

# **Commission for Research Integrity**

## **Annual Report 2014**

### Preface by the Commission Chair

The Commission's annual reports not only provide an overview of the activities of the Commission for Research Integrity, but also allow comparisons of the misconduct cases handled over time. Now that the Commission has been active for six years, the time series of cases is gradually becoming longer, which has yielded a number of interesting insights. The picture is gradually consolidating: Spectacular cases of data manipulation are – at least as far as the Commission gains knowledge of them – extremely seldom. It thus appears that the natural and technical sciences are not highly susceptible to research misconduct. Life sciences and medicine are in the middle range, while humanities and social sciences are at the top in terms of the number of cases. Another type of misconduct is slowly coming to the fore: In addition to plagiarism allegations, which already accounted for a large number of cases in the past, recent cases have also involved authorship conflicts and problems regarding the fair and professional supervision of Ph.D. students. The former cases are certainly linked to the rising pressure on junior researchers to publish and have mainly arisen in hierarchically organised disciplines which often rely on collective research efforts. The latter cases are not a new problem, but they have certainly aroused greater interest and sensitivity at Austrian universities. Although the standards of professional, responsible supervision and assessment should be a matter of course, they have been violated repeatedly at the expense of the Ph.D. candidates.

However, this also means that the Commission's activities have shifted from clearly verifiable cases to ones which involve complex interpersonal relations and are more difficult to assess. Therefore, it is only logical that the OeAWI Office has received a larger number of inquiries and has taken on a stronger advisory role. That is a positive development, as advising can also support prevention.

Peter Weingart

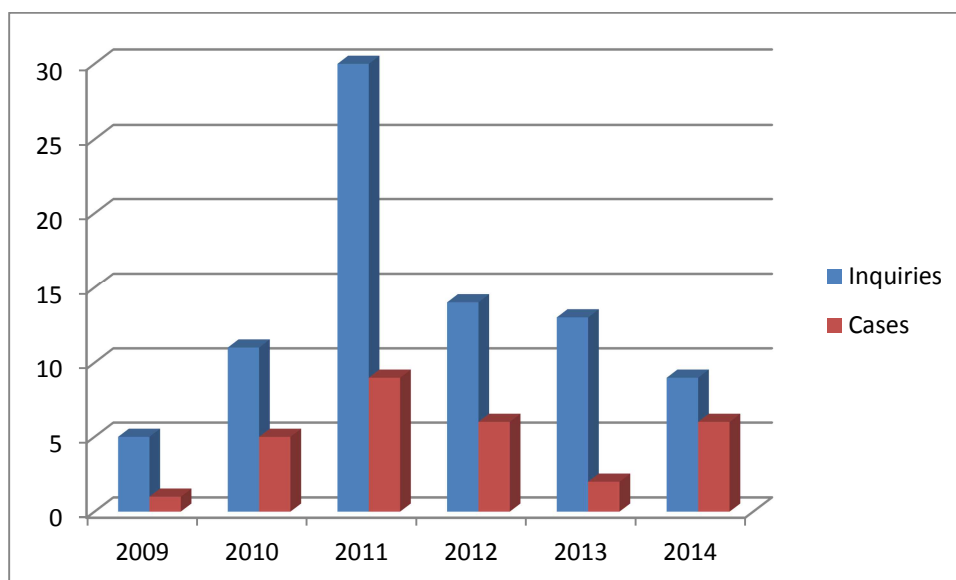
### Commission for Research Integrity

The Commission for Research Integrity is an independent body of the Austrian Agency for Research Integrity (OeAWI), an association established under Austrian law. The Commission examines allegations of scholarly misconduct involving scientists and researchers working in Austria. It consists of six 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 the Investigation of Alleged Scientific Misconduct (available at [www.oeawi.at](http://www.oeawi.at)). One important principle underlying the Commission's work is confidentiality, which must be ensured in order to protect the parties who submit inquiries as well as any persons accused of misconduct.

### **Overview of inquiries and cases, 2009 to 2014**

By the end of 2014, the Commission for Research Integrity had handled a total of 82 inquiries since it began its work in June 2009. Twenty-nine of those inquiries qualified as cases to be handled by the Commission and thus led to the initiation of a formal procedure.



The cases handled to date are distributed across all research disciplines; the table below shows the number of cases in each category.

Research discipline(s)	Number of cases (since 2009)
Social sciences and humanities	10
Life sciences	7
Medicine	7
Natural and technical sciences	3
Law	2

Table 1: Categorisation of cases by discipline

### **Inquiries and cases in 2014:**

In 2014, the Commission held two ordinary meetings and one extraordinary meeting.

A total of nine inquiries were submitted to the Commission in the year under review, and six of those inquiries qualified as cases and led to the initiation of a formal investigation procedure.

Two of the remaining three inquiries were submitted anonymously; one of them related to (alleged) corruption and serious fraud, which are outside the scope of the Commission's responsibilities. The allegations were also very vaguely articulated and difficult to verify. The second anonymous inquiry was received from one "Clare Francis," an informant who is well known internationally but whose true identity remains unknown. The allegations referred to the manipulation of illustrations in multiple publications by an Austrian research team. An expert reviewer was called in, but a majority of the allegations could not be verified. As for the remaining issues, the researchers in question were asked to submit the original data they had used, which cleared up the other apparent irregularities.

The third inquiry concerned a conflict between a Ph.D. student and her supervisor; the conflict had hindered her from completing her dissertation for a considerable period of time. The OeAWI Office offered to arrange for mediation by an independent professional mediator, and the meetings led to a swift resolution of the conflict: Shortly thereafter, the Ph.D. student was able to submit her dissertation with the consent of her supervisor.

In addition, one inquiry from 2013 was completed during the year under review: The Commission had decided not to initiate an investigation because the case was already being examined at two institutions in Germany at the same time. At regular intervals of several months, the OeAWI contacted those two institutions to inquire as to the status of their investigations. One institution completed its investigation with a public reprimand in July 2014 (see

[http://www.dfg.de/service/presse/pressemitteilungen/2014/pressemitteilung\\_nr\\_26/](http://www.dfg.de/service/presse/pressemitteilungen/2014/pressemitteilung_nr_26/)).

The other institution completed its examination of the case in December 2014. While one member of the research team was found to have falsified data, the head of the research team was cleared of this accusation.

The cases completed in the year 2014 are described briefly below.

Case 2013/02:

In this case, an applicant for a grant suspected that one of the reviewers, who had identified himself as such in an e-mail to her after the review procedure, was using information from her proposal for his own research. The Commission approached him with this allegation. However, the reviewer was able to provide clear evidence that it was not the case: He was able to demonstrate that he had worked on a similar project idea at a much earlier point in time, and that the idea had already been approved by a funding agency abroad on the basis of a grant proposal he had already submitted in the past. The Commission contacted the funding agency abroad to confirm the reviewer's claims, and the allegation of "idea theft" could not be verified. The reviewer had contacted the applicant after the review procedure because he wished to invite her to collaborate in a research project.

Case 2014/01:

In this case, a funding agency submitted the following inquiry to the Commission: Two consortia had submitted grant proposals, but only one of the two had received funding. One of the project partners in the consortium which did not receive funding then accused the other applicants of using his project ideas in their proposal. Both applicants had been in contact shortly after the call for proposals was announced, and they had discussed the possibility of a joint submission, but in the end they could not reach an agreement. Each applicant then submitted a proposal with different project partners. The Commission attempted to call in an expert reviewer, but due to the very specific, narrow field of research involved, the Commission was unable to find an expert who was willing to compose an opinion. In the end, the Commission engaged the services of an attorney with the appropriate expertise, and the attorney was unable to identify any theft of ideas in the proposal.

Case 2014/02

A funding agency consulted the Commission due to an allegation that an applicant had committed plagiarism in his grant proposal; one of the peer reviewers had discovered the violation. According to the reviewer, a previously published work based on a similar research approach had not been cited, possibly in order to make the proposal appear more innovative. The OeAWI Office checked the text with a software program, but it did not find any matching text in the sources available to the software. However, the Commission confirmed that the overall flow of argumentation in the proposal aroused serious suspicions

that the uncited source was indeed known to the applicants and had served as a basis for the ideas in the proposal.

#### Case 2014/03:

In this case, a funding agency once again contacted the Commission due to suspicions of plagiarism in a grant proposal. The proposal was subjected to a check with a software program, and it turned out that vast parts of the proposal had been pieced together from a variety of sources; entire passages had been lifted from uncited sources. In its opinion, the Commission confirmed the funding agency's suspicions of plagiarism.

#### Case 2014/04:

In this case, a researcher contacted the Commission due to a conflict regarding authorship: Within the framework of a cooperation partnership and the joint supervision of a Ph.D. student, a conflict had arisen between the supervisors in the process of preparing a manuscript; they could not agree on who should be listed as the last author of the publication. The first supervisor (Researcher A) had gone on leave, and the researcher who had replaced her (Researcher B) had then taken over the management of the project at that institution. In addition, a third researcher from another institution (Researcher C) was also involved as a cooperation partner in supervising the Ph.D. student. All three researchers claimed the right to be named as the last author of the planned publication, giving rise to a conflict which lasted nearly two years. A mediation process offered by the university had ended in failure. The Commission requested that each of the parties involved describe her respective contribution to the publication in a written statement. Two of the co-authors responded to this request, but no statement was provided by Researcher A, who had gone on leave and in the meantime departed from the institute. After the OeAWI had made several attempts to contact her, she wrote that she was not able to provide a detailed statement, but that she would respect the decision of the other two authors. In its concluding opinion, the Commission stated that naming Researchers B and C as "equally contributing last authors" would be a conceivable solution to the problem, but that it was not possible to assess the contribution made by Researcher A because she had not submitted a statement. The researchers then contacted each other again in order to complete and submit their joint manuscript.

#### Case 2014/05:

In the case described above, a conflict also arose between the Ph.D. student and her official supervisor (Researcher D), who had been assigned to her because her original supervisor

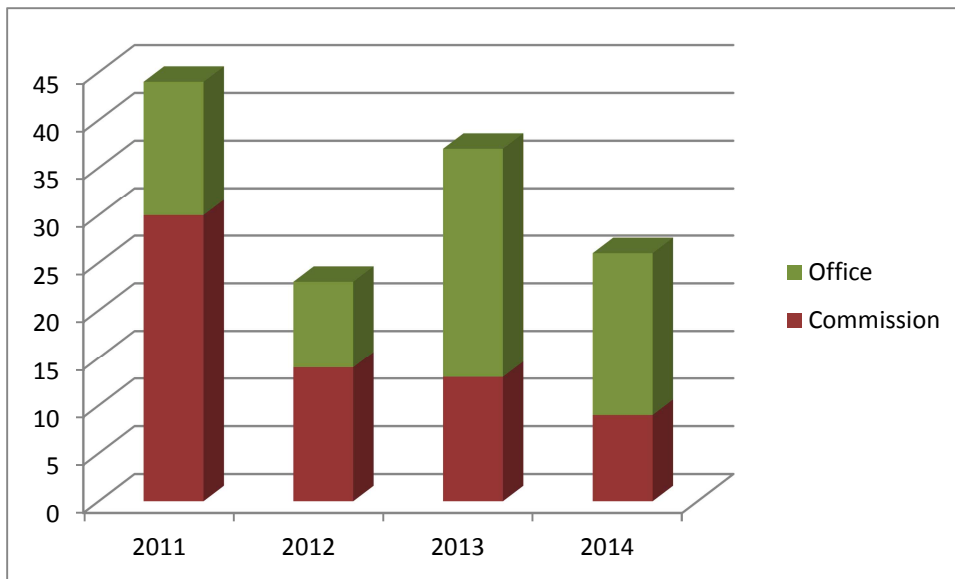
(Researcher A) had not completed her *venia*. The official supervisor was only willing to agree to a cumulative dissertation (as opposed to a monographic dissertation). As the existing (nearly two-year) authorship conflict between the above-mentioned project partners had hindered the initial publication in which the Ph.D. student was to be named as the first author, it appeared highly questionable whether a cumulative dissertation (i.e. at least two publications where the candidate is named as the first author) would be possible in the foreseeable future. The official supervisor did not show any understanding in this regard and continued to insist on the submission of a cumulative dissertation. In this case, the Commission contacted the chancellor of the university, who confirmed that a change of supervisors and an amendment of the Ph.D. plan to a monographic dissertation would not be a problem; the Ph.D. candidate would only have to submit an official request for the changes. The Ph.D. student was then assigned four examiners for a written assessment of her work and was able to take the examination.

#### Case 2014/06:

A researcher consulted the Commission with the allegation that her project partner had published parts of the project idea as the sole author of an essay. The Commission requested a statement from the accused party. This statement did not indicate any consciously improper use of the ideas. The Commission stated that it was difficult to separate individual contributions to a joint proposal after the fact and to determine which applicant had contributed which ideas (and when). The OeAWI Office offered to arrange for mediation by an independent professional mediator, but this offer was rejected by the party who had submitted the inquiry.

#### **Inquiries to and advising by the OeAWI Office**

In 2014, an additional 17 inquiries (in the form of e-mails, telephone calls or face-to-face advising) were received by the Office of the Agency for Research Integrity. In those instances, the Office performed an advisory function or served as a mediator between the parties to the conflict. In a majority of those inquiries, the parties first obtain advice and then make efforts to resolve the conflicts themselves. In these activities, the OeAWI Office often accompanied the process over longer periods of time. The Office also receives inquiries from ombudspersons or other employees of research institutions who have to deal with alleged cases of scholarly misconduct at their institutions. The Agency also provides advisory support in such cases.



Overview: Inquiries submitted to the Commission and the OeAWI Office<sup>1</sup>

### **Preparation of national guidelines for good practice in science and research**

In some of the cases it has handled, the Commission has observed that the rules of good practice in science and research are not standardised across its member organisations and that they even contradict each other in some respects. As a result, a process was launched to standardise those rules. For this purpose, the Commission prepared a draft, which was sent out to the member organisations for an initial round of comments. The Agency plans to publish the final documents in 2015, once all 37 member organisations (as of January 2015) have submitted comments. The member organisations will be asked to implement those guidelines accordingly.

<sup>1</sup> The latter inquiries have only been documented since 2011.



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Prof. Pieter C. Emmer

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