

Austrian Commission for Research Integrity

Annual Report 2016

Preface by the Commission Chair

The Annual Report of the Commission for Research Integrity for the year 2016 is being presented at a point (November 2017) when we can observe a trend, already discernable in the previous year, ever more clearly: the work of the Commission has been increasing. By this we do not mean merely the rising number of inquiries, but the administrative effort related to the processing of each individual query, which has substantially increased. On the one hand, this is, of course, a good sign because it demonstrates that the members of the Austrian Agency for Research Integrity (OeAWI) trust in the expertise of the Commission, particularly when complex or controversial allegations of research misconduct are made. On the other hand, we need to tackle the question of how to cope with the increased work load in the long term. This is a relevant issue not only for the pro bono members of the Commission, but primarily for the employees of the Agency - without their commitment and solid support the Commission could not be doing its work. To avoid mincing any words about it: the team members of the Agency have reached the limits of their capacity. If the OeAWI is expected to sustain its current level of work, the number of employees must be increased, and the sooner the better. It should be added here that the employees' responsibilities go far beyond the task of supporting the Commission.

The growing number of requests to the Commission to deal with complex and controversial allegations of research misconduct has contributed to the Commission's or the OeAWI's greater visibility in the scientific/scholarly community and before the general public. In this regard we should emphasize, however, that the Commission is not to function as a "supervising body of academic fairness" taking up any issue that has caused conflict within the research community. It is the Commission's specific task to deal with the standards of good scientific practice (GSP), e.g., fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism, authorship conflicts, problems of access to data, etc. Clearly, not every (empirical or alleged) irregularity in the academic world is a (possible) violation of standards of GSP.

The Commission's independence, as guaranteed by its bylaws, is essential to its work. The Austrian model is unique around the world. The fact that the Commission is comprised solely of international scholars guarantees maximum remove from the daily routine of Austrian academe. This is an important institutional precaution to safeguard a fair and objective assessment of alleged research misconduct. In 2016, the members of the Commission were most willing, once again, to contribute their expertise in the implementation of the standards of good scientific practice to the Austrian research community.

Vienna, November 2017

Prof. Dr. Stephan Rixen

Chair of the Commission for Research Integrity

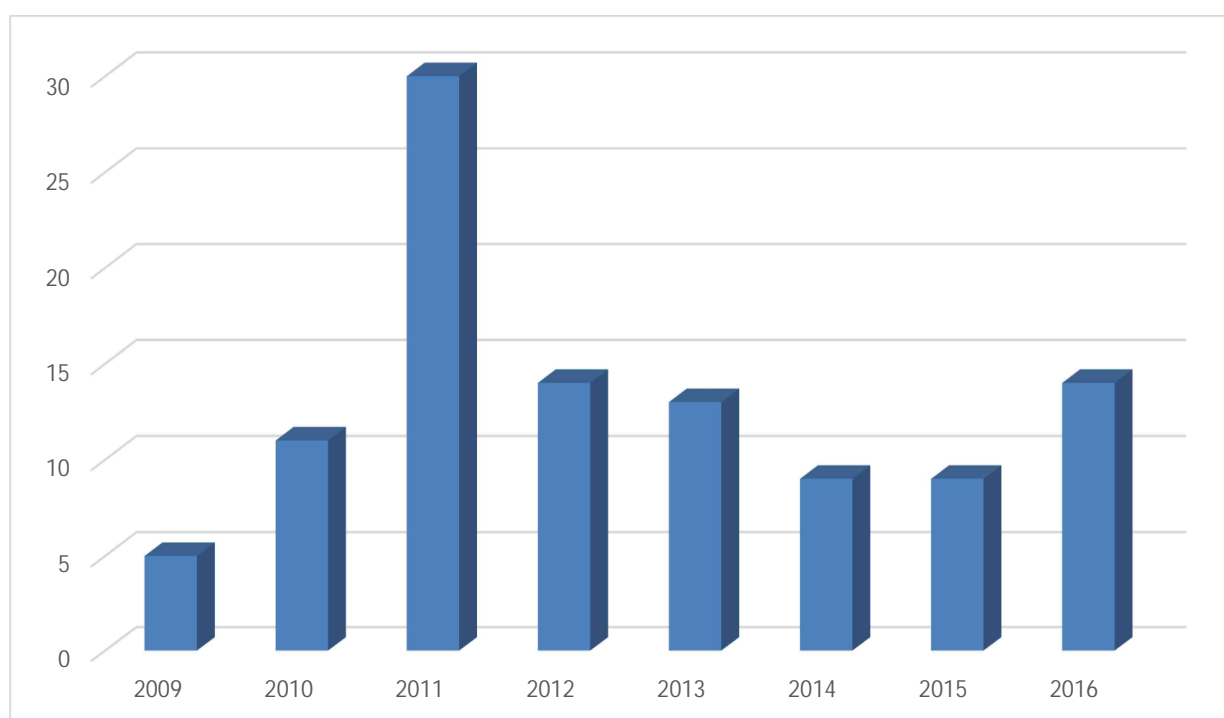
Commission for Research Integrity

The Commission for Research Integrity is an independent body of the Austrian Agency for Research Integrity (OeAWI). The Commission examines allegations of scientific/scholarly misconduct involving researchers and research institutions in Austria. It consists of six scientists/scholars from outside Austria whose expertise covers a broad variety of disciplines. For issues related to Austrian law, an advisor is called in when necessary.

The Commission operates on the basis of its Rules of Procedure and the Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice (www.oeawi.at). One important principle underlying the Commission's work is confidentiality, which must be ensured to protect the parties submitting inquiries as well as those accused of misconduct.

Overview of Inquiries and Cases, 2009 to 2016

By the end of 2016, the Commission for Research Integrity had handled a total of 106 inquiries since it started its work in June 2009. The Commission no longer distinguishes between "inquiries" and "cases" as it used to do; instead, it now uses the term "inquiry" only.



Graph 1: Inquiries to the Commission between June 2009 and December 2016

Inquiries in 2016:

In 2016, the Commission held three ordinary meetings and received 14 inquiries. Some of the inquiries from 2015 were completed in 2016 and will be summarized below. Some of the inquiries from 2015 are still in progress and therefore cannot be described in detail at this point.

Inquiry A 2015/07:

This inquiry turned into Case F 2015/01 (previous nomenclature, ref. Overview of Inquiries and Cases, 2009 to 2016). It concerns the allegation of a duplicate publication.

In this case, a former staff member accused her supervisor of republishing her work, a retrospective data collection of patients dating back to 2011, which was first published in a 2015 journal article that lists the supervisor as secondary author. The challenged publication lists a different scientist as primary author and the supervisor again as secondary author, while the former staff member is not included among the authors.

While all three authors confirmed the duplicate publication, which, given the content of the articles, is self-evident, they offered brief and very different explanations for the circumstances leading to it. Upon further queries and written responses of the three researchers involved, it became clear that two manuscripts had been submitted simultaneously. It cannot be ascertained how this could have happened and who could be held accountable for it, particularly because each of the three is convinced of the accuracy of their specific account of what happened. Furthermore, there are also divergent opinions as to why it was not submitted to and voted upon by the ethics committee.

The Commission believes that all three authors violated the standards of good scientific practice because they created such a non-transparent and error-prone publication process resulting in a duplicate publication (with more than a third of identical or similar text content). In addition, they failed to report their study to the relevant ethics commission. According to the Commission, this kind of procedure does not comply with the minimal standards scientists/scholars are to observe in their research and publication projects.

Therefore, the Commission recommended that both publications be withdrawn.

Inquiry A 2015/09:

This case concerns the allegation of a doctoral supervisor who claimed that a student did not correctly hand over her data and lab books. The Commission invited the student to present her viewpoint; she then provided extensive information documenting when and what kinds of data and materials she handed over particular data and materials to specific individuals, and where in the lab she deposited samples, lab books or similar things. Unfortunately, she was not able to store some data on the server because her electronic user account was

blocked. The supervisor was informed of this. In addition, it was made clear to the supervisor that the department is obliged to keep all data for ten years.

Ultimately, the student was able to provide copies of the data and her lab books. The Commission also pointed out to the supervisor that (related to the topic) the doctoral student must be listed as co-author in any further publications.

Inquiry A 2016/01:

A member organization turned to the Commission for its assessment of the following matter: It is unclear whether a medical study followed the standards of good scientific practice in its reporting of data in publications. The Commission concluded that the research did not comply with fundamental quality assurance rules of scientific practice, raising many more questions. The university assumed responsibility for a further investigation.

Inquiry A 2016/02:

This query concerned a contribution on a university info platform serving physicians seeking information on medical topics. The specific response to the query of a practicing physician states that it does not offer a systematic review but a summary of best evidence. In the particular article, there is recurring reference to the fact that the small sample of cases renders the listed differences statistically insignificant, thus not a basis for solid conclusions. Instead, the small sample allows only for observable trends, and the strength of the evidence is evaluated as "low".

The Commission concluded that the article provides very cautious interpretations and conclusions. Furthermore, the authors do not claim comprehensiveness. Ultimately, it is important to recognize that this sort of article does not undergo so-called peer review.

Inquiry A 2016/03:

Still in progress.

Inquiry A 2016/04:

An evaluator of a submitted grant application informed a grant agency of similarities with another research project. The other project, published on the internet, was not referenced.

The Commission concluded that the purely quantitative textual similarities are not very copious but qualitatively of great significance. For example, the grant applicant appropriated not only texts but also the research hypothesis and key concepts regarding the research goals and ideas. The applicant himself did not acknowledge any wrong-doing; he stated that the project was his original idea and that no comparable research existed.

The Commission judged the project description for the grant to be a plagiarism.

Inquiry A 2016/05:

An Austrian university charged the Commission with the investigation of alleged plagiarism in a dissertation. The Commission obtained two expert opinions.

The Commission concluded that the dissertation reveals such a high number of violations of clear referencing rules that the entire work must be considered "patchwork plagiarism" representing research misconduct. The Commission ruled out the possibility of "random" errors, given the pattern quasi across the board. It was the Commission's stance that this was certainly not a trivial matter (one that might apply to quantitatively or qualitatively minimal transgressions). Therefore, the Commission judged the dissertation a plagiarism.

Inquiry A 2016/06:

Still in progress.

Inquiry A 2016/07:

Together with a foreign researcher, an Austrian scientist/scholar submitted a grant application for a project that would provide the foreign colleague with the funds to carry out the joint research. Unfortunately, the foreign colleague, who had contributed to the final version of the application, passed away before the application was evaluated. Subsequently the Austrian researcher withdrew his application. At a later point, however, he re-submitted the identical grant application to the same grant agency - but with another foreign researcher. The agency rejected the submission, indicating that this could be a case of research misconduct, given that the deceased foreign co-applicant was no longer listed as co-author.

Upon further inquiry, the Austrian scientist/scholar explained that the deceased foreign colleague had contributed to the development of the final application, whereas the new foreign co-applicant had not been part of it although he is undoubtedly qualified for the research tasks related to the project.

The Commission believes that the co-applicants have misunderstood the terms and conditions of the grant application, according to which foreign applicants must be involved in the development of the application. The Commission has recommended that the Austrian scientist/scholar - together with the new foreign colleague - revise the application and, in their text, establish clear connections between the project and the specific qualifications of the new colleague.

Inquiry A 2016/08:

The chair of a search committee at a foreign university approached the Commission with the following question: On the homepage of a professional journal he found a reference to scientific misconduct of an Austrian candidate going through the appointment process. He wants to obtain more information on this case.

The Commission has suggested that he turn directly to the institution mentioned in the journal as having carried out the investigation. Additionally, the Commission has encouraged him to raise the allegation directly with the candidate.

Inquiry A 2016/09:

Still in progress.

Inquiry A 2016/10:

Still in progress.

Inquiry A 2016/11:

An informant requested that the Commission examine the extent to which scientific/scholarly experts' evaluation of issues of public interest is in accord with "the code of conduct for tenured civil servants and complies with their academic oath."

The Commission explained that communicating with the media and the public inevitably requires a fairly simplified and also generally comprehensible discourse on a subject matter. Any conscientious scientist/scholar is likely to draw conclusions from their own research and the current state of the relevant discipline, allowing inferences that extend beyond the immediate area of their expertise. To communicate such inferences to the public is an ethical prerogative and justifiably demanded by society. Occasionally the political discourse also demands such information, particularly when the topics are of general importance. Obviously, researchers within the same discipline may reach different conclusions, and admittedly, this fact does not facilitate the process whereby the general public and policy-makers develop an informed opinion. The Commission believes that it would be in essence a violation of the principles of good scientific practice if discipline experts were to refrain from shaping public opinion altogether. (See also §1, section 1 of The Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice of the OeAWI: "Research integrity also includes sincere, comprehensible and transparent communication with the general public in a way that appropriately reflects the complexity of scientific research.")

Inquiry A 2016/12:

Still in progress.

Inquiry A 2016/13:

Still in progress.

Inquiry A 2016/14:

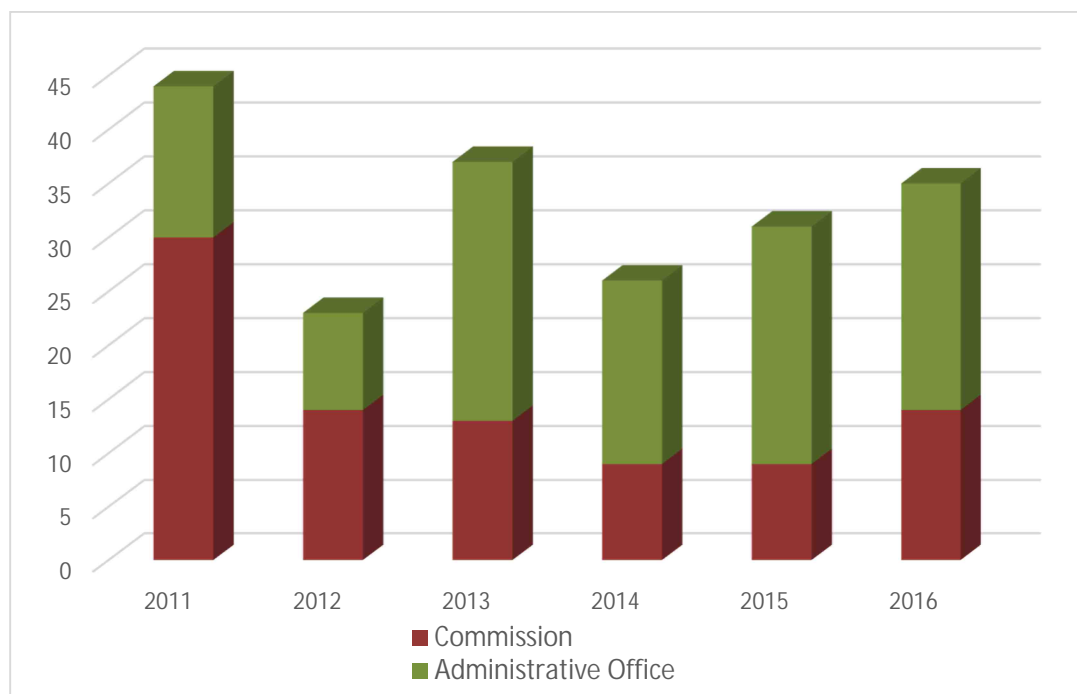
This inquiry, submitted by an anonymous party, referred to alleged plagiarism. However, there was no mention of concrete text passages, similarities, or missing source references. For the Commission, the anonymous note, consisting of six lines, was insufficient to be followed up on.

Inquiries to and Consultation through the Administrative Office

In 2016, there were also 21 inquiries (e-mails, phone calls, and personal consultation sessions) to the Administrative Office of the Agency for Research Integrity. These queries involved different kinds of topics:

Conflicts over authorship, ownership of data, duplicate publication/self-plagiarism, ethical concerns, (centralized) data management and data documentation, repeatability of data, questions about appropriate contact regarding procedures or new guidelines, problems regarding the mentoring of young scholars/scientists, ghostwriting, and support in identifying contacts abroad.

The Administrative Office assumes a consulting function or serves as a mediator between conflicting parties.



Graph 2: Overview of Inquiries to the Commission and the Administrative Office (the latter have been recorded only since 2011).

Members of the Commission for Research Integrity:

Prof. Dr. Stephan Rixen (Chair)
Prof. Dr. Daniela Männel (Deputy Chair)
Prof. Dr. Beatrice Beck-Schimmer
Prof. Dr. Andreas Diekmann
Prof. Dr. Michael Hagner
Prof. Dr. Gerd Müller

OeAWI Office:

Dr. Nicole Föger
Martina Frey
Mag. Birgit Buschbom (since October 2016)

Mariahilfer Straße 123, 3. Stock
T: +43/1/59999 8001 bzw. 8017
www.oeawi.at