



European Research Council
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Case reporting on scientific misconduct and conflict of interest

The ERC strategy on scientific misconduct provides for record keeping and reporting of cases dealt with by the CoIME. In 2017 the CoIME gave its advice on 17 cases of alleged scientific misconduct. The following is a report of the 11 cases dealt with and closed in 2017. In six more cases the final decision was still pending at the end of the year.

Cases of scientific misconduct

DATA FALSIFICATION/FABRICATION/MANIPULATION

1- The Agency was informed about allegations of scientific misconduct and financial fraud by the PI of an ERC-funded project. The allegations (originating from a co-worker of the PI) stated that the ERC project was strongly based on two research papers containing falsified data fabricated by a former PhD student of the PI.

The ERCEA analysed the allegations as well as the mid-term report submitted by the PI in and it appeared that the two articles addressed in the allegations were crucial for the selection to the ERC grant and that up to that moment the project had a limited output (two publications).

Following the contact of the ERCEA with the PI asking for clarifications, the PI provided detailed explanations, denying the anonymous allegations about fabrication of data on which the ERC project was based. Due to the limited project output reported at mid-term, a site visit was organised by the ERCEA in order to monitor the progress of the project and its output. The site visit confirmed that the PI encountered several scientific and technical problems which affected the implementation of her/his project and resulted in a relatively limited output. The PI had four articles under review and five more articles under preparation. The PI and the team were motivated, working hard to achieve the objectives of the ERC project.

In view of this situation, COIME's decision was that the PI should be allowed to continue working on the project, and that no further action should be taken at that time. Hence, this case was closed under the ERC procedure to deal with scientific misconduct with no other follow up.

2- Early 2016, the ERCEA was informed about allegations of scientific misconduct by a PI of an ERC-funded project, leading to the PI's dismissal by his/her Host Institution. In addition, the Host Institution was filing three retraction letters of publications related to the PI's research and submitted to the ERCEA a request for suspension of the grant. The Host Institution also informed the

ERCEA that they were involved in a law court procedure with the PI as a consequence of the PI's dismissal.

In this context, the ERCEA assessed if the three papers for which the allegations were made were related to the on-going ERC grant. It appeared that among the three articles, one paper was closely related to the proposal submitted to the project that led to the selection for funding. At the time of the application, this paper was only submitted to a peer-reviewed journal (not yet published).

Following the contact of the ERCEA with the PI asking for clarifications, the PI was not in a position to provide neither data nor clarifications about the claimed allegations. In parallel, the ERCEA was informed about the imminent retraction of the three articles questioned in PubPeer which claims appeared after the proposal was evaluated.

In view of the multiple unknowns of the situation (trial, retraction files) and taking into account that the grant was already suspended, the CoIME decided that the ERCEA should wait for the actual retraction of the central article before launching a review of the project to be carried out by a group of experts to verify its continued scientific relevance.

In March 2017, the ERCEA was informed about the retraction of two papers from a peer-reviewed journal. The ERCEA and CoIME considered that the fact that the PI was not able to provide the raw data on which one of the retracted articles was based (as stated in the text of the retraction) constituted a breach of scientific integrity. The paper in question was published before the ERC grant started and therefore it was not linked to research performed under ERC funding. Nevertheless, the paper in question was central for one of the objectives of the funded proposal and its retraction sheds some doubts on the scientific relevance of the objective in question.

In the meantime the ERCEA received also a request to terminate the grant, and a termination procedure at the request of the Host Institution was started. In view of this situation, the ERCEA and the CoIME recommend closing this case under the procedure to deal with information on scientific misconduct with no follow up actions.

3- The ERCEA was alerted that an ERC grantee was accused of manipulation and falsification of data linked to some publications carried out before she/he was an ERC grantee. These allegations were contained in a report from Committee on Scientific Integrity of a University where the PI was employed before receiving the ERC grant.

ERCEA assessed these allegations and drafted a report on the case where the facts were detailed and the connection of those publications to the current grant was analysed. The PI started the ERC grant in a different institution than the one conducting the investigation. The new Host Institution was informed about the case and investigated it further. At a later stage, the ERCEA received the report from the Host Institution's investigation into this matter, concluding that no scientific misconduct had been detected, though it was noted that this decision could be reversed if the journals that published the data in question request a retraction. A technical audit had also been conducted on this project, which concluded that while the publication of results had been delayed, the work has been carried out appropriately. The case was closed with no further follow-up, on the understanding that it would be re-opened if new information arising on the alleged data manipulation would come to light.

FALSIFICATION OF PHD CERTIFICATE

1- During the eligibility checks, the PhD date of the proposal submitted by an applicant to an ERC call was found dubious as it was referring to the first day of the year which is a holiday (1 January 2015, which was also the first day of the eligibility window for the proposals to the call to which the PI applied). A clarification email was sent to the applicant (with the Host Institution in copy) to which the applicant replied the following day acknowledging that this was due to a "mistake". In two subsequent communications, the applicant was asked to give ERCEA the consent to the disclosure of the PhD certificate, enclosed with the application, in order to verify its nature. The applicant never replied. The ERCEA contacted the director of the University where the PhD was obtained informing them about the doubts concerning the authenticity of the PhD certificate. The reply was backing the applicant's position (i.e. there was a mistake in the printing of the certificate). The proposal was rejected because of ineligibility and because it was in breach of research integrity due to misinterpretation of the information required for participation in the call.

2- An applicant modified the date of his/her PhD in order to become eligible for an ERC grant, and investigation had confirmed this. The proposal was rejected on the grounds of scientific misconduct, in line with previous cases.

INCONSISTENCIES IN THE CV

Inconsistencies were identified in the CV that an applicant submitted as part of an ERC application: a patent indicated as granted while its application was still ongoing, and overestimate of the number of articles "in peer reviewed journals and peer reviewed highly esteemed conferences" by including oral communication and posters.

The CoIME took note of the explanations provided by the applicant when requested. However, the CoIME believed that it is commonly agreed in the scientific community that information provided in researchers' CV should be precise, correct and factual. Hence, patents indicated should be granted and publications in peer-reviewed journals should never include oral presentations/posters in conferences. The ERC evaluation criteria linked to applicants' track record is among the elements considered by the ERC panel members and reviewers in assessing applicants' potential as a researcher. Therefore, this information considerably influences the panel assessment and the final outcome of the evaluation. Hence, in a letter of reprimand addressed to the applicant, the Scientific Council made sure that the applicant would understand the seriousness of the situation, which could also be seen as an attempt to mislead evaluators. Hence, the ERC Scientific Council strongly advised the applicant to make sure of providing accurate and fully transparent information on track record when applying for funding of research proposals in the future.

SUSPECTED PLAGIARISM

A panel member informed ERCEA that in two occasions the text provided in the introductory part of a proposal to an ERC call had been plagiarised. In the first one the text had been copy-pasted from an article in a scientific magazine. In the second one from the paper that was immediately quoted after the plagiarised paragraph. ERCEA asked the PI for clarification and the answer was an apology, saying that he/she did not think that the paraphrasing and copying parts of the scientific literature in the

state-of-the-art section of the proposal could be considered plagiarism. In the meanwhile the proposal has been evaluated in step1 scoring C, but a letter of reprimand was sent to the applicant advising her/him to be more cautious when writing proposals and articles in the future.

INCORRECT AUTHORS' ORDERING IN PUBLICATIONS

1- The CoIME took note of an applicant's claim for an unfortunate negligence when modifying the authorship of some of his/her publications listed in the CV section of a proposal to an ERC call, by changing the authors' order in three articles. The proposal was scored C in step 1 evaluation. However, as authorship in scientific publication is commonly agreed in the scientific community as being of paramount importance, a letter of reprimand was written to the applicant strongly advising him/her to be more cautious when listing publications in the future.

2- ERCEA was alerted by the panel that the order of the authors in two of the papers quoted in the track record of the PI of a proposal were altered. The discrepancy was noted by the panel and the PI was asked about the change in the authorship order during the interview. The applicant responded that this was an accepted practice in their field for those publications where authors equally contributed and were identified as such in publications. Given that the panel was aware of the issue during the interview and still chose to recommend the project for funding, a reprimand letter to the PI was considered sufficient. As authorship in scientific publication is commonly agreed in the scientific community as being of paramount importance, the applicant was strongly advised to be more cautious when listing publications in the future.

MISREPRESENTATION OF ACHIEVEMENTS

The ERCEA received allegations claiming that the PI of a proposal to the ERC misrepresented his/her role in a project leading to an award. After investigation, the ERCEA found that while the PI was an active participant in the project that led to the award in question, the PI was not a named recipient of the award.

After considering the information available on this case, the CoIME was satisfied that this was a case of negligence rather than scientific misconduct. As such, a reprimand letter to the PI was considered sufficient. As being recipient of a scientific award is commonly agreed in the scientific community as being of paramount importance, the applicant was advised to be more cautious when providing such information in the future.

MISREPRESENTATION OF DATA IN PROPOSAL

The ERCEA was informed about anonymous allegations of data misrepresentation by the PI of a project selected for funding by the ERC with regard to missing information in the proposal "Funding ID" section of similar projects already funded by other funders.

The ERCEA analysed the situation and, based on elements provided by the PI, it was concluded that there were not enough elements to sustain that the PI deliberately misrepresented the information provided in the proposal.

The PI had been the Principal Investigator of a multi-grant project funded by public funding in a European country during the previous eight years. Indeed, the data related to this project was not accurately provided in the proposal to the ERC; but the PI clarified this point indicating that the information had already been corrected during the granting process. As the last phase of the nationally funded project would be completed by the end of 2017, the temporal overlap with the ERC grant would be very limited. In addition, from the scientific perspective, both projects were very different from each other.

The case was closed under the ERC procedure to deal with scientific misconduct with no other follow up.