



**COMETS**  
CNRS Ethics Committee

Opinion no. 2012-11

# “THE SCIENTIFIC ASSESSOR’S INTEGRITY CHARTER”

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## I. FORMAL INTERNAL REQUEST

### A. For a code of ethics applicable to scientific assessors

With the development of project-based research and the growing importance of team and staff ratings, researchers, engineers, technicians and administrative staff are increasingly faced with assessments. They themselves may be subjected to them when applying for funds, or they may subject others to them when called upon to appraise projects. It is thus becoming essential for the CNRS to define a set of common and shared principles on assessment. COMETS issued an Opinion on this topic<sup>1</sup> in 2004, but has never addressed the position of the assessor, even though this role may increasingly become a source of conflicts of interest and tensions within the communities involved, or even encourage deviant behaviour such as the appropriation of ideas or plagiarism. COMETS therefore considers it necessary for the CNRS to adopt ethical standards via an integrity charter for assessors that is in line with the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity drafted at the Second World Conference on Research Integrity in July 2010 and published in 2011 (see Annex).

Although the CNRS has had a charter on expert appraisals since June 2011, this does not address ethical standards for assessments. Yet evaluation is a part of researchers' activities, and currently occupies an increasing proportion of their time. It takes different forms depending on the discipline and its purpose. Its methods may be criticised, and its very principle is sometimes questioned on a philosophical level. However, although it is by nature imperfect, it is indispensable. The approach proposed by COMETS is to start deliberations from this difficulty instead of, as is often the case, ending with it. This focus on the general principles of assessment takes into account its inevitable practical difficulties. To this end, COMETS will propose a charter containing a series of rules of good conduct which it will be the duty of scientific staff to observe whenever they are called upon to participate in a group or give an individual expert opinion to assess, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*:

- the activity of a colleague,
- the work of a research team, laboratory or institution,
- a research project.

This CNRS integrity charter will not replace the various charters imposed by research agencies or institutions for assessments in which CNRS researchers are participating. It will supplement such charters or be applied when there are no others. If there is a difference on certain issues between the CNRS charter and the charter of the agency or institution concerned, the CNRS staff involved will always be required to comply with the rules of this CNRS integrity charter and *a fortiori* those of the sponsor if they are more restrictive.

Initially, the scientific assessor's integrity charter will be brought to the attention of all CNRS staff. This code of ethics will be presented to those joining the CNRS, institute directors, research unit directors and during scientific integrity awareness sessions planned by COMETS. It will also be presented to other organisations upon request.

In a second stage, the CNRS will endeavour to give the charter a status, for example by appending it to the rules for competitive selection processes, promotions and assessments provided for in the decree of 27 December 1984, so that it can serve as a reference for organising activities.

In a third stage, following initial feedback, the CNRS is planning to hold discussions with other research institutions or agencies in France and to develop the status of the charter so that it can serve as a general charter on integrity in research assessments.

<sup>1</sup> [https://comite-ethique.cnrs.fr/avis-publies/Opinion no. 2004-08](https://comite-ethique.cnrs.fr/avis-publies/Opinion%20no.%202004-08)

## II. The scientific assessor's integrity charter

### A. Preamble

Evaluating research has become a vital part of scientific life. Assessments increasingly occupy the time but also the minds of researchers, because the related responsibility is huge and concerns the very functioning of the scientific community. In the light of this development, it is becoming essential for this community to agree on a set of common and shared principles that will enable an assessment to be carried out in optimal conditions of fairness and justice.

Numerous deliberations have focused on this subject and many high-quality texts have already been produced by various recognised bodies. COMETS wishes to make an additional contribution to this reflection not only to call for a convergence of general principles, but also to find a consensus so that a shared charter can be drawn up. Indeed, the assessment of research is under constant debate even as it is developing and growing. While on the one hand it may seem indispensable for evaluating the talent, merit and success of a particular person, team or institution, the applicable criteria always appear subject to consideration, debate or even dispute. Some even accuse assessment of being a veritable sham, camouflaging under a supposedly quantified objectivity pure power relations and opinions that are more subjective and self-serving than they claim. This is a daunting criticism because it undermines an essential element of scientific life, namely trust.

COMETS proposes to start deliberations from this particular difficulty instead of, as is often the case, ending with it. Should we not admit that assessment is somehow both necessary and impossible in order to begin to envisage the conditions under which it can actually be implemented? For it is by being aware of its limits that the assessment will be more relevant; it is by accepting its inevitable fallibility that it can hope to be fairer; it is by integrating its most frequent criticisms that it will be the least questionable. This is the approach that COMETS intends to initiate here. Our reflection is on principles; it renounces the ideal of a perfect assessment but takes into account the inevitable difficulties of a thorough one.

The rules of good conduct set out in this integrity charter are binding for all CNRS staff when they find themselves in the role of assessor.

### B. The Charter

This integrity charter establishes a set of fundamental principles that guarantee the quality of the assessment provided by a CNRS researcher, engineer, technician or administrative staff member asked to participate in a group or give an individual opinion on the work of:

- a colleague,
- a research team, laboratory or institution,
- a research project.

The purpose of the charter is to define the skills needed by assessors, to guarantee their impartiality by avoiding conflicts of interest, to protect the confidentiality of projects brought to their knowledge, and finally to underline their responsibility as regards the proper functioning of the research system. The principles formulated herein are rules of good conduct that are in line with a new definition of research integrity in accordance with the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity published in March 2011 (see Annex).

### C. Scientific excellence

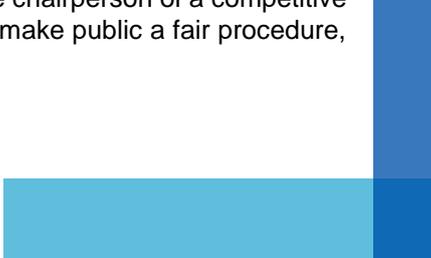
- Assessors must be able to demonstrate specific competence in the field or sub-field for which their opinion is being sought, through a bibliography of their own works. They must enjoy scientific renown attested by publications in reputable journals in their own discipline.

- They must be able to demonstrate a broad vision of their discipline and related disciplines, including insight into their development both nationally and internationally.
- Being in a position to appoint experts, the assessor must ensure that their competencies and viewpoints are complementary. Assessors must also take care to avoid conflicts of interest.

### **1. Impartiality and conflicts of interest**

- It is the assessor's duty to treat all projects and applications with equal attention, taking into account all the elements provided for the assessment.
- Assessors must point out any positive or negative conflicts of interest that they may have with the persons and/or laboratories being assessed, and must recuse themselves if they consider that these conflicts are likely to undermine their impartiality. If they do not step down after reporting conflicts of interest, the organiser of the assessment has the right to disqualify them if he or she considers that these conflicts of interest are incompatible with the impartiality required for the assessment.
- Assessors must not act as individual rapporteurs for a project or application submitted by a person close to them (spouse, child or other relative, etc.). Except in duly justified cases of regulatory obligation calling into question the statutory existence of a committee, assessors must refrain from participating in a collective assessment involving a person close to them.
- They must not be rapporteurs for missions or applications involving their own research unit. They must not be present at deliberations when there is a conflict of interest.
- They must refrain, except in exceptional legitimate circumstances that must be publicly explained, from being rapporteurs on the work of a colleague who was their thesis student within the past five years, or on that of a colleague with whom they have co-authored articles within the past three years. Exceptionally, if publicly justified, assessors may take part in a collective evaluation of these persons, under the supervision of the assessment body's chairperson.
- In the case of a collective assessment of projects, assessors must refrain from evaluating a project competing with a project involving either themselves or close colleagues.

### **2. Confidentiality**

- Assessors must not use information gathered during an assessment for the benefit of themselves, their team or their laboratory.
  - If an assessor is found to have plagiarised data communicated during assessment procedures, he or she is liable to disciplinary measures provided for within the framework of his or her role.
  - Assessors must not report to third parties any comments made individually during deliberations.
  - Assessors are duty-bound to report any infringement of ethical standards on the part of the person or project that they have been entrusted to evaluate, even if such a comment is not provided for in the analysis models supplied by those responsible for the assessment.
  - If the assessor is in charge of directing discussions, for example as the chairperson of a competitive selection committee or board, he or she is required to implement and make public a fair procedure, without deviating from the principle of the secrecy of deliberations.
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### 3. Transparency

- Assessors acting as external experts must be assured that their appraisal will remain anonymous, which is a guarantee of efficiency and not of impunity.
- Assessors must justify their conclusions in a reasoned manner, avoiding innuendoes and ambiguous interpretations. In this way they can be defended in the event of an appeal. When acting as individual experts, unless otherwise stipulated expressly and in detail, assessors must transmit their complete assessment — which has neither been redacted nor rewritten — to the project leaders, persons and laboratories to which it relates.
- When the assessment is collective, the assessment sent to the project leader, the person being assessed or the laboratory by the committee chair and spokesperson must explicitly present the criteria and reasons for the given opinion. All the assessors, under the responsibility of the chairperson, must ensure that information is provided fairly to all staff being assessed or to all project leaders.
- If valid objections are raised, an assessor cannot refuse to participate in subsequent investigations.



### III. ANNEX

#### A. Singapore Statement on Research Integrity

##### Preamble

The value and benefits of research are vitally dependent on the integrity of research. While there can be and are national and disciplinary differences in the way research is organized and conducted, there are also principles and professional responsibilities that are fundamental to the integrity of research wherever it is undertaken.

#### 4. Principles

Honesty in all aspects of research  
Accountability in the conduct of research  
Professional courtesy and fairness in working with others  
Good stewardship of research on behalf of others

#### 5. Responsibilities

1. Integrity: Researchers should take responsibility for the trustworthiness of their research.
2. Adherence to Regulations: Researchers should be aware of and adhere to regulations and policies related to research.
3. Research Methods: Researchers should employ appropriate research methods, base conclusions on critical analysis of the evidence and report findings and interpretations fully and objectively.
4. Research Records: Researchers should keep clear, accurate records of all research in ways that will allow verification and replication of their work by others.
5. Research Findings: Researchers should share data and findings openly and promptly, as soon as they have had an opportunity to establish priority and ownership claims.
6. Authorship: Researchers should take responsibility for their contributions to all publications, funding applications, reports and other representations of their research. Lists of authors should include all those and only those who meet applicable authorship criteria.
7. Publication Acknowledgement: Researchers should acknowledge in publications the names and roles of those who made significant contributions to the research, including writers, funders, sponsors, and others, but do not meet authorship criteria.
8. Peer Review: Researchers should provide fair, prompt and rigorous evaluations and respect confidentiality when reviewing others' work.
9. Conflict of Interest: Researchers should disclose financial and other conflicts of interest that could compromise the trustworthiness of their work in research proposals, publications and public communications as well as in all review activities.
10. Public Communication: Researchers should limit professional comments to their recognized expertise when engaged in public discussions about the application and importance of research findings and clearly distinguish professional comments from opinions based on personal views.

11. **Reporting Irresponsible Research Practices:** Researchers should report to the appropriate authorities any suspected research misconduct, including fabrication, falsification or plagiarism, and other irresponsible research practices that undermine the trustworthiness of research, such as carelessness, improperly listing authors, failing to report conflicting data, or the use of misleading analytical methods.
12. **Responding to Irresponsible Research Practices:** Research institutions, as well as journals, professional organizations and agencies that have commitments to research, should have procedures for responding to allegations of misconduct and other irresponsible research practices and for protecting those who report such behavior in good faith. When misconduct or other irresponsible research practice is confirmed, appropriate actions should be taken promptly, including correcting the research record.
13. **Research Environments:** Research institutions should create and sustain environments that encourage integrity through education, clear policies, and reasonable standards for advancement, while fostering work environments that support research integrity.
14. **Societal Considerations:** Researchers and research institutions should recognize that they have an ethical obligation to weigh societal benefits against risks inherent in their work.

