

Press release

CNRS investigation in collaboration with ETH Zurich

ETH professor not guilty of manipulation

Zurich, 6 September 2018

An independent commission of inquiry led by the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) with the participation of ETH Zurich has investigated the publications of ETH Professor Olivier Voinnet's former research group at the CNRS. The inquiry uncovered manipulation of certain figures. However, the commission's report confirms that Voinnet did not personally initiate this manipulation.

The investigation discovered not only negligence and errors connected with figures in the five publications reviewed, but also evidence of intentional manipulation. These shortcomings, described as "severe" by the Executive Board of ETH Zurich, go beyond those described in the original 2015 report by the ETH independent commission of inquiry. The CNRS independent commission of inquiry worked under the leadership of an independent representative of the Institut Pasteur and also included two ETH representatives. ETH Zurich is now drawing its own conclusions, independently of the CNRS, based on the report's findings.

Not personally involved in manipulation, but responsible as group leader

Professor Olivier Voinnet was co-author of four out of the five publications examined. Three of these were published during his time as head of a research group at the CNRS in Strasbourg. The new report confirms that neither Voinnet nor other members of ETH Zurich were personally involved in manipulating the figures. Voinnet did not perform, order or scientifically endorse such manipulation. "This finding is crucial for assessing the case. The figures were manipulated, but not by Olivier Voinnet himself. Nevertheless, as group leader he still bears overall organisational and management responsibility," emphasises Professor Detlef Günther, Vice President for Research and Corporate Relations at ETH Zurich.

Based on the findings of the report, the Executive Board has reached the decision that Voinnet will remain a professor at ETH Zurich. The Executive Board has nevertheless also decided to extend the

sanctions it originally imposed in 2015. In concrete terms, this means that the formal warning given to Voinnet is reiterated and will continue for another five years up to 2023. He must also continue to restrict his research to his own group in Zurich, and his publication activity will be monitored up to the end of 2020. Furthermore, Voinnet's supervision by an experienced mentor, first initiated in 2015, will continue at least until the end of 2020.

Inquiry triggered by Voinnet

Vice President Günther stresses that no further infringements of the ETH Zurich Guidelines for Research Integrity (see info box below for information on good scientific practice) have occurred in the Voinnet group at ETH Zurich since the initial inquiry in 2015. The question of the motive for the manipulation is still unanswered after the CNRS inquiry – just as it was after the ETH investigation in 2015 – as there appears to have been no clear scientific advantage in manipulating the figures.

The Executive Board recognises that Voinnet has cooperated with the investigation since the first allegations and has actively contributed to a resolution of the errors. In recent years, for example, the ETH professor has worked conscientiously and to the best of his ability to submit corrigenda for the erroneous research data or to retract the relevant publications where necessary. It was also Voinnet himself who got the latest investigation into events at CNRS in Strasbourg under way by contributing his own in-depth research, and who insisted on full clarification of the facts. The investigation has identified another problem: since Voinnet implicitly trusted his former employees at IBMP and saw no reason to be suspicious up to the summer of 2016, some manipulated data may also have potentially crept in to the corrections that he made to the research articles. Voinnet will now rectify these immediately.

Additional information

ETH Zurich
Media Relations

Tel: +41 44 632 41 41
mediarelations@hk.ethz.ch

Promoting good scientific practice (GSP)

ETH Zurich has Guidelines for Research Integrity and a clear Procedure to Address Allegations of Research Misconduct. To ensure these guidelines are implemented more effectively and allegations can be investigated more quickly, the Executive Board will now be supported by not just one, but two trusted intermediaries.

Additional measures have been introduced in recent years to promote good scientific practice. In 2018, for example, the Executive Board set up a new Commission for Good Scientific Practice comprising 16 members (one from each academic department) whose task is to coordinate work

on this issue across the entire university, raise awareness of correct scientific practice, and recommend appropriate study content and events. In addition, ETH Zurich signed the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) in 2016, which essentially recommends judging researchers and their work on the basis of their quality and wherever possible avoid referring to citation rankings in the assessment.

Olivier Voinnet

Olivier Voinnet was Director of Research at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) in Strasbourg up to 2010. He has been Full Professor of RNA Biology at ETH Zurich since 2010. His field of research is RNA interference, a natural mechanism that plants and animals use at the cellular level to control their metabolism and to combat certain viruses.

In early 2015, Olivier Voinnet was accused in online scientific forums of manipulating figures in his publications. An independent commission of inquiry set up by the ETH Executive Board concluded in July 2015 that Voinnet breached his duty of care in the handling of figures as well as in his supervisory duties as research director, but was not guilty of scientific misconduct as defined in ETH Zurich's Rules of Procedure. Voinnet has received a formal warning and appropriate measures have been taken to remedy any shortcomings in the correct handling of figures.