



Balancing Complexity and Collaboration: Multi-Institutional Research Integrity Investigations in Australia

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Disclosures

INTERESTS & ETHICS

Disclosures of interest

Karolyn White: [ORCID 0009-0002-6131-8488](#)

- Chair of the Working Party which developed NHMRC, ARC, UA *Guide to Managing and Investigating Potential Breaches of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (2018)
- Member of the Expert Working Committee which oversaw the development of NHMRC, ARC, UA *The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (2018), and
- Chair Australasian Ethics Network
- Co-Chair Special Interest Group, Ethics & Integrity, Australian Research Management society

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- Manager of several joint or co-institutional RI matters including one which involved participants interviewed this study

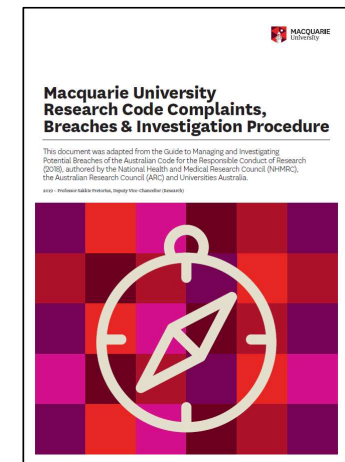
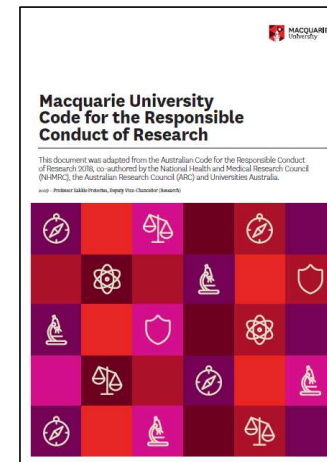
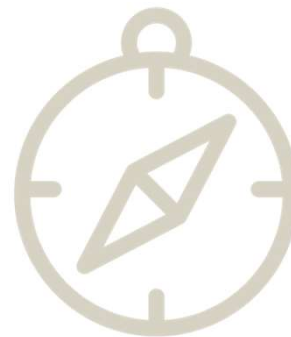
Ethics Approval via Macquarie University <https://ror.org/01sf06y89>

Human Research Ethics Committee Approval – Ethics Project Reference No: 52024**1703056374**

Interests & Ethics

THE AUSTRALIAN CODE & GUIDE (2018)

The ***Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*** (The Australian Code) establishes the research conduct standards that Australian research institutions must adhere to, advises best practices and outlines the obligations of institutions and researchers.

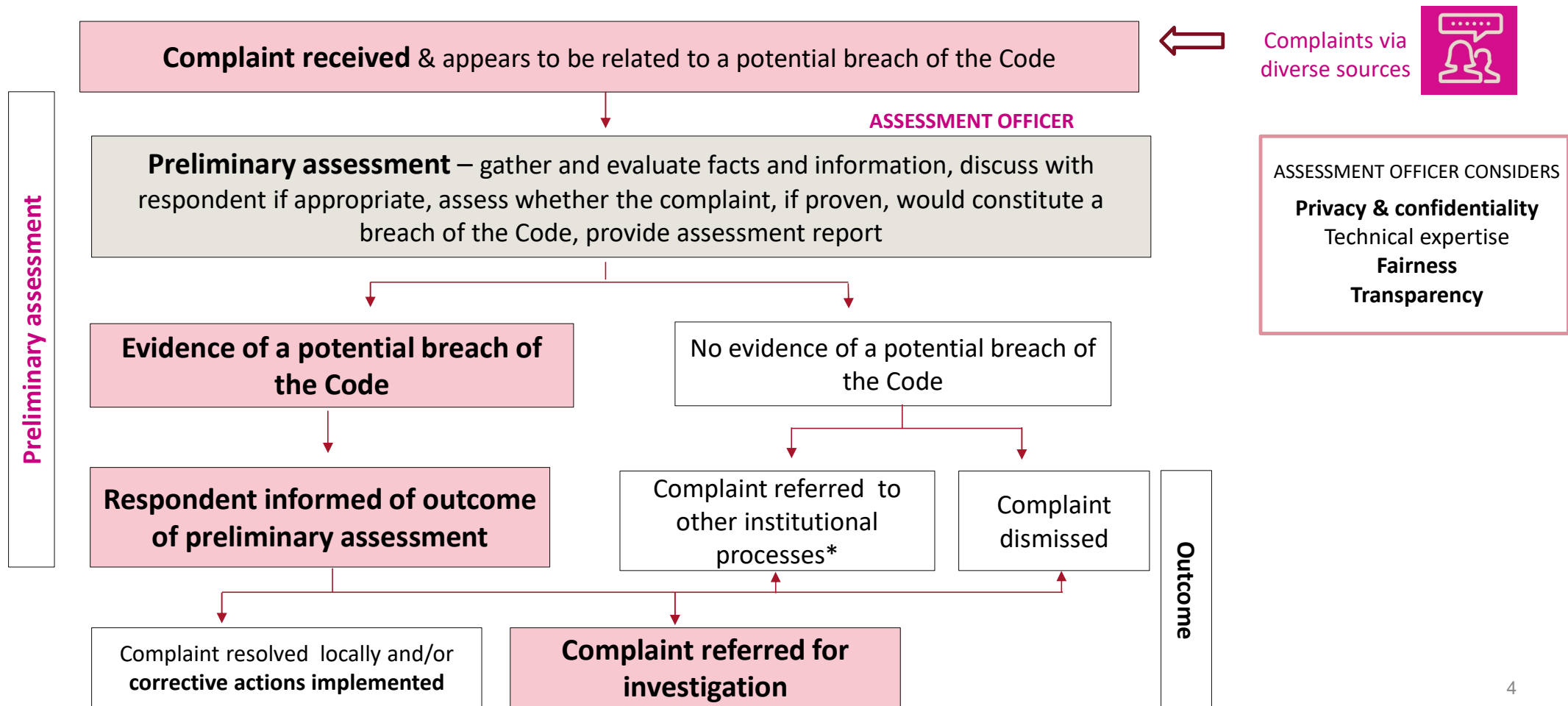


Guide to Managing and Investigating Potential Breaches of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (The Guide).

- Co-authored by the NHMRC, ARC (government funders) and UA (coalition of Australian universities).
- Institutions receiving funding from the ARC and NHMRC are obliged to adopt these documents in part or in full.

Australian Context

INSTITUTIONAL PROCESS FOR MANAGING COMPLAINTS & POTENTIAL BREACHES



Australian Context

INSTITUTIONAL PROCESS FOR INVESTIGATIONS



TERMS OF REFERENCE WRITTEN

- scope, authority and purpose of panel (generally includes to report on mitigating factors)
- specific allegations to be investigated
- a statement of secretariat support



PANEL MEMBERS APPOINTED

- appropriate number of members/expertise/skills/gender & diversity
- prior experience of similar investigation panels or relevant experience
- knowledge and understanding of the responsible conduct of research
- conflicts of interest or bias (consider external investigation)

REMINDERS TO PANEL / OVERSIGHT OF PROCESSES



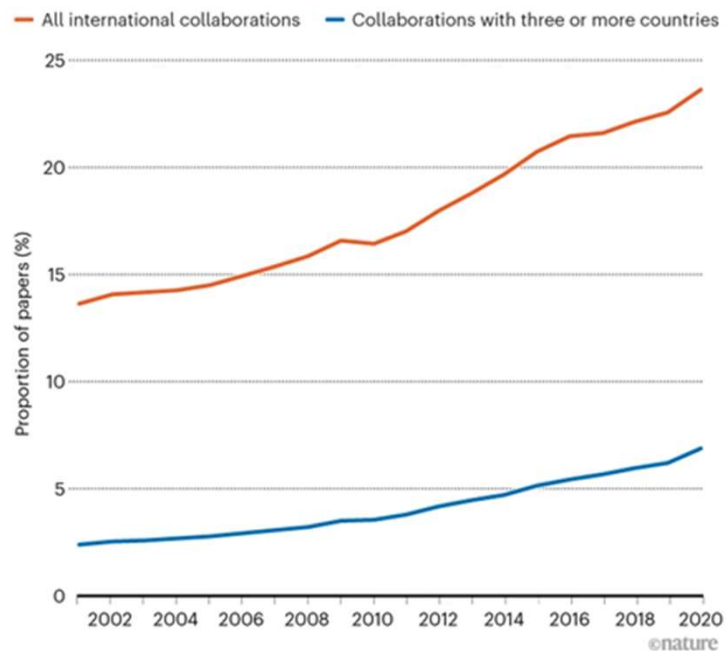
- Balance of Probability
- Conflict of Interest
- Privacy & confidentiality
- Procedural Fairness

Changing Research Landscape

RESEARCH IS NOW MULTI-INSTITUTIONAL

COLLABORATIONS ON THE RISE

The past few decades have seen a rapid rise in the fraction of papers with authors from more than one country.




Maier & Van Norden 2021 *Nature*

Research collaborations have changed in frequency & nature.

- More multilateral collaborations
- Fewer internal institutional and intra-disciplinary collaborations
- Increased national & international engagements
- Increased inter-disciplinary research

Research collaboration has become a strategic priority over the last decade. Mathews et al 2020 *Accountability in Research*

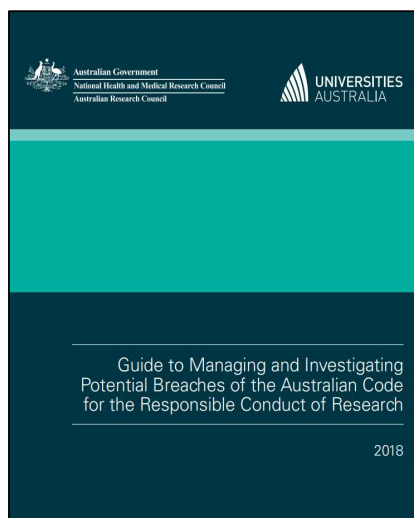
Anecdotal rise in:

- 
- Complexity of RI matters due to inter-disciplinarity of research.
 - Number of matters involving respondents from/across >1 institute e.g, co-authorship, researcher mobility, conjoint appointments.
 - Number of RI complaints about trustworthiness of a research article **vs** complaints about the conduct of a specific researcher

Multi-institutional RI Matters



DETAILED PRACTICAL GUIDANCE IS ABSENT



“Institutions should consider ...[arrangements] for multi-institutional collaborations on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration ...the lead institution, where the complaint was lodged, contractual arrangements or where the events occurred.

Institutions **should cooperate ...to ensure that only one investigation is conducted.**

There should be clear communication between all parties throughout the investigation.

Special consideration needs to be given to international collaborations since research practices and guidelines about the conduct of investigations differ between countries”

- **The Guide** p.22.



Russell Group Statement of Cooperation in respect of cross-institutional research misconduct allegations

Russell Group Research Integrity Forum

Agreement of cooperation | UK research-intensive universities.

Principles based: Respectful cooperation. Transparency & maintenance of legal obligations and duty of care. Avoiding duplication. Full, fair and proportionate investigations.

Research project

AIMS & METHODS

Aim

Explore how joint or multi-institutional research integrity matters are managed

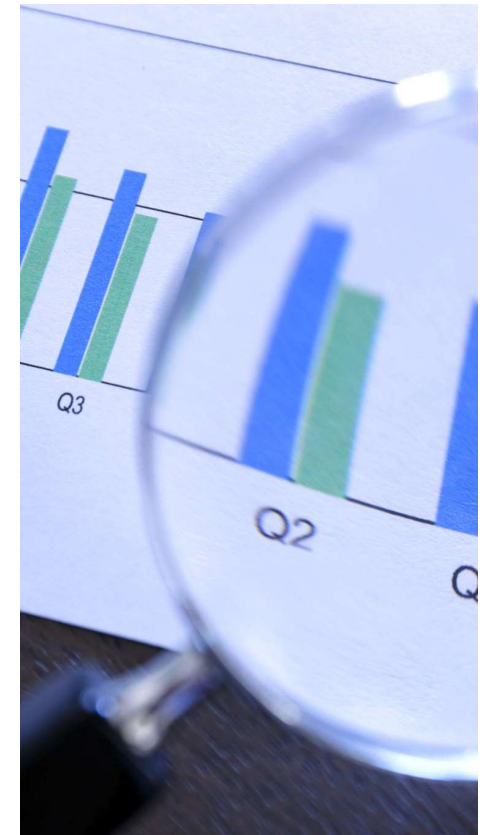
- Frequency
- Challenges
- Opportunities
- Potential solutions

Methods

Part 1 **Semi-structured interviews** with integrity staff & investigators

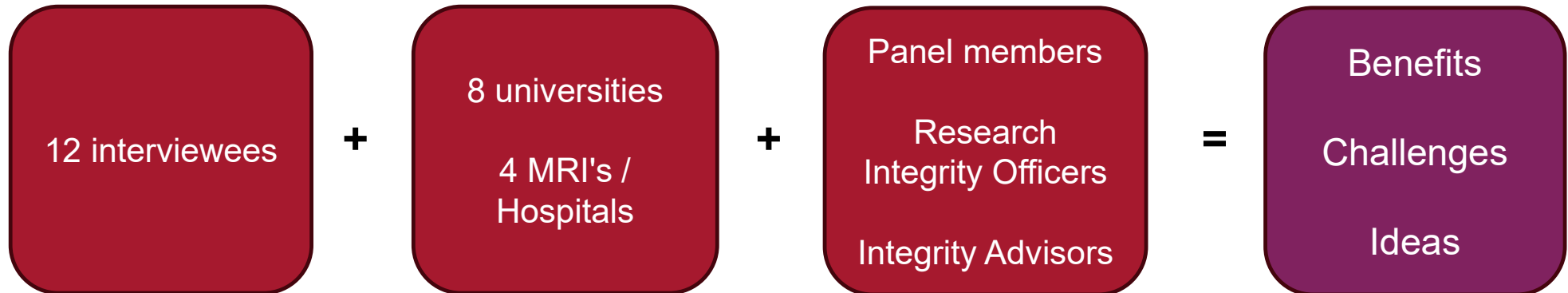
- Complaint receipt, Preliminary assessments & Investigations
- What works well & what doesn't
- What can we do to better support joint investigations.
- **Report on findings from part 1**

Part 2 **Australia-wide online survey** - coming soon 2024



Participants

DEMOGRAPHICS



Results – Emerging Themes

ACTUAL & PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF UNDERTAKING JOINT MATTERS

- Less onerous on respondent
 - Interviews
 - Complaints
- Procedural fairness for respondent
- Less resource intensive
 - Time & Costs
 - Access to discipline expertise
 - RIO expertise
 - Shared access to panel members
- Funders / regulator approved
- Compliance with guide & confidence in process
- Discover patterns of behavior

“...having all information present and available for one panel”

“Findings in relation to different authors have an effect on each other”

“When it works well, it works really well”

“We saw patterns of behaviour across organisations”

“it would be impractical to not have a joint investigation ...not procedurally fair for the respondent to have to undergo two processes....and potentially two different outcomes from the same set of allegations.”

Results – Emerging Themes

ACTUAL & PERCEIVED CHALLENGES OF UNDERTAKING JOINT MATTERS

- Teams lack experience in doing joint RI processes
- Little practical advice about when, or how, to structure a joint investigation
- Confidentiality requirements
- Workplace/ Staff agreements
- Differences can be problematic:
 - Nature of complaint
 - Policy/procedure
 - Maturity of RIO
 - Evolving maturity of process
 - Resources
 - Precedents from other cases (outcomes)
 - Corrective actions

“...I don't think it's particularly practical”

“It feels like too many cooks in the kitchens”

“It's definitely not easy”

“there's always a question of what information can be shared.”

“Well, barriers regarding confidentiality....”

Outcome 1:

CHECKLIST

Before settling on a process for multi-Institutional matters:

- Are the complaints the same at each organization?
- Policies: do processes or policies align?
 - Legal input
 - Definitions of misconduct etc.
 - Processes for PA/reports
 - Dissemination/actioning of findings
- Accountability:
 - Do both organizations have similar responsibility for the matter?
- Willingness & Procedural Fairness: Is the organization/respondent willing to do this?
- Resourcing/Maturity:
 - Do your RIOs have similar resources/maturity?



Outcome 2: Different models

INTERVIEWEE RECCOMENDATIONS

- Separate processes at each institution
- **External Assessor** to complete common PA *“...able to seek the information from both entities and ask the relevant questions of those entities.”*
- **Parallel investigation**
 - Separate complaint & PA *“I reckon that would work best for us”*
 - Joint interviews
- **Delegation to 1 institution** with / without resourcing *“we have gotten around the barriers and challenges by being effectively fully delegated to run the investigation”*
- **Joint investigation** (following the process of the Guide) *“It was a bit full-on, but it was worth doing.”*
- **Sharing information** to minimize duplication across stages *“if institutions were made to share all information, that would be really good”*
 - Complaints
 - PA
 - Expert advice
 - Media release

Reflections

SYSTEMIC OBSERVATIONS & IMPROVEMENTS

Institutional

- Ensure RI teams have adequate experience and resources
- Incorporate procedural flexibility into policies
- Establish mutual non-disclosure agreements fit for RI purposes to enable fulsome sharing of information
- Support Author Contribution Statements & use of By-lines (to denote institutional accountability)
- Create a policy or procedure about the Support establishment of formal collaborative research agreements which outline how cross-institutional RI matters will be handled
- Risk-based approach to investigations

Sector-Wide

- Very few joint investigations have been undertaken despite recommendations of the guide
- The scale of required actions (e.g., retractions) resulting from an investigation can be unmanageable
- Support recording of metadata about research provenance and accountability (PIDs)

Reflections

NEXT STEPS

This Research

- Revealed gaps, inconsistencies and potential solutions
- We need greater range of interviewees and to conduct further thematic analysis
- To explore consistency & thresholds across institutions (complaints, assessments & investigations)

The Guide

- Explore addition of resources

"...it's easy to unearth a spiders web of intricacy which [The Guide] doesn't really prepare you for."

"I mean, it could always be more specific, but it's a guide until it's a mandated national procedure, a guide...you can't be too specific because the institutions are also different."

The national framework

- Provide feedback to funders and national agencies.
- Inform discourse regarding 'National Office of RI'

Position statement—An Australian system for managing research misconduct



The Council of the Australian Academy of Science supports the establishment of a robust and fair national process for assuring the integrity of Australian research funded or subsidised by any public source, wherever conducted.

[Download statement](#) (PDF, 135KB)



(YOU)^{us}

**WILL BE
EMPOWERED TO ACT
WITH INTEGRITY**

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Felicity Clive for assistance with presentation of results and MQ RIO team for robust discussions.

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