GUEST EDITORIAL

Giving editors and institutions some CLUEs about research integrity cases

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Concerns about the integrity of submitted and published research can create headaches for editors. Mishandling such cases can have serious consequences for both journals and researchers. One feature that makes such cases particularly challenging is that editors rarely have all the information they need to resolve them, and journals lack both the resources and the legal authority to carry out formal investigations. It is therefore inevitable that editors will need to liaise with institutions when serious concerns arise about the integrity of research reported in submissions to journals. However, despite being essential, such liaison between editors and universities is often difficult, especially when editors need to contact institutions in other countries where codes of conduct, disciplinary procedures, and employment law may be unfamiliar.

Although journals and institutions both have important responsibilities regarding research integrity cases, their focuses are different. For example, editors as guardians of the scientific record have responsibilities to their readers to correct or retract publications that are misleading, and to do this promptly, regardless of whether problems are due to deliberate misconduct or honest error. However, institutions usually focus solely on determining whether an individual researcher has committed misconduct and they may be legally obliged to maintain confidentiality until a full investigation (with rights of appeal) has been completed. So, while a journal may request information to enable it to publish an Expression of Concern, an institution may be unable to provide any details because of local employment law. Journals also have responsibilities to authors, and want to ensure they have a fair hearing, and may therefore be reluctant to raise concerns with employers that might eventually prove to be unfounded.

These challenges were recognized almost a decade ago in guidelines developed by COPE (the Committee On Publication Ethics) and they have been discussed at various meetings including the World Conferences on Research Integrity. From these discussions, it became clear that further, practical guidance might be helpful, and this was the starting point for developing the CLUE recommendations (on Cooperation and Liaison between Universities and Editors) which have recently been published in *Research Integrity & Peer Review*.[1]

The recommendations cover topics such as what journal editors should do when peer reviewers say findings look 'too good to be true' or feel that something is 'not quite right' about a manuscript but don't have specific evidence of misconduct. Another topic is whether journals should always raise concerns with authors first or whether there are situations in which it is better to contact the authors' institution directly (to avoid the destruction of evidence).

CLUE makes recommendations for journals, institutions and others involved, such as funders and regional research integrity organizations. However, it also recognizes that some of the difficulties facing journals and institutions over research integrity cases can only be resolved by changes in legislation or new practices and policies (such as the possibility of authors waiving the right to a confidential investigation when they submit work to a journal). Recognizing employers' needs to follow relevant laws and guidelines for disciplinary proceedings sometimes conflicts with journals' needs to alert readers promptly to serious problems with published work. The guidance therefore calls on institutions to develop mechanisms for determining the integrity of a publication (or manuscript) that are distinct from, but would not preclude, investigations into whether researchers have committed misconduct.

We hope that this new publication will act as a focus for discussion between journals, research institutions, and other parties to improve cooperation on research integrity cases and concerns, which will ensure that they are resolved promptly, effectively, and fairly.

Reference

1 Wager E, Kleinert S, on behalf of the CLUE Working Group. Cooperation & Liaison between Universities & Editors (CLUE): recommendations on best practice. Res Integr Peer Rev 6, 6 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-021-00109-3

Competing interests

EW is self-employed and received no funding for time spent on this article. EW is the former Chair of COPE (the Committee On Publication Ethics) and an author of the COPE guidelines on cooperation between journals and institutions. This was an unpaid position but COPE covered her travel and accommodation expenses for attending meetings. She provides consultancy and training for academic institutions, publishers, and pharmaceutical companies. SK is Senior Executive Editor at *The Lancet* with responsibility for research integrity, the former vice-chair of COPE and current co-chair of the 7th World Conference on Research Integrity (WCRI), and a member of the WCRI Foundation Steering Committee. The CLUE workshop was funded by the European Molecular Biology Organization and COPE. Ksenija Bazdaric (editor-in-chief of *European Science Editing*) was a member of the CLUE Working Group. She commissioned this editorial but was not involved in the decision to publish.

Author contributions

Both authors discussed the contents of this article, which was then drafted by EW, reviewed and revised by SK, and finalized after further discussion. Both authors approved the final version.