

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 2

You are a *postdoctoral researcher* at a university, employed on a fixed-term contract that is just coming up for renewal, you are hoping to be offered a permanent position. You are a member of a research team involving university staff and several PhD students. Your Department is rapidly gaining a reputation as an exceptional place to work, not least because of the research of a colleague, 'X'. Widely perceived as the protégé of the Head of the Department, X has published a series of papers in high-profile journals which have been described as ground-breaking research, attracting a great deal of interest from the research community and beyond.

The decision on your contract will be made by a panel of senior colleagues, including your Head of Department. You are hopeful that the outcome will be positive: your research has been well-received, as you have several articles 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 X, all published in peer-reviewed, high-profile journals. She shows you digital images in the three papers. *The images are identical*. However, X 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 support them. Perhaps X, the protégé of 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?



Please discuss and decide:

1. What do you do?
2. What do you advise Emily to do?
3. How might the matter be resolved?

Case study 2 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 What do you do?

As a researcher - whether a member of staff or a research student – **it is not your responsibility to investigate** any concerns you may have about the conduct of research. Your research organisation does not expect you to be a detective and find out what has happened. However, **it is your responsibility to raise your concerns with your institution**, providing as much information as you can, so it can then investigate the matter.

Your institution will have a formal process for investigating allegations of research misconduct, including who to contact if you have any concerns about research misconduct. Some institutions have a single person, normally a senior manager; others have multiple points of contact, for example at the College, Faculty or School level.

Recognising that raising concerns with a senior member of staff can be rather intimidating, some institutions allow you to be supported by a supervisor, colleague, or union representative, or to report your concerns via an intermediary. Your institution’s **research misconduct policy** and contact point(s) should be on its intranet or (ideally) its external website.

Once you have reported the matter, the university will then begin an *initial investigation*. If you have trouble finding your institution’s research misconduct policy or to whom you should report your concerns, you could contact your university’s *research integrity officer* or the chair of the research ethics committee for advice. UKRIO can also help you identify your institution’s point of contact if you get stuck.

2 What do you advise Emily to do?

This question can be the subject of considerable debate when this case study is used in UKRIO training sessions. Some suggest that, as it was Emily who discovered the alleged misconduct, you should tell her to report the matter and do nothing yourself. Most delegates feel this is unethical and ignores your own professional responsibility as a researcher to report concerns about possible misconduct, as well as the pastoral responsibilities a member of the university has to a student.

You and Emily could raise your concerns jointly with the university, though you should also encourage her to seek support from her PhD supervisor(s) or the Students' Union. An alternative might be that you raise the concerns on behalf of Emily and yourself, telling the university what you know and suggesting that it interviews Emily as part of any investigation.

3 How might the matter be resolved?

There is no way of knowing at this stage whether the allegation concerning X is true or not. You and Emily may be mistaken, and X has made an honest error in their work or you may be right, and X could have committed research misconduct.

A full investigation of the matter is necessary to determine whether the allegation is upheld or not, and what actions might need to be taken. Given the perception that the respondent is the protégé of the Head of Department, who has considerable authority over the complainants, **the initial investigation should be conducted by someone outside of the Department** or by a small panel including people from elsewhere in the university. Regardless, the *Head of Department* **should play no part in investigating** the allegation (though they may well be called as a witness) **or in deciding** whether the allegation is upheld or dismissed. This will avoid any perception of conflict of interest or bias in the investigation.

Meanwhile, the university must take steps to ensure that you and Emily do not suffer any detriment because you have raised concerns about a colleague, particularly one associated with the Head of Department. Similarly, X should not suffer any detriment because of an unproven allegation. Human Resources and Student Services should provide advice on how best to ensure all of this, for example in relation to your contract renewal.

One approach could be to recuse the Head of Department from any involvement in the upcoming contract renewal, to avoid any allegations of bias in the panel's decision. If this is done, it should be made clear to all concerned that this does not constitute any disciplinary action or other sanction against the Head of Department. Equally, it does not mean that the university believes that the allegations concerning X are true. Instead, it should be stressed that this action is essential to ensure that the allegations of misconduct can be properly investigated.

3 How might the matter be resolved? *continued...*

Alternatively, the renewal could be delayed until after the investigation has concluded, with the Head of Department participating *only* if the allegation is not upheld. However, this could still leave the university open to *allegations of bias* if the contract is not renewed – *'I raised concerns in good faith, but the Head of Department's protégé was exonerated and now the Head is out to get me.'*

Human Resources will have encountered this type of situation before and can give advice on how to address it.



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

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