

Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics (STEM)

Research Contribution

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 7

Two *research assistants* in a medical school need some advice. They have been junior members of a research team in the school for almost two years, working on open-ended contracts with grant/project end dates that expire in a few months. Their research team is led by a professor in the same school and has been working on a single project. The project has recently been written up and is about to be published.

The research assistants tell you that they have carried out a variety of duties on the project, including providing technical assistance, doing literature searches, helping gather and organise primary data, preparing data for publication, and supporting various networks and events.

Neither research assistant expected to be listed as an author in the published article but both thought that their contribution to the project would be acknowledged. However, **the professor leading the research team has recently told them that they will not be listed in the article's acknowledgments section.** The research assistants tell you that they are confused and upset by this.

According to them, they challenged the professor's decision but were told, "*research assistants are employed to work on research projects. We don't list people in acknowledgements sections for simply doing what they are employed to do.*"

The researchers ask for your views on whether the professor's decision was correct. They stress that they are not seeking to be listed as authors on the paper but would like their contribution to the research to be acknowledged.



Please discuss and decide:

1. What should be done in response to the concerns?
2. If what the research assistants say is true, do you agree with the professor's decision and the reason for it?
3. Are there any other issues to consider?

Case study 7 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 should be done in response to the concerns?

The university would need to take action to look into the research assistants' concerns and they should be encouraged to report the matter to the relevant person in the institution.

The university might use an informal process, perhaps involving mediation, or examine the matter formally under the university's research misconduct procedure. Any enquiry should be fair, thorough, and objective, and conducted in a timely and transparent manner.

Gathering evidence of what contributions the research assistants and the other members of the team made to the project will be crucial – the [CRedit](#) contributor roles taxonomy can be useful for this. Guidance on publication practices from the university and the relevant journal would also be relevant – **are those standards being met?**

2 If what the research assistants say is true, do you agree with the professor's decision and the reason for it?

There are [no universal standards for authorship](#): norms vary between disciplines. In health and biomedicine, various bodies – such as the [International Committee of Medical Journal Editors \(ICMJE\)](#) – have set out criteria for authorship and these have been adopted by many medical journals.

ICMJE guidelines state that **contributors to a research project who do not fulfil criteria for authorship ‘...should not be listed as authors, but they should be acknowledged.’**

This is not dependent on whether they were ‘employed to work on research projects’ or not and applies to a research assistant as much as to a professor. Indeed, a professor is normally employed to conduct research, weakening the argument of the professor in question.

3 Are there any other issues to consider?

Would the research assistants' contribution be acknowledged differently – or at all – in another discipline?

This dispute may have arisen because of ignorance of good practice in authorship and contributorship and of the 'grey areas' which can arise. The school may wish to **conduct awareness-raising activities and training** on these issues.

- How could the school make the issues of authorship and acknowledgments interesting and relevant to its researchers?
- Would different approaches be needed for students and early-career researchers, and for more senior staff? If so, what approaches could be used? COPE has [guidance for new researchers](#) to avoid and resolve disputes.
- How might this situation impact on the working relationships of the research team?
- Assuming the same team was going to continue with future projects, what could be done to help ensure the involved parties work together?
- Should the issue be left up to the individuals involved?



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.