

## Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (AHSS):

# Plagiarism

*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 3

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

**Professor Z** is an academic in the Philosophy department at your institution with a high media profile, including a regular podcast and occasional TV appearances, and who often writes articles for daily newspapers. She has just had a book published, which has appeal to the general public as well as academia.

A *journalist* has recently contacted your institution stating that large portions of Professor Z's most recent article, which appeared online in a major national newspaper, were *plagiarised* substantially from several different sources. He has not yet publicised the matter beyond contacting your institution but there is no guarantee this will continue.

Professor Z has responded to your initial contact with her over the matter by partially refuting the allegation and has pointed out that the article was *not research but journalism*.



**Please discuss and decide:**

1. How do you respond to the journalist?
2. How do you take the matter forward?

## Case study 3 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 do you respond to the journalist?

You should consult with your university's press office before responding. A sensible response would be to say that the university will investigate the matter thoroughly but note that this will take some time. You could ask the journalist if he would consider holding off publication until the investigation is completed. He might be agreeable to this but equally may want to publish immediately.

You could say that Professor Z's media work is her own, private work and decline to investigate, but both the journalist and his readers are unlikely to be impressed by this. If Professor Z's affiliation with the university is widely known, readers of the paper would naturally assume that Professor Z wrote the article in question with the knowledge of the university. While Professor Z may have acted in a wholly private capacity when she wrote the article – i.e., the article has nothing to do with her role at the university – this would need to be confirmed by a formal investigation.

## 2 How do you take the matter forward?

- A key question is whether Professor Z is correct that the article in question is not research but journalism. **Is this type of alleged plagiarism covered by your institution's research misconduct procedure or not?** The scope of these procedures can vary a great deal. Some cover only 'research', normally defined using the definition used for the [REF](#), or [Frascati definition](#). Others have a wider scope, including consultancy, knowledge transfer and other work undertaken under the auspices of the university. It is important to include a definition to ensure clarity over whether a matter is covered by the procedure.

If popular journalism is not covered by your research misconduct procedure, you will need to determine which other university process can be used to investigate the concerns. You should seek advice from [Human Resources](#) at the earliest opportunity. Once the correct process has been identified, you should initiate the first stage of the investigation (for example, the screening/initial assessment stage of your research misconduct procedure) to see if there is a case to answer.

If the work is indeed deemed journalism rather than research, this does not absolve the individual from avoiding plagiarism and acknowledging sources.

- It will be important to keep the press office up to date on the matter, given the likelihood of further media interest. However, you should **take care that no information which could prejudice the conduct of the investigation is released to the media.**

There is continuing debate on how open institutions should be at the conclusion of investigations into staff or student conduct. Different institutions take different approaches but all need to bear in mind their [legal obligations](#) regarding appropriate [confidentiality](#), as well as any [ethical issues](#) that might relate to the release of information from a research project.

Where a case has generated media interest, it may be helpful to make a statement on the outcome – not least to restore the reputations of [whistle-blowers](#) who have raised concerns in good faith and researchers who have been exonerated of misconduct.

Given clear trends towards greater transparency and accountability, institutions may wish to consider going beyond basic standards and being more open in certain cases. There is an increasing interest in issues of research practice and the need to retain the public's trust.

Regardless, institutions should also make appropriate disclosures to involved parties at the end of an investigation – for example, regulators, funders, professional bodies, partner organisations, journals and research participants (and their doctors, carers, or parents and guardians if necessary).

## 2 How do you take the matter forward? *continued...*

- There is also the issue of Professor Z's recently published book. Should it be investigated for plagiarised material also? What could you do? Should you do anything at this stage or wait until the inquiry into the article has concluded, or at least progressed to a formal investigation stage?



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

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