



Australian Government
National Health and Medical Research Council
Australian Research Council

Australian Research Integrity Committee Annual Report to the Sector, 2020-21

Foreword

The Australian Research Integrity Committee (ARIC) has now been in operation for 11 years. This is the first in what we propose to become an annual report to the research sector on ARIC's activities.

The aim is to inform the sector on the volume and nature of reviews ARIC undertakes; to outline the outcomes of ARIC reviews and to point to the key issues raised by the reviews and the implications for institutional processes. By highlighting the most common problems encountered in our reviews we hope that they can be avoided in the future.

Research integrity in Australia is maintained through a system of self-regulation where research institutions take responsibility for ensuring that the research they undertake is conducted in line with the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (the Code).

Our key research funding bodies, the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), oversee research integrity requirements. They jointly established ARIC to review complaints of a lack of procedural fairness or lack of proper process in research integrity investigations.

We all have a stake in ensuring widespread community trust in the outcomes of Australian research. Arguably, in an era of fake news and disputed facts, it has never been more important that the public can have faith in research outcomes and particularly in research conducted with public funds. ARIC seeks to support this objective by ensuring that research integrity complaints are fairly and thoroughly addressed.

ARIC seeks to work in partnership with the research sector towards the shared aim of ensuring high levels of community confidence in the integrity of Australian research. We thus look for co-operation and support for the role ARIC undertakes. We hope that our confidential reports to research institutions contribute to improved processes for handling research integrity complaints, as well as fair and just outcomes in individual cases.

In that spirit ARIC is always open to feedback on its own activities and processes. We also maintain a register of issues raised in relation to the Code itself, for consideration at the next Code review. If you would like to provide comments or feedback to ARIC or if you have questions in relation to this report, please contact aric@nhmrc.gov.au.

Patricia Kelly
Chair
Australian Research Integrity Committee

Annual Report to the Sector

The Australian Research Integrity Committee (ARIC) was established jointly by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Australian Research Council (ARC) in 2011. The information in this report details matters considered by ARIC for both agencies in the financial year 2020-21.

ARIC reviews the processes by which an institution has managed and/or investigated a potential breach of the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (the Code). At the conclusion of an ARIC review, ARIC provides recommendations to the CEO of the relevant agency who, on the basis of ARIC's advice and any other relevant considerations, responds to the relevant parties, providing recommendations for action, where appropriate.

In instances where institutions' investigation processes are determined not to have met the requirements of the Code or the associated *Guide to Managing and Investigation Potential Breaches of the Code*, 2018 (the Investigation Guide), the requested action may include redoing an investigation, providing additional information to relevant parties or making adjustments to institutional processes for complaints handling or management of potential breaches under the Code, to ensure procedural fairness in future matters. In this way, ARIC contributes to public confidence in the integrity of Australia's research effort.

Members

Member	Appointed	Expiry of current appointment
Ms Patricia Kelly (Chair)	April 2020	March 2023
Ms Julie Hamblin (Deputy Chair)	January 2011	March 2023
Mr Michael Chilcott	May 2017	March 2023
Emeritus Professor Alan Lawson	May 2017	March 2023
Professor Margaret Otlowski	May 2017	March 2023
Emeritus Professor Janice Reid	May 2017	March 2023
Emeritus Professor John Finlay-Jones	April 2020	March 2023

Activities

Financial Year	No. of cases carried forward	No. of requests received	No. of requests accepted	No. of requests not accepted	No. of cases active in current period (at 30 June)
2020-21	6	8	5	3	5

During 2020-21, ARIC received 8 requests for review. Five of these requests were accepted. Of the 5 matters that commenced in the reporting period, all of these reviews were ongoing as at 30 June 2021.

ARIC also continued 6 reviews that commenced in the 2019-20 reporting period. All 6 of these reviews were finalised in 2020-21.

Of the 3 requests for review that were not accepted in the reporting period:

- Two did not relate to research integrity investigations
- One did not involve procedural issues with how the institution conducted its research integrity investigation.

Of the 6 reviews finalised in 2020-21, the procedural concerns identified by ARIC were:

Procedural concern*	Reviews
The institution failed to provide reasons for its decision/s	1
Issues with communication with complainant and/or respondent	2
Failure to inform complainant of appeal avenues	1
Not all the concerns raised by the complainant were addressed	1
Poor record keeping by the institution	1
The institution took an unreasonably long time to conduct its preliminary assessment and/or investigation	1
The institution did not have clearly documented and publicly available procedures on how complaints about potential breaches of the Code are received and managed	1
The institution did not follow its own policies or procedures when reviewing the complaint	2
Failed to offer applicant procedural fairness	1
No procedural concerns identified	1

*NB: single reviews can have multiple procedural concerns

Recommendations made by ARIC in the 6 matters concluded during 2020-21 include the following:

ARIC recommendation*	Reviews
The institution redo its preliminary assessment and/or investigation	3
The institution engage an independent panel to reassess its preliminary assessment and/or investigation	0
The institution improve its processes for managing and investigating potential breaches of the Code	1
The institution improve its record keeping processes	0
The institution improve its communication with the complainant and/or respondent	3
The institution provide more information to the complainant and/or respondent about its reasons for the preliminary assessment and/or investigation outcomes	2
The institution review its processes to ensure preliminary assessments and/or investigations are conducted in a timely manner	0
The institution provide information about appeal options when communicating the outcome of the preliminary assessments and/or investigations to the complainant and/or respondent	1
The institution conducted its preliminary assessments and/or investigation in line with the Code – no recommendations needed.	0

*NB: reviews can have multiple recommendations

Outreach activities

During 2020-21, the ARIC Chair undertook the following outreach activities:

- Met with representatives from Clarivate to discuss research integrity activities, 17 February 2021
- Presented at the Universities Australia Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Research) Committee meeting, 4 June 2021

Key lessons

ARIC's collective experience is that the most common issues observed in its reviews are:

- Timeliness of managing the process: lack of timeliness can compromise procedural fairness.
- Failure to treat the complaint objectively and with fairness. Some complainants can be seen as unpleasant or difficult to deal with but may still have a valid complaint and all need to be treated with procedural fairness.
- Inadequate communication. Communication, with both complainants and respondents, is important from the time a complaint is lodged to when a complaint process is finalised. Regular communication on the progress of an investigation engenders confidence in the process, as does clear communication of the outcomes of a matter.
- Not complying with the provisions of the Code and Investigation Guide and/or other relevant policies, including institutional research integrity policies.
- Not advising parties to a complaint of their right to request a review, whether within the institution or with appropriate external bodies including, explicitly, ARIC.
- Overlooking or ignoring some of the matters raised in a complaint. If a matter is regarded as out of scope for a research integrity investigation this should be communicated to the complainant and alternative avenues for action suggested where appropriate: this might include advising a complainant that certain matters have been referred to another body within, or external to, the institution.
- Management of conflicts of interest. These should be managed conservatively, focussing not just on actual conflicts of interest but also on perceived conflicts. Investigation reports should document declared conflicts and how they are managed.