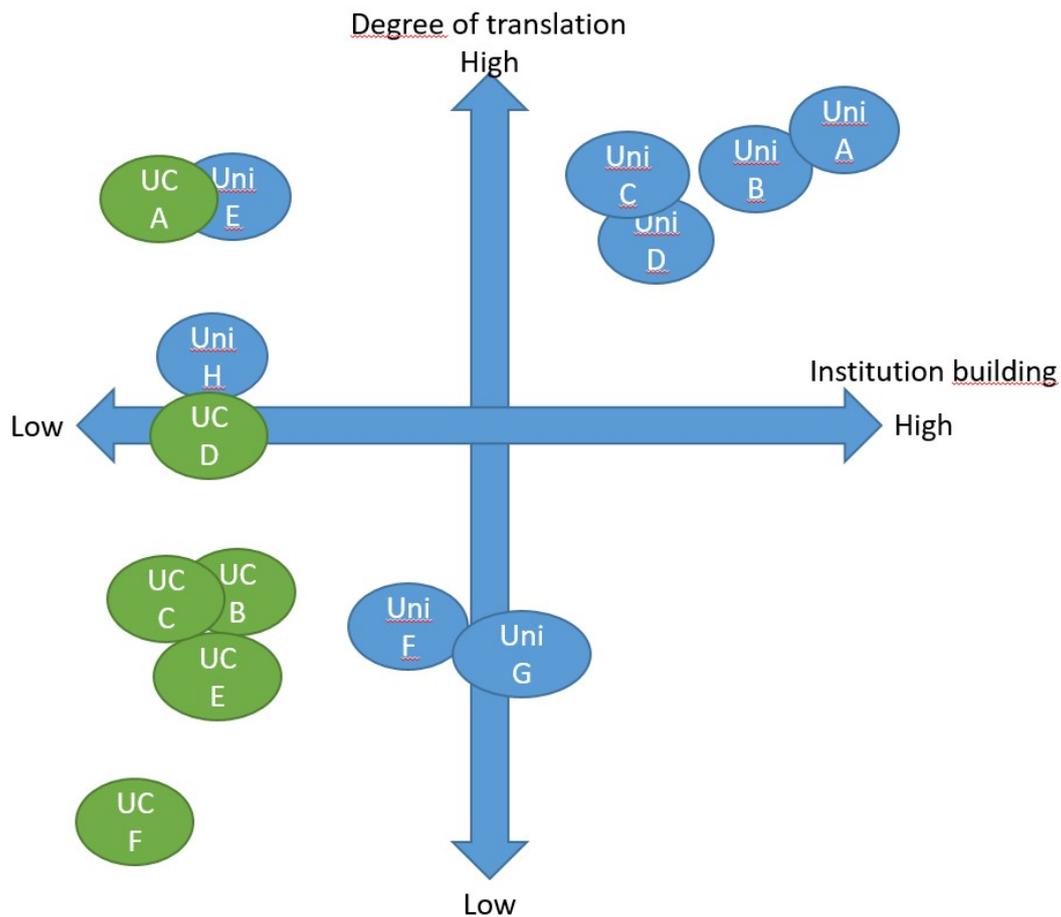


Figure 1: Materialization of translation process.

well-developed ‘integrity infrastructure’, i.e. established procedures and units responsible for dealing with matters of integrity, and courses for doctoral students and other groups. In terms of organizational characteristics, it seems significant that these universities all are multi-faculty and all have faculties of health sciences, which is not the case for the universities in the other clusters.

Cluster 2 (Universities E and H) have moderate to high degrees of translation, meaning that they have adapted the national code into their own institutional context, but their institution building is quite low, meaning that they do not have permanent research practice committees or doctoral courses. They both however have procedures in place meant to handle potential cases of misconduct.

Cluster 3 (Universities F and G) have established research practice committees and are thus categorized as having a moderate degree of institution building. They are

also both characterized as having a low degree of translation, as their policies of research integrity are limited to the rule set of these practice committees.

The UCs also demonstrate significant diversity in their degree of translation of the national code, which ranges from a high degree of translation by UC A to no translation by UC F. Most of the UCs have translated the national code into a local policy/guideline, but both the number of sub-policies and the specificity of the translations vary substantially. As shown in the figure above, the degree of institution building in all the UCs can be characterized as low.

The dynamics behind these variations will be explored further in the planned interviews with research managers and other key stakeholders in the studied institutions.

### ***Travels and idea carriers***

In the analysis of the documents from the universities and particularly the university colleges it becomes apparent that there is a degree of imitation, and perhaps also what Erlingsdóttir and Lindberg call isonymism, meaning ‘the adoption of the same names but for different forms and practices’ (2005).

One informant mentions that, when confronted with the demands for institution building in the Danish code of conduct, ‘... the first thing we did, obviously, was to look at what the other universities have done, and then we found out that University A’s model looked like something that could be interesting...’ (Head of Dean’s office).

As mentioned in the previous section, the UC translations vary, but some of the translations are quite similar. Of particular interest from a travel and translation perspective, is that the preliminary interviews suggest a ‘package’, i.e. a specific document seems to circulate in the UC system providing the translators with a ‘ready-made’, UC-specific translation. This is also seen in UCs C and B, where the policies are almost identical. The processes of packaging and travelling, however, need to be investigated further.

## ***Translation***

The central process in travelling ideas, according to Scandinavian institutionalism, is that an idea is translated into an object, becomes disembedded, sent on, and re-embedded in a new context where it is ‘unpacked’/translated into an object and so on.

In the present study, the attempt is to investigate how such a translation model might help us understand the nuances of how an idea of research integrity or responsible conduct of research travels through a national system of research like the Danish one.

An initial point of interest emerges, when looking at how packages seem to circulate between institutions. The early interviews suggest that there is a degree of imitation or isomorphism at play in the field, and that ideas that have been ‘packaged’ by one institution provide another searching institution with a ready-made solution to the external pressure to develop policies and a legitimate integrity infrastructure.

The ensuing question is: to what extent do these policies and practices become institutionalized? The argument in Scandinavian institutionalism is that to be re-embedded, turned into action and thus institutionalized (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996), an idea must be unpacked, i.e. translated to fit the new context. From the analysis above, we see that this unpacking does not always occur. Where the degree of translation is low, there is a risk that the norms of integrity, described in the national code, might be decoupled from the institutional/disciplinary context. Where the degree of institution building is low, there is a risk that it might be hard to translate the norms into actions that can become routine practices.

## **Discussion**

From the analysis of the documents and the preliminary interviews with managers and key stakeholders concerning research integrity and responsible conduct of research some interesting discussions arise. These are tentatively unfolded below and will be developed further as the interviews with research leaders are collected and analysed in the autumn of 2017.

## ***Legalization vs. internalization***

Interviewees frequently articulated their feeling that there was a demand for ‘legalization’ of the research integrity area. They saw this process as somewhat decoupled from academic practice and the ‘enculturated’ norms of academia. Addressing the question of why a research practice committee had not been set up before, one informant reflected:

.. there are two reasons.. One is [...] a matter of prioritizing resources, but it is also a matter of tradition... [...] which was that they did not wish to let matters of academic practice become legal matters. And the perception was that the research practice committee and the setup around it, made it a legal matter.

Another informant pointed to the demands from international funding agencies as the initial reason for constructing a policy for responsible conduct of research. The same informant went on to describe how the need for a cultural ‘change’ was addressed by way of courses (institution building) rather than organizational policy development (translation). So translation of policy is not seen as an internally driven process, based in an academic discussion about practice, but a formalization question – we do it because we have to comply with external pressures.

## ***Decoupling***

A related discussion concerns the ‘distribution of labour’ when it comes to translation of the integrity idea. As mentioned, there seems to be a degree of imitation in the translation processes and indeed some of the respondents mentioned a ‘network’ of people, working with these translation processes in the various institutions. In many cases, particularly in the universities, the ‘translation task’ or the unpacking of the idea of research integrity is in the hands of what could be called ‘para-academics’ (MacFarlane 2011). This could explain the potential decoupling between the practice, e.g. the course development, and the policy-construction. This potential decoupling will also be explored in further interviews.

## **Concluding remarks and avenues for further exploration**

The initial search for and analysis of policy translations at the universities and the UCs indicate that there are large differences between the degree of materialization of translation between the institutions. The planned interviews are aimed at exploring the mechanisms and dynamics behind these differences.

One focus will be on the 'idea carriers' and 'un-packers', where the initial analysis has indicated that there is a network of people (or maybe more than one) working with these matters. It will be interesting to explore how these networks are built, how they help package/unpackage ideas, and with what implications.

Another area to be explored in the interviews is the variation in the degrees of translation and the consistently low degree of institution building in the university colleges. Interviews are thus vital to explore why this is the case.

The next steps in the analysis will contribute to the growing body of literature on academic management and leadership, as it explores the role that leaders and managers play, particularly at local levels, in the translation of abstract policy into local action.

In this paper, the aim has been to explore the organizational level of policy translation in the higher education sector. The next question seems to be: what happens to policy and policy translation when practitioners (academics) are to make sense of it in their day-to-day academic work? The findings of this study will therefore hopefully feed into future studies of micro-level sensemaking and academic 'bricolage' (Weick 1993).

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