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# Discussion paper on terminology changes to destigmatise the investigation of research misconduct

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## Introduction

This discussion paper focuses on the terminology currently used in research misconduct investigations in the UK and the potential to amend it to improve confidence in the investigation process, clarify roles and responsibilities of parties involved, and normalise reporting of concerns.

It presents a series of suggestions for consideration and discussion by the research community, noting that while changes to terminology alone will not resolve issues relating to research misconduct investigations, they are an important way to underscore the intention of these investigations: to assess and take steps to safeguard the trustworthiness of the research in question.

## Background

In recent years, the guidance and information available to those involved in managing and investigating allegations of research misconduct have been steadily developing and improving, as has the professionalism of institutions involved in investigations. There has also been a positive move toward more open discussions of the challenges that can arise in research misconduct investigations and the sharing of good practice to address them.

However, our recent review into research misconduct, alongside intelligence gathered through our advisory service and regular interactions with the UK research community, has shown that there remain significant challenges to reporting and investigating potential issues. Many actors involved – whether individuals raising concerns, on the receiving end of investigations, or responsible for investigating and resolving matters – lack confidence and clarity in the process.

To understand how the UK can better tackle research misconduct, the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) convened an expert working group, chaired by Tracey Brown OBE, in early 2023 to review the challenges faced by those reporting and investigating allegations of research misconduct. This group's findings were published in UKRIO's recent report, [Barriers to Investigating and Reporting Research Misconduct](#), and identified that the language commonly used in research misconduct investigations may inadvertently discourage reporting.

### The report notes that:

*"...the language used in policies and procedures stigmatises both the people who raise concerns and the people who go through an initial investigation, causing others to back away from making disclosures.*

*Terms such as 'complainant' or 'allegation of misconduct' are not neutral, and stigmatisation can be inadvertently enhanced by the titles of organisational policies or by procedural steps that route all concerns about research, whether they initially present as potential errors or allegations of fraud, via a 'misconduct' procedure. There have been longstanding calls for destigmatisation of retractions in research<sup>18, 19, 20</sup> and, in more recent years, for similar approaches to be applied to investigating potential cases of research misconduct, often drawing on models in other countries<sup>21</sup> or sectors<sup>22</sup>."*

In response to this finding, the report sets out the following proposals:

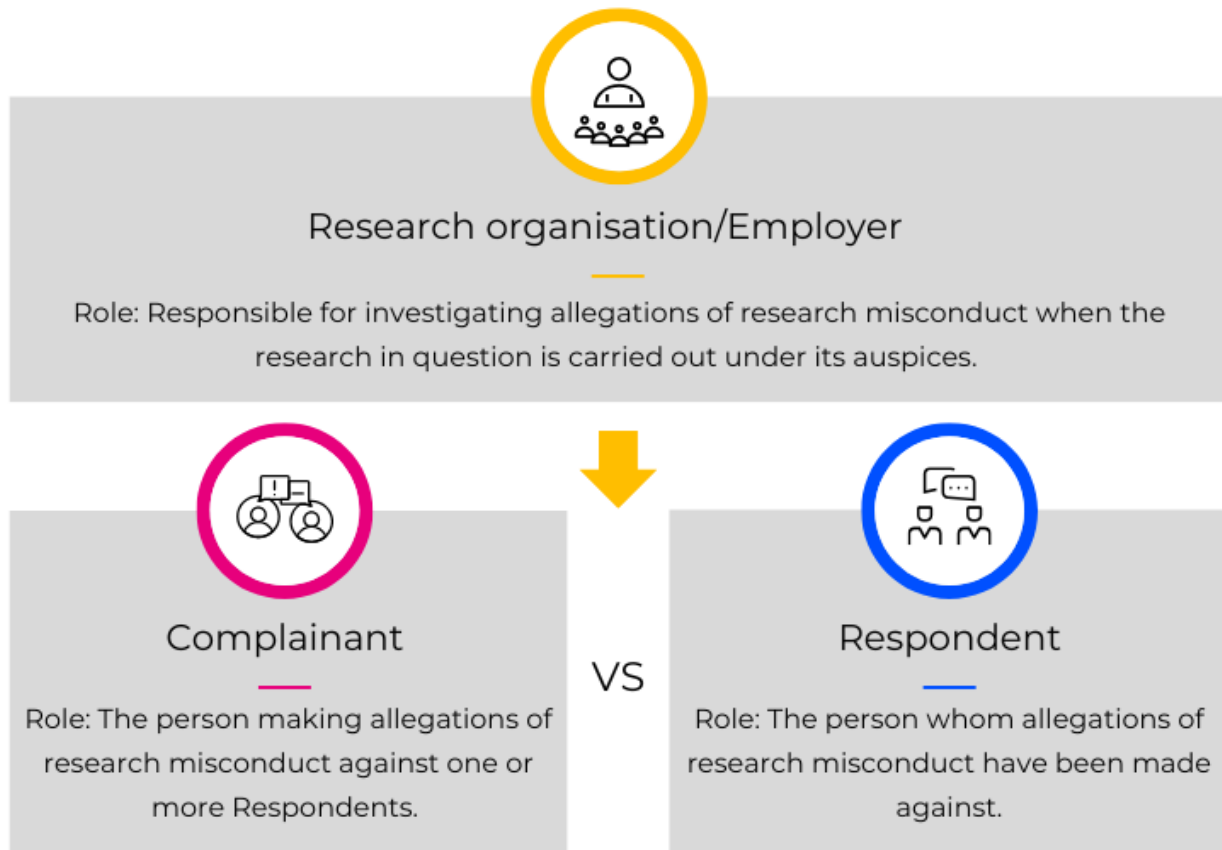
**Proposal 3.** *The research community should adopt a flagging system or model that **promotes transparency, destigmatises allegations of research misconduct, and normalises early raising of concerns.***

**3.1.** *Policies, systems and leadership should shift from describing concerns as ‘allegations of misconduct’ to **a destigmatising model** that, at the preliminary investigation stage, **focuses on concerns about research** and then, as processes progress, routes them to mechanisms for correcting problems or to mechanisms for investigating alleged misconduct as appropriate. **More neutral terminology** – e.g., ‘initiators’ instead of ‘complainants’, ‘breaches of good practice’ instead of ‘allegations of misconduct’ – **should be adopted and processes revised to mitigate against confrontational or stigmatising systems and attitudes.** This should be operationalised through an update of the UKRIO Procedure and the upcoming revision of the Concordat, and then cascaded through the research sector, building on existing work being done in this area by UKRIO and many research organisations.*

**3.2.** *Approaches found in other countries or sectors could provide useful models for change. For example, the Australian approach shifts the focus from establishing intent to commit wrongdoing to correcting errors and, in doing so, helps to normalise the practice of raising concerns earlier on<sup>26</sup>. Similarly, sectors such as transportation, aviation, and healthcare have encouraged cultural shifts towards rapid flagging of incidents with a focus on prevention of further harm and improvement through learning<sup>27</sup>.*

## The current state of play

At present, much of the terminology used by the UK research community is in the tradition of complaints or grievance procedures; that is, A (the complainant) raises a complaint (allegation) against B (the respondent) and C (the employer) investigates the complaint. This includes UKRIO's model [Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research](#) and related guidance and advisory notes on the investigation of research misconduct (see Fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** An image showing the current terminology used by UKRIO.

Through our recent report and wider activities on the topic of research misconduct, we have identified the following difficulties with the current terminology used in investigating and reporting such matters:

- a) **Current terminology frames the person raising the concerns in a head-to-head antagonistic way.** 'Making a complaint' or 'raising an allegation,' for example, are charged terms that can make a specific impression both on those investigating and those on the other end of the matter. These terms may also deter people from raising a concern, especially in cases where there is a power imbalance. For instance, an individual in a junior position may be reluctant to voice concerns about a senior colleague if they will be framed as a 'complainant' and fear this could negatively impact their future career.
- b) **Current terminology stigmatises the subject of the concerns.** However much the institution investigating a matter indicates that the investigation is a neutral act, the language used in a research misconduct procedure can

often lead the subject of the investigation to feel stigmatised and worry that some form of wrongdoing on their part will be assumed. This can not only be very distressing for this individual, but it can also put them in a defensive position. We recognise that terms such as ‘misconduct’ will always be emotionally charged and while there will be times when it is appropriate to use them, this should not be determined by the initiator of the concern.

- c) **Current terminology attaches the concerns to a person, rather than the research itself, and implies potential wrongdoing.** By alleging research misconduct, the implication is that the subject of the allegation has deliberately done something wrong. It requires the person making the allegation to come to a view on a person’s conduct, rather than allowing them to flag a concern relating to the research, pass this concern onto the institution to investigate it and, if it has merit, identify its underpinning causes. In reality, breaches in research integrity can arise for any number of reasons, and only one of these is intentional misconduct. We also recognise that raising certain matters can set up a ‘head-to-head’ from the start – concerns raised about potential plagiarism or other authorship issues, for example. Nonetheless, changes to terminology can also help in these instances, as they will help the investigating institution determine what has happened and the level of any breach.
- d) **Current terminology places the institution as the adjudicator between two opposing parties: the person raising the concerns and the subject of these concerns.** Current terminology places the focus of an investigation on determining whether allegations of wrongdoing are substantiated, with the institution acting as the adjudicator between the prosecution (the person raising the concerns) and the defendant (the subject of these concerns). This detracts from the real purpose of an investigation: to find out what has occurred, whether the integrity of the research in question has been breached, and what corrective actions may be needed.

## The case for terminology changes

### Improving confidence

One lesson UKRIO has learnt through the extensive experience of its staff in investigating and advising on research misconduct investigations is that **tone and language matter**. When dealing with a distressed initiator/whistleblower or respondent, a firm but calm tone is important to help take the heat out of a situation. While involved parties may continue to hold strong opinions and feel frustration, using neutral terminology will help to ensure all parties feel confident that the process is balanced, impartial, and objective.

### Clarifying roles and responsibilities

Changing the terminology used in research misconduct investigations is an important opportunity to shift the emphasis of these investigations from making a complaint or allegation to identifying a potential breach in good research practice (as described in the [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#) or [UKRIO’s Code of](#)

[Practice in Research](#)). This helps to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the initiator, the respondent, and the investigating institution.

Our proposed terminology changes are intended to make it clear that the role of the initiator of a concern is to highlight a potential issue at the earliest possible stage, while the role of the investigation is to determine whether the matter at hand relates to a questionable research practice/minor breach, research misconduct or if the concern raised is mistaken and/or malicious. Importantly, we propose that the initiator’s concern should relate to the research and not an individual – in other words, the concern does not predetermine research misconduct (see Fig. 2).



**Figure 2:** A diagram showing the roles of the initiator, research organisation/employer and respondent using destigmatising language.

We note that any such terminology changes must strike a balance and not stray too far in the other direction. For example, there is a risk that these terms could inadvertently frame misconduct as collegiate fact-checking of innocent, reasonable errors when in fact they constitute serious misconduct and require corrective action.

Our proposed terminology is not intended to downplay the importance of investigating and resolving potential breaches, but rather to shift the responsibility for determining the status and severity of a breach from the initiator to the investigation. In this way, the initiator will not have to bear the weight of accusing an individual of research misconduct. Examples of how these could come into play are provided below (Fig. 3).





**Figure 3:** A diagram showing current example scenarios versus preferred example scenarios.

### Normalising reporting

Destigmatising the search and correction of errors by acknowledging that mistakes can and do happen in research is an essential part of improving the quality and integrity of that research. Yet, as discussed in UKRIO’s recent blog, [Breaches in Research Integrity](#), the current terminology used in the UK tends to emphasise an individual’s conduct and their intent to commit wrongdoing. In doing so, it often detracts from the second task at hand: to assess and take steps to safeguard the trustworthiness of the research in question.

*“There are psychological implications of either reporting a concern or being accused of research misconduct, no matter the outcome. Being transparent about the spectrum of breaches while not detracting from the seriousness of research misconduct could indicate areas to focus on for improvement and remove barriers to reporting. As an example, being accused of denying authorship is serious, but if this accusation was unfounded this could damage a reputation. However, calling this a breach of best practice in authorship changes the tone.”*

There are alternative approaches, however. At a recent UKRIO event, Dr Dan Barr, Principal Research Integrity Advisor at RMIT University, Australia, presented on their experience of the [Guide to Managing and Investigating Potential Breaches of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research 2018](#), noting that Australia’s shift from the term ‘research misconduct’ to ‘breaches in research integrity’ has helped to place the emphasis on the trustworthiness of research, not on the trustworthiness of a researcher.

The terminology we propose in the next section draws in part from the Australian experience. It is our belief that using more neutral language – for example, the investigation of ‘breaches’ – helps clarify the purpose of such investigations and refocus these efforts on whether the research can be trusted, rather than whether research misconduct has occurred. In doing so, it destigmatises and encourages



individuals to raise concerns. Whilst it will remain true that an outcome of an investigation can be that research misconduct is found to have occurred, the adoption of these terminology changes can shift the emphasis adopted at the start.

It is possible that such terminology changes could lead to an increase in the number of matters raised if they empower people to raise concerns about research that they might not have otherwise. This may help ensure matters are investigated and dealt with before they become entrenched and emotionally charged, although we recognise that sometimes matters may not be raised until they have already reached this stage. It is also important to recognise that the adoption of these terminology changes may entail an increased workload for institutions.

## Suggested terminology changes

**The terminology proposed in the table below sets out common terminology used in research misconduct investigations and provides alternative suggestions using more neutral language. It is presented for consideration and discussion by the research community.**

We welcome feedback on these proposed terms and trust the research community recognises that our intention behind these suggestions is to destigmatise and normalise concerns of potential breaches in research integrity. Rather than ensuring institutions adopt the suggested terminology wholesale, our goal is to encourage institutions to consider a process of destigmatising the whistleblowing process.

Current Terminology	Suggested Revision	Rationale
<p><b>Procedure for the investigation of misconduct in research:</b> This is a document that sets out the process to be followed when an individual or group of individuals raises a concern relating to potential research misconduct. One example is UKRIO’s model <a href="#">Procedure for the Investigation of Misconduct in Research</a>.</p>	<p>Procedure for the investigation of potential breaches in research integrity or good research practice</p>	<p>This title change is intended to place the emphasis of concern on the research, rather than the researcher.</p> <p>Removing the word ‘misconduct’ automatically destigmatises the purpose of the process even if the goal of the procedure is unchanged. Including the word ‘potential’ instead of ‘alleged’ also changes the tone.</p>
<p><b>Complainant:</b> The Complainant is a person making allegations of misconduct of research against one or more Respondents. They need not be a member of the research organisation/employer.</p>	<p>Initiator</p>	<p>The term ‘Initiator’ is less charged and combative than ‘Complainant’. It also clarifies that the person is raising a concern for the institution to investigate – not for the institution to adjudicate a ‘complaint’, as current terminology implies.</p>
<p><b>Respondent:</b> The Respondent is the person against whom allegations of research misconduct are made.</p> <p>They will be a present or past employee or research student of the research organisation/employer investigating the allegation or an individual visiting the organisation to undertake research.</p>	<p>The Respondent is the individual responsible for the research where a potential breach of good research practice has been raised</p>	<p>We do not propose to change this term, as it is not as charged as other terminology currently in use. However, in accordance with the above descriptions, the concerns are to be made about the research and not the researcher(s), noting that the respondent can also be a group.</p> <p>The Respondent is the individual or group of individuals responsible for the research under scrutiny.</p>

Current Terminology	Suggested Revision	Rationale
<p><b>Allegation of research misconduct:</b> This is when a Complainant raises a concern of research misconduct against one or more Respondents about their research.</p>	<p>Initiating a concern of a potential breach of research integrity or good research practice</p>	<p>The suggested language repositions the role of the Initiator. Rather than framing them as a Complainant making an allegation against another person, the focus is on their role in highlighting a potential breach of research integrity.</p> <p>In practice, this may still relate to the actions of an individual. However, the terminology does not assume the person raising the matter is directing this at any individual or imply that they are responsible for determining the motivation or intention of the person in question. It also allows for a range of possible reasons for the potential breach, not simply a deliberate act of misconduct. This has the effect of somewhat reducing the responsibility placed on the initiator: they are responsible for raising a concern about a potential breach and providing evidence to support this concern; they are not required to determine who did what or why.</p> <p>It is important to recognise that allegations can be opinionated and unsubstantiated. Referring to them as disclosures or concerns helps to convey that they require further evidence to substantiate.</p>

Current Terminology	Suggested Revision	Rationale
<p><b>Misconduct in research:</b> This can be defined as behaviours that deliberately or recklessly fall short of the standards expected in the conduct of research.</p> <p>UKRIO recommends the definition contained in the Concordat to Support Research Integrity.</p> <p>For a finding of research misconduct, as opposed to poor or questionable research practice, there generally needs to be a finding that the behaviour was intentional or reckless.</p>		<p>We do not propose that this definition be changed.</p> <p>However, rather than making an allegation of misconduct in research, the initiator will highlight concerns of a potential breach of research integrity or good research practice. An investigation will then determine whether the matter relates to questionable research practice/a minor breach, research misconduct or is mistaken and/or malicious.</p>
<p><b>Poor Research Practice:</b> This is research conduct that departs from Accepted Procedures (for research) but has a cause that is not considered either intentional or reckless behaviour.</p>		<p>While we are not proposing to change this definition, our other suggested changes emphasise that it is the responsibility of the panel to determine whether a matter raised is poor research practice, research misconduct or one of the other outcomes.</p> <p>The initiator's role is simply to flag up a matter of concern. This is a nuance, but a significant one.</p>

Current Terminology	Suggested Revision	Rationale
<p><b>Initial/Full Investigations:</b> These are the terms used for the different stages of an investigation.</p> <p>The Initial Investigation stage determines whether there is sufficient evidence of research misconduct to warrant a Full Investigation or whether alternative action(s) should be taken.</p> <p>The Full Investigation stage determines whether an allegation is upheld in full, upheld in part or not upheld. It also makes recommendations for the appropriate Organisational authorities to consider, including those to address any misconduct it may have found, correct the research record and/or address other matters uncovered.</p>		<p>We do not propose that this terminology be changed.</p> <p>The purpose of investigations remains to determine whether a matter raised meets the definition of research misconduct or is a minor breach of good research practice.</p> <p>While the changes we propose are intended to emphasise that the purpose of an investigation is to verify the trustworthiness of the research in question, they will necessarily require examination of the actions of those involved and to determine their motivation where possible.</p> <p>Changes to other associated terminology (noted in this table) shifts the focus of investigations from reaching a determination on whether an allegation is upheld to determining whether the research is sound – and if not, what corrective steps need to be taken.</p>

## Conclusion

We recognise that the proposed terminology presented in this paper is a change of direction and may require significant discussion and work within the research community to adopt widely. We particularly note the role of funders and national policy statements such as the *Concordat to Support Research Integrity* in ensuring any terminology changes are embedded into the fabric of research integrity in the UK.

We also understand that existing opinions and behaviours relating to raising a concern or being accused of research misconduct won't be overcome by changes in language alone, and that it will take time for the research community to adopt and adjust to these changes due to the serious consequences that come with research misconduct investigations.

In addition, we recognise that changing terminology will not have a great deal of impact by itself – a change in culture and expectation across a range of stakeholders in the sector, including funders, regulators, institutions and researchers will be required. However, we consider the narrative for the change to be compelling and hope that by working across the sector, change will gradually take place.

It may also be challenging to embed the concept that raising concerns must be focused on the research rather than on individuals. The perception of detriment is influenced by embedded cultural norms, such as the absence of clear positive outcomes in investigation procedures, inadequate support for correcting published mistakes, hierarchical power imbalances (such as imbalances between PhD students and Principal Investigators) and the continued presence of a 'publish or perish' system. There is the risk that any updated terms may acquire the same stigmas.

**However, we believe the terminology changes outlined in this paper are an important step toward cultivating a culture supportive of open research, accountability, trustworthiness in the research record and constructive whistleblowing within institutions.** Working towards promoting and rewarding ethical behaviours that allow researchers to report errors without stigma and consequences is key to protecting the research record.



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- Education via our guidance publications on research practice, training activities and comprehensive events programme.
- Sharing best practice within the community by facilitating discussions about key issues, informing national and international initiatives, and working to improve research culture.
- Giving confidential expert guidance in response to requests for assistance.

Established in 2006, UKRIO is the UK's most experienced research integrity organisation and provides independent, expert and confidential support across all disciplines of research, from the arts and humanities to the life sciences. We cover all research sectors: higher education, the NHS, private sector organisations and charities. No other organisation in the UK has comparable expertise in providing such support in the field of research integrity.

UKRIO welcomes enquiries on any issues relating to the conduct of research, whether promoting good research practice, seeking help with a particular research project, responding to allegations of fraud and misconduct, or improving research culture and systems.

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