

# IMPLEMENTATION OF ACADEMIC ETHICAL STANDARDS IN SERBIA: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MISCONDUCT IN RESEARCH PUBLISHING

The report on the presentation to the Council of Europe's  
"Strengthen integrity and combat corruption in higher education"

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In this presentation, I outlined the state-of-the-art of integrity in higher education in Serbia, based on a CEES study, complemented with findings of the long-term monitoring of the publishing behaviour of the members of the national academic community.

## Institutionalization

Ethical boards are formed at most universities in Serbia. Individual schools/departments have so far followed this practice only sporadically. There is strong evidence of the lack of coordination among bodies operating at different levels within particular universities.

The perceptions of the legislation dealing with various aspects of integrity are outlined based on the results of a study by CEON/CEES. The members of ethical boards generally consider the regulations unsatisfactory. Their main objections can be summarized as the lack of consistency in the regulations, resulting in the lack of boards' effectivity.

## Issues in ethical boards' work

The external influences on the decision process of ethical boards are reported as being very frequent. On the other hand, the competences of board members are perceived as high, although abundant anecdotal evidence suggests that some of them are not familiar with elementary standards and protocols intended to protect integrity.

## Forms of violating integrity

The incidence of the typical forms of violating academic integrity *by the students and in relation to students* were reported based on responses to a CEON/CEES survey conducted among the common members of the academic community, not involved in the work of ethical bodies. Among various items offered in the survey, diploma selling and tolerating student plagiarism are ranked on the top. Other issues are generally underrated.

As to the forms of violating integrity of the *faculty staff among themselves*, the respondents admit only mild offences, such as awarding gift authorship or forming cliques based on illegitimate interests. Falsification and fabrication are denied, while publishing in predatory journals is minimized, which contradicts the findings of previous CEON/CEES studies. The

defensive attitude of respondents in reporting violations of their colleagues is evident, strong, and discouraging.

At last, the violations of ethical standards *by the university departments' management* are reported by the members of academic staff to be the most serious. Some of the most frequently reported forms of abuse, such as nepotism and harnessing whistleblowers, obviously cannot be eradicated by ethical actions, but require legal measures.

## Misconduct in research publishing

In the second part of my presentation I dwelt upon the findings of CEES's monitoring of research publishing in Serbia.

Plagiarism in Serbian journals is relatively high. In the 2011–2016 period, it was reduced from 10% to 8% thanks to the measures aimed at systematic prevention. However, the incidence is reduced only in published articles, and not in submitted manuscripts. Obviously, sole credit for this small improvement goes to journal publishers, organized and technically supported by CEES. Regulation bodies including the ministry responsible for science did not follow such efforts in any visible manner.

There is little evidence of the fabrication and falsification in publishing, but this is only due to the low and costly verifiability of reported cases. In fact, the indications suggest that the incidence of this kind of misconduct is also high.

Publishing in predatory journals used to be a growing and widespread practice until 2013. Meanwhile, it has been partly eradicated, mainly thanks to the impact of public action initiated by CEES and a group of independent authors. In this case, the National Council of Science and the ministry responsible for science reacted by undertaking actions that resulted in some improvement of the situation.

## Conclusion

In my concluding remarks, I stated that the system of protecting integrity and eradicating corruption in the academic community of Serbia is still in its infancy. It is doomed to a slow-paced development, since it depends on the democratization of society as a whole, and this process has been practically blocked over the past few years. To accelerate the process, external support is needed. At present, the academic community of Serbia alone does not demonstrate the capacity for a real transformation of academic values. Related policies on evaluation and staff promotion have to be completely replaced, as they open the doors wide to unethical behaviour. EU support in upgrading competencies of potential carriers of change (anticorruption agencies and NGOs dealing with integrity and corruption, independent judiciary, etc.) is crucial and absolutely necessary.