

# Commission on Research Integrity and Plagiarism Control Group

## Report: 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020

### 1. Research integrity at the SNSF - Overview

[Research integrity](#) is of high importance to the SNSF. The [Regulations on scientific misconduct](#) specify the procedures to be applied in cases of suspected misconduct along with possible penalties (e.g. letter of warning or exclusion from the application process for a limited period) and the procedural rights of the parties concerned.

The SNSF has appointed the Commission on Research Integrity (Commission) and the Plagiarism Control Group (Control Group) to prevent and investigate cases of scientific misconduct. The [Regulations of the Commission on Research Integrity](#) define the organisation and competencies of the Commission on Research Integrity appointed by the National Research Council. In this document, these two bodies report on their activities.

### 2. Framework and bodies

#### 2.1 Control Group

The Control Group is composed of 8 employees of the Administrative Offices who represent the four divisions and three specialised committees as well as the legal department.

The Control Group employs the software iThenticate by Turnitin to compare texts and investigate plagiarism. The software analyses research plans submitted with applications for research funding by searching for identical passages. In cases of suspected scientific misconduct – when research plans either contain an increased number of such passages or are reported as suspected cases by persons inside or outside the Administrative Offices of the SNSF – a detailed analysis is carried out.

#### 2.2 Commission

The Commission is composed of the President, one delegate from each of the divisions and specialised committees of the Research Council plus the Control Group.

The Commission 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 principle usually awaits the decision taken by the institution.

Following the agreement of the Commission's President, an investigation is coordinated by the Control Group delegate of the legal department and the scientific officer of the concerned division or specialised committee. A group of four is responsible for examining suspected cases (Article 4 of the [Organisational Regulations](#)). 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-American [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.

## **3. Plagiarism Control Group**

### **3.1 Practice**

5% of the submitted applications<sup>1</sup> are randomly selected and their research plans checked for copied text passages or other content (figures, tables, etc.). The Control Group conducts these analyses using the iThenticate software, which compares the research plans with texts on the internet and scientific databases. Only results with a similarity index<sup>2</sup> of  $\geq 10\%$  and/or the largest possible degree of correspondence<sup>3</sup> of >200 words are followed up more in detail. Besides these spot checks, the Control Group investigates all suspected cases reported to them by the evaluators (referees and external reviewers), by the rule-breaking researchers themselves, by members of the Administrative Offices or by other informers. Based on detailed analyses, the Control Group then decides whether the suspicions are justified and whether the case should be forwarded to the Commission for further investigation. Before forwarding cases to the Commission, they are presented to the President of the Commission who decides whether to formally open an investigation or not.

The severity of cases of plagiarism is judged based on the amount of text copied without proper referencing (share of whole text, number of words), structure (longer passages, individual sentences or fragments), location in the research plan (general, current state of research, methods or research hypothesis) and content. Incorrectly quoted passages from the applicant's own<sup>4</sup> publications are considered to be less serious than plagiarism of text by uninvolved parties. 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 Control Group sends applicants a written statement reminding them of the rules of

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Percentage of texts identified by the software as identical with other published sources; not yet an indication of scientific misconduct.

<sup>3</sup> Largest source identified by the software.

<sup>4</sup> Publications with co-authors (regardless of the position of the authors) are not considered "own" publications

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. The applicants' institution is not informed.

### 3.2 Analyses in 2020

The Control Group checks the research proposals submitted to the SNSF (i) at random (5% of all submissions) and (ii) when being alerted to potential cases of scientific misconduct by persons inside and outside the SNSF's Administrative Offices. In the year under review<sup>5</sup>, the Control Group ran 357 research plans through the software and carried out a detailed analysis for 93 research plans. In comparison with the previous years, the Control Group examined a larger number of research plans (see Fig. 1). This increase is mainly due to the inclusion of submissions to the Special Call on Coronavirus and Spark.

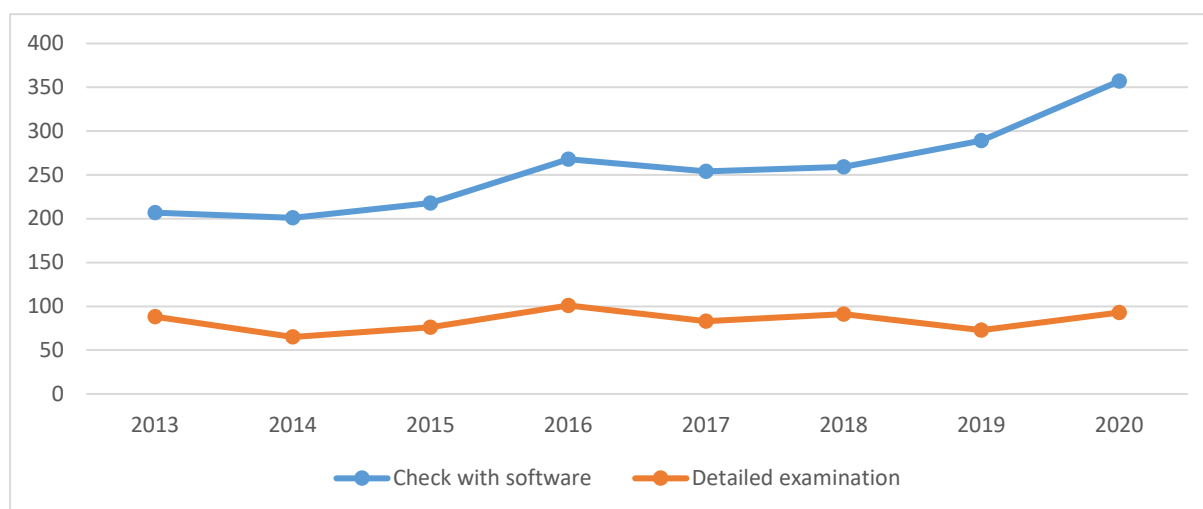


Fig. 1: Overview of the applications examined by the Control Group from 2013-2020: 357 checks with the software and 93 detailed analyses.

#### 3.2.1 Random checks

In 2020, the Control Group conducted random checks on 340 applications (see Fig. 2). For 264 of them, plagiarism could already be ruled out based on the analysis conducted by the software; 76 research plans needed to be checked in detail. The Control Group established that 20 applications that had come from random checks had breached the rules of good scientific practice. However, in 16 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 Control Group sent the applicants a written reminder of the rules of good scientific practice. 3 applications that had come from a random check were forwarded to the Commission for further clarification and were sanctioned. In 1 case, the investigation was abandoned following the applicant's statement.

#### 3.2.2 Reports on suspected scientific misconduct

In addition to the random checks, 17 cases of suspected scientific misconduct were reported to the Control Group by persons inside and outside the Administrative Offices. Most of these reports were

<sup>5</sup> The criterion for inclusion in the 2020 report is that the decision date is in 2020. Hence, analyses may be included that were conducted in 2019 if the corresponding decisions were taken in 2020. Similarly, decisions corresponding to analyses conducted towards the end of 2020 will likely be included in the 2021 report.

sent by Research Council members or external reviewers. 3 alerts were made by members of the Administrative Offices. All 17 reports were studied in detail by the Control Group. There were 9 cases where suspicions of scientific misconduct proved to be unfounded and no further action had to be taken. In 5 cases, the Control Group found minor irregularities as regards the citation of original sources and concluded the analysis by sending the applicants a written reminder of the rules of good scientific practice. In 1 case, the Control Group asked for a statement and when this proved to be sufficiently explanatory, the case was closed. In 2 cases, serious research misconduct was identified and the cases were forwarded to the Commission.

	Examinations		Decisions	
	Checks with the software	Detailed analyses	Minor errors <sup>a</sup>	Forwarded to Commission
Random checks	340	76	16	4
Reports by externals	17	17	8	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>6</b>

<sup>a</sup>. 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.

Fig. 2: Checks and decisions by the Control Group in the report period

## 4. Commission on Research Integrity

### 4.1 Cases

The Commission dealt with 6 cases in the report year. In 5 cases, it recommended imposing sanctions to the Presiding Board of the Research Council. In 1 case the Commission decided to abandon the investigation and a written reminder of the rules of good scientific practice was sent to the applicants. Fig. 3 shows a similar number of investigations and sanctions in the report year compared to previous years.

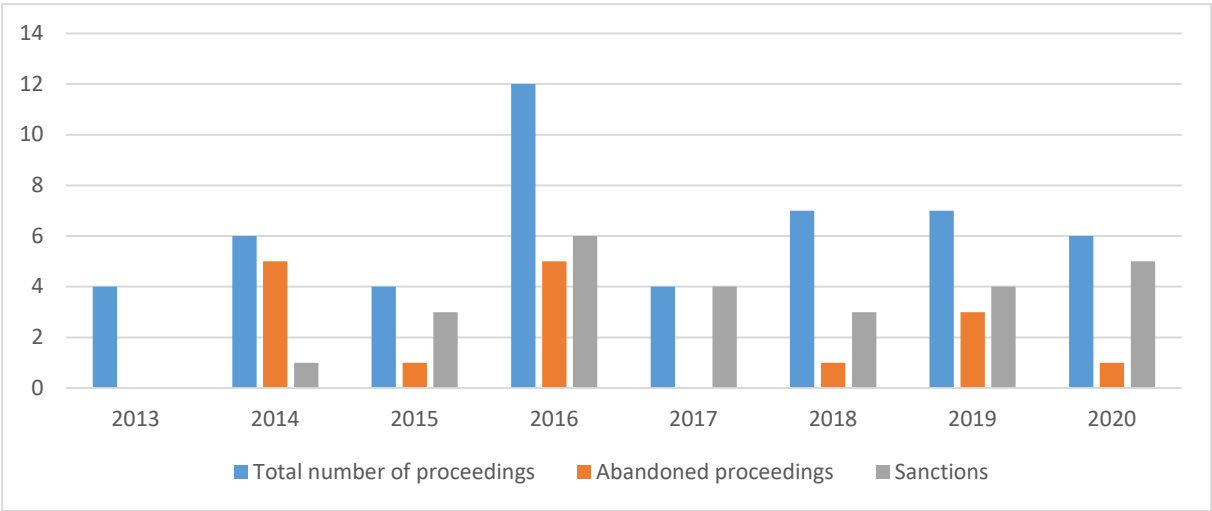


Fig. 3: Overview of the cases that the Commission dealt with from 2013-2020.

The number of sanctions imposed in the report period was in the order of the previous years. The cases concerned the funding instruments Ambizione, Project Funding, Sinergia and Spark and the Divisions II, III, CAR and InterCo. Experienced as well as less experienced researchers were concerned.

<b>Investigations</b>	
Investigations launched during the report period	6
<b>Decisions</b>	
Sanctions imposed in the report period (warning, ban on submissions)	5 (2 warnings, 3 bans)
Abandonment of investigation	1
<b>Total number of cases investigated</b>	
	6

Fig. 4: Investigations and decisions by the Commission in the report period.

All cases were discussed via email/phone and decisions within the Commission taken by circular resolution.

#### **4.2 Investigations conducted by research institutions**

In the report year, no cases of alleged misconduct in connection with the use of SNSF funding were reported to the Commission. According to the principle of subsidiarity the SNSF would refer 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.

### **5. Further activities and events**

#### **5.1 Plenary meeting**

According to the Regulations of the Commission, the Commission convenes at least once a year for a plenary meeting. In 2020, the plenary meeting did not take place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report for 2019 was circulated to the Commission by email.

#### **5.2 iThenticate**

##### **5.2.1 Licence renewal**

The licence for iThenticate was renewed for a further year at a similar price (\$ 7415.98), factoring in the steadily increasing number of tests (testing one document costs CHF 19.40). The licence includes 350 tests and unrestricted access to the repository that enables the highly efficient matching of documents.

##### **5.2.2 Renewal of confidentiality agreement**

The Control Group investigated an exchange between the Control Group's lead and its delegate from the legal services, and the iThenticate account manager regarding the confidentiality agreement. The latter was signed on 29 March 2010, by the SNSF's then-deputy director and the EVP of Business Affairs of iParadigms, which was a precursor of Turnitin. Since iParadigms has since

evolved into Turnitin, the Control Group suggested to renew the confidentiality agreement. Following an extended exchange and several checks by the legal departments of both the SNSF and Turnitin, a new confidentiality agreement with two minor adjustments was signed on 6 October 2020.

### **5.2.3 New process for deletion of uploaded research plans**

In August and September 2020, the Control Group's lead and its delegate from the legal services inquired whether iThenticate still meets the SNSF's confidentiality requirements. The impetus behind this investigation was that the Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner (FDPIC) was conducting the annual assessment of the Swiss-US Privacy Shield Regime. On [8 September 2020](#), it was announced that the FDPIC did not consider the CH-US Privacy Shield to provide adequate level of data protection. It was taken into account that Turnitin and its servers are located in the USA, and that research plans need to be uploaded in order to be analysed by the software.

The Control Group's investigation concluded that it was necessary to introduce new processes to delete the analysed research plans from iThenticate following the analyses. Detailed instructions were elaborated by the Control Group's lead and its delegate from the legal services and distributed to the members of the Control Group. These stipulated the bulk deletion of all research plans analysed by iThenticate before October 2020, plus guidelines on how to delete unproblematic research plans in the future.

## **Annex I**

### **Composition of the Commission on Research Integrity of the SNSF**

In the report year 2020, the Commission was composed as follows:

#### Chair

- Prof. Dr. Nadja Capus, President

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

- Prof. Dr. Danièle Tosato-Rigo, Div. I
- Prof. Dr. Andrew Barry, Div. II
- Prof. Dr. Bart Deplancke, Div. III
- Prof. Dr. Regina Aebi-Müller, Div. IV
- Prof. Dr. Michael Hottiger (until 31.5.2020), Prof. Stuart Lane (as of 1.6.2020), FA Careers
- Prof. Dr. Anna Fontcuberta i Morral, Specialised Committee International Cooperation
- Prof. Dr. Juliane Hollender, Specialised Committee Interdisciplinary Research

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

- Eva Moser, Div. I
- Dr. Tania Bühler, Div. II
- Dr. Barbara Schellenberg, Div. III
- Dr. Claudia Rutte, Div. IV
- Dr. Sönke Bauck, Careers
- Dr. Marco Bieri (until 31.8.2020), Dr. Sarah Glaser (as of 1.9.2020), Careers
- Dr. Vanja Michel, InterCo
- Dr. Stephanie Hoppeler, InterCo (Control Group lead)

#### Representative of the Legal Department

- Claudia Lautenschütz (until 14.10.2020)
- Danielle Jeanneret (as of 15.10.2020)
- Milva Franceschi (as of 15.10.2020)

#### Administrative secretariat

- Daniela Büschlen, Secretariat Legal Department

20 July 2021 mlf/dj/sho

## Annex II

### Report of cases decided during the period from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020<sup>6</sup>

#### Sanctions

##### 1.

Source	SNSF Administrative Offices
Allegation	28% of text plus several illustrations from various sources of third parties without proper quotation for own research plan.
Investigation	The applicant has some understanding into the fact that correct source quotation should have been made, however, she/he does not go into the extent of the affected passages or at least partially describes them as "fragments".
Decision	Sanction (9-month exclusion)

##### 2.

Source	SNSF Administrative Offices
Allegation	About 5-6% of text plus two illustrations from other source of third parties without proper quotation for own research plan.
Investigation	The applicant argued that the references got lost when the various contributions to the research plan were combined
Decision	Sanction (written reprimand)

##### 3.

Source	Referee
Allegation	25% of the application text is not quoted correctly.
Investigation	The applicant refers to the collaboration with a colleague who helped write the research proposal. Since the paper, from which extensive text sections were taken without quotation, had not yet been peer-reviewed, they had not cited it as a source. With regard to the adoption of text from the successful Ambizione application, they assumed that it was a confidential text that did not need to be cited.
Decision	Sanction (7-month exclusion)

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<sup>6</sup> All cases of decision letters sent between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2020.



**4.**

Source	SNSF Administrative Offices
Allegation	31% of the research plan was taken from publications without proper quotation and, in addition, 44% of the research plan was taken literally from a successful application by a third party. The total amount of plagiates (due to overlaps of the two aspects) is around 65% of the research plan.
Investigation	<p>The applicant admits that she/he failed to critically question those parts of the application that were written in collaboration with a project partner; that she/he should in any case have cited one of the sources mentioned in the request for comments in several places; and that she/he "misleadingly under-referenced" text from a successful PostDoc.Mobility application, she/he had "misleadingly referred too little to the work of the colleague" and had "regarded passages of this application too much as original text due to significant support of the colleague in the preparation of the protocol and due to academic seniority".</p> <p>The applicant argued that no references were mentioned when text passages with less than 100 words were used from other source.</p>
Decision	Sanction (19-month exclusion)

**5.**

Source	SNSF Administrative Offices
Allegation	In total, 30% text of the research plan taken from existing publications without proper quotation. The source was neither mentioned in the research plan nor in the bibliography.
Investigation	The applicant justifies the procedure by stating that the project submitted is a continuation of her/his doctoral thesis. The applicant mentions that she/he had contributed an enormous amount to the text passages in question, which is proven by the fact that parts of them had already been published in her/his doctoral thesis.
Decision	Sanction (written reprimand)

**Investigation abandoned**

**6.**

Source	SNSF Administrative Offices
Allegation	Indications of scientific misconduct in the research plan with suspected use of third-party texts that were not proper quoted, as well as re-use of text passages from publications that were not proper or not quoted at all and for which the applicant and other persons involved in the research project are listed as authors.

Investigation	The investigation showed sources of third parties without proper quotation. But the violation of the quotation rules was less than other cases that were sanctioned. Overall, the case was judged as a borderline case.
Decision	The Commission abandoned the investigation. No sanction but reminder of good scientific practices. ( <i>Hinweis</i> ).