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Peer Review

A guide supporting the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*

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1. Introduction

This guide supports the implementation of the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (the Code), which articulates the broad principles and responsibilities that underpin the responsible conduct of Australian research.

In particular, this guide is intended to assist institutions and researchers to adhere to relevant principles of the Code, including:

- Principle 3, 'Transparency in declaring interests ...', which includes the responsibility to disclose interests and manage conflicts of interest.
- Principle 4, 'Fairness in the treatment of others', which requires researchers and others involved in research to be treated fairly and with respect.

This guide aims to assist those involved in research to understand and apply best practice in conducting and participating in peer review.

This guide applies to the peer review of research by researchers employed by, or affiliated with, Australian institutions. These institutions vary in size, maturity, experience and organisational structure. They range from large and complex universities to small privately funded institutes. Accordingly, it is acknowledged that different institutional policies and processes are capable of fulfilling the aim of this guide and attempts have been made to ensure that there are appropriate options for flexibility in its application.

2. Peer review

For the purposes of this guide, and as defined in the Code:

Peer review is the impartial and independent assessment of research by others working in the same or a related field.

Peer review has a number of important roles in research and research management, including:

- the assessment of research proposals and grant applications
- the assessment and selection of material for publication and dissemination
- the assessment of the research of Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates
- the assessment of research quality, engagement and impact by government bodies, and
- other reviews or assessments of research conducted by individual researchers, teams, academic units and institutions.

Peer review provides expert scrutiny of proposed research or research outputs and helps to maintain high standards in research, including by ensuring that accepted disciplinary standards are met. At its best, peer review contributes to accurate, thorough and credible reporting of research.

Peer review may also draw attention to departures from the principles in the Code, including by identifying plagiarism, duplicative publication, errors and misleading statements.

Participating in peer review also provides benefits for researchers, including keeping abreast of the most recent research, improving critical analysis skills and understanding of peer review processes, and obtaining recognition for contributions to peer review.

3. Responsibilities of institutions

This section provides guidance on the responsibilities that institutions have in relation to peer review, including for internal peer review processes.

3.1 Support peer review

Institutions should recognise the importance of peer review processes to academic and scientific endeavour by encouraging and supporting the participation of its researchers.

Institutions should appropriately recognise that peer review is an important activity that has an impact on the researcher's workload and status.

3.2 Provide training for researchers

Institutions must provide ongoing training and education that promotes and supports responsible research conduct and assists all researchers in relevant aspects of peer review processes, including training for early career researchers and HDR students.

Under the Code, institutions have responsibilities to:

- R4 Provide ongoing training and education that promotes and supports responsible research conduct for all researchers and those in other relevant roles.*
- R5 Ensure supervisors of research trainees have the appropriate skills, qualifications and resources.*

4. Responsibilities of researchers

This section provides guidance on the responsibilities that researchers have in relation to peer review.

4.1 Participate in peer review

Participating in peer review processes is an important part of the research endeavour. Researchers in receipt of public funding may have a responsibility to participate in peer review.

To ensure the quality and integrity of peer review processes, researchers should ensure that they have the appropriate expertise to participate in the peer review activity.

4.2 Conduct peer review responsibly

It is important that peer reviewers are fair, rigorous and timely in their review. They must also maintain any required confidentiality of the peer review process.

Researchers must engage in peer review appropriately and respectfully, and must not use the peer review process to disparage other researchers.

Peer reviewers should also be aware that funding agencies and publishers are likely to have their own peer review policies, guidelines and expectations to which they must adhere.

Under the Code, researchers have the responsibility to:

R28 Participate in peer review in a way that is fair, rigorous and timely and maintains the confidentiality of the content.

Peer reviewers must:

- inform themselves about the criteria to be applied in the peer review process
- review research objectively, impartially and in accordance with the review criteria
- apply standards equally to all research under review
- give proper consideration to research that challenges or changes accepted ways of thinking, which may include innovative, interdisciplinary or collaborative research
- maintain professionalism in the tone of their comments, ensuring that peer reviews are as constructive as possible, and
- disclose interests and manage conflicts of interest.

Peer reviewers must not:

- contact the author/s or other reviewers unless authorised to do so
- seek to unduly influence the review process
- delegate their responsibilities or ask others to assist with a review, unless authorised to do so
- take into account factors that are not relevant to the review criteria
- permit personal prejudice to influence the process (peer reviewers should be aware of how their own biases (conscious or unconscious) could affect the peer review process, including in relation to gender, ethnicity, nationality, institutional employer and research discipline)
- take advantage of knowledge obtained during the peer review process, or use information from research projects under review, without permission
- conduct a review for which one lacks appropriate expertise, or
- intentionally delay the review process.

4.2.1 Respect confidentiality

Peer reviewers must ensure that they adhere to the confidentiality requirements of all bodies utilising peer review including universities, publishers and funding agencies. In most circumstances, peer reviewers are required to maintain the confidentiality of the peer review process and must not disclose the content of any material under review or the outcome of any review process. The unauthorised disclosure of information is a breach of confidentiality and, potentially, a breach of the Code.

4.2.2 Disclose interests and manage conflicts of interest

Peer reviewers must disclose interests, and abide by any requirements established to manage conflicts of interest, in accordance with Responsibility 24 of the Code and *Disclosure of interests and management of conflicts of interest: A guide supporting the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*.

Under the Code, researchers have the responsibility to:

R24 Disclose and manage actual, potential and perceived conflicts of interest.

4.3 Avoid interference in the peer review process

Researchers whose work is undergoing peer review must not seek to influence the process or outcomes.

4.4 Mentor trainees in peer review

Researchers have a responsibility to assist research trainees under their supervision, including early career and HDR students, to develop the skills necessary for conducting peer review responsibly.

4.5 Engage in relevant training

Researchers should engage in relevant training about peer review processes, and should seek out other relevant training opportunities when they perceive a knowledge gap.

Under the Code, researchers have the responsibility to:

R16 Undertake and promote education and training in responsible research conduct.

5. Breaches of the Code

Institutions should manage and investigate concerns or complaints about potential breaches of the Code in accordance with the *Guide to Managing and Investigating Potential Breaches of the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (the Investigation Guide).

Examples of breaches of the Code that are related to peer review (see also Section 2.1 of the Investigation Guide) include, but are not limited to:

- failing to conduct peer review responsibly and fairly
- taking advantage of knowledge obtained through peer review processes
- disclosing the content or outcome of peer review processes
- failing to disclose relevant interests.

Peer reviewers should familiarise themselves with the processes involved in reporting potential breaches of the Code identified during the peer review process¹.

Additional Resources

- NHMRC Research Integrity Fact Sheet Two (“Concerns about research integrity arising during NHMRC peer review”)
- Guide to NHMRC Peer Review
- [ARC Peer Review](#) (webpage)
- The International Congress on Peer Review and Scientific Publication (<https://peerreviewcongress.org/index.html>)
- COPE Council, Ethical guidelines for peer reviewers, September 2017 (www.publicationethics.org)
- Global Research Council, Statement of Principles on Peer/Merit Review 2018 (https://www.globalresearchcouncil.org/fileadmin//documents/GRC_Publications/Statement_of_Principles_on_Peer-Merit_Review_2018.pdf)

¹ See, for example, NHMRC Research Integrity Fact Sheet Two (“Concerns about research integrity arising during NHMRC peer review”) and *ARC Research Integrity Policy* (section 5).

