

## Case study 10. It isn't material...or is it?

### A hypothetical case about potential conflicts of interests

Ramsey, a PhD student, was invited to join a research team and work as a research assistant. It is a great opportunity for him who is looking to work in academia in the future. The team is led by a very accomplished researcher, and if Ramsey performs well, this could be his ticket to success in the highly competitive research field. But one thing is bothering Ramsey. The team is applying for a grant and the researchers have to declare "significant interests" involved, if any. Until recently, Ramsey was working as an intern in a private laboratory. The principal investigator is aware of his internship job, but she doesn't know that the laboratory is owned by a company that would most likely benefit from their research. She also doesn't know that Ramsey and his laboratory supervisor have become close friends. Ramsey is not entirely sure if his relationship with that laboratory would be a concern for the grant application. "Well, I am just an assistant. Who cares about my past internship anyway?" Ramsey convinces himself that he should not let this get in the way of his work in the research team.

### Reflection corner

1. What is a conflict of interest?
2. What would you do if you were Ramsey?
3. What might be the problem if a researcher fails to declare a conflict of interest?

### Analysis: When should I declare a conflict of interest?

A conflict of interest may occur when a researcher is affiliated with, or financially involved in, any organisation or entity with a direct interest in the subject matter, or in the provision of materials for the research. The HKU Policy on Research Integrity requires that all such instances must be included in a full acknowledgment. Non-disclosure of potential conflicts of interest is regarded as research misconduct in the University policy. The credibility of the research results or even the University could be jeopardised by non-disclosure of actual or potential conflicts of interest. Even for a potentially minor or unavoidable conflict of interest, researchers should make sure that it is unambiguously declared. Although in Ramsey's case the conflict of interest could be of an unsubstantial and indirect nature, he still has the responsibility to make a declaration in appropriate avenues, e.g., research proposals, publications, or other forms of dissemination of findings. According to the University's Regulations Governing Students' Academic Conduct Concerning Assessment, students who have committed research misconduct including among others non-disclosure of potential conflicts of interest would be liable for disciplinary action.

See more:

1. HKU Policy on Research Integrity:  
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/integrity/rcr/policy#Research%20Misconduct>
2. HKU Regulations Governing Students' Academic Conduct Concerning Assessment:  
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/integrity/rcr/student-regulations>