

SNSF Commission on Research Integrity and Plagiarism Control Group

Report on the period 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2015

Introduction

The SNSF attaches great importance to the sanctioning and prevention of scientific misconduct. It has appointed the two bodies

- Commission on Research Integrity and
- Plagiarism Control Group

These bodies submit reports on their activities.

1. Research integrity and the SNSF - review of important points in 2015

1.1 Similar number of plagiarism cases

In the year under review, the Plagiarism Control Group and the Commission on Scientific Integrity had to deal with a similar number of research integrity cases as in the previous year. The Plagiarism Control Group examined approx. 220 applications in 2015, around 20 more than in 2014. Three cases of plagiarism were detected and sanctioned by the Presiding Board of the National Research Council in the report year. In eight cases involving incorrect citation, the Plagiarism Control Group sent applicants a written reminder of the rules of good scientific practice (five cases in the previous year).

1.2 Investigation by research institutions

In the report year, the SNSF had to deal with the case of an ETH professor whose publications included data presented in too favourable a light - the case has attracted some publicity. ETH Zurich conducted its own investigation, the results of which were accepted by the person concerned. The Commission therefore decided not to conduct an investigation of its own. Nevertheless, the Presiding Board of the NRC imposed a three-year application ban on the professor because he had breached provisions of the Funding Regulations (incorrect details provided in track record, neglected duty to inform). Two ongoing grants were terminated by the Presiding Board of the NRC.

In March 2016, the Commission received a communication from the USA about a case of suspected plagiarism. In due course it became clear that the message had already been sent to the relevant

institution and the latter had initiated an investigation. The Commission is waiting for the results of the investigation by the relevant institution, which is still ongoing.

1.3 Anonymous reporting

In the report year, the Commission forwarded one reported case of suspected plagiarism, which had been anonymously submitted to the SNSF, to the relevant institution for investigation because of suspected scientific misconduct in the use of an SNSF grant. According to the Regulations, it is primarily the relevant institutions' responsibility to investigate such cases. This anonymous complaint led to a decision of principle to consider anonymous reports if they contain serious allegations; the aim is to unreservedly sanction all cases of scientific misconduct (see 3.2.3).

1.4 Retraction watch

Blogs such as the US retractionwatch.com are gaining in importance. Not every retraction of a publication 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.

2. Context and bodies

2.1 Plagiarism Control Group

The SNSF uses a special software to compare texts and investigate plagiarism. Applications are checked for plagiarism either at random or in response to a report from an evaluator. The Plagiarism Control Group of the SNSF Administrative Offices is responsible for coordinating use of the software across all divisions, for scrutinising suspected cases of plagiarism, and for making decisions on the further course of action with respect to these cases; it also develops standards and procedures for detecting plagiarism. For this purpose it collaborates closely with the SNSF Commission on Scientific Integrity (of which it is a member), which is responsible for investigating cases of suspected plagiarism.

2.2 SNSF Commission on Research Integrity

The SNSF Commission on Research Integrity investigates suspected cases of scientific misconduct on the part of applicants and (subsidiary to the institution at which the alleged misconduct occurred) on the part of holders of SNSF grants¹. If suspicions of scientific misconduct are confirmed by the investigation conducted by the Commission, the Commission recommends that the Presiding Board impose sanctions. A four-person team at the Commission deals with these suspected cases of scientific misconduct (cf. Article 2 of the Organisational Regulations²):

- a. President
- b. Delegate of the relevant evaluation body (division or specialised committee)
- c. Scientific collaborator of the Administrative Offices
- d. Representative of the Legal division

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

¹ Regulations of the National Research Council on the treatment of scientific misconduct by applicants and grantees

² Organisational Regulations of the Commission on Research Integrity

3. Consideration of cases

The plagiarism investigation procedure and the cases examined by the Plagiarism Control Group and the Commission on Scientific Integrity: summaries of the cases resolved in the report year are described in a separate document.

3.1 Plagiarism Control Group

3.1.1 Practice

Five per cent of the submitted applications³ are randomly selected to have 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 a special software that compares the passages from the research plans with texts on the internet and scientific databases. Besides these spot checks, the Group investigates all cases of suspected incorrect citation reported to them by the evaluators (referees and external reviewers). Based on a detailed analysis, the Group identifies the applications in which incorrect citation is suspected and forwards them to the Commission on Research Integrity, which may decide to launch an investigation. The decision to either forward or not forward a suspected case to the Commission depends on the amount of text copied without proper referencing, its structure and its content. In borderline cases (minor errors), the Plagiarism Control Group sends the applicant a written statement reminding them of the rules of good scientific practice. This reminder does not imply any sanctions and is sent regardless of whether the grant application is approved or rejected.

3.1.2 Analyses in 2015

In 2015, 221 applications were checked for incorrect citations. Of these, 204 were chosen at random, whereas 17 were referred to the Group by an evaluator. In 25 cases it was deemed possible that the application involved scientific misconduct. Seven suspected cases were cleared following a detailed analysis. 13 were considered "minor breaches"; in 5 cases an investigation was launched by the Commission on Research Integrity. The Commission confirmed plagiarism in a solitary case, four cases were still pending at the end of the report period. In addition, the Commission completed its investigation of three cases from 2014, confirming suspicions of plagiarism in two of them.

Applications examined by the Plagiarism Control Group between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2015

Reason for examination	Number of examinations	Suspected cases			
		Investigation	No Misconduct	Minor breach	Misconduct (not plagiarism)
Sample	204	2	4	6	
Suspected case reported by evaluators	17	2	3	7	1
Total	221	4	7	13	1

³ 5% per funding scheme

3.2 SNSF Commission on Research Integrity

3.2.1 Cases

Cases considered by the Commission between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2015

Investigations carried over from the report period 1 October 2013 to 31 December 2014	3
Investigations launched during reported period	4
Sanctions imposed in the report period (warning, ban on submissions)	1 warning, 2 bans on submissions
Termination of proceedings	1 (only with regard to the co-applicant)
Investigations pending at the end of the report period	4

The number of sanctions imposed in the report period is in the order of the previous years with 3 cases (between 0 and 4 per year since 2009, 3 on average). In 2015, there were two cases in the life sciences and one case in the social sciences. One case concerned a researcher at the start of his/her career, whereas two cases involved experienced researchers.

3.2.2 Meetings

The Commission held a meeting to discuss cases in January 2015. Another was already discussed at a meeting held in December 2014 and one case was decided by circular letter. The second plenary meeting of the Commission was held on 23 June 2015.

4. Activities, events

Pursuant to the Organisational Regulations for the Commission on Scientific Integrity, the president convenes at least one meeting per year with all members of the Commission in order to discuss organisational and procedural matters as well as fundamental questions related to research integrity. The second plenary meeting of this kind was held on 23 June 2015. Prof. Matthias Mahlmann was elected as the president's deputy (succeeding Prof. Andreas Furrer). In addition, a number of members reported on their work and experiences at the meeting.

5. International networking

The SNSF is represented in the Science Europe working group Research Integrity. During the 2014-2016 mandate, the working group drafted a survey report on Research Integrity Practices in Science Europe Member Organisations, which was approved and adopted by the General Assembly in early May 2016. The report includes an overview of the guidelines, experiences, sanctions and practices of the member organisations as well as recommendations on how to improve them. The working group's mandate was extended for another year as of March 2016. During this period the working group aims to focus on two main goals: 1) Providing input for the revision of the ALLEA Code of Conduct (ALL European Academies) by the end of December 2016, 2) Staging a workshop in early 2017 to discuss lines of action open to the research funding organisations.

Annex

Composition of the Commission on Research Integrity of the SNSF

In the report year 2015, the Commission consisted of the following persons:

Chair

- Prof. Dr. iur. Dr. h.c. Kurt Seelmann, president

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

- Prof. Andreas Furrer (until 22 June 2015), Prof. Matthias Mahlmann (as of 23 June 2015), for Division I
- Prof. Arjen K. Lenstra, Division II
- Prof. Michael Hall, Division III
- Prof. Katharina M. Fromm, Division IV
- Prof. Beatrice Beck Schimmer, Specialised Committee Careers
- Prof. Dominique Soldati-Favre, Specialised Committee International Cooperation
- Prof. Ian Sanders, Specialised Committee Interdisciplinary Research

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

- Marie Guyaz del Aguila, Division I
- Dr. Liz Kohl, Division II
- Dr. Véronique Planchamp, Dr. Martin von Arx (as of 1 April 2015), Division III
- Dr. Marjory Hunt, Division IV
- Dr. Martin Christen, Careers
- Dr. Juliette Pont (until 31 August 2015), Dr. Patricia Jungo (as of 1 September 2015), Interdisciplinary Research
- Elisabeth Schenker, International Cooperation

Representative of the Legal Department

Beatrice Tobler-Miescher, Advocate

Administrative secretariat

Daniela Büschlen/DSR

Deputising arrangements:

- Deputy of the President: election by Commission from the delegates of the Divisions and Specialised Committees, Prof. Andreas Furrer (until 22 June 2015), Prof. Matthias Mahlmann (as of 23 June 2015)
- Deputies of other members: appointed on an ad hoc basis by the President from the members in the member category concerned (Article 2 paragraph 2 of Organisational Regulations).