

PUBLISHING

Elsevier probes dodgy citations

Hundreds of peer reviewers could be exploiting process.

BY DALMEET SINGH CHAWLA

The Dutch publisher Elsevier is investigating hundreds of researchers whom it suspects of deliberately manipulating the peer-review process to boost their own citation numbers.

The publisher is looking into the possibility that some peer reviewers are encouraging the authors of work under review to cite the reviewers' own research in exchange for positive reviews — a frowned-on practice broadly termed coercive citation.

Elsevier's probe has also revealed that several of the reviewers seem to be engaging in other questionable publishing practices in studies that they have authored. The Elsevier analysts who uncovered the activity told *Nature* that they had “discovered clear evidence of peer-review manipulation”. The publisher said that its investigations will lead to some of these studies being retracted.

But the company said it won't be necessary to retract any studies found to be affected by coercive citation, because the authors aren't responsible for the problem, and citation manipulation doesn't affect the research.

Elsevier analytics experts Jeroen Baas and Catriona Fennell discovered the suspicious activity. The pair, based in Amsterdam, looked at the peer-review activity of almost 55,000 academics who review for Elsevier journals, in a bid to find out how often these researchers' work is cited by the papers they assess. The study was posted on the SSRN repository for social-science research on 6 September (go.nature.com/2m8nidy).

Fennell and Baas found that, in most cases, reviewers' own studies are not cited in work that they have reviewed. But a small minority of reviewers — less than 1% of those examined — consistently seem to have their own work referenced in studies they have reviewed. This could indicate instances of coercive citation.

Elsevier is approaching journal editors to ask whether the references in question are relevant. Fennell says that the company has finished investigating the most suspicious cases, but is still scrutinizing less serious ones.

Elsevier is also considering ways to address inappropriate referencing, including retracting individual references in studies, a move that would be unprecedented. Fennell says it could also issue corrections. “We're still working out the best way forward,” she says. ■



Doochul Kim, president of the Institute for Basic Science in South Korea, will step down this month.

POLITICS

Tough times for ‘Nobel project’

South Korea's Institute for Basic Science endured a series of government audits and a sizeable budget cut this year.

BY MARK ZASTROW

It's been a tumultuous year for the prestigious Institute for Basic Science (IBS) in South Korea — a collection of research centres that was founded in 2011 and designed to win the country its first science Nobel prize. Modelled on the Max Planck Society in Germany and RIKEN in Japan, the institute's mission is to foster blue-skies basic science in a country historically more focused on applied research. But over the past 12 months, it has faced government investigations and calls for reform, following accusations of nepotism and financial mismanagement — as well as a sizeable cut to its research budget.

The IBS is now seeking a new leader: current president Doochul Kim's term ends later this month. But many IBS researchers say his replacement, whoever it is, will face a considerable challenge to turn around the organization's fortunes. Many researchers argue that the allegations against the institute — and the media's response — have been overblown. Still, they worry that the events of the past year might have a lasting impact and make it difficult for the organization to function properly.

“The basic philosophy of the IBS was to give full freedom for the researchers to carry out whatever they want to do,” says Narry Kim, director of the IBS Center for RNA Research. Leading scientists from South Korea and abroad were recruited to start centres, and were promised autonomy to run them, along with roughly 10 billion won (US\$8.4 million) a year. But some directors worry that proposals made in the wake of the turmoil could erode their autonomy, which they argue could undermine the organization's original mission.

Many researchers say that the IBS has helped to globalize South Korea's research. The scale and resources of IBS centres help to forge collaborations with international researchers, says Philip Kim, a condensed-matter physicist at Columbia University in New York City. “That's one of the best things that IBS has done for Korean research,” he says.

The institute's recent troubles started in October, when lawmakers from the ruling liberal Democratic Party grilled Doochul Kim during annual parliamentary hearings. They criticized a project to construct a heavy ion particle accelerator in Daejeon for being over budget and behind schedule. Doochul