

## **Summary of RGC's Decision on Substantiated Misconduct Case**

**(2023/24 Funding Exercise)**

### **Case 1: Self-plagiarism**

#### **Case Background**

The Principal Investigator (PI) submitted a funding proposal in the 2023/24 exercise. During the proposal assessment process, an External Reviewer reported to the Panel that the proposal detailing the same technology was similar to a paper by the same PI. The Panel pointed out that the title of the publication and the proposal was exactly the same, and a certain amount of data of the published paper was also included in the proposal without appropriate acknowledgement. The Panel also noticed that the paper was submitted to the journal for publication prior to the PI's submission of his proposal to the RGC. Having considered the PI's representations, the Panel considered that it was a suspected case of self-plagiarism and there was prima facie evidence to warrant further investigation.

On request, the PI's affiliated university conducted a formal investigation into the alleged misconduct. The investigation panel agreed that the PI had not made reference to the paper neither at the time he submitted the proposal, nor in the proposal update in April 2023 after the paper had been published. The PI claimed that the project team started to obtain preliminary data while preparing the proposal, and after the submission of the proposal, they submitted a manuscript for publication with the preliminary data and the results of later experiments. There was still 30 to 40% of the objectives listed in the proposal to be finished in future work after the publication. However, owing to his oversight, the PI did not provide an information update of the publication in the proposal update in April 2023. The investigation panel concluded that the PI was guilty of the accusation of self-plagiarism.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). The IWG commented that the published paper was strongly related to the submitted proposal as evidenced by the same project titles, significant duplicated figures and coincided materials, methods and scientific objectives of the paper and the proposal. The IWG also noted the PI's admission that 60% to 70% of the research work in the proposal had been completed upon submission of the proposal and the outputs generated from the research work had been published in

the paper without appropriate reference, and the PI did not report the related paper in the proposal or the proposal update in April 2023. The IWG further pointed out that the PI had ten years of experiences in academia and expected him to know the requirement for declaring prior research and relevant papers when applying funding application. On the consideration of the IWG's findings and recommendations and the fact that the PI had admitted his own mistake, DC (Investigation) agreed that the allegation of self-plagiarism should be substantiated.

### Penalty

The DC (Investigation) considered that it was the PI's deliberate attempt to hide his prior related research work in the current proposal given the substantial amount of related research work already completed in the paper which was included in the proposal without appropriate acknowledgement. The PI had been in academia for ten years and he was not first-time applicant. The DC (Investigation) considered that a heavier penalty should be imposed on the PI for his intentional act which was not a mistake.

With reference to RGC's "Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty" and having considered the circumstances pertinent to the case, the DC (Investigation) recommended a penalty of "debarment from all research funding schemes administered by the University Grants Committee / RGC in all capacities for two funding exercises / rounds (vis. 2024/25 and 2025/26) plus disqualification of all submitted applications in all capacities" on the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)'s recommendations.

## **Case 2: Non-disclosure of Similar / Related Research Work in the Application**

### **Case Background**

The Principal Investigator (PI) submitted a funding proposal in the 2023/24 exercise. During the proposal assessment process, one of the External Reviewers, who was invited to assess the proposal, pointed out that the proposed research in the proposal had been finished by the same investigator and a paper was available on the Internet. The Panel noticed that the PI did not declare this related research work in both the proposal and during the proposal update. Having considered the PI's representations, the Panel considered that it was a suspected case of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in an application and there was prima facie evidence to warrant further investigation.

On request, the PI's affiliated university conducted a formal investigation into the alleged misconduct. The investigation panel agreed that this was a clear case of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in an application. The PI claimed that this was just a working paper and was not thought to be relevant to the RGC grant application, but the PI failed to provide any evidence to exonerate himself from the allegation. The investigation panel concluded that the alleged misconduct of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application against the PI was substantiated. The university also pointed out that PI had the responsibility to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the information provided and to seek clarification, if necessary.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). The IWG observed that a working paper finished by the PI was available on the Internet but the PI did not declare this related research work in the proposal. The IWG also noted the Panel and the PI's university's consensual view that the research proposal was related to the working paper, but the PI failed to declare this related work in the proposal. The IWG was in full agreement that this was a clear case of non-disclosure of all related research work undertaken by the PI in the grant application. On the consideration of the IWG's findings and recommendations, the DC (Investigation) agreed that there was clear evidence that the PI failed to declare prior related research work (i.e. the working paper) in the proposal concerned. The allegation of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application against the PI should be substantiated.

## Penalty

The DC (Investigation) considered that the attitude of the PI was unacceptable in view of his lack of responsiveness during the investigation process. The PI did not make any attempt to justify the non-disclosure of the working paper, which made the case more serious and should deserve heavier penalty.

With reference to RGC's "Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty" and having considered the circumstances pertinent to the case, the DC (Investigation) recommended a penalty of "debarment from all research funding schemes administered by the University Grants Committee / RGC in all capacities for two funding exercises / rounds (vis. 2024/25 and 2025/26) plus disqualification of all submitted applications in all capacities" on the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)'s recommendations.

## **Summary of RGC's Decision on Substantiated Misconduct Case**

**(2022/23 Funding Exercise)**

### **Case 1: Plagiarism**

#### **Case Background**

The Principal Investigator (PI) submitted a funding proposal in the 2022/23 exercise. During the proposal assessment process, an External Reviewer (ER) found that portions of the figures in the proposal were copied from the ER's grant applications submitted to an overseas funding agency without attributing the source of the figures. There were also similarities of ideas between the PI's proposal and the concerned grant applications. Upon the enquiry of Research Grants Council (RGC), the PI admitted that he had reviewed a grant application from the ER. The Panel noted that the two figures presented in the PI's proposal without attribution were identical to portions of figures in the ER's grant applications. The Panel considered that it was a suspected case of plagiarism and there was prima facie evidence to warrant further investigation.

On request, the PI's affiliated university conducted a formal investigation into the alleged misconduct. In the university's investigation report, the investigation panel concluded that the allegation of plagiarism was substantiated given the PI had used portions of figures from the ER's grant application in his proposal without realising the source of the figures and the PI had admitted full responsibility for the inadvertent plagiarism. The university believed that the PI had no intention to plagiarise and the use of figures from the ER's grant application did not increase the scientific merit of the proposal.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). The IWG noted that the PI admitted keeping the material provided to him as a reviewer of the overseas funding agency and using material from the grant application, without attribution, when constructing his own proposal. The IWG also pointed out that one icon was a direct copy and the another one was being edited to include two portions of figures from the grant application. On consideration of the IWG's findings and recommendations and the fact that the PI had admitted his improper act, DC (Investigation) agreed that the allegation of plagiarism should be substantiated.

## Penalty

The DC (Investigation) considered that the maximum penalty of five funding exercises / rounds' debarment was not applicable to the current case as the core idea of the PI's proposal was not plagiarised from others' work and there was no effect on the intellectual merit of the PI's proposal. However, the minimum penalty of two funding exercises / rounds' debarment was not applicable neither as the PI had actually edited the figure indicating that this was not an unintentional act. In addition, the PI, being a well-known expert and grant reviewer, should be clearly aware of the confidentiality policy of the funding agency.

With reference to RGC's "Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty" and the level of penalty of precedent cases, and having considered the circumstances pertinent to the case, the DC (Investigation) recommended a penalty of "debarment from all research funding schemes administered by the University Grants Committee / RGC in all capacities for three funding exercises / rounds (viz. 2023/24, 2024/25 and 2025/26) plus disqualification of all submitted applications in all capacities" on the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)'s recommendations.

## **Case 2: Non-disclosure of Similar / Related Research Work in the Application**

### **Case Background**

During assessment of the completion report of a project funded in the 2019/20 exercise, the Panel Member noticed that two journal papers, reported as direct research output of the project were submitted to a journal publisher in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Both papers existed before the commencement of the project but were not declared in the original proposal or in the proposal update. The Panel considered that the PI did not declare related prior research work in the proposal and there was a cause for further investigation.

On request, the PI's affiliated university conducted a formal investigation into the alleged misconduct. In the university's investigation report, the investigation panel agreed that the two journal papers were submitted before the project commencement date and the PI had infringed the RGC's guidelines on disclosure of similar / related research work in the application. The PI claimed that he made major contribution of ideas and revisions to one of the draft papers after the co-author had created the first draft, which led to the subsequent addition of his name to the final version of the paper as the corresponding author. However, the PI could not provide relevant documents to substantiate his claim. The investigation panel concluded that the alleged misconduct of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application against the PI was substantiated.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). The IWG considered that the submission dates of the two publications concerned, reported as direct research output in the completion report, were before the project commencement date. The PI failed to declare the two journal papers in his proposal submitted to the RGC in the 2019/20 exercise or in the proposal update. On the consideration of the IWG's findings and recommendations, the DC (Investigation) agreed that there was clear evidence that the PI failed to declare prior related research work (i.e. the two journal papers) in the proposal concerned and attributed such publications as direct research output in the completion report of the project instead. The allegation of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application against the PI should be substantiated.

## Penalty

The DC (Investigation) considered that the lightest penalty (i.e. “warning letter plus disqualification of related funding application in the concerned exercise”) was not applicable to the current case as this was a clear case of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application arising from reckless and deliberate breach of RGC’s relevant guidelines.

With reference to RGC’s “Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty” and the level of penalty of precedent cases, and having considered the circumstances pertinent to the case, the DC (Investigation) recommended a penalty of “debarment from all research funding schemes administered by the University Grants Committee / RGC in all capacities for two funding exercises / rounds (viz. 2023/24 and 2024/25) plus disqualification of all submitted applications in all capacities” on the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)’s recommendations.



### **Case 3: Non-disclosure of Similar / Related Research Work in the Application**

#### **Case Background**

The Principal Investigator (PI) submitted a funding proposal in the 2022/23 exercise. He declared in the application that he did not have any proposal pending for funding approval in relation to his submitted proposal. By the deadline in April 2022, he did not provide any information update on the part of declaration of similar or related project(s) / proposal(s) either.

A Panel Member found that two months after submission of the above-mentioned proposal, the PI submitted a preliminary proposal under another funding scheme administered by the RGC in the same round of exercise with overlapping research themes and research scopes with similar objectives. The Panel considered that it was a suspected case of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application and there was prima facie evidence to warrant further investigation.

On request, the PI's affiliated university conducted a formal investigation into the alleged misconduct. The investigation panel considered that two out of four research objectives of the proposals were similar and related, and the research scope of the preliminary proposal covered that of the other proposal with an expanded study area. The investigation panel concluded that the alleged misconduct of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application was substantiated.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). The IWG was of the view that the two proposals were related only on the general topic or research domain, but with different research questions, research datasets and analytical methods. The IWG considered that the differences between the two proposals were sufficient to label them as distinct and separate proposals and it was reasonable for the PI to believe that he was engaged in two separate research projects and not to declare the preliminary proposal in the information update of the other proposal.

The DC (Investigation) disagreed with the IWG's findings and recommendations and considered that the two proposals with the same research theme and overlapping objectives and addressed the same research question should be regarded as "related". The DC (Investigation) pointed out that it was a clear

requirement that the PI had to disclose any related research work or proposal in the information update of the proposal in April 2022, but he failed to do so. The DC (Investigation) concluded that the allegation of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application should be substantiated.

### Penalty

With reference to RGC's "Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty" and the level of penalty of precedent cases, and having considered the circumstances pertinent to the case, the DC (Investigation) recommended a penalty of "warning letter plus disqualification of related funding application in the concerned exercise" on the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)'s recommendations.

## **Summary of RGC's Decision on Substantiated Misconduct Cases**

**(2021/22 Funding Exercise)**

### **Case 1: Non-disclosure of Similar / Related Research Work in the Application**

#### ***Case Background***

It came to the attention of the University Grants Committee (UGC) Secretariat that similar proposals submitted by the same Principal Investigator (PI) were funded under different funding schemes. Three projects were involved, including two funded by the RGC and one funded by another funding agency. The Panel commented that the three proposals were similar and varied by the agents being chosen for study. Having considered the PI's representations, the Panel considered that it was a suspected case of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application and there was prima facie evidence to warrant further investigation.

On request, the PI's affiliated university conducted a formal investigation into the alleged misconduct. The PI admitted his failing to report / declare the project funded by another funding agency in a proposal submitted to the RGC due to oversight and negligence. Regarding the relatedness of two proposals submitted to the RGC, the PI explained that he used to define similar / related research work by originality and novelty, and he did not realize that investigating different compounds towards a common goal would make the projects being considered as closely related. The investigation panel concluded that the alleged misconduct of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application was substantiated but considered that the PI did not intentionally hide his grants / project record.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). The IWG considered that there was evidence that the PI failed to report / declare a related project funded by another funding agency in his proposal submitted to the RGC in the 2021/22 exercise. Regarding the relatedness of the two proposals submitted to and funded by the RGC, the IWG considered that the two proposals were not related as the compounds under investigation and the putative mechanisms of action were totally different. On the consideration of the IWG's findings and recommendations, the DC (Investigation) agreed that the allegation of non-disclosure of similar / related research work (i.e. project funded by another funding agency) in the application submitted to the RGC in the 2021/22 exercise should be substantiated.

## Penalty

The DC (Investigation) considered that it was not a deliberate attempt of the PI to withhold his grants record in the application. With reference to RGC's "Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty" and the level of penalty of precedent cases, the DC (Investigation) recommended a penalty of "warning letter plus disqualification of related funding application in the concerned exercise" on the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)'s recommendations on the substantiation of the allegation of non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application and the penalty of "warning letter plus disqualification of related funding application in the concerned exercise" (i.e. 2021/22 exercise).

## **Summary of RGC's Decision on Substantiated Misconduct Cases**

### **(2020/21 Funding Exercise)**

#### **Case 1: Plagiarism and self-plagiarism**

##### ***Case Background***

The Principal Investigator (PI) submitted a funding proposal in the 2020/21 exercise. During the assessment process, an external reviewer found that a statement in the proposal appeared to be copied from somewhere else. The First Reader also found that there was word-by-word copy from a former paper of the PI to the proposal with no reference cited, and some figures in the proposal seemed to be copied from somewhere. Having considered the PI's representations, the Panel considered that it was a suspected case of plagiarism and self-plagiarism and there was prima facie evidence to warrant further investigation.

On request, the PI's affiliated university conducted a formal investigation into the alleged misconduct. In the university's investigation report, the Investigation Panel concluded that the allegation of plagiarism was substantiated for some quoted examples but the allegation of self-plagiarism was not substantiated. The university believed that the mistakes were caused by the PI's negligence but not the deliberate acts of the PI.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). The IWG considered that five figures in the PI's proposal were copied from publications / website without acknowledgement which amounted to the misconduct of plagiarism and lines of text were copied from the PI's previous publication without proper citation in two instances which amounted to the misconduct of self-plagiarism. Having considered the findings and recommendations of the IWG, the definition of plagiarism and self-plagiarism in the RGC's "Guidelines on Handling of Research Misconduct Cases" and the PI's final representations, the DC (Investigation) concluded that the allegation of plagiarism and self-plagiarism against the PI was substantiated.

### Penalty

The DC (Investigation) considered that unlike the precedent case with a penalty of five years' debarment, the core idea of the proposal in the current case was not plagiarized from others' work and therefore the case was not serious enough to warrant a maximum penalty of five years' debarment. However, the DC (Investigation) doubted if the misconduct acts were the deliberate acts of the PI as a number of figures were copied from publications / website. Moreover, the PI was an experienced applicant of RGC grants. Hence, the DC (Investigation) considered that the minimum penalty of plagiarism (i.e. two years' debarment) was not suitable for this case.

With reference to the "Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty" endorsed by the RGC and the level of penalty of precedent cases of plagiarism, and having considered the circumstances pertinent to the case, the DC (Investigation) recommended to impose a penalty of "debarment from all research funding schemes administered by the UGC / RGC in all capacities for three years plus disqualification of all submitted applications in all capacities" on the PI. The recommended penalty covered both the misconduct of plagiarism and self-plagiarism committed by the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)'s recommendations.

## **Summary of RGC's Decision on Substantiated Misconduct Cases**

**(2019/20 Funding Exercise)**

### **Case 1: Non-disclosure of Similar / Related Research Work in the Application**

#### ***Case Background***

The Principal Investigator (PI) submitted a funding proposal in the 2019/20 exercise. He declared in the application that he did not have any research work that was being / had been conducted in relation to his submitted proposal. By the deadline on 15 April 2019, he did not provide any information update on the part of declaration of similar or related project(s) / proposal(s) either.

A Panel Member found that a preliminary working paper co-authored by the PI, which was available on the internet with the date of publication as March 2019, was similar to the submitted proposal. The Panel considered that this was a suspected case of non-disclosure of similar / related research work and there was prima facie evidence to warrant further investigation.

The PI explained the differences between the working paper and the proposal in his representation. He said the main results in the working paper did not form part of the proposal. Other results in the paper were also not part of the objectives or hypotheses in the proposal. All the hypotheses in the proposal had not been conclusively tested. Analysis had not been done for the proposed tasks in the proposal. The PI was fully engaged and therefore overlooked the email from the Research Office reminding him of the deadline to provide information update to the RGC.

The case was further examined by the Investigation Working Group (IWG) appointed by the Disciplinary Committee (DC) (Investigation). On the consideration of the findings of the IWG, the DC (Investigation) considered that the working paper, at least part of its content / research, was related to the submitted proposal. The PI should follow the RGC's guidelines to report the working paper in the application or during the period of proposal update to the RGC. The allegation against the PI should be substantiated.

The DC (Investigation) agreed that it was not a deliberate attempt of the PI to withhold his working paper, which was partly related to his proposal, to the RGC.

## Penalty

With reference to the “Guiding Principles for Determining the Level of Penalty” endorsed by the RGC and the level of penalty of precedent cases, and having considered the circumstances pertinent to the case, the DC (Investigation) recommended a penalty of “warning letter plus disqualification of related funding application in the concerned exercise” on the PI.

The RGC approved the DC (Investigation)’s recommendations on the substantiation of the allegation of “non-disclosure of similar / related research work in the application” and the penalty of “warning letter plus disqualification of related funding application in the concerned exercise”.