

#9 Conflicts of interest and research

V2 September 2019

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1) What is a conflict of interest in research?

The [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research \(2018\)](#) defines a conflict of interest (Col) as a situation where an independent observer might reasonably conclude that the professional actions of a person are or may be unduly influenced by other interests. This refers to a financial or non-financial interest which may be a perceived, potential or actual conflict of interest.

For research, a conflict of interest arises where an individual's role, responsibilities and other interests has the potential to have an influence upon how they meet their professional obligations with regards to a research idea, project or output.

At 2.1, the [Disclosure of interests and management of conflicts of interest](#) good practice guide (see 2 below) lists eight interests that might be conflicts for research. At 2.1 the guide also suggests three non-financial interests that might be relevant to research.

The NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) guidelines on Conflict of Interest state "there is nothing unusual or necessarily wrong in having a conflict of interest. How it is dealt with is the important thing". While conflicts of interest are not wrong in themselves, and indeed cannot always be avoided, the potential for conflict of interest in University's research activity must be appropriately managed.

There is a risk that an unmanaged Col might inappropriately alter the design, conduct, analysis and reporting of results from a research project. This is likely to be considered a breach of the [Responsible Conduct of Research policy](#). In serious cases, this may constitute research misconduct. See [Procedure for the handling of alleged breaches of the Australian Code \(2018\)](#) for more about these matters.

Notable recent cases reported in the academic and popular press (some examples listed at 6 below) demonstrate undisclosed Col have the potential to compromise the credibility of research outputs, severely damage reputations, invalidate a promising line of enquiry and undermine public confidence in research.

2) Col and the Australian Code (2018)

The [Australian Code](#) (2018) is the Australian standard for research integrity/the responsible conduct of research. It is complemented by the [Conflicts of interest](#) good practice guide. These documents list the following principles that relate to Col.

**CORE
VALUES**



Griffith University digital Col resources, guides and services

[Griffith University
Conflict of
Interest Policy](#)



[Griffith University
conflicts of interest
web
page/resources.](#)

[Online conflicts
of interest
disclosure form
for staff
\(required Portal
login\)](#)



HDR Candidates/students engaged in research under the auspices of Griffith University, who believe they have a Col or **are not sure** if their situation is a Col should discuss the circumstances with their primary supervisor and contact a local Research Integrity Adviser. The Griffith Graduate Research School and the Office for Research are also source of advice for research students.



P1 Honesty in the development, undertaking and reporting of research.

Present information truthfully and accurately in proposing, conducting and reporting research.

P3 Transparency in declaring interests and reporting research methodology, data and findings

Share and communicate research methodology, data and findings openly, responsibly and accurately.

Disclose and manage conflicts of interest.

The following Researcher Responsibilities relate to Col:

R17 Comply with the relevant laws, regulations, disciplinary standards, ethics guidelines and institutional policies related to responsible research conduct. Ensure that appropriate approvals are obtained prior to the commencement of research, and that conditions of any approvals are adhered to during the course of research.

R24 Disclose and manage actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest.

3) Griffith University's approach to Col

Griffith University has adopted a policy and procedure with regard to Col and the operation of the University – [see the policy library](#). The University has also produced web-based guidance material and resources [available online](#).

All Griffith University researchers (as well as all other categories of person listed in the Scope section of the [University's policy](#)) must be aware of, and adhere to, the [University's Col policy](#), follow the procedures it describes and refer to the [University's guidance material](#).

4) Types of conflict

There are three types of COI that are discussed in the University's policies, processes and resources: perceived, potential and actual (these are discussed below).

As per 2.1 of the [COI good practice guide](#), conflicts might also pertain to the immediate family of the researcher.

All conflicts must be disclosed as per the University's arrangements.

4.1 PERCEIVED COI

As per the Griffith University conflicts of interest policy, a perceived Col in research refers to a situation where a reasonable person could look at a situation and perceive the researcher to have a COI.

4.2 POTENTIAL COI

A potential Col in research exists when a conflict may arise in the

External CoI resources and guides

[Managing Conflicts of Interest in the Public Sector - Qld CCC/NSW ICAC \(Guidelines\)](#)



[Australian Public Service Commission Values and Code of Conduct in practice](#)



[ARC Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Policy](#)



[Nature journals tighten rules on non-financial conflicts - Nature \(Editorial | January 2018\)](#)



[The Complex and Multifaceted Aspects of Conflicts of Interest - JAMA Editorial](#)



future between current or future duties and responsibilities and existing or future private interests. This is the case even when individuals have no intent to misuse their position.

The Griffith University [Conflict of Interest Policy](#) defines Private interests as: any interests that involve potential gain or loss (financial or non-financial) for an individual or for any other person or organisation that individual may wish to benefit (e.g. family, friends, associates) or disadvantage (e.g. competitors, rivals).

4.3 ACTUAL COI

An actual CoI in research refers to situations where there is a real conflict between current duties and responsibilities and existing private interests.

In some cases a CoI will first be perceived as a potential conflict (see 4.1 and 4.2 above) and only become actual conflict when a researcher's other interests impact upon the University's interests or the responsible design/conduct of the research project. In other cases, there is an actual conflict between the researcher's private interests and the interests of the University. **As such all conflicts must be managed, even if the researcher believes an interest will not impact upon the University's interest or the responsible design/conduct of the research project.**

5) Management strategies

The strategies to manage interests should be proportional to their significance.

At 2.1 of the [COI good practice guide](#) there are three dot points relating to the evaluation of the significance of financial interests. The [COI good practice guide](#) at 2.3 lists five suggested management strategies.

The first management strategy that should be used for all CoIs (of any kind – see 4.0) is disclosure (see the [disclosure web form](#) and further resources to the left), which you should discuss with your direct supervisor and perhaps your line manager.

If involved in collaborative research, Griffith University researchers should always disclose conflicts to collaborators.

There are circumstances where disclosures will need to be made to: potential participants, funding bodies, gatekeepers (such as a body with a duty of care for the potential participant pool), editors, publishers and/or readers/ audience/users. Events elsewhere in Australia and internationally have shown the consequences of failing to fully disclose a CoI and the conflicts later being exposed (this is discussed

Costly missteps

[He Jiankui's Germline Editing Ethics Article Retracted by The CRISPR Journal - GEN \(Julianna LeMieux - February 2019\)](#)

[Hidden conflicts? Pharma payments to FDA advisers after drug approvals spark ethical concerns – Science \(Charles Pillar and Jia You | July 2018\)](#)

[The Oaxaca Incident: A geographer's efforts to map a Mexican village reveal the risks of military entanglement – The Chronicle of Higher Education \(Paul Voosen | April 2016\)](#)

[Oh, What A Tangled Web! Citation Network Underscores Editorial Conflicts of Interest – Scholarly Kitchen \(Phil Davis | December 2018\)](#)

[Renowned cancer scientist was paid by chemical firm for 20 years – The Guardian \(Sarah Boseley | December 2017\)](#)

[\(Australian QLD case\) Research problems at Australian university hit the news - Retraction Watch \(Victoria Stern | April 2018\)](#)

further in 6 below).

6) Consequences of not adequately managing

At 4.0 the [COI good practice guide](#) discusses the responsibilities of researchers with regard to interests. 5.0 of the guide discusses disputes and 6.0 breaches of the [Australian Code \(2018\)](#) relating to COI.

Unfortunately there is no shortage of high profile cases of alleged undisclosed/unmanaged Col in research. A few example cases are in the sidebar of this page.

When such undisclosed Col are exposed they tend to have similar consequences:

- (i) It is assumed the Col is real, serious and the researchers tried to hide it
- (ii) It undermines trust
- (iii) It can tarnish even prestigious reputations
- (iv) It can result in painful forced publication retractions and misconduct proceedings

6.1 CONSEQUENCES AT GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

Griffith University takes undisclosed/unmanaged Col very seriously. Such a matter is likely to be reviewed as a potential breach of the Australian Code (2018) – [see RIRS#11](#). Depending on the circumstances it may be investigated as potential research misconduct – [see RIRS#14](#).

7) Griffith University resources

At 3.0 the [COI good practice guide](#) outlines the responsibilities of institutions with regard to COI.

The sidebar on page 2 outlines the Griffith University Col resources and processes. This includes the University's policy and disclosure form, as well as the University's Col page. These constitute the University's implementation of the Queensland, Australian and international standards.

8) External resources

The side bar on page 3 lists some additional external resources about the identification and management of Col. These resources should be consulted once researchers have a good understanding of the University's arrangements.



OR CONTACTS

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Support Officer**

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9) Collaborative research and Col

When planning and designing a new collaborative research project it is essential for team members to discuss their respective ColS, where else they should be disclosed, whether any additional management strategy is required and reflect on whether the conflict is insurmountable.

Ideally a register of the disclosures and decisions will be maintained and available to the entire team.

The chief investigator should remind team members to keep the register up to date, and to contact them about any emergent ColS.

10) Scope of these matters

These guidelines apply to all Griffith University research, regardless of whether the work requires ethical or biosafety clearance, the expertise of the parties, the methodology/design used, and/or the funding for the work (if any).

11) Sources of advice

Researchers are urged to consult the [other resource sheets](#) in this series. Researchers with further questions should consult a [RIA](#) (whether in their Group or elsewhere in the University) or the Office for Research.



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