

Authorship Dispute

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 5

Dr Jones and Dr Smith are *researchers* based in the same department at a UK university. They had a fruitful collaboration on a research project, having published a number of articles related to the project in peer-reviewed journals. The two researchers are now producing a book about their research. The research was conducted under the auspices of their university.

The final manuscript was submitted to the publishers a while ago and **Dr Jones** contacts the firm for an update. He is surprised and very upset when the publishers tell him that the book is to be published with **Dr Smith** as the sole author. *Dr Jones is informed that his role in both the research and the book itself will be acknowledged in the list of contributors to the project, nothing more.* The publishers' decision is based on information supplied by Dr Smith.

As far as Dr Jones is concerned, he wrote the book with Dr Smith and should also be credited as an author of the work. He is convinced 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 remember having any written record of this agreement or of any discussions regarding authorship.

Dr Jones speaks to Dr Smith in an attempt to reach some sort of agreement on the matter but the position remains unchanged. He then tries speaking to the publishers of the book. They say that they have 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 wanting to resolve the issue of authorship, he is also concerned about how his career may be affected by the dispute with Dr Smith.



Please discuss and decide:

1. What could Dr Jones do?
2. What 'evidence' or other information might shed light on the matter?
3. How might the situation be resolved?
4. Could anything have been done to prevent this situation from occurring in the first place?

Case study 5 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 What could Dr Jones do?

Dr Jones has tried to resolve the matter informally, first with Dr Smith and then with the publisher. Neither approach has been successful.

As Dr Jones' and Dr Smith's joint research project was *conducted under the auspices of the university*, it **must** meet the university's standards for good research practice, including authorship. Breaches of these standards can happen because of misconduct in research; they can also happen because of honest mistakes.

Having exhausted other options, Dr Jones should contact the university to investigate the matter. The university may be able to resolve the matter informally, through discussion with the three involved parties, or initiate a **formal investigation** to determine whether the university's and the publisher's standards for authorship are being met. Regardless, the university should address the matter objectively, thoroughly and fairly.

The university should also reassure Dr Jones that it has processes to help ensure that people raising concerns in good faith do not suffer any detriment. Equally, it should reassure Dr Smith that persons accused of wrongdoing but subsequently exonerated will also suffer no detriment.

2 What information might shed some light on the matter?

Any approach to resolving the matter, whether formal or informal, needs to involve interviewing Dr Jones and Dr Smith to get their accounts of the situation. There may be evidence to indicate who contributed what to the project, for example:

- draft manuscripts;
- laboratory, field or other notes; and
- any correspondence discussing the book or its authorship.

The previously published papers on the research should also be examined, including the roles played by the two researchers and who was listed as an author.

The investigator should also talk to the publisher in confidence: *how has the publisher made its decision*, and did it look into Dr Jones' concerns properly or simply rely on assurances from Dr Smith?

3 How might the situation be resolved?

Disputes over authorship can arise for many reasons:

- ignorance of what constitutes authorship;
- misunderstanding of one's own or another person's contribution to a project;
- deliberate attempts to misrepresent a person's involvement in the work; or
- failure to discuss ideas about authorship as the project develops.

After gathering more information, the university may be able to negotiate a solution that is acceptable to both Dr Jones and Dr Smith. However, if the evidence suggests that there may have been deliberate misrepresentation of one or the other's contribution to the work, then it would be sensible for the university to initiate its formal research misconduct procedure. This would allow the university to make a more thorough, formal assessment of the matter.

4 Could the situation have been prevented?

There is no 'universal' definition of authorship in academic research. Definitions and practices can vary considerably between disciplines. Therefore, researchers should make sure they are familiar with the standards relevant to their work. These would include any overarching standards for their discipline or sub-discipline, the requirements of their university or other employer, guidance from relevant professional bodies and learned societies, organisations such as [UKRIO](#) and the [Committee on Publication Ethics \(COPE\)](#) and, in particular, the requirements of the journal or publisher in question. The [Contributor Roles Taxonomy \(CRediT\)](#) guidelines can help to itemise contributions to determine authorship.

Even when researchers are aware of definitions and standards, applying them can be challenging. This is especially the case in cross-disciplinary or other collaborative research. UKRIO's view is that it is important for researchers to consider issues relating to publication and authorship, especially the roles of all collaborators and contributors, **at an early stage of the design of a project**. The researchers should revisit these issues as the project progresses.

The roles and contributions of researchers may well change during the time span of the research (sometimes this is subject to legal and ethical requirements). What is important is that researchers start thinking early on about how they will approach these issues – they should not leave it until the last stages of the project.

Decisions on publication and authorship should be agreed jointly and communicated to all members of the research team.



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

© UK Research Integrity Office 2023

This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License](#), which allows re-users to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.