



European Research Council
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The ERC strategy on scientific misconduct provides for record keeping and reporting of cases dealt with by the CoIME. In 2018 the CoIME gave its advice on 21 cases of alleged scientific misconduct. Six cases were opened in 2017 and 15 in 2018. The following is a report of the 17 cases dealt with and closed in 2018. Two of the cases of 2017 were still pending at the end of 2018, in one case waiting for the conclusions of an internal investigation in the Host institutions of the researchers involved and the other waiting for the conclusion of a related court case. Of the 15 cases from 2018, two were still pending at the end of 2018.

Cases started in 2017

INAPPROPRIATE SCIENTIFIC PRACTICES RELATED TO PUBLICATIONS

The ERCEA was informed that an ERC grantee was being investigated on grounds of potential scientific misconduct by his/her Host Institution. Inappropriate scientific practices were identified, related to 11 publications, six of them partially funded by the ERC. Both the Host Institution and the PI provided then information on the measures taken to correct the situation and indicated that further information would be provided. The ERCEA received the requested information from the Host Institution, including the report by the ad hoc committee appointed to investigate the case. They also received an email from the PI addressing the issues identified by this committee. The Host Institution supported the actions taken by PI and considered that the measures that had been put in place were enough to guarantee that similar mistakes would not occur again. The PI sent corrections to some of the papers questioned that had been published in the respective journals. The CoIME expressed the opinion that the ERC should take no action at the time. However, CoIME supported the close monitoring of this project by the ERCEA. If additional concerns would arise in future, then additional actions may need to be taken.

INCORRECT AUTHORS' ORDERING IN PUBLICATION

A remote referee pointed out that the PI of a proposal listed herself/himself as the first author in two papers in the publication list presented in the proposal. The first of these papers was a short introductory note to a meeting abstract where the PI was the first author. The second was a short review with 38 authors and the PI was listed in position 24.

The proposal was scored B in step 2 of the evaluation and therefore it would not be funded. The ERCEA, having consulted the CoIME, took note of the PI's claim for an unfortunate negligence when modifying the authorship of some of her/his publications in the ERC proposal. However, as authorship in scientific publications is commonly agreed in the scientific community as being of paramount importance, in a reprimand letter the PI was strongly advised to be more cautious when listing her/his publications in the future.

ALLEGATIONS OF MISREPRESENTATION OF DATA IN PROPOSAL

The ERCEA received a message, sent by an alias under which the complainant disguised his/her identity, concerning an ERC-funded project. The correspondent questioned the PI's scientific profile and scientific production as well as the project scientific soundness and specifically referred to a modification of the proposal's budget after the evaluation results, due to an incomplete and incorrect understanding of the ERC's procedure concerning budget checks. Indeed, an obvious clerical error was corrected in the granting phase, in agreement with the financial rules.

The panel that had initially evaluated the proposal was asked to assess the claims. The case was thoroughly analysed with the conclusion that the allegations of data misrepresentation had a weak ground for opening a case. This conclusion was shared with COIME, which recommended no further action.

BREACH OF CONFIDENTIALITY BY A REMOTE REFEREE

The ERCEA was informed that a remote referee contacted an applicant regarding the proposal that the referee was evaluating. The referee was also listed as a collaborator of the PI in the proposal, but did not declare any Conflict of Interest, which was however detected by the panel and his/her evaluation was disregarded.

The ERCEA analysed the case and concluded that the remote referee breached the confidentiality obligation of the appointment letter signed when accepting to review the proposal and that there were the grounds for the termination of the appointment. CoIME was informed and agreed that the appointment should be terminated. The termination letter was sent and the case closed.

Cases started in 2018

LACK OF WRITTEN CONSENT OF COLLABORATORS/MEMBERS OF ADVISORY BOARDS LISTED IN THE PROPOSAL

1- An evaluation panel informed ERCEA that one of the panel members was named as a collaborator to carry out part of the research activity of one of the work packages in a proposal. The panel member declared that neither she/he nor anyone from his/her lab was involved in the proposal or knew the applicant. When asked, the applicant replied that he/she had a verbal agreement with a post-doc in the panel member's laboratory and provided a written intention of collaboration signed by this post-doc. In addition, the applicant had declared in the application "... to have the written consent of all participants on their participation and on the content of this proposal, as well as of any researcher mentioned in the proposal as participating in the project (either as other PI, team member or collaborator)". The applicant claimed that although the post-doc would have carried out the research activities in case the proposal was funded, the panel member was listed in the proposal in his/her capacity of director of the collaborating institute.

In agreement with CoIME it was decided that the applicant should be given the benefit of doubt and a strong reprimand letter should be sent. A reprimand letter hand-signed by the Chairman of CoIME

was sent, strongly advising the applicant to be more cautious when making declarations and listing collaborators in the future.

2- A potential "out-of-the-call" Conflict of Interest was detected for a panel chair who was named as leader of one of the work packages in a proposal. When contacted, the panel chair declared that he/she did not know of the involvement in the proposal and that the applicant never discussed the proposal with him/her. Once contacted, the PI said that he/she was not aware of the obligation to receive the consent of collaborators before including their names in a proposal.

The CoIME recommended rejecting the proposal as a clear violation of the obligation to have the prior written consent of all team members of the proposal, according to the current provision in section 2.2 of the ERC Rules for Submission.

The ERCEA also concluded that the fact that PI was not aware of the relevant provision in the ERC Rules for Submission was not an acceptable justification, even more since the PI had confirmed in the application form to have obtained the written consent from any researcher mentioned in the proposal as participating in the project. In addition, the fact that the mentioned collaborator had an important responsibility in the project (coordinator of a work package) proved a strong argument to agree with CoIME's recommendation to reject the proposal on the grounds of breach of research integrity, meaning that the applicant may be subject to specific re-submission restrictions in future ERC calls.

3- A panel member was mentioned as member of an "envisaged" advisory board for the project in a proposal, without having been contacted by the applicant in advance. ERCEA assigned the panel member an "out of the room" Col with this proposal. Asked for clarification, the PI answered that the consent was not asked because members of an advisory board do not participate in the research as team members do. In agreement with CoIME, no further action was taken, considering the fact that the advisory board in question was only envisaged and not actually established.

4- A remote referee informed the ERCEA that his/her name was mentioned in a proposal as a member of the International Advisory Board of a project. Asked to clarify, the applicant provided the consent of the remote referee to be part of the advisory board, which was obtained after the proposal was submitted to the ERC. The review of the remote referee in question was not taken into consideration in the evaluation of the proposal. A letter of reprimand was sent to the applicant drawing his/her attention to the unfortunate negligence of declaring incorrectly to have the written consent of all participants in the proposal. The PI was strongly advised to be more cautious when making declarations and listing collaborators in the future.

5- A remote referee informed an evaluation panel that his/her name was mentioned as a consultant in a proposal that the remote referee reviewed, without never being asked to be a consultant. The panel was recommended to remove the review, since the situation represented a conflict of interest. The applicant had signed a declaration confirming to have the written consent of all researchers mentioned in the proposal. Asked for clarification, the applicant replied saying the proposal mentioned only an envisaged collaboration, not an agreed one and therefore such a consent was not asked for. The proposal was in the meantime rejected. A letter of reprimand signed by the Chair of CoIME was sent to the applicant underlying the situation of unfortunate negligence on the applicant's behalf and strongly advising him/her to be more cautious in the future when submitting a proposal.

6- An evaluation panel detected a potential Conflict of Interest for a panel member who was named in a proposal as member of the Advisory Board with budgeted costs for transfers and subsistence. When contacted the panel member declared that he/she was not aware of being named in the proposal and confirmed not to be involved at all in the preparation of the proposal. He/she had explicitly asked not to be involved in the evaluation of the proposal. The applicant was not able to provide the written consent of the panel member to be involved in the Advisory Board of the proposal. The ERCEA applied an "out of the room" Col for the panel member. The proposal was in the meantime rejected. In agreement with CoIME, a letter of reprimand was sent to the applicant underlying the situation of unfortunate negligence on the applicant's behalf and strongly advising him/her to be more cautious in the future when submitting a proposal.

ALLEGATION OF PLAGIARISM IN PROPOSAL

1- A panel member informed the ERCEA of a potential case of plagiarism in an ERC proposal. Invited to provide clarification, the applicant replied stating that a wrong reference was included in the reference list and acknowledged citing another article by the same author and published in the same year in the same journal instead of another one. The PI apologised for the mistake and for not considering the use of quotation marks for some sentences used in the proposal.

The CoIME decided that a letter of reprimand should be sent to the PIs, with the Host Institution in copy. A letter, signed by the Chair of the CoIME, was sent in which it was stated that, according to common standards in the scientific community, copying or adapting a text from already published literature without correctly citing its source is not acceptable and could be considered as a situation of plagiarism. Hence, the applicant was strongly advised to be more cautious when writing proposals and articles in the future.

2- Two remote referees informed the ERCEA that in their opinion there were parts of a proposal that were plagiarised from the introductory chapter of a book co-authored by them. Indeed some verbatim coincidences were highlighted. ERCEA requested a clarification to the PI who explained that this was not a question of plagiarism but he/she admitted that there could however be a fault of not being more precise in the citations. A letter of reprimand was sent to the PI stating that the CoIME took note of the claim of negligence from the PI and strongly advised him/her to be more cautious when writing proposals and articles in the future, to avoid even the slightest suspicion of false claims and misattribution of ideas and concepts

BREACH OF CONFIDENTIALITY BY EVALUATORS

A panel member and a remote referee submitted very similar Individual Assessment Reports in step 2 of an evaluation. ERCEA inquired about it and both evaluators claimed that the mistake was due to the person who proofread the reviews of both experts and uploaded inadvertently sections of one reviewer on the ERC evaluation page of the other.

It was decided that the panel member involved breached confidentiality obligations and would not be re-invited to serve on future calls.

INCORRECT AUTHORS' ORDERING IN PUBLICATION

1- Two panel members brought to the attention of the whole panel the fact that a PI changed the order of authors in one of the publications listed in the track record reported in his/her proposal, putting her/his name before the other first co-author, therefore changing the authors' order compared to the list of authors reported on the publisher's website.

Asked for clarifications, the PI acknowledged the mistake and asked it to be corrected, but insisted that being herself/himself indeed first author of that paper as shown by the equal contribution statement, the order of the authors was indifferent.

The ERCEA informed the PI that manipulation of authorship and misrepresentation of research achievements are listed among the violations of research integrity in the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and that the published order of authors cannot be changed without the authorisation of the publisher and upon the issue of a correction, even if the first authorship is shared. In agreement with the recommendation of CoIME and considering that the PI admitted the wrongdoing of changing order of the authors, but still indicated equal contribution to the article and given that proposal received a B in step 1, no further action was taken.

2- During the evaluation interview, an applicant presented a slide reporting to be a senior author in a publication, while on the publisher's website, it was indicated that there was only one senior author, who was not the applicant. When asked for clarification, the applicant admitted with apologies to be pre-senior in the article. In agreement with the CoIME, a letter of reprimand was sent to the applicant, taking note of her/his claim of unfortunate negligence and warning that authorship in scientific publications is commonly agreed in the scientific community as being of paramount importance and strongly advising her/him to be more cautious when presenting publications in the future.

3- The ERCEA was informed that an applicant changed the order of authors in a publication listed in his/her proposal. When asked for clarification, the applicant explained that since the first three authors of this publication were all listed as "first authors", he/she assumed that their position relative to each other could be any way. In agreement with the CoIME, a letter of reprimand was sent to the applicant acknowledging his/her unfortunate negligence when listing his/her publications in the proposal and warning nevertheless that, as authorship in scientific publications is commonly agreed in the scientific community as being of paramount importance, the applicant was strongly advised to be more cautious when presenting his/her publications in the future. Even if the first authorship is shared, the published order of authors cannot be changed without the authorisation of the publisher and upon the issue of a correction.

INCLUSION OF A RETRACTED PAPER IN LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

An evaluation panel detected that a PI included a retracted publication among the selected publications listed in a proposal to the ERC. Asked for clarification, the PI explained the reasons to include such a publication. Though the arguments seemed reasonable, it would have been more transparent if the PI would have indicated the status of this publication in the proposal. In agreement with the CoIME, a letter of reprimand from the Agency was sent to the PI drawing his/her attention on the importance of being more transparent in the future in order to avoid any concern among peers and strongly advising him/her to be more cautious when listing publications.

