



Recommendation 1/2023, of 16th May, concerning multiple affiliations in scientific journals

In accordance with article 95 of Law 9/2022, of 21 December, on Science in Catalonia, the Committee for the Integrity of Research in Catalonia (CIR-CAT) is the collegiate body that advises institutions that carry out or fund research in the research, development and innovation system on how to promote and consolidate good practice and analyse and prevent conflicts affecting research integrity.

In accordance with the powers attributed to it by article 97 of Law 9/2022, the Plenary of the CIR-CAT, in the ordinary session held on 16 May 2023, issues the following opinion:

I.- Background and Context

On 25 April 2023, the CIR-CAT Plenary met in extraordinary session to consider the request submitted by the Director General for Research on 19 April referring to several frequently cited researchers who are linked to universities and research centres in Catalonia but have declared that they had changed their preferred professional affiliation, in some cases presumably with financial incentives, in order to promote or strengthen the status of other foreign institutions in terms of scientific production and institutional reputation. The information available did not indicate that the research had been conducted, supported or approved in the foreign institutions. Nor was it clear whether the researchers' own university or centre had received this information.

The CIR-CAT was asked to analyse this situation and the position of these scientists, whose actions could be damaging the image of Catalan institutions and misusing public funds.

The Plenary of the Committee considered that the facts briefly described by the Director General, on the basis of the information available, did have aspects that could have an impact on good scientific practice and the integrity of research, affecting the principle of honesty and proper authorship. They could also have an impact on proper compliance with the legal framework applicable to the case.

The Plenary of the Committee thus unanimously decided that, within the framework of the powers assigned to it by Article 97 of Law 9/2022 on Science in Catalonia, it is competent to rule on the matter raised in the petition, as regards good practice and research integrity.

II.- On multiple affiliations

The affiliations specified by the authors of scientific work in their publications, in bibliometric databases and in any other area of their professional activity indicate the entity or entities to which they are linked in connection with their scientific activity.

Affiliations are, therefore, an integral part of scientific publications, as is an ordered list of authors who have participated in the project. Affiliations and authorship are inextricably linked. Consequently, the information given after the title of the scientific work specifies who the authors are and where the work was carried out.

Declaring more than one affiliation is explicitly allowed for in scenarios where, for example, authors work in centres that report to multiple institutions, the research is carried out in a centre other than the one to which the author is linked by their main occupation (doctors or teachers, for example) or when the author is on sabbatical leave at another centre¹. In such cases, these conditions are usually established within the framework of agreements between the institutions or on the basis of permission for specific cases².

The primary affiliation for each author should be the institution where the majority of their work was done. If an author has subsequently moved, the current address may also be stated. (Nature; <https://www.nature.com/nature-portfolio/editorial-policies/authorship>)

This issue has become particularly significant following the establishment of University and Research Centre rankings calculated from the number of citations of articles published in international journals and based on the affiliations declared by authors. The importance that some institutions have given to these rankings has led them to devote resources to improving their position in the lists, which may have contributed to the problem described. This fact has led to discussion about the value of these classifications and their adverse effects on the behaviour of some researchers.

Any article affiliations should represent the institution(s) at which the research presented was conducted and/or supported and/or approved. For non-research content, any affiliations should represent the institution(s) with which each author is currently affiliated. Knowingly providing false or fraudulent affiliation information is a form of misconduct, and may lead to article retraction. (Cambridge University Press; <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-file-manager/file/5b44807ace5b3fca0954531e/CUP-Research-Publishing-Ethics-Guidelines-2019.pdf>)

¹Article 17 of Spanish Law 14/2011, of 1 June, on Science, Technology and Innovation (amended by Spanish Law 17/2022, of 5 September), recognises as normal, in cases of partial assignment, the possibility of double affiliation, as follows: "2. *The public agents of the Spanish Science, Technology and Innovation System may authorise the secondment, on a full- or part-time basis, of research personnel who provide services in them to other public or private agencies, both national and international, regardless of the nature of their contract. They may also authorise the secondment on a full- or part-time basis of research staff from other public agencies. In both cases, the employment or statutory relationship with the original public agency shall be maintained, and the purpose of the secondment shall be to carry out scientific and technical research, experimental development, transfer or dissemination of knowledge, or management of research centres, scientific facilities or scientific programmes and projects, for the time necessary for the execution of the research project, subject to a favourable report from the original institution and in accordance with what the statutes, where appropriate, establish regarding procedures for secondment and its effects. In the case of partial secondment, research personnel belonging to a public agency of the Spanish Science, Technology and Innovation System shall have dual affiliation: to the centre to which they were originally linked and to the centre to which they are partially seconded. Such dual affiliation must be made explicit in any work produced during the period of partial secondment*".

²Accordingly, article 22.3 of Law 9/2022, the Catalan Law on Science stipulates that: 3. *Total or partial secondment of research staff shall be coordinated by an agreement between the respective institutions and shall imply no alteration to the legal status of the researchers, who shall be considered, to all intents and purposes, as staff of the original institution, in accordance with applicable labour laws. Seconded staff are subject to the internal rules of the institution to which they are seconded.*

If affiliations do not correspond to a real attachment to a given institution, they are to be considered misleading or fraudulent. As affiliation and authorship declarations are part of the mechanism for attributing merit to scientific output globally, poor practice in these declarations can undermine this process and harm third parties.

The correct and honest attribution of merit in research is thus a prerequisite for the fair recognition, evaluation and promotion of researchers, their ability to obtain funding and the positioning of the institutions to which they belong, with a fair return to the latter for the resources allocated.

Multiple author affiliations to a university and a hospital or a research organization, for example, are generally fine but the problem arises with dual author affiliations or multiple affiliations to universities, because of the potential issue of boosting productivity. If multiple institutional affiliations appear in the author byline, editors might want to ask authors to explain why and what contributions were made by the universities to the research. Editors could also pursue the primary university to determine if they are aware of the second university and if the second university was involved in the research. (Committee on Publication Ethics: <https://publicationethics.org/case/institutions-paying-authors-be-named-papers>)

III.- Situations of which the CIR-CAT has been made aware

In recent weeks, in the light of media reports and an ad hoc technical report by the consultancy firm SIRIS Academic (<https://www.sirisacademic.com/blog/the-affiliation-game-of-saudi-arabian-higher-education-research-institutions>), it has been reported that some researchers working in research centres in Catalonia (and others working in centres elsewhere in Spain) may have engaged in malpractice. It has been disclosed that these researchers could, possibly with a financial incentive, have signed scientific articles expressly acknowledging non-formalised affiliations, which do not fall within the scenarios mentioned in the previous section, with the sole purpose of favouring an improvement in the ranking of the universities in question, in this case in Saudi Arabia.

However, the individual cases that have been mentioned and questioned by the media should be carefully analysed internally by each of the institutions involved, in accordance with the legal system applicable and with full respect for individual rights. CIR-CAT wishes to emphasise that the majority of authors with multiple, appropriate and successful affiliations comply with the criteria for good scientific practice. Given that we are dealing with a limited number of cases, we consider it important to avoid hasty generalisations, which can only undermine the credibility of our research system.

When the conditions described in section II are not complied with, and an author introduces multiple affiliations in their publications and/or in the bibliography reference databases, we are confronted with an anomalous situation, given that, as mentioned above, they may be contravening the conditions of their employment contract or position as a civil servant and may also be diverting funds allocated to research for different purposes. It should be borne in mind that a false claim in connection with authorship constitutes a breach of Good Scientific Practice. Furthermore, such conduct by an author, if accredited, may have direct effects on the researcher. It may imply that they are guilty of an offence specified in the disciplinary regime applicable to them, notwithstanding any other responsibilities that they may incur.

In view of the above observations, the different situations referred to in this report may require different, individualised solutions, which will be determined by the regulations applicable to the centre in which the researcher carries out their main activities. The Generalitat recognises that it may have

limited authority to deal with all matters that are in its interest (3. *The Generalitat has different levels of authority over institutions in the research, development and innovation system, depending on their ownership, legal status, affiliation and whether they belong to the public sector or not, in accordance with the legal framework applicable to each type of institution* (article 4.3 of Law 9/2022, on Science)

IV.- CIR-CAT recommendations

In the cases that have been published and brought to the attention of the CIR-CAT concerning researchers working in institutions in Catalonia who have multiple affiliations, including with Saudi Arabian Universities, in some cases involving individual financial considerations, the CIR-CAT considers that:

The cases published may have contravened the conditions of the researchers' contracts with their main institutions located in Catalonia and involved the use of funds earmarked for research carried out there.

Although the CIR-CAT cannot intervene in these questions of an internal legal nature, they should be investigated and dealt with within the legal framework of these institutions.

The following measures are therefore recommended:

1. The governing bodies of the aforementioned research centres should commission and carry out an internal analysis of these cases, investigating whether the contractual terms established have been breached and whether the relevant permits or authorisations were requested and obtained prior to publication. In the light of the results obtained, the CIR-CAT considers that appropriate disciplinary proceedings should be initiated, if there are sufficient grounds to do so. It is also necessary to investigate whether the principle of honesty has been disregarded in the disclosure of the authors' affiliations.
2. Researchers who have published scientific articles with affiliations that were not justified should contact the relevant journals and bibliographic databases asking for the affiliation information to be rectified. If there was appropriate scientific collaboration, this can be stated in other parts of the publication such as the Acknowledgements section.

The CIR-CAT also wishes to emphasise that matters related to multiple affiliations are of interest not only to the institutions that have been the subject of attention in recent weeks, but also to the entire Catalan system of agencies carrying out and financing research in general.

For this reason, the CIR-CAT recommends that:

1. Research centres in Catalonia review compliance with Good Research Integrity Practices by their researchers, particularly aspects relating to the criteria and procedures for the authorisation of new institutional affiliations, and strengthen internal communication and awareness.

2. The Ministry of Research and Universities publicise the considerations in this report to encourage each institution to reflect, as a preventive measure, on how it is regulated and what tools and mechanisms are currently available to prevent cases such as those mentioned above and react appropriately to them. Beyond this internal approach, if it is deemed that this problem requires a uniform solution for the research carried out in centres in Catalonia, more specific regulations governing these issues and their effects could be introduced, either in the future rollout of Law 9/2022 on Science in Catalonia, or before this, albeit only partially, by introducing modifications in the system of subsidies or funding, always respecting the autonomy of each centre. The CIR-CAT also invites the Ministry to take measures, in the appropriate framework, for the role to be adopted by CERCA and ICREA in the prevention and solution of problems such as those detected to be clarified and specified.

The functions of the CIR-CAT include clarifying the concept of good scientific practice and preventing possible deviations. Within this framework, it undertakes to develop a guide to help clarify the interpretation of the affiliations declared in scientific publications and the conditions under which declarations of multiple affiliations can properly be presented.

The Committee for the Integrity of Research in Catalonia (CIR-CAT) has accepted the aforementioned request from the Directorate General for Research and responded in the terms set out above. The latter is requested to give favourable consideration to the recommendations made in this report.