

Commission on Research Integrity and Plagiarism Control Group

Report: 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018

1. Research integrity at the SNSF - An overview

Research integrity is of high importance to the SNSF. It has appointed the Commission on Research Integrity and the Plagiarism Control Group to prevent and investigate cases of scientific misconduct. In this document, these two bodies report on their activities.

The Plagiarism Control Group checks the research proposals submitted to the SNSF (i) at random (5% of all submissions) and (ii) on being alerted to potential cases of scientific misconduct by persons outside the Administrative Offices of the SNSF. In the year under review, the Plagiarism Control Group and the Commission on Research Integrity had to investigate a similar number of cases as in the previous years (Fig. 1). In 2018, the Plagiarism Control Group and the Commission on Research Integrity examined a total of 259 applications.

In a first step, the examination consists in searching for identical passages by means of a special software. Detailed investigations into suspected scientific misconduct cases were deemed necessary for 91 applications, as they either contained an increased number of such passages or were reported as suspected cases by persons outside the Administrative Offices of the SNSF.

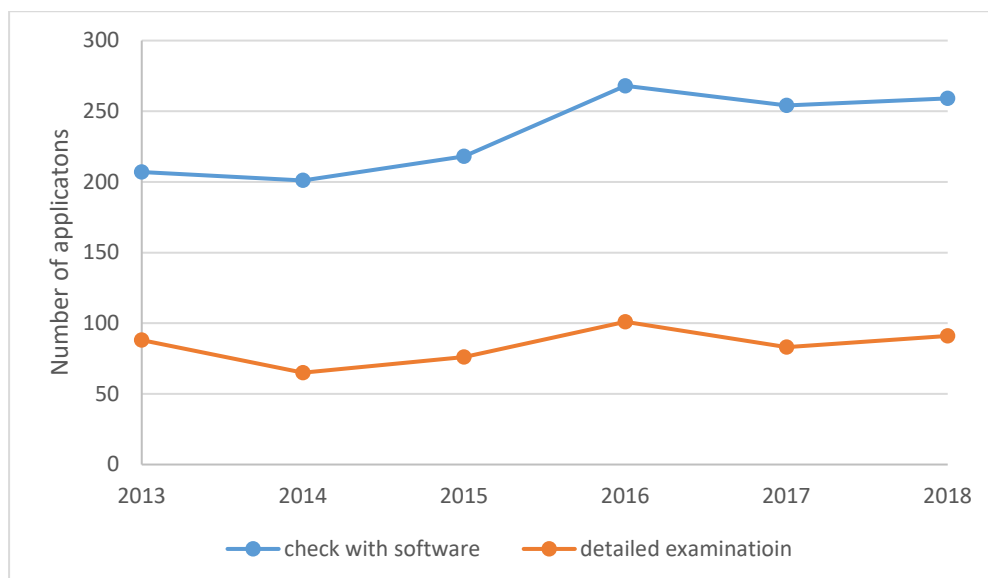


Fig. 1: Overview of the applications examined by the Plagiarism Control Group from 2013-2018. The Group uses a software that analyses research plans submitted with applications for research funding (259 applications in 2018). In cases of suspected scientific misconduct, a detailed investigation is carried out (91 applications in 2018).

The Integrity Commission dealt with **seven cases** in the report year. In three cases, it recommended imposing sanctions to the Presiding Board of the Research Council. In one case the Commission decided to abandon the proceedings. Three cases were still pending by the end of the report period. A comparable number of sanctions were imposed in the report year as in previous years (Fig. 2).

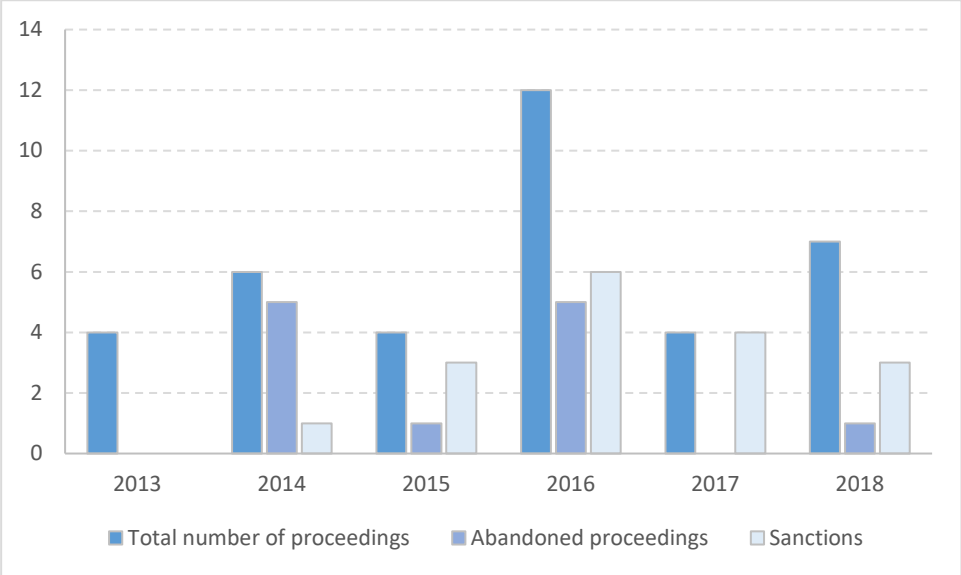


Fig. 2: Overview of the cases that the Integrity Commission dealt with in 2018. The figures refer to proceedings that were opened and/or concluded in the year under review.

2. Framework and bodies

2.1 Plagiarism Control Group

The Plagiarism Control Group continues to use the software *iThenticate* to compare texts and investigate plagiarism. The findings of the software are the starting point for further, more detailed checks.

The licence for *iThenticate* was hence renegotiated for a further year at the same price, factoring in the steadily increasing number of tests (testing one document costs \$19.80). The licence includes unrestricted access to the repository that enables the highly efficient matching of documents.

2.2 Commission on Research Integrity (“Commission”)

The Commission on Research Integrity is responsible for processing cases of alleged scientific misconduct in connection with applications for SNSF grants or the use thereof. Investigating suspected misconduct in the *application process* is the primary responsibility of the Commission. If the suspected misconduct concerns the *use of SNSF funding*, the Commission according to the subsidiarity principle¹ usually awaits the decision taken by the institution (cf. chapter 3.3). The Commission may assist the institution where the misconduct is believed to have taken place in its investigation.

By agreement with the President of the Commission, the investigation is coordinated by the commission member of the legal department and the scientific officer of the concerned body. A group of four is responsible for examining suspected cases (Article 2 of the Organisational Regulations²):

- a. President
- b. Delegate of the relevant evaluation body (division or specialised committee)
- c. Scientific officer from the body concerned
- d. Representative of the Legal department

(c. and d. are also members of the Plagiarism Control Group of the Administrative Offices).

If the Commission comes to the conclusion that scientific misconduct has occurred, it submits a recommendation to impose sanctions to the Presiding Board of the Research Council.

2.3 Retraction watch / pubpeer

Blogs such as the US retractionwatch.com and pubpeer.com are gaining in importance. However, not every retraction of a publication and not every critical comment or suspicion made on pubpeer is due to scientific misconduct. Any pointers in this direction need to be examined with the utmost care and it is important not to prejudge those concerned. The SNSF takes note of reports on retractionwatch and pubpeer and decides to either pursue them further or not, as the case may be.

¹ Regulations on scientific misconduct

http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/ueb_org_fehlverh_gesuchstellende_e.pdf

² Regulations of the Commission on Research Integrity

http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/organisationsreglement_kommission_wiss_integritaet_e.pdf

3. Consideration of cases

The cases examined by the Plagiarism Control Group and the Commission on Research Integrity are described below.

3.1 Plagiarism Control Group

3.1.1 Practice

Five per cent of the submitted applications³ are randomly picked and their research plans checked for copied or wrongly quoted text passages or other content (figures, tables, etc.). The Plagiarism Control Group conducts these analyses using the *iThenticate* software, which compares the research plans with texts on the internet and scientific databases (primarily www.crossref.org/cross-check/index.html). Only results with a similarity index⁴ of $\geq 10\%$ and/or the largest possible degree of correspondence⁵ of >200 words are followed up more in detail. Besides these spot checks, the Group investigates all suspected cases reported to them by the evaluators (referees and external reviewers), by the rule-breaking researchers themselves or by informers. Based on a detailed analyses, the Group then decides whether the suspicions are justified and whether the case should be forwarded to the Commission for further investigation.

The consequences of cases of plagiarism are decided based on the amount of text copied without proper referencing (share of whole text, number of words), structure (longer passages or individual sentences) and content (general, current state of research, methods or research hypothesis). Incorrectly quoted passages from the applicant's own⁶ publications are considered to be less serious than actual plagiarism and no sanctions are imposed in such cases. However, making earlier research work / publications not transparent may under certain circumstances still be regarded as scientific misconduct. The decision to investigate a suspected case also depends on the results of a comparative analysis of the recently examined cases. In borderline cases (minor errors), the Plagiarism Control Group sends applicants a written statement reminding them of the rules of good scientific practice. This reminder does not constitute sanctions of any kind, and it does not affect the evaluation of the application in any way.

When a suspected case of misconduct is forwarded to the Commission, the President decides whether to formally open proceedings or not.

3.1.2 Analyses in 2018

In 2018 the Control Group conducted random checks on 246 applications. For 168 applications, plagiarism could already be ruled out based on the analysis conducted by the software; 78 research plans needed to be checked in detail. The Control Group established that four applications had breached the rules of good scientific practice. However, in three cases (i) only isolated passages and/or (ii) only a few works of the applicants themselves had not been correctly cited. In these cases the Plagiarism Control Group sent the applicants a written reminder of the rules of good scientific practice. One case was forwarded to the Commission for further clarification.

In addition to the random checks 13 cases of suspected scientific misconduct were reported to the Plagiarism Control Group by persons outside the Administrative Offices. Most of these reports were

³ 5% per funding scheme, only for full research applications. Lead agency projects, which are assessed by an external partner, so-called "excellence grant" projects, which are subject to a simplified evaluation process, and pre-proposals are excluded.

⁴ Percentage of texts identified by the software as identical with other published sources.

⁵ Largest source identified by the software.

⁶ Publications with co-authors (regardless of the position of the authors) are not considered "own" publications

sent by Research Council members or external reviewers. Only few concerned self-report. All 13 reports were studied in detail by the Control Group. In five cases, suspicions of scientific misconduct proved to be unfounded and no further action was taken. In two cases, the Control Group found minor irregularities as regards the citation of original sources and concluded the control by sending the applicants a written reminder of the rules of good scientific practice. In six cases, a serious research misconduct was identified based on a detailed control, and the cases were therefore forwarded to the Integrity Commission.

Tab. 1: Checks and decisions by the Plagiarism Control Group between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2018

	Examinations		Decisions	
	Checking with the software	Detailed checking	Minor breach ^a	Forwarded to Integrity Commission
Random checks	246	78	8	1
Reports by externals	13	13	3	6
Total	259	91	11	7

^a: if the detailed control yields a minor research misconduct, the case is closed by sending the applicants a reminder of the rules of good scientific practice.

3.2 Commission on Research Integrity

3.2.1 Cases

Overall the Commission dealt with seven cases. In three cases the Commission recommended to impose sanctions. In one case proceedings were abandoned and three cases were still pending at the end of the report period.

The number of sanctions imposed in the report period was in the order of the previous years (0 to 4 cases per year since 2009, 3 on average). The cases concerned Division III and Division InterCo. All of the cases involved experienced researchers.

Tab. 2: Investigations and decisions by the Commission on Research Integrity between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2018

Investigations	
Investigations launched during the period 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018.	7
Decisions	
Sanctions imposed in the report period (warning, ban on submissions)	3 warnings
Abandonment of proceedings	1
Investigations still pending at the end of the report period	3
Total number of cases investigated	7

3.2.2 Meetings

All cases were discussed via Email/phone calls and decisions within the Commission taken by circular letter.

3.3 Investigations conducted by research institutions

In the report year, the SNSF also dealt with cases where the relevant universities/institutions were primarily responsible for.

3.3.1

In May 2018 an institution made public that it had sanctioned two researchers for scientific misconduct. Both researchers had been funded by the SNSF. According to the research integrity regulations (article 5) the SNSF had to make sure that all aspects relevant to the SNSF had been covered by the proceedings conducted at the institution. The researchers were asked to make a statement about the link between SNSF funding and the misconduct. In their statements to the SNSF they both argued and made plausible that the research results and manuscripts where research misconduct had been found had not been supported by the SNSF but that the funding had been used for other work. Consequently the SNSF had no entry point to impose sanctions.

3.3.2

A few other cases of alleged misconduct in connection with the use of SNSF funding were reported to the Commission. According to the principle of subsidiarity the Commission referred the informers to the institution concerned while at the same time sharing the reported allegations with the institution and asking them to deal with the case.

4. Activities, events

4.1 Plenary meeting

According to the Regulations of the Commission, the Commission convenes at least once a year for a plenary meeting. In 2018, the plenary meeting took place on 5 June. The Commission looked at an overview of sanctions decided by the SNSF during the last years and a comparison to sanctions made public by the German DFG and the Austrian FWF. The Commission discussed and confirmed the adequacy of SNSF's sanctioning practice.

4.2 Code of Conduct redrafted by Expert Group

The Regulations on scientific misconduct of the SNSF are based on a publication of the Academies that goes back to 2008: "Integrity in scientific research; principles and procedures" ("guidelines"). In June 2018 the Academies relaunched a process of redrafting and refining these guidelines together with a group of experts and with the support of the administrative offices of the Academies, swissuniversities, SNSF and Innosuisse. The work started in late 2018 and will continue throughout 2019.

4.3 ENRIO

As announced in last years' report the SNF used to be a member of Science Europe's (SE) Working Group on research integrity. This working group's mandate expired in spring 2017 and it was decided not to renew it for the time being. In order to maintain contacts and a network with actors in the field of research integrity in Europe, the SNSF started the process of becoming a member of ENRIO (European Network of Research Integrity Offices). In its October 2018 meeting in Stockholm a delegate of the Commission presented the SNSF and its activities in the field of research integrity. ENRIO is expected to decide about SNSF's full membership during its next meeting (Prague, end of March 2019).

Annex I

Composition of the Commission on Research Integrity of the SNSF

In the report year 2018, the Commission was composed as follows:

Chair

- Prof. Nadja Capus, President

Delegates from the divisions and Specialised Committees of the National Research Council

- Prof. Danièle Tosato-Rigo, Div. I
- Prof. Andrew Barry, Div. II
- Prof. Didier Trono, Div. III (until 31 October 2018); Prof. Bart Deplancke (as of 1 November 2018)
- Prof. Regina Aebi-Müller, Div. IV
- Prof. Michael Hottiger, FA Careers
- Prof. Anna Fontcuberta i Morral, Specialised Committee International Cooperation
- Prof. Alexander Grob, Specialised Committee Interdisciplinary Research

Scientific officers (also members of the Plagiarism Control Group of the Administrative Offices)

- Gilles Wasser, Div. I
- Dr. Liz Kohl, Div. II (until 31 May 2018); Dr. Marc Türler (1 June 2018 until 30 September 2018); Dr. Tania Bühler (as of 1 November 2018)
- Dr. Martin von Arx, Div. III
- Dr. Claudia Rutte, Div. IV
- Dr. Martin Christen, Dr. Marco Bieri, Careers
- Dr. Stéphanie Boder-Pasche, Dr. Stephanie Hoppeler, InterCo

Representative of the Legal Department

- Claudia Lautenschütz (deputy: Inge Blatter)

Administrative secretariat

- Daniela Büschlen, Secretariat Legal Department

28.05.2019/mvo/cla

Annex II

Report of cases decided during the period 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2018

Sanctions

1.

Source	External Reviewer
Allegation	Incorrect listing of multiple publications in the publication list
Investigation	Applicant claimed that the incorrect listings were not intentional and happened due to time pressure
Decision	Sanction (written reprimand)

2.

Source	Random check
Allegation	Several instances of non-citation of various sources throughout the application documents, including in the detailed research plan.
Investigation	Applicant claimed text by someone else as his own hypothesis; several instances of non-citation in detailed research plan.
Decision	Sanction (written reprimand)

3.

Source	Referee
Allegation	Ca. 520 words (ca. 26%) from state of research and ca. 860 words (ca. 9%) from detailed research plan (total of ca. 1499 words, ca. 14%) taken from various sources without proper quotation.
Investigation	The authors neglected the quotation of papers that summarized literature and cited the original authors instead; text by a person not from the project team is repeatedly used without citation and without the paper's inclusion in the bibliography; location of problematic text excerpts in state of the art, but 5 sources in project implementation part, i.e., detailed research plan.
Decision	Sanction (written reprimand)

Investigation abandoned

4.

Source	External Reviewer
Allegation	Applicant is suspected of having copied research ideas of former mentor.
Investigation	Applicant was asked for a statement. He/she argued somewhat (but not in all aspects) plausibly that there are significant differences between the research topics. The Commission took into account that applicant is a newly established PI still in the process of differentiating his/her research.
Decision	Investigation is closed, no sanction but reminder of good scientific practices. (<i>Hinweis</i>).

Reminder letters

In 11 cases the Plagiarism Control Group concluded that the findings did not justify the opening of an investigation but that the researchers in question had to be informed of the findings and reminded of the rules of good scientific practice (*Hinweis*).