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Disclosing and Managing (Conflicts of) Interests in Graduate Research

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The new-look guidelines

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Thank you to the working group and for your feedback at the October webinar!

- The final version now contains:
  - The Statement of key principles
  - The Matrix of Interests, with examples in 'minor' and 'major' categories

Revision process - summary

- **12 April 2021**: Proposal to refresh guidelines tabled at ACGR national meeting. Polls used to indicate current use and appetite to broaden scope (70% support for this). Call for volunteers to join a working group

- **June – August 2021**: working group met and edited guidelines/matrix

- **1 October 2021**: Webinar to discuss revised guidelines and matrix 29 October 2021. Further amendments made.

- **4 November 2021**: tabled at ACGR Exec for endorsement

- **11 November 2021**: final draft available for review

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Key updates

- Encouraging a **culture** of disclosure, and of 'aiming high' instead of low

- Acknowledging the importance of **managing** and **monitoring** conflicts

- Acknowledging that the examples occur on a **continuum** (minor through major)

- Acknowledging that the matrix is **not comprehensive** and is adaptable

- Adding sections for **supervision, assessors and industry partnership/internship**

- Providing more explicit **phrasing** e.g.
  - Clarifying when co-authoring is 'too close'
  - Examples of the types of relationships that are problematic

- Emphasising that a **number of low-level conflicts** often indicates a need to consider the risk as major

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Tricky points

- **Defining co-authoring**
  - Exploring the 'spirit of the collaboration' rather than a pre-set formula of how many papers and how many authors and understanding discipline norms

- **Industry partners**
  - The reality is that industry partners will always have vested interest and this should be managed by agreements endorsed prior to commencement of candidature, and regularly monitored

- **'Recycling reviewers'**
  - This is likely to be interpreted differently according to the HDR program structure at your institution

- **Supervisors in a close personal relationship**
  - acknowledging that while some institutions prohibit co-supervision for partners/spouses/family members all together, others have structures which aim to mitigate impact on student

Implementation options
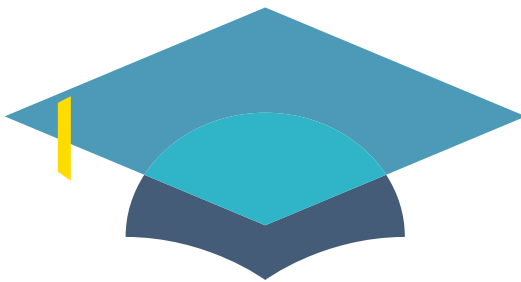
- **Keep in mind:**
  - These are 'guidelines' (not mandated)
  - These are 'good practice' (i.e., the minimum requirement)
  - The matrix could be:
    - Used as information source - to alert colleagues to numerous e.gs of possible CoI during candidature
    - Used or modified to map institutional approaches to managing conflicts

- **Who is your intended audience (and how will you reach them?)**
  - University executive (good practice benchmarking)
  - Grad Schools & Administrators
  - Faculty/Schools and postgraduate coordinators
  - Supervisors
  - Examiners/Assessors
  - Candidates
  - Industry partners

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How might implementation happen ?

- ACGR guidelines recognised as helpful for empowering Deans to argue for thresholds of standards establishing HDR management good practice in their institutions

- It is your institution's choice
  - Circulate as a 'reference point' only?
  - Embed in policy?
    - 'Guide' v strictly enforced

- What else will be important? Consider your institution's:
  - Code of Conduct and Student Charter
  - Conflict of Interest Policy
  - Candidate/Supervisor Agreement process
  - Milestone review processes
  - Template forms for disclosing interest
  - Template agreements for industry research projects and internships
  - Examination policy

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Using other structures to help

It may be possible to reduce, manage or avoid the conflict of interest in other ways, e.g.

- Legal agreements (e.g. industry/institution)
- Strengthening the candidate-supervisor MoU (or similar)
- Adding another member onto the supervision team (possibly a senior supervisor at a higher level on your register)
- Deploying more active monitoring/review (e.g. as an addition to milestone reviews)
- Changing cultures of supervision by focusing on supervisor risk and wellbeing
- Strengthening the postgraduate coordinator role to foster good practice at the local level