

The value of the appeals process to evaluate the efficacy of a newly developed integrated research integrity management system: North-West University, SA

Prof Minrie Greeff
Research Integrity Officer and Advisor, NWU, SA
Minrie.greeff@nwu.ac.za

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<https://www.nwu.ac.za/irims>

Background

The North-West University (NWU) rolled out a revised research ethics system for all its faculties in 2018. However, no formal research integrity system existed. Each faculty would handle breaches in a way they saw fit. In 2020, the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) took the lead in this endeavor and started to develop a formal research integrity management system to specifically *handle breaches*. The need was soon realized to further develop a formal framework to guide researchers in *fostering a climate of responsible conduct of research (RCR)*. This led to the establishment of the Integrated Research Integrity Management System (IRIMS) in the FHS. The success of this endeavor in the FHS, prompted the university management to roll the IRIMS out to the remaining seven (7) faculties, after which it became known as the **NWU Integrated Research Integrity Management System (IRIMS)**. *Faculty also refers to school/college.*

Integrated Research Integrity Management System (IRIMS)

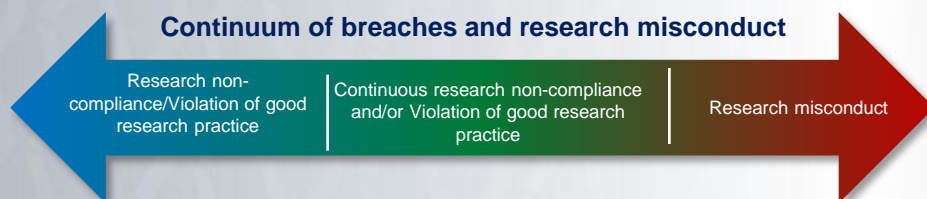
SOPs for handling breaches



Framework for fostering a climate of RCR

Area	Element
Support	Research environment
	Research study supervision
	Mentoring
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research ethics structure Scientific committee structure Integrated Research Integrity Management Systems (IRIMS) Data management system and management practices Fair research assessment practices
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research collaboration Declaration of interests Stakeholder/external organisation communication Publication and communication Research ethics and research integrity webpage
Training	Research ethics and research integrity training to academics and postgraduate students

Continuum of breaches and research misconduct



Two very specific ways of handling breaches

- Handling research *non-compliance* and *violation of good research practice* on an **intra-faculty level**, as a **restorative process** by undergoing **individualized mentorship**.
- Handling *research misconduct* (FFP) as prescribed by the *NWU Policy on Academic Integrity (2021)* by **escalating** it to either the Registrar's office (for staff) or the Student Judicial Office (for post graduate students) for **disciplinary action**.

Appeals process or not?

- While developing the SOPs for the management of breaches in research integrity, a decision had to be taken regarding whether an appeals process would be available for cases managed on an *intra-faculty level* (RI SOP1). Having the option is not a compulsory requirement and it is generally left to the institution to decide whether such an option will be made available.
- During the research integrity investigative process, there are so many factors to consider, people to include, as well as the ongoing need to protect the integrity of the research being undertaken, the research entity housing the researcher, and the institution itself.
- At the same time, the alleged should also have a fair chance to first give his/her side of the allegation before a decision of their innocence or guilt can be made. The NWU therefore decided to include an appeals process for the alleged, should he/she decide to use this option.

When can you appeal?

All alleged individuals are given the opportunity to provide their side of the allegation during an investigation. However, the alleged can appeal the decision of the Empaneled Research Integrity Committee (ERIC) after the investigation when he/she wishes to:

- Alter some content of the letter of reprimand written to him/her.
- Question some aspects of the process.
- Question part of the decision made.

The appeals process

1. The panel receives	2. Orientation	3. Review time	4. Formal meeting	5. Panel decision option
*Formal appeals letter from alleged and supporting documents. *All investigation-generated documents (e.g., emails, minutes, reports).	Initial orientation session conducted by the RIO to discuss expectations and process to be followed.	Ample time afforded to work through all the documentation.	Date, time and venue set for the formal appeals panel meeting.	1.To request further information, if needed. 2.To interview the alleged if it seems necessary. 3.To uphold the appeal. 4.To dismiss the appeal.

Who is the appeals panel?

The appeals panel would be comprised of another group of people that had not been part of the initial investigation, including the following individuals:

- The Executive Dean as chairperson.
- The Research Integrity Officer (RIO).
- The Research Director of the entity in which the alleged resides.
- Two independent expert panelists that are knowledgeable about the specific issue at hand.
- The secretariat.

Lessons learnt from an actual appeals process

Going through the first appeals process, in a newly developed IRIMS, can be a daunting experience unless it is viewed from an optimistic and positive perspective, of evaluating this new system.

In the newly developed system, it was soon realized that an appeals process has value because it allows for the evaluation of the efficacy of the system.

It can also afford the opportunity to evaluate the correctness, efficacy and fairness of the various processes followed throughout the investigation and allows for change if required.

It can also allow for the evaluation of the appeals SOP itself, and whether it is effective and comprehensive enough and allows for change if required.

It can evaluate whether the IRIMS investigation process could and will "stand the test of time".

Insight can come from what it is that the alleged is appealing, but also from whether the appeals panel itself decides that there was:

- Procedural fairness.
- Sufficient substantive evidence to make the finding that the initial investigative ERIC made.
- Whether the sanctions/corrective interventions were indeed developmental and restorative in nature and matched the findings.

It allows for a truly open and honest reflection on whether processes are sufficient, whether they can be improved and/or whether the new system is giving the results that are expected from it.

An open, reflective mind allows for growth and change if needed.