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Procedure for dealing with breaches of integrity in research

Approved by the Research Ethics Committee

UOC

Index

- Breaches of integrity in research
- Procedure for addressing possible scientific misconduct
- Calculation of deadlines



Contents

1. Breaches of integrity in research
2. Procedure for addressing possible scientific misconduct
 - 2.1. Receipt of the complaint
 - 2.2. Evaluation of the complaint
 - 2.3. Notification of decisions
 - 2.4. Opening a query and/or complaint in the Queries and Complaints channel
3. Calculation of deadlines

Record of changes		
Review	Change	Date
This document replaces Addressing irregular behaviour in research activity issued in 2012.		
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1. Breaches of integrity in research

The purpose of this Procedure is to establish the steps to be taken if conduct contrary to integrity in research is detected.

Academic negligence or misconduct related to any aspect of research activity represents a failure to comply with the requirements of the UOC's "Code of Research Integrity".

It can refer to the following:

- a) Invention or falsification of data or research results.
- b) Plagiarism, non-citation or misappropriation of the ideas, work or data of others.
- c) Failure to comply with legal obligations in a research project, such as not having the informed consent of participants or violating data protection regulations.

These forms of transgression are considered especially serious, because they directly distort the research record.

There are other practices that also affect the integrity of research:

- a) Failing to publish a retraction when serious errors are detected in a published article.
- b) Manipulating authorship or not acknowledging the role of other researchers in publications.
- c) Republishing substantial parts of one's own previous publications, including translations, without acknowledging or citing the original (self-plagiarism).
- d) Citing selectively or imprecisely and overusing self-references.
- e) Hiding the use of AI or automated tools in content creation or in the drafting of publications.
- f) Ignoring alleged breaches of integrity in research by others.
- g) Creating, funding or participating in publications that compromise quality control in research ("predatory publications").

Other breaches of research integrity are detailed in the [European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) (ALLEA, 2023) and are applicable to irregular conduct in research at the UOC.

Failure to declare conflicts of interest deserves special attention. A conflict of interest can occur when the researcher has a real or potential opportunity to prioritize their own personal

or professional interests, or those of any other person or organization, compromising the objectivity of the research.

If a researcher or member of the Research Ethics Committee is involved in a conflict of interest, the provisions of the UOC's [Conflict of Interest Policy](#) regarding the management of related risks will apply. If a researcher identifies a conflict of interest, they must refrain from making any decision in this regard and must immediately inform the Research Ethics Committee. The Research Ethics Committee will be responsible for assessing the situation in accordance with research protocol methodology, taking the measures it deems appropriate, and will provide support to the researcher in this regard.

Errors or misunderstandings arising from honest practice carried out in good faith are not considered ethical misconduct.

Scientific conflicts and irregular situations can often be resolved with the help of procedures specially defined by many scientific communities. Many institutions in the field of research and publishers of scientific publications have policies and procedures to manage these conflicts. The types of conflict and the ways in which they may be resolved are very diverse: they range from a researcher who informs the editor that they should not review an article to legal action to protect research staff, the participants in a research project or the institution itself.

The purpose of this document is to establish the procedure to be followed in the event of a complaint of scientific misconduct, to ensure it is transparent and fair for the researchers involved.

2. Procedure for addressing possible scientific misconduct

Scientific integrity at the UOC involves a series of recommendations and commitments on research-related activities to ensure the integrity and ethics of research staff, which inspire and guarantee good practice and ensure the quality of the knowledge generated. This procedure guarantees the safety of people who want to disclose irregularities or negligence within the framework of a research activity.

The Research Ethics Committee is the body responsible for promoting, applying and monitoring compliance with the UOC Code for Research Integrity. The Research Ethics Committee will deal with queries or allegations according to this procedure, guaranteeing the confidentiality of the informant.

2.1 Receipt of the complaint

Any member of the UOC community who has a query, observation, complaint and/or suggestion concerning integrity, ethics and good research practice or who is aware of any indication of scientific malpractice must notify the Research Ethics Committee in writing (comite_etica@uoc.edu).

The notification must be a complete, formal statement of ethical misconduct and must include all possible details, such as the parties involved, dates, publications, etc., as well as the specific nature of the misconduct or issue reported.

The Research Ethics Committee Technical Secretary's Office receives the complaint and proceeds to open a file in a secure Research Ethics Committee folder on the corporate drive, exclusively accessible to its members. Within a period of three (3) days the Technical Secretary's Office notifies the informant that the complaint has been received, that it is being processed and that they will be informed of the decision regarding the matter within a maximum of forty (40) days.

In accordance with Article 10 of the Committee's [Regulations](#) the the Research Ethics Committee will call a meeting to discuss the complaint received at the next ordinary session convened. If necessary, and in accordance with the same article, an extraordinary meeting may be convened to analyse and evaluate the complaint received.

During the process, all parties involved undertake in writing to act with absolute confidentiality regarding any information related to the case being studied. In the event of a conflict of interest on the part of any of those involved, they will abstain and will not participate in any stage of the procedure.

2.2 Assessment of the complaint

The meeting assesses whether the facts presented constitute scientific misconduct, whether they are included in the UOC Code for Research Integrity and whether this procedure is applicable to them. During the session, additional information can be requested from any of the parties, and personal interviews can be requested, with the informant, with the person to whom the facts reported relate, and with others who may have information on aspects of the report.

If the Research Ethics Committee, in a preliminary assessment, considers that the facts presented do not constitute scientific misconduct, it may consider the procedure closed and notify the informant, as stipulated in point 2.3 of this procedure.

If the Research Ethics Committee considers that the complaint is credible, specific and falls within the scope of this procedure, it will carry out a detailed assessment of the complaint. The assessment will analyse the risks that may arise from circumstances contrary to the values of the UOC Code for Research Integrity and will suggest preventive measures to avoid their recurrence, making recommendations, where appropriate, as indicated in point 2.3 of this procedure.

Based on an assessment of the facts, the Research Ethics Committee will issue a decision on whether the facts set out in the report indicate scientific misconduct and may give the following types of ruling:

- a) If the Research Ethics Committee considers that the facts described comply fully with the regulations applicable to the UOC, it will consider the case closed and notify the informant in accordance with point 2.3 of this procedure.
- b) If the Research Ethics Committee considers that, although no misconduct has been detected, it is appropriate to review certain elements of the research, it will suggest preventive measures to avoid the recurrence of problems and, where appropriate, will make recommendations, as indicated in point 2.3 of this procedure.
- c) If the Research Ethics Committee considers that the misconduct may lead to disciplinary proceedings for non-compliance with the UOC Code for Research Integrity, it will inform the Compliance Committee through the UOC's Queries and Complaints channel (Internal Information System), following the instructions in point 2.4 of this procedure.
- d) If complaints are received by the Research Ethics Committee and it concludes that they were not made in good faith or were made with the intention of harming the person reported, they will be brought to the attention of the Compliance Committee through the UOC's Queries and Complaints channel (Internal Information System), following the instructions in point 2.4 of this procedure.

In cases of special complexity, the Research Ethics Committee may request a report from external experts or set up an independent commission of inquiry.

The Research Ethics Committee prepares a final report with all the observations made, the decisions made and the rulings issued. A record of the case is entered in the file opened by the Technical Secretary's Office when the complaint was received.

The final record must include:

- The identity of the informant.

- The identity of the person or persons reported.
- A compilation of the information or evidence provided by the parties involved and any witnesses, and a record of any statements made.
- An analysis of the facts, with details of the internal regulations infringed.
- Description of facts discovered by the Research Ethics Committee (optional).
- A conclusion.
- Recommendations that include a warning or other consideration (optional).

The Technical Secretary's Office must take note of the opinions expressed and the agreements reached during the meeting. Once the meeting is over, the Technical Secretary's Office draws up minutes for the session, recording the decision made and signing them with the approval of the Chair. The minutes are saved in the relevant Research Ethics Committee folder.

2.3 Notification of decisions

Within two (2) days after the minutes of the meeting have been drawn up and signed, the Technical Secretary's Office notifies the parties involved of the decision by email. The final report with the decision taken is attached to the notification.

In cases where the decision notified is as described in points 2.2.a and 2.2.b, the recipients are informed that they can exercise the right to appeal within fifteen (15) days from issuance of the notification. In cases 2.2.c and 2.2.d there can be no objection to the notification and the instructions laid down in the UOC's Queries and Complaints channel (Internal Information System) procedure must be followed.

If the informant wishes to appeal against the decision made by the Research Ethics Committee, they must prepare a written appeal and send it to the Committee (comite_etica@uoc.edu). The document must describe in detail the reason for the appeal, including any relevant evidence.

When the email with the appeal is received, the Technical Secretary's Office will reopen the file and the process described in points 2.1 and 2.2 of this procedure will be repeated.

In order to protect third parties, to preserve confidentiality in scientific research, to restore the UOC's scientific reputation or to prevent consequential damage, or in the public interest, the Research Ethics Committee may decide to notify third parties who have been affected or the public of its decisions.

2.4 Presentation of queries and/or complaints via the Queries and Complaints channel

In the cases described in points 2.2.c and 2.2.d, the Technical Secretary's Office will present a query and/or complaint via the UOC's Queries and Complaints channel (Internal Information System).

This channel allows people to report any infringement of current legislation or regulations by a university worker of which they are aware. Internal regulations are understood to include all the UOC's codes, policies, procedures, instructions, protocols, rules and manuals, among other documents.

The Technical Secretary's Office will follow the instructions given in the [Regulations of the UOC's Queries and Complaints channel](#) (Internal Information System) to register the query and/or complaint. In its submission, it will report, in detail, the facts that are the subject of the complaint, regulatory compliance with which is not within the scope of action of the Research Ethics Committee.

The Compliance Committee will deal with the case submitted, following the procedure detailed in the UOC's [Click Response Protocol](#).

The Compliance Committee will inform the Research Ethics Committee Technical Secretary's Office of the final conclusions and the decision made.

3. Calculation of deadlines

When deadlines are expressed in days, these are understood to be business days. The calculation does not include Saturdays, Sundays, public holidays or the month of August.

Periods and deadlines expressed in days must be calculated from the day following the date upon which the notification or publication in question is made.

When the last day is not a business day, the period will be extended until the next business day.

Entry into force

This procedure will come into force as soon as it is published on the UOC's E-Services Portal, subject to approval by the UOC's Executive Board.