



UK Research Integrity Office
Annual Conference 2014

MATERIALS FOR CASE STUDY WORKSHOP 10:40 – 11:10

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The following case studies draw on UKRIO's extensive experience in assisting with issues of research integrity.

For the purposes of confidentiality, they are not literal accounts of any particular enquiry to UKRIO. Instead they are scenarios, based on real-life situations, which illustrate recurring or notable issues and problems which have been brought to our attention. This material and other case studies will be circulated to UKRIO subscribers shortly.

As with the rest of our annual conference, the scenarios will be discussed under the Chatham House Rule.

Case study I

You are a volunteer Adviser at the UK Research Integrity Office.

Sue, a member of the public, contacts you for advice. She is the author of 'Totally UK Politics', a blog discussing UK political news and related issues. Sue explains that she is an amateur with a keen interest in politics. She has no links with the Government, Parliament, any political party or the media, though she did briefly work for a local paper years ago.

For some months, Bob Smith, a reader of Totally UK Politics, has been claiming that Sue is actually a member of the political establishment and the pseudonymous author of 'Westminster Snoop', a popular blog specialising in political gossip. He has posted his claims on numerous blogs and social media sites.

A researcher from a UK university recently carried out a linguistic analysis of Sue's posts from Totally UK Politics and compared them to posts from Westminster Snoop. The research concluded that Sue and the author of Westminster Snoop were one and the same. Sue denies this claim and is extremely distressed by it.

Sue notes that the research included analysis of posts from Totally UK Politics which she had previously deleted for various reasons. The research report states that archived copies of the deleted posts were given to the researcher by Bob Smith, the person who had been claiming that Sue was a member of the political establishment.

The research report was not published in a journal. Instead it was passed by the researcher to Bob Smith, who then posted it on the internet.

Sue is concerned that her blog was the subject of an academic research project without her knowledge or permission. She is also concerned that she was not given any right of reply in the research report and feels that this was unethical.

Sue tells you that she has contacted someone at the university. The person replied that they had spoken to the researcher in question and accepted their reassurances that the project had been conducted correctly.

Since the report was posted on the internet, Sue has been the subject of abusive messages on social media sites and her blog. Sue tells you, 'I want the university to take responsibility for its actions.'

- *How would you advise Sue?*
- *Did the researcher act correctly or should they have done things differently?*
- *What issues does this raise for the university in question?*

Case study 2

You are a volunteer Adviser at the UK Research Integrity Office.

A consortium of mining and technology companies is going to collaborate with a university on a major research project. The consortium has significant interests in the mining of rare earth minerals – essential for modern technologies such as smartphones, laptops and tablets – and the manufacturing of luxury consumer electronics.

A new technique for the mining and subsequent processing of rare earth minerals has recently generated much media discussion and public debate. The process has been developed by private sector mining companies. It is claimed that the process is much more efficient than existing methods, allowing for significantly more efficient use of these limited natural resources – 'manufacturers will be able to do much more, with less'.

However, it is also claimed the process has a significantly greater environmental impact than existing methods and may jeopardise the safety of the miners involved. In addition, it is alleged that some of the companies involved in developing this new process are still trading in so-called 'conflict minerals' – rare earth minerals and other resources from conflict zones, such trading prohibited by law.

Following a pilot study, the university is undertaking a major research project into the environmental impact and safety of the new process. The pilot study determined that, while there had been a great deal of discussion in the media, there was little existing peer-reviewed research on this topic. There were also questions over how complete and unbiased that existing research was.

While the project will involve partnerships with other academic institutions, the mining and manufacturing consortium will be the main partner of the university. This consortium will provide the vast majority of the funding for the project. This will include funding trips by the university's researchers to the various countries where the members of the consortium have mining or manufacturing interests.

The university recognises that the governance, ethics and integrity of the research will be crucial, to prevent both actual conflicts of interest and any perceived conflicts of interest. They would like your advice.

- *What issues are raised by this scenario?*
- *How can integrity in the conduct, analysis and reporting of the research be supported?*
- *Should the university decline to participate in the research project?*

Case study 3

A university is revising its structures for research integrity.

It already has a system for ethical review, focusing mainly on research involving human or animal subjects, human tissue or personal data. The uptake of the ethical review process is unclear. Both the central and the local ethics committees believe that some research projects, both externally-funded and non-funded, which fulfil the criteria for requiring ethical review are not being submitted for approval.

For the last few years, the university has a research integrity officer - a part-time administrator based in the Research and Innovation Office. Due to the part-time nature of their post, their role has not been well defined to date.

This is now changing. Their post is now being made full-time and additional staff are being recruited in order to create a small research integrity/ governance team. This team will be led by the existing research integrity officer and will also be based in the Research and Innovation Office.

- *How can the research integrity team and the central ethics committee (and its local equivalents) work efficiently alongside each other?*
- *What ways are there for the research integrity team to give support to the university's researchers that do not interfere with, or duplicate, the work of the central ethics committee and vice versa?*
- *Are the remits and responsibilities of the two bodies fundamentally different? If they are not, could this lead to overlapping remits and should some boundaries be drawn? Or would any overlap be helpful?*

Case study 4

You are in charge of the UK Research Integrity Office.

'X' is a social worker and a researcher at a UK university. She believes that UKRIO was contacted in the past by someone with concerns about her research.

Some years ago, X was the respondent in two separate investigations into alleged research misconduct. The first investigation was carried out by her employer, the university where she currently works. After this investigation, her conduct was then investigated by the regulatory body for her profession. She was informed at the time that the investigations were initiated following complaints about her research by whistle blowers. She does not know the identity of the whistle blowers but believes they were some of her colleagues at the university.

The investigations upheld the allegations in part. X was not formally disciplined by either organisation but had to undergo retraining and her research was monitored for a set period.

X is convinced that the whistle blowers or her employer contacted UKRIO for advice. She asks for any and all information that UKRIO holds on her, including the identity of anyone who raised concerns about her research. If you do not give her the information, she will request it under Freedom of Information legislation.

- *What do you do?*

Case study 5

You are the Head of a School at your university.

Two research assistants have come to you for advice. They have been junior members of a research team in your School for almost two years, working on a fixed term contract that expires in a few months. The research team in question is led by a professor in your School and has been working on a single project. The project has recently been written up and is about to be published.

The research assistants tell you that they have carried out a variety of duties on the project, including providing technical assistance, doing literature searches, helping gather and organise primary data, preparing data for publication and supporting various networks and events.

Neither research assistant expected to be listed as an author in the published paper but both thought that their contribution to the project would be acknowledged in the article. However, the professor leading the research team has recently told them that they will not be listed in the paper's acknowledgments section. They tell you that they are confused and upset by this.

According to them, they challenged the professor's decision but were told, 'research assistants are employed to assist with research projects. We don't list people in acknowledgements sections for simply doing what they are employed to do.'

The researchers ask you to look into the matter. They also ask if the professor's decision was correct. They stress that they are not seeking to be listed as authors on the paper but would like their contribution to the research to be acknowledged.

- *What actions do you take?*
- *If what the research assistants say is true, do you agree with the professor's decision and the reason for it?*
- *Are there any wider issues to consider?*

Case study 6

You are a member of a working group tasked with reviewing your university's guide to good practice in research to make sure it is up to date. As part of your work, you have looked at similar codes of practice in use at other universities, both in the UK and abroad.

Many of these codes include guidance on authorship of papers in academic journals. Though the precise wording varies, they state that:

- 'A researcher can be named as the author of a paper only when he or she fulfils the criteria for authorship set out by the relevant journal.'
- 'Authorship should not be allocated to so-called 'honorary' or 'guest' authors (i.e. those who do not meet the criteria for authorship).'
- 'No person who fulfils the criteria for authorship should be excluded from the submitted work.'

You note that a few of these codes word the third bullet point differently. These codes state:

- 'No person who fulfils the criteria for authorship should be excluded from the submitted work **unless they have given their permission in writing.**' [emphasis added]
- *Under what circumstances might it be reasonable for someone to decline authorship of a paper?*
- *Under what circumstances would it not be reasonable for someone to decline authorship?*
- *If researchers who qualify for authorship are allowed to decline being listed as an author by giving their permission in writing, could this be exploited?*

Case study 7

You are a PhD student who has recently submitted their thesis, though you have yet to sit your viva.

Feeling a bit nervous about what is to come, you talk to a student on your PhD course who will also be sitting their viva soon. During the conversation, he tells you that he did not collect all of the data for his thesis himself; instead, he paid some other researchers to gather the data for him. He says that these researchers did not help with the research design, analysing the data, or with writing up the thesis – he did all of those things himself.

He also says that he is not very worried about what the external examiner will think of his thesis, as the external examiner has worked with his supervisor on a number of research projects.

- *What actions do you take?*
- *Is it acceptable for a PhD student to pay others to collect data for their PhD?*
- *Is it acceptable for an external examiner to assess the PhD thesis when they have previously worked with the student's supervisor?*

Case study 8

You are the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research at a university. Professor Jones, the Head of the School of Social Sciences, has contacted you regarding 'M', a PhD student at in their School.

A significant part of M's research for her PhD involved interviewing a number of vulnerable adults regarding their experiences with the UK social care system. The interviews involved discussion of the reasons why the participants required assistance from the social care system and the nature and outcome of that assistance. The PhD project has been written up and M is about to sit her viva.

M identified potential interviewees according to the approved research design, provided them with information on the study and sought their consent to participate. All of the actual interviewees consented to participate and did so in writing. However, it has since been discovered that:

- The study used a **significantly** modified consent form rather than that originally approved by the Ethics Committee. This meant that participants gave permission for their data to be used for purposes which the Ethics Committee had not approved.
- Some of the questions asked in the interviews were **significantly** different from those originally approved by the Ethics Committee.

It is clear that the changes made to the consent form and the interview questions went far beyond any reasonable changes to the wording, which might result from proof-reading or other editing after ethical approval had been received.

Professor Jones tells you that she has asked M to explain this situation. While they have not yet been able to discuss the issue in depth, M has stated that her supervisor within the university had confirmed that ethical approval had been given for the project and that the instructions of the Ethics Committee were being followed. As a PhD student, M had felt it was reasonable to take on trust the information she received from her supervisor.

- *What actions do you take?*
- *Should M be allowed to sit her viva or not? Might there be an alternative solution?*
- *Are there any wider issues to consider?*

Case study 9

You are a postdoctoral researcher at a university, employed on a fixed-term contract that is just coming up for renewal. You are a member of a research team involving university staff and several PhD students.

The decision on your contract extension will be made by a panel of senior colleagues, including your Head of Department. You think that it is very likely that your contract will be extended for several more years: your research has been well-received, as have a number of articles you have published; you get on with your colleagues and managers; and you have been able to attract the interest of additional funding bodies.

Emily, a PhD student who is part of the same research team as you, brings to you three papers written by your Head of Department and published in peer reviewed journals. She shows you digital images in the three papers. The images are identical. However, the Head of Department has described them as denoting the results of a different piece of work in each paper.

You have thoroughly gone over the figures and the data that supports them. Perhaps your Head of Department has made a serious mistake in his work. Or has he deliberately falsified information in one or more of the articles?

- *What do you do?*
- *What do you advise Emily to do?*
- *How might the matter be resolved?*

Case study 10

You are the Head of the Research Office at a university.

You are approached by Dr Jones, a researcher at your university. He states that he was surprised and very upset to learn recently that a book he had written jointly with a colleague, Dr Smith, is to be published with Dr Smith as the sole author. Dr Jones' role in the research and the book will be acknowledged in the list of contributors to the project, nothing more.

The book is based on research which was conducted by Dr Jones and Dr Smith under the auspices of your university. A number of articles relating to the research have previously been published in peer reviewed journals.

Dr Jones states that he and Dr Smith had previously agreed that the book was a joint work and that they would each receive co-authorship. He does not have any written record of this agreement or any discussions regarding authorship.

Dr Jones tells you that he has spoken to Dr Smith in an attempt to reach some sort of agreement on the matter but was unsuccessful. He states that he has also spoken to the publishers of the book. Their response was that they had received reassurances from Dr Smith which they accept and they have no plans to change the attribution of authorship.

Prior to this dispute, Dr Jones believed that he had a good working relationship with Dr Smith. As well as seeking advice on how to address the issue of authorship, he is also concerned how his career might be affected by the dispute with Dr Smith.

- *How would you respond to Dr Jones?*
- *What further information might you seek?*
- *How might the situation be resolved?*