Key role for institutions in new research integrity guidelines
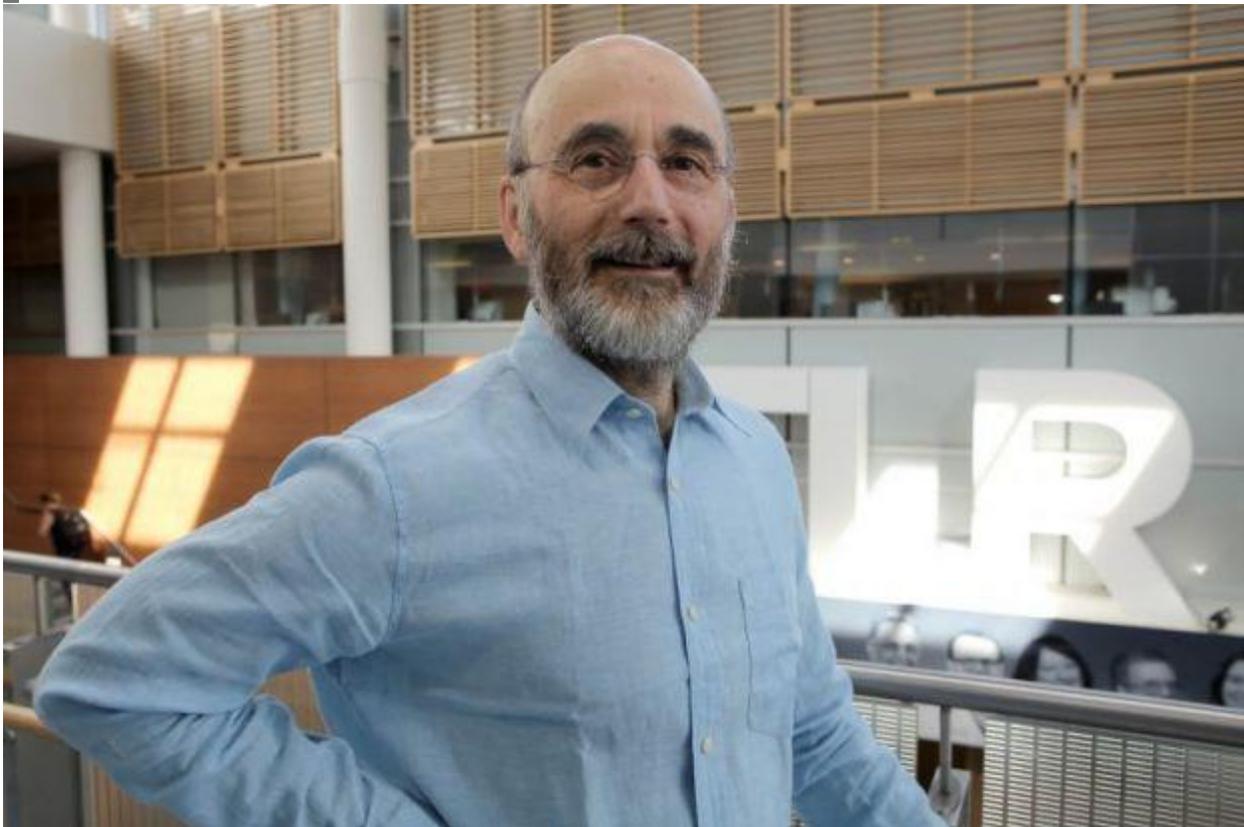
Developer of research assessment guidelines says that while funders and journals are important, role of universities is pivotal

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Universities and other research institutions arguably have a bigger role to play in boosting research integrity than journals or funding bodies, according to the architect of guidelines designed to prevent bad practice from flourishing under "publish or perish" regimes.

Epidemiologist David Moher said that research institutions performed a vital function as "the group that promotes and tenures" researchers. "They have the interest and ability to foster research integrity and promote better research practices," he told *Times Higher Education*.

"Institutions are essential drivers for change. We have to start somewhere, and [we] think institutions are a critical stakeholder."

Dr Moher led the team that developed guidelines on how institutions assess and reward their researchers' efforts, dubbed the "Hong Kong Principles". Published in their final form in the journal *Plos Biology*, along with illustrative examples showing how to apply them, the principles have been whittled down from a draft version debated at last year's World Congress on Research Integrity (WCRI) in Hong Kong.

The five principles spotlight factors all too often overlooked in metrics-based evaluations of researchers' work, which tend to focus on publications, citations and research grant income. "While easy to measure, these criteria do not give a full picture of the rigour of researchers' work or of their contributions to research and society," said Dr Moher, an expert in scientific publishing at the University of Ottawa.

The guidelines highlight the need to ensure "responsible practices" at all stages of research projects – including conception, design, methodology, execution and dissemination – and to transparently report all research, regardless of the results.

They stress the value of open access – to methods, materials and data as well as publications – and of the various forms of research including replication, innovation, translation, synthesis and meta-research. They also emphasise the importance of peer review, mentoring, outreach and knowledge exchange.

Dr Moher acknowledged that the guidelines warranted support from funding councils and publishers as well as universities. "These principles are aimed at institutions, [but] that doesn't mean journals or funders are being excluded," he said. "[They] can endorse the principles, [which] would send a positive message to institutions."

He said the reverse also applied, with institutional endorsement needed to bolster initiatives aimed at funders or publishers. He cited the Transparency and Openness Promotion Guidelines, a Centre for Open Science initiative to foster data transparency standards, which had attracted "buy-in" from journals and funders but not yet institutions.

"Not every researcher receives funding," he added. "The reach of funders is often curtailed."

The Hong Kong Principles have evolved from drafts circulated to 700 WCRI participants. A later version, uploaded after the June 2019 conference, attracted input from more than 100 people.

Since then, the Covid-19 pandemic has sapped the resources available to researchers in many countries. But Dr Moher said that this highlighted the need to double down on research integrity.

He said that the pandemic had shone a light on some "very unfortunate research practices" that had led to article retractions. Research findings about Covid-19 had been kept secret even though an undertaking to share data had been signed by the Wellcome Trust and more than 150 other organisations.

"Will and commitment" are needed in the face of such problems, he insisted. "The Hong Kong Principles can be endorsed and implemented across all institutions, regardless of their fiscal health."

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