

Tuesday late afternoon session Track C, Tuesday, Sep 23 2025, 16:00-17:45

Location: Seminar 5

Session: Handling cases

Chair: Marten Juurik

OR-42

Bad apples in which barrels?

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Explanations for the occurrence of various kinds of misconduct often point to “bad apples” (individuals prone to cut corners) as well as “broken barrels” (organisations that through acts or omissions encourage unethical behaviour). This applies more specifically to research misconduct and other deviations from good research practice, as reflected in ethics and integrity codes and guidelines, like the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (the ALLEA Code), as well as in regulations, like the Swedish law on responsibility for good research practice and assessment of research misconduct.

It is certainly true that research performing organisations have an important role to play in the advancement of good research practice; the ALLEA Code lists a number of obligations, including promoting awareness of and creating incentives for research integrity, ensuring the availability of training opportunities in research integrity, and providing infrastructures necessary for adequate generation, management, and protection of data and research materials (see sections 2.1 and 2.2 of the ALLEA Code). A separate section in the ALLEA Code is devoted to the important role of handling misconduct and other deviations from good research practice within the organisation. But when this is to be implemented in practice, a crucial question is: What are the criteria for determining whether or not something has been done within a certain organisation? Or to exploit the metaphors above: What determines whether a certain apple belongs to a certain barrel?

The idea of allocating specific tasks to certain designated actors in the process of handling and following up on suspected deviations from good research practice is not unreasonable, but its workability in practice requires that the organisational home of the research can be determined. And while this is often the case, there are also cases where standard clues like stated affiliation and employment are not sufficiently clear or point in the wrong direction. Indeed, unclarities may even be expected to be more common in cases where there is reason to suspect deviations from good research practice.

In this presentation we will show how problems in specifying the institutional belonging of research and researchers may undermine the purpose of parts of well-intentioned research integrity and ethics systems. They may, for instance, lead to complications due to overlapping responsibilities, or worse, to situations where no one is responsible for certain crucial measures, like investigation or informing stakeholders. The overall consequences may be negative for the appropriate handling of individual cases as well as for the functioning of the system as a whole. We will focus on examples from the Swedish context, but we will also discuss the issues and possible solutions more generally.