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ETHICAL PROBLEMS FOR RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS COLLABORATING WITH COMMERCIAL ENTITIES

ALLEA STATEMENT

Executive Summary

This ALLEA statement provides guidance to research institutions on navigating the ethical problems of collaborations with commercial entities. While such partnerships are increasingly common due to the demand for resources and a desire for impactful, transdisciplinary research, they may also pose risks to research integrity, academic freedom, and public trust. Issues such as greenwashing, conflicts of interest, and restrictions on Open Science highlight the need for robust ethical safeguards.

This statement outlines key considerations for evaluating partnerships with commercial entities, including alignment with institutional values, transparency, governance, and contextual factors like discipline-specific risks and alternative funding sources. To mitigate ethical risks, institutions should establish clear contracts, implement arms-length mechanisms, and regularly review such partnerships.

These guidelines should enable institutions to safeguard core scientific values, maintain public trust, and decline collaborations that present unacceptable risks.

Introduction

This ALLEA Statement provides guidance to research institutions¹ to address the ethical problems posed by partnerships with commercial entities by identifying key issues and possible responses.

As demands for societally impactful and transdisciplinary research grow, more researchers actively look for partnerships with organisations beyond academia, including commercial entities.² This development brings ethical problems, and many research institutions wrestle with the question of how to evaluate the ethics of collaborations with commercial entities. Collaborations with the fossil fuel industry in particular have garnered attention, where concerns about greenwashing offset the purported benefits such as advancing research on alternative energy provision.³ However, risks such as greenwashing, conflicts of interest, or undue limitations on academic freedom can also occur in collaborations with other sectors.

If research institutions do not establish clear ethical safeguards for collaborations with commercial organisations, such collaborations could erode research integrity and public trust. Research shows that public trust in science differs between public and private institutions. When asked who is best qualified to talk about “the impact of scientific and technological developments on society,” 61% of participants in the 2021 Eurobarometer on attitudes towards science and technology named “scientists working at public organisations”, with only 40% naming “scientists working at private organisations”.⁴

There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution or algorithm that can tell research institutions which collaborations are ethically justifiable, all things considered, and which ones are not. Careful case-by-case analysis and reflection are needed. Nonetheless, there are a series of problems that should always be considered, and these baseline considerations are explored in this statement. For this purpose, its primary focus is substantial, medium-to-long-term collaborations between an existing commercial entity and a research institution, e.g., (co-)sponsoring a research or PhD project, or financing academic positions such as a Chair.

1 This includes Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) such as universities as well as other scientific institutions, e.g., pure research performing institutes.

2 For some reporting about discussions in different European countries see, e.g.: Ilana Cohen, “A Dutch University Just Set a Powerful Precedent for Climate Research,” *The Nation* [website], 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/environment/fossil-free-research-policy-vrije-universiteit-amsterdam-climate-change/> (accessed 20 January 2025); Constant Méheut, “At Elite French Universities, Students Demand Environmental Action,” *The New York Times* [website], 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/30/world/europe/france-elite-universities-environment.html> (accessed 20 January 2025); Juliet Ferguson and Chris Matthews, “European Universities Accept €260 Million in Fossil Fuel Money,” *Investigate Europe* [website], <https://www.investigate-europe.eu/posts/european-universities-accept-260-million-euros-fossil-fuel-money> (accessed 20 January 2025). For a research perspective see, e.g.: S. Hiltner et al., “Fossil Fuel Industry Influence in Higher Education: A Review and a Research Agenda,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews*, e904, <https://wires.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/wcc.904> (accessed 20 January 2025).

3 See, e.g., Dharna Noor, “Elite US Universities Rake in Millions from Big Oil Donations, Research Finds,” *The Guardian* [website], <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/19/oil-donations-universities> (accessed 20 January 2025).

4 European Commission, “Eurobarometer 2237: Fieldwork Date April 2021 - May 2021, Publication Date September 2021,” *European Commission* [website], p. 10, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2237> (accessed 20 January 2025).

The statement aims to guide research institutions in decisions regarding these collaborations. Building on existing guidelines and research on the topic, referenced at the end, this statement distils the key issues and possible responses in an accessible way.

Contributions by commercial entities can be in cash or in kind. In addition to the direct partnerships with commercial entities described above, the ethical considerations outlined below may also apply to other scenarios, such as:

- Contract research including specific tasks for external parties, e.g., analysis of certain materials
- Collaborations with non-commercial external entities that have specific vested interests, e.g., NGOs or political advocacy groups, high-net-worth individuals or families
- Donations to research institutions that are not directly research-related, e.g., sponsoring and naming of research infrastructures
- Commercial spin-offs owned privately by university employees, e.g., start-ups
- Collaborations in education or knowledge dissemination, e.g., sponsorship of student projects, guest lectures, part-time or adjunct lecturing positions, or outreach activities

Specific questions of dual civil/military use that apply in this regard are beyond the scope of this statement, nor does it cover the specific problems of medical and pharmaceutical research, for which established protocols exist, or questions about collaboration with specific countries, e.g., in geopolitical conflicts.⁵

Ethical Problems

Research institutions need to consider how collaborations may undermine their institutional and research integrity. The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity highlights four key principles for good research practices: reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability.⁶ Ethical problems arise in collaborations when these key principles are put at risk.

The following keystones of research can be at risk in collaborations with commercial entities:

- The official *vision, mission, and values* of the academic institution can be contradicted by the collaboration, undermining the reliability and honesty of science and the reputation of the institution. This may vary across institutions, particularly between those focused on fundamental research and those emphasising applied research.
- If collaborations endanger *academic freedom*, both within research projects and for institutions, e.g., by imposing restrictions on publishing particular results or incentivising certain biases, the reliability and honesty of science are at risk.

⁵ ALLEA, "ALLEA Statement on European Research Collaboration and Research Security in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape," ALLEA, Berlin, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.26356/ALLEA-RESEARCHSECURITY-STATEMENT> (accessed 20 January 2025).

⁶ ALLEA, "The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity – Revised Edition 2023," ALLEA, Berlin, 2023, <https://allea.org/portfolio-item/european-code-of-conduct-2023/> (accessed 20 January 2025).

- *Open Science*, which is crucial to the reliability and accountability of science and highly valued by citizens,⁷ can be endangered by restrictions on sharing research findings.⁸
- *Research ethics and integrity* within projects, e.g., ensuring that all ethical requirements are met, can be undermined if partners do not have the capacities to ensure them, thereby putting at risk all four principles of research integrity listed above.

Appendix 1 provides examples of how these keystones might be at risk in collaborations with commercial entities.

If any of these keystones are encroached upon, research institutions violate their responsibility to deliver reliable research findings and/or to uphold public trust in science, by being untrustworthy. It is also in the interest of research institutions to maintain their academic reputation as trustworthy institutions. Nonetheless, short-term financial pressures, or pressures to be competitive, can tempt research institutions to override this interest. Therefore, it is important to deal carefully with the ethical problems of collaborations with commercial entities, and great care should be taken to fully understand their motives and inherent conflicts of interest.⁹

Contextual Factors

In addition to these possible risks for core scientific values, research institutions need to take certain contextual factors into account:

- Differences in the functioning of different research fields: Some fields, e.g., applied technology, aim to bring innovations to market, while others, e.g., critical fields in the humanities, aim to support democratic discourse about questions of values and power. The risk of undermining trust needs to be evaluated in relation to the nature and character of different fields.
- Differences in the availability of alternative funding sources: The easier it is to access other funds (without conflicts of interest), the more questionable funding from a commercial party, with greater risks, becomes.
- Distribution of benefits: The standard assumption is that a collaboration is entered into because both parties benefit in some way. However, this still leaves open questions about:
 - a. The concrete distribution of benefits and burdens, including immaterial benefits (e.g., positive reputational effects, building of public will through collaboration with an established research institution)

7 European Commission, "European Citizens' Knowledge and Attitudes Towards Science and Technology," European Commission [website], pp. 175-176, September 2021, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2237> (accessed 20 January 2025).

8 ALLEA, "Sustainable and FAIR Data Sharing in the Humanities," ALLEA, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.tq582c863> (accessed 20 January 2025).

9 These can include influence on government policies (e.g., delaying regulatory measures), prior access to information and exclusion of other parties, distraction from other (more controversial) activities or topics, greenwashing, creating dependencies, denigration of critics or alternative voices and others. See also: Wageningen University & Research, "WUR Advisory Group on Fossil Collaboration Presents Advice," Wageningen University & Research [website], appendix, pp. 14-15, <https://www.wur.nl/en/newsarticle/wur-advisory-group-on-fossil-collaboration-presents-advice.htm> (accessed 20 January 2025).

- b. Possible benefits for third parties (e.g., future customers)
- c. Possible lack of benefits for other parties (e.g., other possible collaboration partners that might be excluded)
- Risks of tainting an institution's reputation if it is connected to areas that are highly polarised in public debate: Even when not directly violating the principles of research integrity, collaborations may contribute to reducing public trust in science.

Possible Solutions

Once ethical problems have been identified, research institutions can take action to mitigate risks and ensure that no ethical principles are violated in collaborations. Such actions include:

- *Contracts*: Agreements should ensure compliance with ethical principles by clearly defining ethical standards, their violations, regular review mechanisms and procedures, responses to possible misconduct, and exit strategies. Transparency should be ensured by making these agreements public.
- *Effective governance mechanisms*: To prevent misconduct, the legal, organisational, ethical, and research integrity responsibilities of both sides need to be clearly delineated and agreed upon beforehand. Oversight mechanisms need to be installed, and sanctions need to be implemented effectively. These should be communicated to all collaborating parties and should be made public to honour transparency.
- *'Arm's-length' mechanisms*: To ensure independence and thereby to minimise the risk of unethical behaviour, it may be possible to collaborate at 'arm's length', by involving an additional independent party through which the funding flows and which independently distributes it to researchers. This can ensure sufficient distance for the research teams and prevent ambiguity of roles [see example in Appendix 2].
- *Limiting influence of commercial entities*: In some cases, it may be advisable to limit the influence of one specific party, e.g., by reducing the duration or scope of collaborations, or their integration into projects with other funders of a different nature (e.g., public funding agencies). This can reduce the risks of compromising academic freedom or research integrity that might arise from one-sided dependence.
- *Ensuring transparency and accountability*: This includes reporting on specific collaborations, monitoring all collaborations, and keeping an eye on structural dependencies (e.g., publication of an annual report). The rationale for each collaboration, the identified ethical problems, and steps taken to mitigate the ethical risks, should be clearly explained.
- *Regular review*: Long-term collaborations should be reviewed periodically to ensure that conditions are still in place to meet the agreed standards and to determine whether adjustments in the arrangements are needed or the collaboration should be stopped.

Considering ethical problems may also lead research institutions to not enter a collaboration. If a possible collaboration leads to ethical problems in several dimensions,

a research institution may decide, at an early stage in the process, not to go forward with it. The effort required to address all these problems might outweigh the benefits, leading to a search for alternative funding sources.

Last but not least, a number of additional factors should be taken into account:

- Research institutions have a responsibility to protect their employees from undue pressure or role conflicts, thus safeguarding their scientific integrity and academic freedom. This needs to be reflected in internal evaluation criteria (e.g., no disadvantages for the career trajectories of researchers who refuse to participate in industry collaborations and therefore bring in less research funding).
- Research institutions may not need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ or do a lot of research about possible collaboration partners but can instead rely on external standards of evaluation provided by independent parties, such as the Science-Based Targets initiative.¹⁰
- Independent committees should evaluate specific cases based on a self-assessment by the researchers interested in engaging in the collaboration. Alternatively, ethics review boards can develop the capacity to evaluate such cases.

Conclusion

Research institutions navigating ethical problems in collaborations with commercial entities should follow key guidelines to maintain research integrity and public trust. First, they must evaluate the alignment between their values and the commercial partner’s goals, paying particular attention to potential conflicts of interest and risks to academic freedom. Ensuring transparency, contractual clarity, and effective governance is essential to protect core scientific values. Additionally, mechanisms such as arm’s-length partnerships, limiting the influence of individual commercial partners, and regular reviews should be implemented. Research institutions should evaluate the broader context, including alternative funding sources, while prioritising long-term reputation considerations and integrity concerns. Ultimately, these guidelines may help research institutions to identify and ultimately decline collaborations with commercial actors that pose unacceptable risks, prioritising the protection of research ethics and integrity over short-term financial gains.

¹⁰ See Science Based Targets Initiative, “Science-Based Targets,” *Science Based Targets* [website], <https://sciencebasedtargets.org/> (accessed 20 January 2025).

Appendix 1

Examples of Risks for Keystones of Research

Tensions between the vision, mission, and values of the institution and the (declared and inferable) goals of the commercial entities

- Example: Many research institutions are committed to the goals of the Paris Agreement, while fossil fuel companies lobby against climate-protective legislation. Research institutions risk becoming complicit by offering fossil fuel companies opportunities for green-washing and for creating good will with the public. On the other hand, research institutions could mitigate this conflict by requesting commercial entities to also commit to the Paris Agreement and to abstain from lobbying against it.

Possible risks for academic freedom within a research project

- Example 1: Sponsors might require the right to approve results before publication, to protect their commercial or ideological interests.
- Example 2: Closeness in collaborative arrangements might stifle criticism and open debate during the research process because academic researchers do not want to endanger the position of researchers employed at commercial entities.

Possible risks for academic freedom at the level of the institution

- Example 1: The structural dependence of a whole research group on sponsorship might create pressure on other researchers not to engage in research that is critical of the commercial party in question.
- Example 2: If a research institution or sub-unit already has ongoing collaborations, an additional collaboration with a commercial entity might mean crossing a critical threshold of structural dependence on a particular entity or industry sector.

Possible risks for Open Science

- Example: Commercial parties might try to impose a requirement not to make research publicly available. Exceptions may apply in the case of translational research that aims to bring products to market, but these need to be carefully delineated. The same holds for intellectual property rights requirements that sponsors might raise.

Possible risks for research ethics and integrity within a project

- Example 1: Sponsors might bring expectations to frame research questions in ways that support a particular outcome.
- Example 2: To protect their reputation, sponsors might try to impose a requirement that study participants should not be informed about the sponsorship source.
- Example 3: Parts of the research are being executed by an external party who has insufficient competencies or structures in research ethics (e.g., no research ethics committee).

Appendix 2

The Vista Programme: A Collaboration between Equinor and the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters

Equinor, formerly Statoil, is a Norwegian state-owned, multinational energy company headquartered in Stavanger, Norway. While primarily in the oil and gas industry, in recent years the company has branched out into renewables and low-carbon energy production. Equinor provides funding for the Vista programme, which is a research and innovation project to support research in the university sector. Vista is an example of how commercial funding may be moderated by interaction with public agencies. The programme builds on a 30-year collaboration between the company and the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters (DNVA). Equinor provides the funding – currently a seven-year budget of €10 Million – and chooses the research topics. DNVA manages the programme, organises the research call, and reviews and selects the projects to be funded. Equinor has two representatives on the programme board, but DNVA selects the Chair and other members.

Documents Consulted and Further Resources

ALLEA, European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, 2023 Version, ALLEA, <https://allea.org/code-of-conduct/> (accessed 20 January 2025)

ALLEA, Statement on Private Sponsoring in the Science Enterprise, Trust in Science and Academic Freedom (2014), ALLEA, https://allea.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Private_sponsoring_trust_ALLEA_PWGSE_2201151.pdf1.pdf (accessed 20 January 2025)

Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH), Guidelines on Research Ethics, Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) [website], <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/en/guidelines/social-sciences-and-humanities/guidelines-for-research-ethics-in-the-social-sciences-and-the-humanities/> (accessed 20 January 2025)

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About ALLEA

ALLEA is the European Federation of Academies of Sciences and Humanities, representing approximately 50 academies from nearly 40 countries in Europe. Since its foundation in 1994, ALLEA speaks out on behalf of its members on the European and international stages, promotes science as a global public good, and facilitates scientific collaboration across borders and disciplines. Learn more here: <http://www.allea.org>.

About This Statement

This ALLEA statement has been prepared by the [ALLEA Permanent Working Group on Science and Ethics](#). Through its Working Groups and Task Forces, ALLEA provides input on behalf of European academies to pressing societal, scientific, and science-policy debates, and their underlying legislations. With its work, ALLEA seeks to ensure that science and research in Europe can excel and serve the interests of society.

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