The storage of research data / materials and responding to challenges about research results

Summary

A key responsibility for all researchers is being prepared for challenges with regards to the disseminated results of their work. This requires the appropriate storage of data / materials and engaging positively with those who challenge the results of a project. A failure to meet these responsibilities can very easily become an allegation of research misconduct.

National and University guidelines

The national guidelines and integrity principles that apply to responding to challenges about disseminated research results can be found in the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007). The University has implemented, and clarified our implementation of, the Australian Code with the release of the Griffith University Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

Some of the related policies, processes and requirements also have legislative force because of Queensland or Australian legislation.

Consequently, it is extremely important that a researcher is clear of her or his responsibilities with regards to these matters. The Research Integrity Information Sheet Series is a resource for researchers to assist with the implementation of these guidelines. These guidelines apply to all Griffith University researchers, including students.

The responsible management of research data

The introduction to s2 of the Australian Code discusses the need for researchers to responsibly retain research data and materials "to justify the outcomes of the research and to defend them if they are challenged". This willingness, and preparedness, to defend challenges from academic, professional and other colleagues, is a key element of a positive dialogue about research and its potential impact on society. Griffith University is absolutely committed to the importance of this open and informed dialogue.

As per the Australian Code, Griffith University has established policies with regards to the retention of research data and materials. This includes the Schedule of Retention Periods for Research Data and Primary Materials. These arrangements have been registered as part of the University's disposal schedule and so have legislative force. This information sheet is intended to explain the processes with regards to challenges about research findings. Ideally any dispute over the published / reported results of research should be resolved between the author(s) and challengers, but Griffith University recognises that this is not always possible.
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What should be retained?

The Schedule of Retention Periods provides some discussion with regards to the retention of research data, including a discussion about research materials, and length of time which it should be retained. The correct storage of research data can be the most compelling way to respond to a challenge about the accuracy of the disseminated results of a project.

In most cases, the decision of what should be retained will be shaped by: the discipline of the work; the research design; the way in which the results of the research are to be disseminated; contractual considerations; privacy considerations; other ethical considerations; and other factors that impact what can and should be retained so as to make it possible to answer challenges in response to the disseminated results of the research.

In practice, the decision of what should be retained will be made by the researchers/ authors of the disseminated results. The decision will be specific to the particular project and means of disseminating the results. The duration for which the data and materials will be retained must be based on the Schedule of Retention Periods.

What can be challenged?

A challenge to the disseminated results of a research project might relate to: the findings / final conclusions; the analysis of the data / mathematical treatment of the data; observations / commentaries by the author(s); potential conflicts of interest; ethical issues; and/or acknowledged (or not acknowledged) limitations of the results.

This list should not be considered exhaustive as a valid challenge can relate to any element of the research and the disseminated results.

Who can challenge the disseminated results of a research project?

In practice, anyone who has access to the disseminated results of the research (whether it was published in a refereed journal, appeared in a report, was published, in a web site, etc) can challenge those results. This might include challenges in the academic and mass media.

Of course, when deciding the merit of a challenge (see Initial assessment) one of the matters to consider is the degree to which the challenger can make an informed challenge. By definition, such an assessment will be based upon the specifics of the research, the dissemination of the results and the challenger.

In some cases, an assessment might be made that a challenge has no merit. However, as a general principle, Griffith University takes an inclusive view of who can challenge the disseminated results.
Who initially receives challenges?

Challenges about disseminated research findings can be received by a wide range of individuals including (but not limited to): the author(s); one of the academic elements where an author is based; senior research staff (e.g., deputy deans research); administrative units (such as the Research Ethics and Integrity team in the Office for Research, or Corporate Archives and Records Management Services) or the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research).

In the majority of cases the author(s) themselves will receive the challenge. In the event the author(s) have left Griffith University, the challenge might be received by any of the parties named above.

In some cases a challenge will relate to the work of authors/researchers from more than one institution. Generally, the handling of the challenge should be based upon the policies and processes of the institution where the Executive or Corresponding Author (see Factsheet 2 in this series) is based at the time when the challenge is received.

The initial assessment

Whomever initially receives a challenge, this should be promptly sent to the Executive or Corresponding Author of the publication, report, etc. The Executive or Corresponding Author should make an initial assessment as to whether the challenge appears to have *prima facie* merit. This assessment of merit will be based on factors such as the complexity of the work, the nature of the disseminated results and how these were reported/published, the apparent relevant knowledge/expertise of the challenger and any other relevant factors. **However, a very inclusive assessment should be made, that recognises a broad scope of challenges as having *prima facie* merit.**

The decision of the Executive or Corresponding Author with regards to whether there is a *prima facie* merit to the challenge, that requires a response, should be communicated to the challenger.

Response from the author(s)

If a challenge is deemed to have *prima facie* merit, the Executive or Corresponding Author should provide a response to the challenge, on behalf of the authors/researchers to the challenge. Preferably this response should be in writing (e.g., in an email). If a verbal response is made, in the interest of maintaining a record, the substance of the response should be reconfirmed in writing or, at the very least, a file note made of the date, time, and substance of the response.

Hopefully this will be the end of a challenge. In most cases, this dialogue can resolve any misunderstanding and may result in an ongoing positive exchange of ideas. It might even provide the basis for a new publication/report. The fact that two informed individuals disagree on the interpretation of the same results does not imply that either are false (or for that matter true).
However, when it is not possible to reach a mutually acceptable resolution (if only to agree to disagree), it may need be necessary for there to be a more formal investigation of whether the matter constitutes research misconduct (e.g., independently determining whether the disseminated results were based upon falsified or misrepresented data).

Any documents (including email correspondence) relating to a challenge must be sent to CARMS for inclusion on the research project management file.

**Unresolved issues**

Despite the best efforts of the authors/researchers, there will be situations where, at the end of the process described above, the challenger feels that their challenge remains unresolved. This can especially be the case when the challenger feels that the disseminated results have been based upon falsified or misrepresented data.

Where it has not been possible to reach a mutually satisfactory resolution of the challenge, the matter should normally be considered in terms of an allegation of research misconduct.

**Research misconduct**

The University’s policies and approach to research misconduct is discussed in the *Griffith University Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*. A finding that research misconduct has occurred may result in the issuing of instructions with regards to corrective action, required training, or the commencement of further disciplinary proceedings.

If a person who made the challenge, is found to have made a mischievous or specious challenge, they may also be subject of a research misconduct investigation.

The process for the determination of these matters fall outside the scope of this Information Sheet.

**Scope of these guidelines**

These guidelines apply to all forms of dissemination of results of research by Griffith University researchers, regardless of whether refereed or non-refereed, online or offline, books, conference proceedings, internal reports, formal or more informal publications. The guidelines also apply to all research, irrespective of whether it requires animal ethics or human research ethical clearance, or how the work was funded (if at all).