Plagiarism in funding applications

General advice

Flemish Commission for Scientific Integrity

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1   Plagiarism in applications for research funding

1.1   Topic of advice

The essence of plagiarism is representing the work of others as one's own work. Self-plagiarism is the practice of representing one's earlier work as new work. This "work" includes not only text but also ideas, images, codes, calculations, etc.

Establishing plagiarism thus requires (1) the identification of another work and (2) the verification that no or insufficient recognition has been given to this other work.

This advice covers plagiarism in project applications, in which one's own work is a project application and the other work is another project application. Plagiarism in project applications in which the other work is part of the regular research literature is also unacceptable but is not discussed in this report.

1.2   Importance of the issue

In the European research landscape, research positions, project funding, research materials, travel grants and prizes are competitively allocated to researchers based on an assessment of their applications. Applications for new research funding mostly contain proposals in which new research is conceived.

Plagiarism in project applications is an important problem, on the one hand, from the perspective of research integrity (misappropriation is unfair) and, on the other hand, because of the risk of "duplicate funding" (receiving funding for the same research from multiple sources, which goes against the efficient use of research funds).

1.3   Determining plagiarism in funding applications

Detecting and combatting plagiarism in funding applications requires a specific approach because (1) in many cases, there is no access to other works (i.e., other funding applications) and (2) it is often unclear to researchers to what extent they must indicate whether their new application overlaps with previous applications (either by themselves or by others).

If two research proposals overlap, collaboration should be considered as a possible reason for the overlap. Consider a case in which one detects a resemblance between an application by Researcher A and an application by Researcher B at the next call. Before drawing the conclusion that Researcher B has plagiarized the work of Researcher A, one has to be certain that Researcher B was in no way involved in the drafting of the application of Researcher A. After all, the overlap between the two applications might actually reflect the work of Researcher B, as would be the case when Researchers A and B collaborate(d), for example, as colleagues of the same research team or as supervisor and PhD student.

However, there are no established rules about how to describe the contribution of other researchers in the development of an application, contrary to what is the case with scientific publications. There are also no clear rules on how to clarify overlap between one's own application and other applications (for example, in case of resubmission of the same application).

The introduction of such rules would make the detection of plagiarism in funding applications possible. One can conclude that plagiarism has taken place if (1) there is significant overlap between the current application and an application by another researcher, *and* (2) it is clear from the description of the contributions to both applications that the overlapping part was not developed by the applicant of the current application, *and* (3) the current applicant in no other way indicates that the overlapping part was developed by others. Self-plagiarism implies that (1) there is significant overlap between the current application and another application by the same applicant *and* (2) the current application contains no information about this overlap.

2   Recommendations for research funding organizations

2.1   Transparency on authorship and uniqueness of applications

First of all, there is a need for transparency on the part of the applicants. Researchers should be asked explicitly to provide the following information with each application for research funding:

1.   Which researchers were involved in the drafting of the application? What was the contribution of each of those researchers?

2.   Are there any other applications of the applicant(s) that partially or completely overlap with the current application? If so, to what extent do these applications overlap and what is the status of the other application?

This information is crucial in diagnosing plagiarism in funding applications (cfr. 1.3).

2.2   Restraint in using authorship and uniqueness information during the selection of applications

The Flemish Commission for Research Integrity recommends that during the selection of applications, one should be careful when using the information provided by applicants about collaborations with others and overlap with other applications. If an application has less chances of being selected when the applicant declares that (1) others were involved in the preparation of the application or (2) there are overlapping applications, this may be detrimental to the willingness of applicants to declare this information truthfully. Sanctioning the input of others or the overlap between applications can thus complicate the detection of plagiarism. Moreover, the involvement of other researchers and overlap between applications could be part of a scientifically laudable and justifiable strategy (e.g., the optimal utilization of available expertise and funding sources). In such cases, there are no grounds for sanctioning this during the selection process. If, after the selection of an application, it is established that overlapping applications have received funding, the overlap between applications may be taken into account when determining the extent of funding for the selected application (see 2.4).

2.3　Transparency about the way plagiarism in funding applications is handled

We recommend that research funding institutions inform applicants in advance about how they will handle overlap between applications. As noted above, merely establishing overlap between funding applications does not suffice to establish plagiarism. It is therefore important that funders clarify (1) in which cases observed overlap between funding applications will be classified as plagiarism and (2) what the consequences are of establishing plagiarism.

2.4　Measures to avoid duplicate funding

Research funding can be made conditional on not receiving alternative funding for overlapping applications. In doing so, one should take into account other factors such as the type of application. For example, when applying for a doctoral position within a team, overlap with other applications from that team is sometimes inevitable or even desirable.

Taking into account alternative funding requires coordination in handling different applications within one institution and between different institutions, within the context of the wider societal cost of duplicate funding. Coordination encompasses not only exchange of information about the allocation of funds but also about the content of the applications, in order to allow for an assessment of the degree of overlap between different applications.

2.5　Provisional restraint in establishing plagiarism

The Flemish Commission for Research Integrity recommends research funding institutions (and their Commissions for Research Integrity) to exert restrain in establishing plagiarism in funding applications, in anticipation of the implementation of our recommendations. Without reliable information about the contributions of others in the development of funding applications, establishing plagiarism is difficult.