



UK Research Integrity Office
Annual Conference 2015

Case study workshop: 'Bring a problem' and UKRIO Case Studies

13:15 – 14:05

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As with the rest of our annual conference, the issues and case studies in this document will be discussed under the Chatham House Rule.

Issues and problems

1. Information about research projects can be made available on private blogs and websites, sometimes by researchers, sometimes by participants or other involved parties. The information can be confidential or otherwise sensitive. How should we deal with this?
2. How should institutions respond to research misconduct allegations concerning joint published papers – i.e. involving multiple institutions? What are the particular issues and problems associated with this sort of investigation? Do certain disciplines or types of research project pose special challenges?
3. How do you make sure that your ethics committees are, and remain, effective and efficient? This includes if/ how they should be monitored and how to make sure that any monitoring is proportionate and useful.
4. What are the challenges involved when the Respondent in a research misconduct investigation has already left your institution or if s/he leaves partway through an investigation?
5. What disclosures can you make at the conclusion of a research misconduct investigation to external bodies who are not directly involved in the research? For example, the new employer of a former student or member of staff who has just had an allegation of plagiarism upheld against them.
6. Sanctions for PhD students involved in misconduct: are the options available too limited compared to staff? As a result, can PhD students end up being treated overly harshly or leniently?
7. Should institutions have some sort of agreed scale of sanctions for misconduct allegations, to ensure consistency/ parity between investigations and to avoid setting incorrect precedents? Or it is unfair not to judge each case according to its own circumstances?

Delegate-submitted case study I

As part of a public degree exhibition a student wishes to burn texts which under the UK Counterterrorism Act are censored or considered illegal to own because their content is thought to incite religious or other violence.

The student has: examined international laws on counterterrorism; researched high-profile court cases featuring terrorist literature; allegedly sought support from high-profile solicitors and barristers specialising in terrorism and legislation to seek advice on the legality of publically displaying the contentious texts.

The student promises to seek police permission to support for his exhibition.

The student wants to ceremoniously burn some of the illegal texts which are of an Islamist, Jewish, Christian, IRA and other political and religious nature. The texts in question have featured in High Court cases related to terrorism.

The aim of the project is to examine, through the act of staging this exhibition, the limits of artistic freedom in the UK and the nature of what counts as terrorism when it comes to possessing contentious literature.

Ethical and Administrative issues:

- Some persons attending exhibition might take offense at religious texts being burnt or may find the texts themselves disturbing.
- Project examines freedom of speech, but at same time promotes illegal behaviour by keeping the controversial literature on campus.
- The University has become, without its consent, an active 'participant' in the student's project which seeks to 'test the boundaries' of artistic freedom.
- The student's work has already been mentioned in a widely read newspaper a few years previous and a Freedom of Information request was submitted to the University requesting further details about this student's work. The university has reason to believe the student themselves had instigated the request for information, but was unable to prove this conclusively.
- The controversial artistic, academic and political questions raised are in line with the academic fields of enquiry at the University so the project could be both a reputational risk as well as a potential reputational bonus (a point which the ethics application submitted by the student specifically comments on)
- The student has submitted the application very late and the degree exhibition is in a few weeks. The time to get governmental/ police approval too short.
- Expert advice on subject with qualified barrister likely to be expensive.
- Student unable to provide evidence of alleged guidance and information received by leading barrister specialising in terrorism legislation.

How should the university respond?

Delegate-submitted case study 2

You have recently been given the responsibility for administering a case to be heard under the research misconduct procedure. You have been informed about an ongoing matter relating to an allegation made by a former member of staff against a colleague whilst they were both staff at the institution. You have an undated note of a preliminary panel meeting on the matter and it appears to you from the information you have that the panel was incorrectly constituted. It recommends that a full investigation should take place.

The initiator of the allegation has recently contacted you to find out what is happening as it is over six months since he raised the allegation and he has not heard anything for some time. The respondent is on an honorary contract with the institution and has not replied to letters sent to their most recent address.

What do you do with respect to this allegation?

Delegate-submitted case study 3

The ethics review process at University X is based on a two-tier system in which student research projects are reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee in academic faculties and staff research projects are reviewed by a central University Research Ethics Committee. In addition to reviewing staff projects, the UREC also receives referred applications from the faculty-based RECs if there are disputes about the decisions made by those RECs.

An allegation has been received from a member of the public who claims that they were misled by researchers on a project that was sponsored by the University. You have been asked to look into the substance of the allegation. On initial review of the allegation, it is apparent that the research in question was conducted by a team of researchers, two members of academic staff and three PhD students. On requesting evidence of the ethical approval for the project, it is clear that there are anomalies between what was provided as a description of the proposed research in the application made by the staff and the application made by the PhD students. No Participant Information Sheets were included with the staff application and those provided with the PhD student application are incomplete. There is also no evidence that the two proposals were treated as a whole but as separate projects.

What do you do with respect to this allegation?