



Conflicts of interest

Section 7: Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research

Conflicts of interest exist where there is a divergence between the individual interests of a person and their professional responsibilities. Generally these conflicts of interest are financial but they can include personal, professional and institutional interests of the individual. (NHMRC et al 2007)

Scenario

A PhD student has negotiated access to sensitive data about individuals enrolled in a number of private schools for the purposes of his thesis. The process of gaining access to these data has taken two years and he is now in his final year with little to show for his PhD. While analysing the data the student identifies a number of anomalies in the data. First, at one school the students have far higher average grades than at the other schools. When the student investigates this finding further he realises this school is cheating the system by providing the students with the answers during the exams. The student realises that if he discloses this finding his access to data will be withdrawn and this will prevent him finishing his PhD.

Points for discussion

1. What should this student do?
2. What are the ethical obligations for this student?
3. What are the ethical obligations for this student's supervisor?
4. What are the implications for the University if the student does not disclose this conflict of interest and it becomes known that he knew of the school's cheating?

National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Universities Australia. 2007. *Revision of the Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice: Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*, Canberra: Australian Government.

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