

Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM)

Allegations of Research Misconduct

For Trainers

Why case studies?

A core function of the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) is to provide independent, expert, and confidential advice on the conduct of research, from promoting good practice to addressing allegations of misconduct. We have been doing this since 2006.

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 research culture and to illustrate the complexities and 'grey areas' that can occur.

Case studies are not literal accounts of any enquiry to UKRIO. Instead, they are scenarios, based on real-life situations, which illustrate recurring or notable issues and problems that have been brought to our attention. While some case studies may mention a particular discipline or setting, they contain themes that are relevant across subjects.

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

Case study 13

You are the *Named Person* in your university responsible for receiving allegations of research misconduct and any other concerns about research conducted under the auspices of the university.

A **statistician** from another university has raised some serious allegations with the institution relating to the *manipulation of statistics* following research carried out by a unit within your institution on the effectiveness of different treatments for people with Alzheimer's disease. The statistics were included as part of a recently published report on the deployment of NHS resources for the most effective treatments.

In accordance with your university's research misconduct procedure, a panel was established to undertake a preliminary investigation of the matter, to determine whether the allegation had sufficient substance to warrant a full, formal investigation. It found *no evidence of manipulation or falsification, although it did find several errors in the referencing of the work undertaken*, which could have led to misunderstandings.

Accordingly, the matter did not progress to a formal enquiry and was dealt with internally by the Head of the relevant Department.

The statistician has been notified of the outcome and has pursued the matter as far as he can under the research misconduct procedure. He says that he is still unhappy and is hinting at his suspicions of a 'cover-up' by the institution and protection of its staff. He has indicated that he may write to his MP and is also *considering reporting those involved to the General Medical Council for negligence*.



Please discuss and decide:

1. How do you respond to the statistician?
2. What actions, if any, should you take?
3. What other issues does this raise?

Case study 13 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 alter details during the discussion to explore the trainees' understanding of good practice.

1 How do you respond to the statistician?

As long as you are satisfied that the university has dealt with the matter thoroughly and fairly, and in accordance with the correct procedure(s), then you do not need to re-investigate the allegation.

It would be sensible to check that any actions which were meant to take place following the investigation did in fact take place. For example, the case study says that *'the matter... was dealt with internally by the Head of the relevant Department.'* Informal actions can sometimes fall by the wayside after an investigation, though this can be a problem with formal actions too. You would need to check that the Head of Department had acted as requested by the investigation, including whether any required training, supervision or monitoring had taken place, and that appropriate records had been kept. **Did the university fulfil any requirements to report the matter externally and all legal, ethical or contractual obligations in relation to the research?**

- What would be the best way to respond to the statistician?

Given their concerns, you should inform them, *politely and in writing*, that the university had examined the matter in accordance with its formal process for investigating allegations of research misconduct and summarise the conclusions of the investigation, as in paragraph three of the case study. Accordingly, the university considers the matter to be closed.

When writing to the statistician, you could also note that, although the university is confident that there was no evidence of manipulation or falsification, it has taken (informal) action to address the errors that were uncovered. If the investigation led to the report being retracted or corrected, you should state this as well.

2 What actions, if any, should you take?

Given that the investigation may be about to generate (further) external interest and perhaps adverse publicity, you should check whether a statement was made by the university on its outcome. This could be reissued. *If no statement exists, then one should be prepared*, though you should take into account any legal, ethical or other reasons which might limit what can be said.

Depending on how matters progress, the university may need to make further statements defending the reputation of its staff, given that they were exonerated of the alleged misconduct. The university should also make it clear that it takes any concerns raised about its research very seriously, to avoid discouraging future whistle blowers.

3 What other issues does this raise?

If this case study referred not to a recent investigation but to one that took place some years ago, would the same approach be suitable? Or would it be sensible to examine the past investigation more thoroughly before you decide how to respond?



Promoting integrity and high ethical standards in research
Providing confidential, independent, and expert support

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