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USAf: Putting the 'Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices' into practice

*Following a Workshop on the Ethics of Scholarly Publishing on 11 April 2018, and with the collective goal of advancing research integrity in South Africa, the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), the Council for Higher Education (CHE), the National Research Foundation (NRF), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and Universities South Africa (USAf) signed the joint **Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices** in Pretoria on 31 July 2019.*

The signatories were invited by the South African Journal of Science to outline to the South African research community how they individually and collectively will be 'putting the Statement into practice'.

While it is vital to continuously build the research integrity of South Africa's national science system, addressing the issue of research and publishing integrity is a system-wide project rather than one that can simply be addressed through interventions at the level of the individual researcher and/or individual institutions.

Following on a period of very stagnant growth, South Africa's research system has grown substantially since 2010, mainly as the result of a number of important interventions, including the introduction by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) of the research output subsidy as part of the block grant subsidy system. South Africa, with its production of more than 24 000 peer-reviewed research publications in 2018, has a 1% share of the global output. More importantly, perhaps, South Africa has a 10% share of the top 10% of the world's most cited articles. What this tells us, is that even though the productiveness of the system has grown substantially over the last 10 years, the quality of the research outputs remains at a very high level. Between 80% and 90% of this output is produced in the university system, which is important because, as elsewhere in the world, the research that produces this output is tied to the generation of new cohorts of master's and doctoral graduates – the next generation of productive, ethical scholars.

With such a fast-growing system it should not be surprising that concerns are being raised about the perceived decline in the ethics of research and publishing. Much emphasis has been placed on the issue of publishing in predatory journals; while this issue is important and corrosive to the research enterprise, we have to keep in mind that these publications amount to just 3% of the total output and that 10 years ago it was at the same level. This is a complex matter because researchers chose these journals to publish in only because they were on the accredited list of journals that the DHET publishes every year. This should not be considered an excuse, but it does point towards the fact that the issue of research and publishing integrity is a system-wide project. The question of predatory journals is, of course, by no means the only ethical issue to be discussed. Plagiarism, the 'slicing and dicing' of articles, the adverse behaviour of supervisors towards their students, etc. are all of great importance.

The push to grow the high-quality research output of our system has resulted in the creation of a series of platforms and interventions that incentivise universities and individual researchers. It has been witnessed just how impactful this steering has been on the research system. It stands to reason therefore that carefully designed steering mechanisms would also contribute to improving the ethical behaviour of researchers.

One example of an intervention is to provide young scholars with the opportunity of working in mature research environments as an effective way to generate a culture of ethical research engagement. The policy and funding mechanisms at our disposal must be designed to address this kind of intervention as a matter of course. There is a strong and compelling case for the key national institutions to collaborate on such projects, as indeed they are. The key agencies – Universities South Africa (USAf), the Academy of Science of South Africa, the Council on Higher Education, the National Research Foundation, and the DHET – the signatories to the joint *Statement on Ethical Research and Scholarly Publishing Practices* – play distinct and influential roles in cultivating the science system. They have to work in concert with each other.

USAf, through its Research and Innovation Strategy Group, has the issue of research ethics high on its agenda – both in terms of advocacy and in the development of online materials for the purpose of exposing postgraduate students very early on in their careers to national and international best practice. In terms of advocacy, USAf will use its current platforms, such as the Higher Education Leadership and Management structure and the National Higher Education Conference, to focus attention on the matter and to develop the capacity of Deputy Vice Chancellors (Research), Directors of Research and Deans, to take active leadership roles in this respect. USAf will, as with all activities, undertake this goal in partnership with South Africa's universities, with DHET and with other national and international partners.