


National integrity survey struggles to get responses

Spam filters and lack of cooperation hold back attempt to question all Dutch researchers

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The highly anticipated National Survey on Research Integrity 2020 has not yet hit the minimum response rate of just 15 per cent, its organisers have admitted.

The survey, launched on 15 October, is part of a €3.8 million programme to promote research integrity, funded by the medical science funder ZonMw, the NWO research council and their partners. The idea was to ask all 40,000 active researchers at 15 Dutch universities by email about their attitudes towards questionable research practices, peer and publication pressure and other circumstances that might jeopardise scientific integrity.

By the start of December, however, just five universities had agreed to cooperate. The others have so far refused to give the survey team direct access to the email addresses of their employees, according to project leader Lex Bouter.

Bouter told Research Netherlands that the team had to scrape email addresses from websites, resulting in many bounces and emails lost in spam filters. Even emails that reached the right inboxes were often treated by researchers as suspected spam or phishing, he said.

As a result, just 9 per cent of scientists at non-cooperating universities have responded to the survey, halfway through its scheduled duration. Even at universities that offered to work with the survey team, the response rate is a mere 13 per cent.

"The basic problem is that our invitation often does not get noticed in the daily flood of invitations by fake journals or dubious conferences," Bouter said. "But we are now making as much noise as we can on social media and making use of our personal networks and academic influencers to get more responses."

The survey distinguishes four disciplines: biomedical sciences; the humanities; natural sciences and engineering; and the social and behavioural sciences. It also looks at three career stages: PhD students, postdocs and junior lecturers; senior lecturers; and full professors.

It remains to be seen, said Bouter, whether enough surveys will be completed in all of these 12 categories to draw reliable conclusions. This is a particular concern in the humanities, which is a small field in terms of staff.

The survey team is planning to issue the first results in summer 2021. Its final, peer-reviewed report is expected to be published in the second half of the year.

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