

RCUK Policy and Guidelines on the Governance of Good Research Conduct

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1 To whom in RCUK should a Research Organisation report potential research misconduct (or any concerns relating to previously upheld instances of research misconduct)?

A1 The issue should be reported to [the designated contact](#) in the relevant Research Council(s), where the matter concerns someone funded by, or engaged with the Research Councils (including acting as a supervisor for an RCUK postgraduate student or engaged with peer review activities) even if it is about work not connected with a grant from a UK Research Council (page 7 of the [RCUK policy](#)). The designated contacts are the RCUK Good Research Conduct policy leads for each council; they are happy to provide advice by e-mail or by telephone, including anonymously, prior to reporting formally, if required.

Q2 When should a Research Organisation report an alleged case of research misconduct to the Research Council(s)?

A2 We require first reporting at the stage when a reasonable case could be argued that research misconduct may have occurred and when the decision is made internally to undertake an [informal inquiry](#) – i.e., the stage, known variously but not exclusively as the ‘preliminary’ or ‘screening’ stage, that is in place locally to determine whether or not there are sufficient grounds to begin a formal investigation into the alleged research misconduct, and which would normally begin when it has been determined that it is unlikely that an allegation is simply mistaken, frivolous, vexatious or malicious. Subsequent stages of reporting during the local investigation processes are detailed at page 7 of the [RCUK policy](#).

Allegations that are very clearly mistaken, frivolous, vexatious and/or malicious, clearly do not concern research misconduct, or relate solely to a difference of scientific opinion, should not be reported via this route.

We expect the decision on whether to inform us to be made by the Research Organisation in each instance, based on the individual circumstances of the allegation.

Q3 What information is needed by the Research Councils when reporting an instance of potential research misconduct?

A3 The [minimum](#) information needed is:

- whether the allegation concerns research or training directly supported by a Research Council grant or grants and, if so, whether the grant(s) are current or historic;
- whether the allegation concerns research or training that is included in an application to one of the RCs, and is still being considered by the Council;
- whether the individual is an applicant on any funding applications currently under consideration by any RCs;
- the nature of the allegation (eg. fabrication, falsification, etc. – pages 6 and 7 of the [RCUK policy](#));

- whether the individual is a member of any Research Council advisory panel or body (including any peer review committee or pool).
- Information on any action taken by the university to mitigate or manage risk (e.g. if the individual(s) against whom the allegation was made have been suspended or if work on the grant has been stopped).

We would not normally need to know the name of individual(s) (the respondent), particularly at the informal/ preliminary/ screening stage of investigation, but it is our preference that this disclosure is made in serious cases: identifiable data are essential if a Research Council needs to consider, for example (and by exception), suspending a grant or requesting that an individual no longer acts as a PhD supervisor. In instances of uncertainty, the Research Organisation should discuss with the [designated contact of the relevant Research Council](#).

See also answers A4 and A7.

Q4 What action will Research Councils take if informed of an investigation?

A4 The information is used by the Research Councils, primarily, to allow us to track individual cases and provide the reassurance that we need, as funders, about the integrity of the research that we fund, and to safeguard the proper use of public funds.

Our default position is not to take responding action during the Research Organisation's investigation, but to await the conclusion of local due process.

On being notified of an allegation, the Research Council(s) will undertake assessment internally on our risk exposure regarding research, funding and reputation, in order to confirm that the Research Council(s)' default position is within tolerable limits. However, we cannot be prescriptive about such tolerance limits, as each case is considered on its own merit. Accordingly, we expect to be provided with identifiable information where any case has the potential for very serious implications for the council(s), or there is an obvious need to take action to manage risk to research participants, animal welfare, or to prevent the potential misuse of public funds. We will make the Research Organisation aware of and discuss any action.

Q5 How will Research Councils protect information relating to a research misconduct allegation provided by the Research Organisation, including that which may identify individuals?

A5 We recognise that an allegation of research misconduct, regardless of whether or not it is ultimately found to have substance, has the potential to do serious and lasting damage to the reputation of a researcher. Data regarding allegations are therefore stored and processed appropriately, confidentially, securely and sensitively, and retained and/or released only where there is a legitimate reason for doing so. The Research Organisation(s) concerned will be advised if any data are to be released beyond the Research Councils.

All information provided pertaining to a misconduct allegation is recorded by the receiving Research Council for an audit trail. Each allegation is given its own unique (eg. alphanumeric) identifier. (If the allegation has been reported to more than one Research Council, only one identifier will be used). The information is recorded on a local log, which is maintained securely and confidentially, with limited internal access granted only to nominated individuals within the relevant Research Council's

electronic back-office. In addition to the local log, a central redacted log (with the names of individuals removed) is held as outlined in Answer A6.

As information on individual cases is collected for the purpose of ensuring the proper use of public funds, it continues to be necessary for the Research Councils to collect and retain this information. The Research Councils take their obligations under the Data Protection Act very seriously, and adhere to all legal requirements accordingly under data protection legislation. As part of our work to prepare for the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), we will be revisiting relevant guidance, terms and conditions, and policies to ensure that Research Organisations and researchers are provided with information on the data collected by the Research Councils and how it might be used.

Information on individual cases is retained in line with the relevant Research Council's information retention policy. Current policies may also be subject to further revision as governance is harmonised within UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

Q6 Who within the relevant Research Council has access to the information, other than the named point of contact, and is it ever shared with other Research Councils or other organisations?

A6 Within each Research Council, and within RCUK, information may be shared confidentially, through normal management arrangements, including across senior management and in serious cases with research grants managers, as necessary.

Each council maintains its own log of research misconduct allegations, as outlined in Answer A5, which may include identifiable information. The Research Councils also maintain a central, redacted, log of research misconduct allegations which is compiled from the individual Council logs but which does not contain identifiable information on individuals.

Information on currently logged cases is therefore shared in confidence, with individual identities redacted where provided, between councils and RCUK/UKRI, as well as with the RCUK Funding Assurance Programme leads.

This central log has been maintained by staff in the RCUK Executive Directorate; responsibility is currently being transferred to UKRI, although information remains within RCUK back-office. It is shared among the designated contacts (see Answer A1), with the aim of:

- providing a basis for councils' policy leads to learn from each other to ensure consistent policy implementation;
- identifying possible duplicate entries;
- enabling strategic policy oversight and identifying any trends of potential concern;
- informing RCUK Funding Assurance audits of Research Organisations.

A central log also helps us answer Parliamentary Questions and Freedom of Information requests about the number and type of misconduct cases. We may also refer to some of this information in our annual Narrative Statements¹ (Commitment 5 of the [UUK Research Integrity Concordat](#)). We will never publish the name of an individual or of a Research Organisation (RO) in relation to specific cases without consulting the RO.

¹ For example: <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/greconreportingforconcordatjun16-pdf/>

Information may also be shared in confidence with other funders to ensure consistency of approach and provide an evidence base for the [UUK Research Integrity Concordat](#) annual statement, thereby reducing the need for additional reporting requirements. When information is shared in the way, the Research Council will inform the employing RO what has been shared and with which other funder(s).

Q7 What information, not provided prior to the formal investigation stage of investigating a research misconduct allegation is needed by the Research Council(s) at the formal stage, and at what point should this be provided?

A7 If the informal/preliminary/screening stage of investigation concludes that the Research Organisation's formal investigation process needs to be triggered, the relevant Research Council(s) should be updated, and information shared in confidence about the respondent's identity, if the Research Organisation's local policy permits and the case falls within any of the following criteria:

- if the respondent is a current PI or Co-I or is being supported by a current grant; and/or
- if the allegation concerns research undertaken during a period in the past when the respondent was the PI or Co-I of, or otherwise supported by, a research council grant; and/or
- if the respondent is currently serving or has served as a member of a research council advisory panel or body at any time since the date of the alleged misconduct.

With the assurance of the Research Councils treating all information confidentially and sensitively (see answers A4 and A5), we request that the identity of the respondent(s) is shared with us at this stage, since it has been established that there is sufficient evidence to warrant formal investigation.

It remains the Research Councils' preference to not take any responding action while a formal investigation is underway, unless we consider that the risk of not doing so exceeds acceptable tolerance limits. This is decided on a case-by-case basis by senior management in each Research Council, although councils reserve the right to confer where more than one council is involved.

Q8 What does RCUK's policy regarding having observer status on Research Organisations' research misconduct investigation panels actually mean in practice?

A8 The Research Councils reserve the right to seek observer status on formal investigations into allegations of research misconduct that involve the councils. This reinforces the importance that the Research Councils attach to Research Organisations dealing with allegations of misconduct in accordance with policy, and ensuring that local procedures are followed properly. We anticipate making requests to observe local proceedings by exception, on a case-by-case basis. Recognising the importance of timeliness, we would not wish to add to local administrative burden or cause delay in due process. It is not anticipated that observers would attend full investigations or hearings, but may instead request access to papers and retain the option to be present for key discussions within the process.

Q9 When might a grant be stopped/further applications not accepted?

A9 The right of a Research Council to stop a grant or refuse further applications is not only in the context of research misconduct, but also for example financial fraud. This

can be initiated by the Research Organisation itself – e.g. the Research Organisation might ask that a grant be put in abeyance if a PI had been suspended. Instances would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

For grant applications, where an allegation was still being investigated, we would normally allow the peer review process to progress as normal, and would not notify peer reviewers of the investigation. If the grant application were successful, we would withhold announcement of funding until the investigation process has been completed and the allegation dismissed. If the allegation were upheld, we may choose to withhold the grant offer to the RO; however, this would be decided on a case-by-case basis.

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