

1 The complaint

On ... 2014 the Committee scientific integrity of Wageningen UR received a complaint from [complainant] via ... regarding the publication “...” written by [defendant 1] and [defendant 2] .

The complaint concerns several suspicions of violation of scientific integrity regarding negligence in carrying out research, deliberately incorrectly interpreting results and conflict of interest. The publication addresses concerns about two... used in ...: the ... and the ... program. The complainant is director of [organisation 1] which verifies the standards for

2 The procedure

The committee decided to handle the complaint in its meeting of ... 2014.

The defendants were asked to write a defence to the complaint on ... 2014. This defence was received by the committee on ... and sent to the complainant on ... 2014 for reply. The complainant commented on the defence on ... 2014 and these comments were sent to the defendants on The defendants were asked to reply to the comments during the scheduled hearing with the committee.

On ... a hearing with the defendants took place. The attendants of this meeting were: [defendant 1] and [defendant 2], ..., Prof. ... and..., all members of the committee and..., secretary. The minutes of this hearing were sent to the attendants with the request to check for factual inaccuracies.

On 2014 a hearing with the complainant took place. The attendants of this meeting were: ... (complainant), ..., ..., ..., all committee members and..., secretary. The minutes of this hearing were sent to the attendants with the request to check for factual inaccuracies.

Hereafter the investigation was closed.

3 Viewpoints of parties

3.1 The viewpoint of the complainant

The complainant states that the concerned publication contains unethical bias, inaccuracy, lack of objectivity, and numerous instances of failure to disclose conflicts of interest.

The complainant states that the publication contains demonstrably false information that could and should have been detected:

1. ... does not contravene the standards of ... as stated in the publication.
2. The authors state that ... is not reaching the market because of a conflict between the ... and the ... program, but this cannot be the reason since there is no prohibition in the [organization 1] standards for....
3. The [organization 1] Program standards were not accurately portrayed in relation to the reason why ... is not considered....

4. The authors state that [organization 2] is paying[organization 1] to ..., but [organization 2] is not paying [organization 1].

According to the complainant these inaccuracies could have easily been prevented by contacting [organization 1] . The complainant further states that the biased representation in the publication deliberately favours a... company (...) with which the researchers have personal, business, and research relationships. The complainant also states that part of the research data was collected by an employee of this company ([employee 1])

3.2 The viewpoint of the defendants

The defendants state that their research is methodologically sound, having followed a standardized case study approach common in [their field].

Regarding the claimed inaccuracies the defendants state:

1. They are willing to issue an erratum if deemed necessary for point 1 made by the complainant.
2. The statements were misinterpreted by the complainant. The publication does not claim that the ... standards directly prohibit ... certification.
3. The publication does provide a clear and concise definition of what ... means according to [organization 1]. The attempts [organization 1] has made to certify ... are not credible.
4. The defendants have sufficient substantiation to maintain the statement made in the publication about the payments. The information is however confidential and was therefore not published. The committee can look into the sources if needed.

The defendants further state that the relationship with the company indicated was purely to access information needed to perform the research. The company has not funded any part of the research conducted. The research was (partly) funded by [Fund]. The defendants also state that [employee 1] has not contributed information in any form to [defendant 1]'s research. The interview referred to was between [defendant 1] and [employee 2] of [organization 1].

3.3 Written comments between complainant and defendant

The complainant replied that the erratum for point 1 should not only be issued if deemed necessary, but should be retracted requiring a demand from the publisher of the journal.

The complainant does not accept the explanation of the defendants about the other points.

The complainant regrets that [employee 2] failed to recollect being contacted by [defendant 1] for a phone interview that took place in 2012. The complainant however does not accept the statement that [employee 1] was not involved in the research.

The complainant further introduces a new undisclosed conflict of interest since [defendant 1] is currently employed by [employer], initiator of one of the two ... involved in the publication.

3.4 Oral comments of the defendants on the comments of the complainant

The defendants on request of the committee replied to some of the comments of the complainant during the hearing:

1. The phrasing could have been more accurate, but it is not intentional and does not affect the conclusion. So we do not see the need for an erratum.
2. Not discussed.

3. Not discussed.
4. The committee requests the sources.

The defendants indicate that there can in no way be conflict of interest regarding the employment of [defendant 1] at [employer] given the timeframe of the acceptance of the paper and the acceptance of the job at [employer] by [defendant 1] .

3.5 Oral comment of the complainant

In the meeting of ... 2014 the committee requested [complainant] to explain the nature of the payment to [organization 1] by [organization 2] . The complainant explained that [organization 1] receives donations to support the monitoring work needed for the ... label. No request from [organization 1] for payment was posed to [organization 2] .

4 Considerations of the committee

4.1 General remarks

The committee advises the Executive Board of Wageningen University or DLO about submitted complaints regarding violations of scientific integrity. The committee bases her judgment about violation of scientific integrity on – but not exclusively - the standards of scientific integrity that are primarily deducted from the Wageningen Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice and the Scientific integrity complaints procedure Wageningen UR.

It is not about new but about well-known and long existing standards from which was – and is- deducted when and under which circumstances violation of scientific integrity occurs.

Violation of these (inter)national standards does not by definition lead to violation of scientific integrity. There can be (culpable) negligent acting not resulting in violation of scientific integrity.

The committee can consult experts when judging the possible violation of scientific integrity. The committee is however not bound to their advice.

The Commission has no jurisdiction to judge on civil matters nor scientific controversies.

It is therefore important to differentiate violation of scientific integrity from criticized or bad science. With criticized or bad science the discussion is often about a difference in interpretation or a difference in opinion about a scientific judgement. These matters should be discussed and settled in the appropriate forum of scientific journals, preferably in the journal in which the criticized article has been published.

The Commission is neither equipped nor empowered to act as arbitrator in scientific controversies.

4.2 Considerations of the committee

4.2.1 Inaccuracies

A discussion about a difference in interpretation or a difference in opinion about a scientific judgement should be discussed and settled in the appropriate forum of scientific journals, preferably in the journal in which the criticized article has been published. An incorrect interpretation becomes misconduct when a scientist persists in incorrectly interpreting facts and presenting unfounded conclusions despite the fact that the scientific community has arrived at an undisputed conclusion on the matter. The committee deems this relevant for the discussion about inaccuracy point 1. The committee regrets that the complainant did not contact the journal and/or the authors about this inaccuracy before submitting a formal complaint. The committee notes that the authors indicate to recognize the possible difference in

interpretation of their statement and are willing to submit an erratum. The committee however regrets the statement of the authors that this erratum will only be issued when deemed necessary by the journal. The committee is of the opinion that the authors, by accepting the statement that their formulation should have been more accurate, should have acted more pro-actively. This is even more relevant since the authors knew the topic of their investigation is sensitive. The committee noted that an erratum has now been added to the thesis of [defendant 1] defended on ... 2014 covering this formulation.

Regarding the other reported inaccuracies the committee repeats the statement from the general remarks above that the committee does not judge the quality of published research. The committee checked the confidential background material for the study and it found no evidence for possible violation of scientific integrity. The committee however does want to stress the importance of awareness of scientists when investigating sensitive topics.

4.2.2 Conflict of interest

The committee did not find any evidence of conflict of interest. Further the committee is of the opinion that in the case of a societal sensitive topic, scientists should be extra aware in their expressions about their research. In this case, a video about the publication was published online when [defendant 1] was already employed at [employer] . Since the research presented in the video was carried out before his appointment at [employer] as was the submission of the paper this does not lead directly to a conflict of interest. Although the committee does by no means want to limit the possibilities to promote research, [defendant 1] and [research group] should have been aware of the questions his employment at [employer] could raise in society and should have been more transparent about this. This consideration does however not deal with possible violation of scientific integrity, but with the communication culture of [research group] .

4.2.3 *Procedure at journal*

The complainant informed the committee that he also has filed a complaint with the journal. The committee does not know which procedure is followed by the journal and when a judgement is to be expected.

5 Advice

The committee advises the Executive Board of Wageningen University to declare the complaints from ... against [defendant 1] and [defendant 2] unfounded. Scientists should however be extra aware when investigating societal sensitive topics and this awareness should be reflected in their publications.

6 Preliminary decision of the Executive Board

The Executive Board accepted the advice of the committee and decided that the complaint was unfounded.

7 LOWI

The case was not submitted to the LOWI.

8 Final decision of the Executive Board

On 19 January 2015 the Executive Board converted its preliminary decision into a final decision.