

Authorship/Research Misconduct

For Trainers

Why case studies?

A core function of the UK Research Integrity Office is to provide independent, expert and confidential advice on the conduct of research, from promoting good practice to addressing allegations of misconduct.

Each request for assistance received by UKRIO increases our body of knowledge. These 'lessons learned' not only inform our response to subsequent enquiries but also underpin our other activities, especially UKRIO's education and training work.

We have found that illustrative case studies are an excellent way to raise awareness of research integrity and to illustrate the complexities and 'grey areas' which can occur.

Case studies 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.

Case studies are suitable for any audience but may be of particular interest to managers, advisors and researchers involved in responding to allegations of research misconduct. While some case studies may mention a particular discipline, they contain themes that are relevant across all subjects.

Please note that this case study is fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, organisations or events is coincidental.

Case study 1

You are the *Pro-Vice-Chancellor* (Research) of a university. A formal complaint has been made to you by **Dr Y**, a *lecturer* in the School of Music.

Dr Y joined the university six years ago, just after being awarded his PhD, to carry out teaching and research duties. He has recently been informed that his recent *application for promotion has been turned down*. The decision was made by the University Promotions Committee. Dr Y claims that a member of the Committee, **Professor B**, is biased against him and that is why his application has been turned down.

Professor B and Dr Y carried out a small joint research project three years ago. The project, which was externally funded, has been completed and a paper was published in a peer-reviewed journal last year. Professor B and Dr Y are listed as the joint authors of the paper, but Dr Y tells you that he had to fight for this.

He claims that when Professor B submitted the draft paper for publication, he *removed Dr Y as an author and added a friend as the other author instead*. Dr Y says he complained to his Head of School, who looked into the matter informally. According to Dr Y, Professor B was ordered to write a letter of apology to him. In this letter, the Professor admitted to the improper changes to the paper's authorship and said that he would not act in such a manner again.

Dr Y says it is clear that he has not been promoted '*because Professor B is out to get me*' and demands that you take action. He also says that the university did not act properly when it looked into the authorship complaint; he has always felt that Professor B's actions deserved a more serious penalty than simply being told to write a letter.



Please discuss and decide:

1. How would you respond to Dr Y?
2. Could anything have been done to prevent this situation from occurring in the first place?
3. Are there any wider issues to consider?

Case study 1 resolution

Trainer tips

You should see your role as guiding the discussions. The resolution below is intended as a starting point for debate and reflection, drawing on the major themes of the case study. Certain approaches are proposed but discussion of the case may well suggest others – there is often no single ‘right’ answer.

You can also alter details during the discussion to explore the trainees understanding of good practice.

1 How would you respond to Dr Y?

The university needs to investigate **Dr Y**'s concerns. Due to the serious nature of the allegations, it would be sensible to investigate using a *formal university process*. Also, given Dr Y's claim that an earlier informal inquiry into some of his concerns was flawed, carrying out a second informal inquiry might compound any previous mistakes, as well as giving the impression that the university does not take Dr Y's concerns seriously.

There are two separate matters to address – the concerns over the promotions procedure and whether that has been followed correctly, and the allegations of research misconduct.

Dr Y has not only made an allegation of research misconduct, but also raised concerns about how the university has previously responded to that allegation and claimed that these two factors have led to him being denied promotion. Both those matters will need to be considered, including the actions of the Head of Department in taking an informal approach. You would need to seek advice from *Human Resources and research integrity colleagues* at a very early stage to decide what approach to adopt. Some institutions might use their **staff grievance procedure**, others their **research misconduct procedure**. *A hybrid approach may well be necessary*: grievance procedures can often be ill-equipped to explore the complexities of an authorship dispute.

2 Could anything have been done to prevent this situation from occurring in the first place?

Sometimes it can be very appropriate to address concerns about research conduct through *informal means*. Situations can arise which present as misconduct but are the result of either a misunderstanding or a dispute between individuals. It may be possible to mediate or resolve such differences at the individual or local level. However, initiating a formal investigation is advised for allegations of a serious nature.

Perhaps more importantly, **informal approaches only work if all parties are satisfied that they are an appropriate method to resolve the situation**. They can sometimes be seen as attempts to carry out a 'witch hunt' or a 'cover up' at the local level – as Dr Y appears to believe in this case. Also, when informal processes are used, it is essential that senior staff **make sure that agreed actions are taken, outcomes monitored and proper records kept**. For example, if the university had possessed a proper record of Dr Y's previous complaint against Professor B, it could have made sure that the Professor was not involved in decisions about Dr Y's progression.

3 Are there any wider issues to consider?

The University will need to review its promotions procedures to ensure that those who have an actual or perceived conflict of interest are taken into account, and to ensure there is transparency over the process followed.



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Providing confidential, independent and expert support

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