

Commission for Research Integrity
Austrian Agency for Research Integrity
Annual Report 2010

The Commission for Research Integrity is an organ of the Austrian Agency for Research Integrity (OeAWI). The Commission ensures independent investigation procedures in cases of alleged scientific misconduct and handles all inquiries in strict confidence in order to protect the parties involved. The Commission operates on the basis of its Rules of Procedure and the Guidelines for the Investigation of Alleged Scientific Misconduct (Annex I to the Rules of Procedure; available at www.oeawi.at). In line with these rules and guidelines, and in order to ensure the protection of the parties involved (and thus the effectiveness of the procedure), it is necessary to conduct careful reviews of any allegations submitted to the Commission as well as any responses to those allegations. Depending on the information available, these reviews may take considerable time to complete. The Commission first reviews whether the allegations (documented in the form of an inquiry) actually warrant the opening of a case.

One case from the previous year (2009/01) was completed in 2010. The allegation in this case cited the falsification of data in multiple scientific publications in which a Vienna-based research group investigated potential DNA damage due to radiation from mobile communications devices. After reviewing the original data and obtaining external opinions as well as comments from the scientists involved, the Commission came to the following conclusion: The allegation could not be confirmed in this case; however, the Commission did criticise the quality of execution and documentation of data in the experiments. As this case had been discussed extensively in the media and among specialist audiences, the Commission decided to make an exception and publish a statement on this specific case (see Opinion of November 23, 2010 at www.oeawi.at).

In the course of the year 2010, the Commission for Research Integrity received 11 inquiries, three of which prompted the Commission to initiate procedures. After attempting to resolve the matter at the relevant institution, one party who had already submitted an inquiry to the Commission in 2009 decided to reactivate the inquiry, which is now also being handled as a case by the Commission.

Four additional inquiries led to the initiation of a procedure but had not yet been resolved by the end of the year 2010. These cases relate to problems concerning authorship, possible (self-)plagiarism, and an alleged exploitation of another person's research approaches. The cases concern the disciplines of geology, medicine and law. As these procedures are still under way, the Commission cannot make any statements on them at this point.

A number of inquiries did not warrant the initiation of procedures: Two inquiries cited possible misconduct during a course of study; in these situations, the responsibility clearly lies with the relevant university (or university of applied sciences). The parties submitting those inquiries were therefore referred to the relevant ombudsman's offices. In this context, the office of the Agency noted that a number of inquiries came from students who were uncertain about the proper citation of sources. Further inquiries revealed that not all universities offer (compulsory) classes on academic research and academic writing.

Another inquiry did not involve scientific misconduct. In this context, the Commission wishes to note that not all of the activities carried out by scientists in their fields can be considered science/research. However, the party submitting the inquiry was informed that he could assert his claims under civil law in that situation.

Another inquiry dealt with possible plagiarism in a commissioned opinion document. The Commission arrived at the conclusion that commissioned opinions are generally not to be considered scientific/research publications.

One inquiry was not pursued further by the Commission because the allegation referred to possible misconduct which lay more than ten years in the past. One inquiry was withdrawn by the party who had submitted it, while another was related to an existing case before the Commission and was handled in that context. Finally, in one inquiry the allegation (unjustified use of an academic title [Dr.]) could not be confirmed in the course of a preliminary procedure. Notwithstanding the outcome of that procedure, the unjustified use of an academic title can be pursued in the courts of law and is subject to an administrative penalty (Art. 116 Universities Act 2002).

Vienna, April 2011