

Commission on Research Integrity and Plagiarism Control Group

Report: 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019

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 (Commission) and the Plagiarism Control Group (Control Group) to prevent and investigate cases of scientific misconduct. In this document, these two bodies report on their activities.

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 outside the Administrative Offices of the SNSF. In the year under review, the Control Group and the Commission examined a similar number of cases as in the previous years (see Fig. 1 and 2).

In a first step, the examination by the Control Group consists of searching for identical passages by means of a specific software. Detailed investigations into suspected scientific misconduct cases were deemed necessary for 73 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.

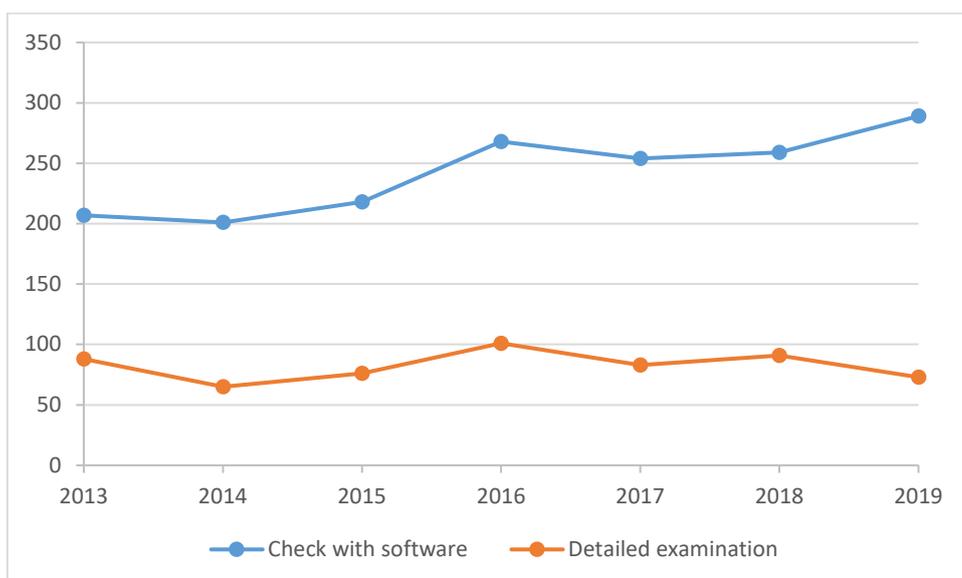


Fig. 1: Overview of the applications examined by the Control Group from 2013-2019. The Control Group uses a software that analyses research plans submitted with applications for research funding (289 applications in 2019). In cases of suspected scientific misconduct, a detailed investigation is carried out (73 applications in 2019).

The Commission dealt with **seven cases** in the report year. In four cases, it recommended imposing sanctions to the Presiding Board of the Research Council. In three cases the Commission decided to abandon the investigation. Fig. 2 shows a similar number of investigations and sanctions in the report year compared to previous years.

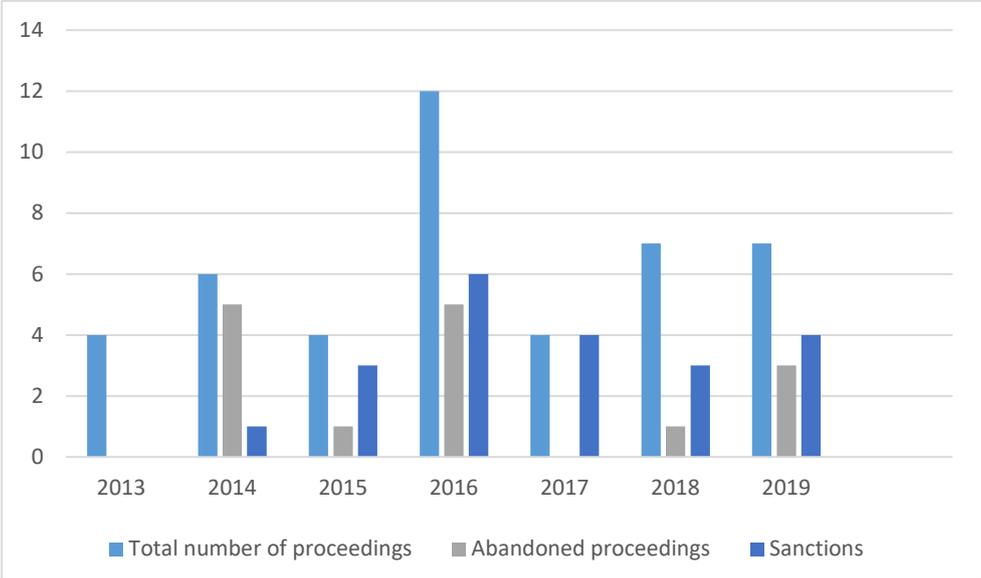


Fig. 2: Overview of the cases that the Commission dealt with in 2019. The figures refer to investigations that were opened and/or concluded in the year under review.

2. Framework and bodies

2.1 Plagiarism Control Group (Control Group)

The 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 CHF 19.80). The licence includes 350 tests and unrestricted access to the repository that enables the highly efficient matching of documents.

2.2 Commission on Research Integrity (Commission)

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 principle¹ usually awaits the decision taken by the institution (cf. chapter 3.3).

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 division. A group of four is responsible for examining suspected cases (Article 2 of the Organisational Regulations²): 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.

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 Control Group and the Commission are described below.

3.1 Plagiarism Control Group

3.1.1 Practice

Five% of the submitted applications³ 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 (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 Control 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 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 own⁶ 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 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.

3.1.2 Analyses in 2019

In 2019 the Control Group conducted random checks on 261 applications. For 202 applications, plagiarism could already be ruled out based on the analysis conducted by the software; 59 research plans needed to be checked in detail. The Control Group established that 13 applications had breached the rules of good scientific practice. However, in 10 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. Three cases were forwarded to the Commission for further clarification.

In addition to the random checks, 28 cases of suspected scientific misconduct were reported to the Control Group by persons outside the Administrative Offices. Most of these reports were sent by Research Council members or external reviewers. Only one concerned self-report. All 28 reports

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

were studied in detail by the Control Group. In 14 cases, suspicions of scientific misconduct proved to be unfounded and no further action was taken. In 10 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 four cases, a serious research misconduct was identified based on a detailed control, and the cases were therefore forwarded to the Commission.

	Examinations		Decisions	
	Checks with the software	Detailed analyses	Minor errors ^a	Forwarded to Commission
Random checks	261	59	10	3
Reports by externals	28	14	10	4
Total	289	73	20	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.

Fig. 3: Checks and decisions by the Control Group between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2019

3.2 Commission on Research Integrity

3.2.1 Cases

Overall the Commission dealt with seven cases. In four cases the Commission recommended to impose sanctions. In three cases investigations were abandoned and a written reminder of the rules of good scientific practice was sent to the applicants. The number of sanctions imposed in the report period was in the order of the previous years (0 to 6 cases per year since 2009, 3 on average). The cases concerned Division I, III and Division InterCo. All of the cases involved experienced researchers.

Investigations	
Investigations launched during the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019.	7
Decisions	
Sanctions imposed in the report period (warning, ban on submissions)	4 (2 warnings, 2 bans)
Abandonment of investigation	3
Total number of cases investigated	7

Fig. 4: Investigations and decisions by the Commission between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2019

3.2.2 Meetings

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

3.3 Investigations conducted by research institutions

In the report year, a few 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 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.

Within the limits of what is legally permissible the SNSF shares relevant information on potential cases under investigation at institutions. After conclusion of an investigation at the institution the SNSF verifies if the results of such proceedings are satisfactory with regard to aspects relevant to the SNSF. The SNSF may conclude that it conducts its own proceedings.

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 2019, the plenary meeting took place on 6 June. The Commission looked back at cases that had been dealt with in 2018 (sanctions and reminder letters). The main topic discussed was the draft of the Code of Conduct on Research Integrity (cf. 4.2 below).

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"). Based on a mandate given by swissuniversities (delegation de recherche) 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 in June 2018. Throughout the year under report the Expert Group (SNSF representative: Prof. Regina Aebi-Müller) met for six working sessions. It studied comparable Codes such as the ALLEA Code (2017) and the Dutch Code of Conduct (2018). By the end of 2019 the Expert Group was close to presenting the first draft version open to review by all partners involved.

4.3 ENRIO

SNSF participated in the March 2019 meeting of ENRIO held in Prague. The new ENRIO chair presented its plans about ENRIO becoming a legal entity and thus being in a better position to get EU funding for its own projects. In the course of discussions the SNSF held with the Academies and with swissuniversities it was decided by the end of 2019 that the Academies would be in the best position to represent Swiss Academia vis-à-vis of ENRIO and would therefore sign a letter of Intent to become a member.

The Academies will share the meeting agendas of ENRIO with swissuniversities and SNSF and will decide on the most suitable delegation to attend ENRIO meetings depending on the topics on the Agenda.

Annex I

Composition of the Commission on Research Integrity of the SNSF

In the report year 2019, 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. Bart Deplancke, Div. III
- Prof. Regina Aebi-Müller, Div. IV
- Prof. Michael Hottiger, FA Careers
- Prof. Anna Fontcuberta i Morral, Specialised Committee International Cooperation
- Prof. Juliane Hollender, Specialised Committee Interdisciplinary Research

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

- Gilles Wasser, Div. I
- Dr. Tania Bühler, Div. II
- Dr. Martin von Arx (until 30 November 2019), Dr. Barbara Schellenberg (as of 1 December 2019), Div. III
- Dr. Claudia Rutte, Div. IV
- Dr. Martin Christen (until 31 August 2019), Dr. Sönke Bauck (as of 1 September 2019), Dr. Marco Bieri, Careers
- Dr. Stéphanie Boder-Pasche (until 31 May 2019), Dr. Vanja Michel (as of 1 June 2019), Dr. Stephanie Hoppeler, InterCo

Representative of the Legal Department

- Claudia Lautenschütz (deputy: Inge Blatter)

Administrative secretariat

- Daniela Büschlen, Secretariat Legal Department

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Annex II

Report of cases decided during the period 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019⁷

Sanctions

1.

Source	SNSF Administrative Offices
Allegation	Incorrect listing of the authors of one of the applicant's most recent publications: applicant left out the name of his supervisor. SNSF qualified this as an important omission as in a previous application the SNSF considered the track record of the applicant as very good but lacking independence of his supervisor.
Investigation	Applicant claimed the omission had happened out of pure negligence and time pressure.
Decision	Sanction (written reprimand)

2.

Source	External Expert
Allegation	All in all about 13% of text including several instances of non-citation of various sources throughout the research plan, including the parts research approach and methodology.
Investigation	Applicant claimed that the core topics of the research plan were not affected by the findings. One passage containing non-cited text was co-authored by co-applicants.
Decision	Sanction (written reprimand)

3.

Source	External Expert
Allegation	All in all about 35% of text taken from various sources of third parties without proper quotation. Factors considered: large amount of text, mostly detailed research plan concerned.
Investigation	The applicant admitted in full that s/he had not properly cited. In her/his defense applicant mentioned that s/he had been in major health trouble which had led her/him to submit a non-finalised research plan. The SNSF took this aspect into consideration when deciding about the sanction. Given the amount of non-cited text an exclusion from submission of 9 months would have been adequate. The exclusion was reduced to 6 months.
Decision	Sanction (6 months exclusion)

⁷ All cases of decision letters sent between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2019.

4.

Source	External Expert
Allegation	All in all about 35% of text taken from various sources without proper quotation. Large part (30%) taken from a publication where applicant is main and corresponding author. Aggravating factors considered: large amount of text, detailed research plan concerned, co-authors not mentioned. Further sources of third parties used without proper quotation.
Investigation	The applicant argued s/he thought s/he was entitled to re-use her/his own publication (issue of co-authors not considered). S/he admitted sloppiness and not having carefully followed the SNSF's clear instructions.
Decision	Sanction (7 months exclusion)

Investigations abandoned

5.

Source	External informer
Allegation	The informer claimed that the applicant had used informer's research ideas in a research plan submitted to the SNSF. Informer also claimed that s/he had substantially worked on the research plan without being mentioned
Investigation	Investigation (with the help of an external expert) did not confirm theft of ideas. Applicant should have however made it clear that a third person had contributed to writing the research plan.
Decision	The Commission abandoned the investigation. No sanction but reminder of good scientific practices. (<i>Hinweis</i>).

6.

Source	Random
Allegation	Several passages taken from third party's publications without proper citation (sometimes completely missing, sometimes very sloppy).
Investigation	Investigation essentially confirmed the findings. At second sight and in comparison to other cases the Commission concluded that the amount of text and its importance for the research plan were just below the threshold to justify a sanction.
Decision	The Commission abandoned the investigation. No sanction but reminder of good scientific practices. (<i>Hinweis</i>).

7.

Source	Reviewer
Allegation	The applicant used text passages (ca. 540 words, 7% of the research plan, mostly affecting "current state of own research" section) and part of a figure of a publication on which s/he was not listed as an author. The applicant did not cite this publication properly. S/he did not list it in the bibliography but instead referred to it in the research plan by using a wording that implies involvement in the work. In addition, the applicant did not cite a publication

	on which s/he is last author properly (ca. 530 words, 6% of the research plan, affecting different sections).
Investigation	The applicant and his mentor rejected the accusations, although neither of them denied that text and figures were taken from the mentioned sources, which points to a lack of awareness concerning good scientific practice. Overall, the case was judged as a borderline case, mitigating factors were (i) the mentor confirmed the involvement of the applicant in the work that was not listed in the bibliography, (ii) the detailed research plan was essentially unaffected, and (iii) the rather small amount of copied text.
Decision	The Commission abandoned the investigation. No sanction but reminder of good scientific practices. (<i>Hinweis</i>).

Reminder letters

8.

Source	Referee
Allegation	The adopted text and figures without citation were mainly taken from a publication that was accepted on October 2, 2018 (1 day after receipt of the application) and where the applicant is the last author. The text is mainly in the “Current state of own research” section.
Investigation	If applicants miss to properly cite (co)-authored own publications the SNSF applies a set of further criteria to evaluate the seriousness of the findings. If at least 3 criteria are met the Control Group sends a reminder letter. In the research plan under investigation this was the case.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

9.

Source	Random
Allegation	In the research plan the applicant used text passages and figures (including figure captions) from two sources (source 1: 287 words, 4% of the research plan; source 2: 180 words, 3% of the research plan), without citing them properly.
Investigation	The copied text fragments concerned the current state of research in the field and the current state of own research in the field. The detailed research plan was unaffected.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

10.

Source	Random
Allegation	Ca 18% (ca. 160 words) of the research plan have been recycled in the research plan.
Investigation	The paragraphs taken over without correct citation originated from own publications. The analysis concerning self-plagiarism resulted in three factors that spoke for sending a reminder letter.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

11.

Source	Random
Allegation	Ca. 4% (ca. 240 words) in 'detailed research plan' taken without citation,
Investigation	Nobody among the research team is a (co-)author of the two sources. The source is not listed in the works cited. Other sources found by software are correctly cited. The amount of text and its importance did not reach the threshold to justify an investigation.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

12.

Source	Reviewer
Allegation	In the section Current state of research, several sources are only listed at the end of each paragraph.
Investigation	Neither text nor figure captions are satisfactorily referenced. Several sources are mentioned at the end of each paragraph, without it being made clear which part of the text originates from which source.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

13.

Source	Referee
Allegation	During the evaluation of the application, the referee identified irregularities in the applicant's publication list.
Investigation	The applicant's output list contained several publications for which the listing of authors did not correspond to the published one, i.e., the applicant changed the order of authors and added or omitted authors. The inconsistencies however had no further importance in the context of the application.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

14.

Source	Reviewer
Allegation	A reviewer accused the applicant of having taken many parts of an article without quoting it. The applicant did indeed translate into French passages of an article initially written in English without quoting it (at least partially, the source is given at many other places).
Investigation	Although this was difficult to prove that it was really a translation, the similarities were quite intriguing. The applicant was given the opportunity to make a statement. Based on the fact that 1. it was difficult to prove a literal translation and 2. all other sources seemed to be correctly cited, the Control Group decided to not further investigate and send a reminder of good scientific practices.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

15.

Source	Referee
Allegation	The applicant has listed research grants that they did not solicit.
Investigation	In particular, two SNSF projects were listed in the CV, which according to the SNSF regulations may not be described as contributions that have been raised by the applicant as they were not on the applicant's team. After investigation, the applicant states that they wrote the proposals together with the person mentioned on the two SNSF projects and was always involved in research. Further, the other person would confirm it if necessary. The response was plausible and the Control Group decided to refrain from opening an investigation.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

16.

Source	Referee
Allegation	Joint work was not properly declared.
Investigation	The applicant writes about Figure 3 in the research plan: "Figure 3 shows the preliminary results from the PIs laboratory." The picture shows a sample system manufactured by the applicant with a TEM image. The sample system appears to have been better examined at the time of application. The publication contains a complete study in which the growth of the probes is assigned to the applicant, however, the TEM images to the EMPA and the project management shared between the applicant and another person. The applicant should have shown more clearly how far the study really is and that it is a collaboration.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

17.

Source	Reviewer
Allegation	The applicant has left out the last authorship in a publication.
Investigation	An external reviewer states that the applicant has incorrectly cited a paper (ref. 1 in her/his list of recent publications) on which they state to be the last author, while the actual last author has been entirely omitted. This inconsistency however had no further importance in the context of the application.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

18.

Source	Random
Allegation	The applicant copied ca. 95 words (ca. 1% from the research plan) from a paper by others and did not cite it in the research plan.
Investigation	The amount of copied text is relatively small but it affected the description of research aims in the section “detailed research plan”. All in all not sufficient for the opening of an investigation.
Decision	Reminder of good scientific practices (<i>Hinweis</i>).

Further cases

19.

Source	Voluntary declaration
Allegation	The applicant informed the SNSF about data manipulation that occurred in the laboratory and that had affected a publication. The applicant explained all measures taken by the applicant and the institution: retraction of paper; PostDoc admitting of being fully responsible for the data manipulation; immediate termination of contract with PostDoc.
Investigation	All points explained by the applicant and measures taken were comprehensible and consistent with good scientific practices. It appeared plausible that applicant could not be held responsible for the data manipulation. Hence, the Commission did not open an investigation.
Decision	No investigation