

# Plagiarism and incorrect citation in applications submitted to the Swiss National Science Foundation

October 2010 to October 2012

## 1. Background

The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) has lately been confronted with several cases of plagiarism and incorrect citation in the funding applications submitted by researchers. Attention was brought to these cases by the experts charged with evaluating the applications, or they came to light during random checks. The SNSF has used a software for comparing texts in order to do random checks as well as for analysing suspected cases in detail. This report describes the SNSF procedures applied in cases of plagiarism or incorrect citation and provides an overview of the cases identified in the applications submitted between October 2010 and October 2012. It also takes stock of the utilisation of the software over the past two years.

## 2. Procedure

The Regulations of the National Research Council on the treatment of scientific misconduct by applicants and grantees<sup>1</sup> define the procedure for handling scientific misconduct at the SNSF in general. The current practice with regard to plagiarism and incorrect citations, which is based on the experience gained by the SNSF as well as on national and international standards<sup>2</sup>, is outlined below.

### 2.1 Definition

Plagiarism can be defined as the "appropriation of another person's results or findings as one's own"<sup>1</sup>. This includes adopting not only scientific content (ideas, results, methods) without appropriate reference to the author(s), but also the formulation of scientific facts (e.g. the state of the art of a research domain) as the latter is a form of scientific work in itself. The citation must be clear and understandable for the reader and provide a verifiable source. If a text is copied, the original source must be mentioned nearby and the text must be appropriately formulated or marked by quotation marks.

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<sup>1</sup> [Regulations of the National Research Council on the treatment of scientific misconduct by applicants and grantees](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Integrity in scientific research](#) (Académies suisses des sciences, 2008), [The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) (European science foundation, ALL European academies, 2011)

Adopting one's own work without a correct citation does not constitute plagiarism in the strict sense, but is nonetheless considered to contravene the rules of good scientific practice.

## **2.2 Checking and handling of cases**

Any suspicion of an incorrect citation in an application submitted to the SNSF is studied minutely and confidentially by the Administrative Offices in collaboration with the National Research Council. An inquiry is either launched based on a hint from an expert or if suspect passages are revealed by random checks. For the random checks and for the analysis of the reported cases, the SNSF has been using a software since 2010 which identifies similarities between texts. The software allows for a detailed comparison of the text of an application based on the Internet and databases of scientific literature.

The investigation may bring to light minor omissions and inaccuracies in the citation of sources, notably because the software pinpoints even minor similarities between the texts. In such cases, the SNSF reminds the applicant of the standards with regard to scientific integrity. Such minimal errors are not considered to be cases of plagiarism and are managed exclusively by the Administrative Offices of the SNSF. Such reminders are independent of the scientific evaluation of the application and do not in any way influence it.

If the inquiry confirms the suspicion of plagiarism, the relevant evaluation body interrupts the evaluation of the application. In addition, sanctions are imposed on the applicant according to the gravity of the case via a warning or a written reprimand. The most serious cases are looked into by the Presiding Board of the National Research Council, which may demand the reduction, blockage or repayment of the grant, or even temporarily ban the applicant from submitting applications. Various factors are taken into account in estimating the gravity of the misconduct. Plagiarism of a text on the state of research or standard methods is considered less serious than plagiarism concerning ideas and original results. Furthermore, the gravity of the case also depends on the amount of material plagiarised. Finally, the SNSF may take into account certain extenuating or aggravating circumstances depending on the context of the plagiarism. The person accused of plagiarism is always invited to state his/her position with regard to the accusations and, in serious cases, has the option to be heard by representatives of the Administrative Offices and the National Research Council. The decision of the SNSF is appealable.

## **3. Plagiarism and incorrect citation**

Among the applications submitted between October 2010 and October 2012, the SNSF has dealt with six cases of plagiarism. Three of these cases were reported by the experts, the other three came to light through random checks in 387 applications. The table in the Annex presents a summary of the cases along with the imposed sanctions.

## **4. Situation up to now and outlook**

The SNSF considers the number of cases of plagiarism and incorrect citation detected during the pilot phase of the software as worthy of attention. Three of these cases were discovered during random checks, whereas the three others were reported by experts. For the most part, the faults were unintentional. The SNSF has therefore decided to send more information to applicants on the practice of correct citation in a proposal. In addition, the SNSF will continue to use the soft-

ware and perform random checks; more work will also be needed on sensitising the experts with regard to plagiarism as the experts play a key role in detecting misconduct. The experiences gained in the pilot phase have also been integrated into an ongoing analysis of the handling of suspected cases.

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## Annex

Cases of plagiarism and incorrect citation addressed among the applications submitted between October 2010 and October 2012

Source of suspicion	Result of inquiry	Sanction
Expert	Significant passages from five different sources were used in the research plan without being correctly marked as citations. The copied text runs to more than 1,900 words, thus comprising approx. 20% of the research plan. The introductory, methodical and general chapters of the research plan are affected. The fact that no research results or ideas were plagiarised is extenuating. These acts were probably not wilful as most of the copied sources are mentioned and quoted elsewhere in the research plan. However, the references are not linked to the problematic passages, which cannot therefore be recognised as citations by the reader. The fact that the applicant has advanced quite far in his/her career and has ample experience is regarded as an aggravating circumstance.	Exclusion from the application procedure for 12 months (incl. suspension of evaluation during the inquiry)
Expert	Significant passages from three different sources (including Wikipedia) were used in the research plan without being clearly marked as quotations. The copied texts run to more than 1,300 words, thus comprising approx. 11.5% of the research plan. Affected are the introductory chapters of the research plan, 30% of which had been copied word for word. The fact that no research results or ideas were plagiarised is extenuating. None of the corresponding sources are mentioned anywhere in the research plan or in the bibliography. The fact that the applicant has reached an advanced stage in his/her career and has ample experience is regarded as an aggravating circumstance.	Exclusion from the application procedure for 12 months
Random check	Substantial passages from seven different sources were used in the research plan without being cited. The copied texts consist of slightly more than 1200 words, thus comprising approx. 12% of the research plan. All of them were written by authors who are not involved in the project. The introductory, methodical and general chapters of the research plan are affected. A member of the research team assumes full responsibility for the malpractice. There are extenuating circumstances in that no research results or ideas were plagiarised and that the applicants have acknowledged their mistake. In addition, the young age of the co-applicant who accepted responsibility offers grounds for clemency. The Research Council is of the opinion that trust is an important factor within any research team. Nonetheless, the main applicant bears a special administrative and scientific responsibility which cannot be delegated. A warning is therefore issued to the applicants who assumed responsibility and to the main applicant.	Written reprimand for both applicants

Source of suspicion	Result of inquiry	Sanction
Random check	In this case approx. 1000 words of a review were used in the introductory chapters of the research plan (13%), without clearly indicating that it is a quotation. The review article was co-authored by an applicant. The research group claims that the relevant passages in the research plan and in the review article were written by the same person. Given the general, introductory nature of the text and the scope, this is regarded as a case of minor misconduct. What is more, the specific situation of the author here contradicts any claims of plagiarism in the strict sense as an applicant has the intellectual property rights to the copied text. However, the omission of the quote does not give the other authors their due and is misleading for the reader as regards the originality of the formulation. This misconduct is sanctioned by a reprimand.	Written reprimand for both applicants
Random check	800 words were taken from a review without any proper citation. The authors of the review are in no way connected to the research team that submitted the application. The copied passage corresponds to 24% of the introductory parts and 16% of the entire research plan. There are extenuating circumstances in that no research results or ideas were plagiarised and the responsible applicant has acknowledged his error and assumed responsibility for it. However, the fact that the applicants are advanced and experienced researchers is considered aggravating.	Exclusion from the application procedure for 12 months (incl. suspension of evaluation during the inquiry)
Expert	In the research plan, three of five sub-projects (60% of the planned research project) were copied without any indication of sources from an article that had not yet been published when the application was submitted. None of the persons involved in the project had any links to the authors of the article. It was considered aggravating that the plagiarised passages were not in the state of research or introductory part of the research proposal but concerned the specific research idea and the methodological approach.	Exclusion from the application procedure for 4 years