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Hilfe! Help! Au secours!: How to Handle Transnational Cases of Research Misconduct

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For research integrity officers and other actors tasked with investigating cases of alleged research misconduct, transnational cases may not be a daily concern. However, when they do occur, their complexity will likely be higher due to conflicts over jurisdiction, differing laws and regulations regarding investigative procedures, and decreased access to case-relevant information. Also, as the number of publications resulting from international collaborations keeps increasing (OECD, 2022), the likelihood of misconduct occurring in such collaborations can be expected to increase at a similar pace. How can people responsible for processing misconduct allegations be supported in navigating these complexities? Although important existing guidelines are transnational in scope (e.g., ALLEA Code, 2023) and set forth widely agreed upon principles of research integrity, they do not give practical, operational recommendations on investigations. Based on an in-depth analysis of 88 case investigations, our working group “Orientation on Transnational Case Investigation” consisting of national agencies and institutional RIOs identified issues specific to transnational cases (Chai et al., 2024). We, for example, identified differing definitions of relevant terminology, differences between (or absence of) national laws, institutional regulations, and responsible bodies, varying responsibilities and competencies of involved bodies, and variations in the handling of confidentiality issues.

Objectives

Based on the issues identified, the working group now including representatives from Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and Switzerland set out to (1) develop a practical, step-by-step guide and supporting material for actors involved in investigating transnational cases related to these four countries and (2) set up an infrastructure to share and disseminate our key outputs.

Method

In an exploratory first phase, a comprehensive list of questions that arose during the investigation of transnational cases was created by each group member and then entered into a question-bank. In the course of a two-day work session, three sub-groups each sorted the questions into logical sequences. These sequences underwent intense discussion and were then merged into a flow-chart depicting the structure of a misconduct investigation and the corresponding questions. At this point, two separate working groups were formed, one to complement the questions with answers and a second to develop appropriate channels for distribution.

Results and Conclusion

We will be presenting the flow-chart of issues and concerns to be considered in the course of a transnational investigation of alleged research misconduct together with the material developed to provide guidance for actors in the field of research integrity. We will also present the online support structure including information hubs and network and are hoping for a lively discussion and possible broadening of our working group.