

Erlangen, June 17, 2019

Dear President of Palacky University,

As you may know, I am part of the RCPTM team at the Palacky University – supported by the European project „Advanced Hybrid Nanostructures for Renewable Energy Applications” – acting as PI and head of the division of photoelectrochemistry. I think this center (and our division) has started its mission “to establish world class research and providing world class expertise” very successfully. We are on the way to be and stand out as a European beacon of nanoscale materials science.

In recent times, however, I feel that internal frictions and simple rivalry endangers our efficiency, thrive and enthusiasm. To be more concrete: the outstanding level of RCPTM (measurable in quantitative and qualitative output numbers and involving steadily improving infrastructure and high motivation at our institute) depends to a large extent on a highly motivated and qualified lead figure: Prof. Radek Zboril, who combined his managerial and scientific skills, energy and leadership with strategic headhunting to assemble RCPTM to the impressive laboratory that it currently is. He and the positive scientific atmosphere he created is the key reason that I a got engaged myself with RCPTM with enthusiasm and the feeling to be part of a highly scientifically stimulating endeavour.

Now, I hear that Prof. Zboril as director of the RCPTM is accused in that he did not act properly in the case of the scientific misconduct identified in the paper Hermanek et al. JACS (10.1021/ja072918x) published in 2007 involving the manipulation of an XRD spectrum. Being myself active on boards of scientific integrity I of course fully agree that falsifying data is a serious violation of good scientific practise. However, as far as I understand, the lead author of this paper measured and processed these data and the report of the expert in the field of cybernetics proved that he manipulated with the same data in another work by the same way. For Prof. Zboril as communicating author the key question is if he could have prevented this issue.

I know Radek Zboril now for five years; we wrote numerous manuscripts together and we agreed in so many cases on “let’s conduct some additional experiments for verifying the data” – by this and also observing the care he takes on details I cannot imagine (at all) that he was careless or even tolerated data manipulation. If he had been aware or had an according suspicion he certainly would have taken all steps to stop the paper. Moreover, and also importantly, the change in data did not alter the message of the paper or a conclusion at all as I know from colleagues at RCPTM who performed control experiments (e.g. Prof. Oytepka).

So, while I fully understand that the Palacky University ethics board needs to examine such cases, it seems to me strongly out of proportion to consider any serious sanctions for Prof. Zboril. (As far as I know an erratum to JACS has already been submitted).

Unfortunately, I fear that personal (non-scientific) interests and jealousy currently interfere with reasonable decisions not only in the case of Prof. Zboril, but also a recent case against another first class scientist, Jiri Tucek. To me these cases seem more motivated by “undermining RCPTM” rather than by scientific rational.

In the light of above, I would strongly suggest to put the RCPTM under the umbrella of the university rather than under umbrella of the Faculty of Science. Indeed the creative conditions under which I signed the contract are far from those I feel in these days. Most importantly, for me to be able to further fully contribute to an inspiring unit that carries the label

excellent I would request steps that keep and further foster a structure that is truly excellent. This to me also includes that issues on “scientific ethics” are dealt with in an adequate way and not to remove outstanding scientists due to dubious reasons.

Again, in the sense of a continuation of this exceptional success story of RCPTM I feel we need to keep the institute as independent as possible and assessing the quality using measurable scientific excellence criteria.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Schmuki'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'P' and a long, sweeping underline.

Prof. Dr. P. Schmuki

Information to my person can be found at:

<http://www.lko.uni-erlangen.de/People/schmuki.html>

In short, to establish my credentials, I am Professor of Materials Science and Head of the Institute of Surface Science and Corrosion (LKO) at the Friedrich-Alexander University (FAU). I am a Thomson Reuters Highly Cited Researcher since 2013 (h-index=98) with more than 630 publications and >40'000 citations. I am Fellow of the Electrochemical Society, the Royal Society of Chemistry, and the International Society of Electrochemistry. I am the recipient of the H.H. Uhlig Award of NACE – International (2005), the Volta Award of the Electrochemical Society (2008), and the H.H. Uhlig Award of the Electrochemical Society (2011), as well as prestigious high-level personal research grants (Reinhard Koselleck Grant [1.5 Mio Euro of the German Research Foundation in 2010, ERC Advanced Grant (2.5 Mio Euro) in 2013]. I have acted as the Editor for Encyclopedia of Electrochemistry, Editor of other monographs, and served in the board of directors of the Electrochemical Society.