

# NTU needs to show its leadership in ethics

By Chuing Prudence Chou 周祝瑛

Many assistant and associate professors at universities across Taiwan have been punished by their schools, the Ministry of Science and Technology or the Ministry of Education for acts of academic misconduct, including submitting the same paper to several publications, plagiarism and fabricating or distorting research data or images. Punishment ranged from suspension to dismissal. The maintenance of academic integrity requires a high level of self-discipline and self-respect on the part of academics.

As the nation's leading university, National Taiwan University (NTU) should be held to the highest ethical standards to set an example and prove that it deserves the public funds it receives.

Only a few days after he was found to be involved in an academic peer review scandal, former minister of education Chiang Wei-ling (蔣偉寧) resigned to take responsibility. In contrast, NTU president Yan Pan-chyr (楊泮池), who has gained fame and fortune by coauthoring many papers published in major academic journals, has not only failed to take responsibility for a recent scandal, he has also placed the blame on others and announced that all NTU graduate students must now take academic integrity classes before setting foot in the university's labs.

If that is to be the standard, then who will teach Yang and his colleagues about academic integrity?

According to the science ministry's academic ethics policy for researchers, violations of academic integrity include "inappropriate research behavior ... such as fabrication or distortion, plagiarism, repeated publication of research results or improper citations, attempts to influence peer reviews through illegal or improper means and improper listing of author contributions."

The third chapter of NTU's code of ethics for teachers says that they must always strive for excellence when conducting research; should be prudent in the handling of research data and findings; should be honest when publishing their work; and should be objective and fair when conducting or receiving peer reviews.

These principles are the same everywhere and must always be followed. Yang cannot be an exception. Without honesty and integrity, there would be no science or academic research.

Compared with other developed nations, Taiwan tends to let off dishonest academics with only light punishments. As a result, the temptation of money and fame means that many are willing to take the risk of being caught, a phenomenon that has been especially common in fields where more papers are published, such as biomedical sciences.

The most urgent issue is whether Taiwan will be able to emulate the US Office of Research Integrity and establish a professional scientific research ethics training program focused on academic research policy guidelines and rules, as well as professional research practices that would provide important guidelines to establish a professional atmosphere.

When encountering academic misconduct, a report should be made. When misconduct is confirmed, punishment can include the perpetrator no longer being allowed to receive government subsidies, not being allowed to serve in a government agency, repaying research expenditures and being dismissed from their post.

NTU must not tolerate leniency for someone who has fabricated a scientific paper and it must protect the academic environment from being constrained by “academic politics” and the lobbying culture. Taiwan’s academic world is waiting to see if this challenge will help the university improve or if it will cause it to deteriorate.

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Translated by Tu Yu-an and Perry Svensson