



**Vetenskapsrådet**

This is a translation of the Swedish Conflict of Interest Policy document, which the Board of the Swedish Research Council has adopted.

## **Conflict of Interest Policy**

Adopted by the Board of the Swedish Research Council on 10 April, 2014, protocol No. 2, appendix 1.

### **1. Why does the Swedish Research Council have a Conflict of Interest Policy?**

The Conflict of Interest Policy is an important tool in safeguarding the principle of objectivity stipulated by constitutional law, which implies that government agencies must maintain objectivity and impartiality, and must consider the equality of all persons before the law. Its purpose is to prevent conflicts of interest for representatives of government agencies in situations where their objectivity could be questioned. The Conflict of Interest Policy is significant not only in terms of the protection of legal rights, but also in terms of public trust in government agencies.

The Swedish Research Council differs from many other government agencies in that the majority of the members in its decision-making and reviewing bodies are active researchers chosen by the research community, and are thus directly affected by the agency's allocation of research funds. Moreover, the evaluation of applications comprises a number of intermediate measures that can potentially affect the outcome of decisions, including the control of formal conditions, decisions to disallow applications, the distribution of applications to evaluation panels and reviewers, individual reviews, reviews by evaluation panels, the implementation of decisions and the management of complaints. The Swedish Research Council also conducts assessments, appoints members to external agencies, is involved in strategic planning, responds to proposals, and participates in communication work, among other things. Some of this work is accomplished through peer review, where experts within a certain field of research assess applications from within the same field. In order not to jeopardise legal security or public trust, it is important that all the Swedish Research Council's work is conducted in a manner that not only prevents conflicts of interest, but takes ambiguous and sensitive situations into account.

It is the responsibility of the Swedish Research Council and of each individual administrator to adhere to the Conflict of Interest Policy. The term "administrator" herein refers to and includes anyone within the Swedish Research Council organisation who could affect the outcome of a matter. This includes officials, appointed reviewers and elected members.

### **2. What is conflict of interest?**

Provisions regarding conflict of interest can be found in the Administrative Procedure Act (1986:223).

According to Section 11 of the Administrative Procedure Act - an Act to which the Swedish Research Council is subject as a government agency - it is stipulated that an administrator enters into a conflict of interest if:



- the matter in question concerns himself or his spouse, parents, children, brothers or sisters or someone else who is closely related to him, or if he or someone closely related to him can expect extraordinary advantage or detriment from the outcome of the matter, or
- there is some other special circumstance that is likely to undermine confidence in his impartiality in the matter.

### **3. The consequences of conflict of interest**

Section 12 of the Administrative Procedure Act describes the consequences of conflict of interest. It states that:

- someone who has a conflict of interest may not handle the matter in question,
- someone who is aware of a circumstance that could be interpreted as a conflict of interest must disclose it of their own accord, and
- if an issue regarding conflict of interest has been raised, the government agency must immediately take action and reach a decision.

The general rule is that the person who has a conflict of interest may neither undertake any preparatory measures nor participate in the resolution of the matter. It is therefore very important that an administrator, regardless of the grounds for conflict of interest and at every step of the review process, avoids administering any application in which a conflict of interest has been established. In addition, someone who is aware of a circumstance that could be interpreted as a conflict of interest must disclose it of their own accord. If an issue regarding conflict of interest has been raised, the Swedish Research Council must immediately take action and resolve the issue.

### **4. Situations that may constitute conflict of interest**

The following situations present a particular risk of conflict of interest and/or can be interpreted as ambiguous in terms of credibility. Individual situations must be assessed on their nature and extent as well as on how long they have been going on.

The following situations typically constitute a conflict of interest:

- when an administrator in a certain matter is simultaneously dependent on an applicant/participant in another matter. An example is if the applicant/participant is responsible for reviewing the administrator's qualifications, grant application, institution or subject area,
- when an administrator has an ongoing or recently terminated close collaboration with an applicant/participant, such as a teacher-student relationship, or runs a joint research project with an applicant/participant. The relationship between a doctoral



student and their supervisor is deemed a conflict of interest regardless of how long ago the collaboration occurred,

- when there is evident friendship, enmity or difference of opinion,
- when there is financial dependence, and
- when there is an manager-employee relationship.

The following situations may constitute conflict of interest:

- the co-authorship of books or articles. As a guideline, administration should be avoided in the case of research collaboration and co-authorship which occurred in the last 5 years. A joint article or a joint chapter in an edited book is enough to establish co-authorship. Co-authorship that occurred more than five years ago can also constitute conflict of interest. The determining factor will be whether it was the result of close, professional collaboration or not, and will be judged on a case-by-case basis,
- when an administrator belongs to the same institution (particularly small and medium-sized ones) or a similar financially independent entity as an applicant/participant, and
- when the nature of someone's involvement in the matter easily arouses suspicion that the basis for impartial assessment is compromised.

## **5. Prevention of conflict of interest**

The following guidelines have been implemented by the Swedish Research Council to prevent situations constituting conflict of interest.

- Administrators in relevant Scientific Councils, committees and evaluation panels should be notified of applications at an early stage, along with a request to report any possible conflicts of interest.
- When evaluation panels are appointed and when applications are distributed, conflicts of interest should be noted and avoided. In some cases, this can be done by appointing the evaluation panels after the applications have been received or by redistributing an application to another group.
- Administrators at risk of conflict of interest will not be appointed as the rapporteur of an application.
- Administrators at risk of conflict of interest will not be present when an application is considered by the evaluation panel.
- Even in terms of participants, possible conflicts of interest should be heeded as much as possible. "Participants" refers to researchers who play a crucial or central role in the implementation of the proposed research.
- Administrators who do not intend to apply for grants or participate in an application during the time they work as administrators are recruited as widely as possible.
- Collective administration of matters, i.e., the simultaneous administration of several matters, for example when a Scientific Council decides on a large number of



applications at once according to a list of priorities established by an evaluation panel, attention must be paid to potential conflict of interest to the furthest extent possible.

- Applications for research funding from members of the Board, of Scientific Councils, councils, committees and evaluation panels are not considered by the group of which the member is Chair, Member or Observer. This applies whether the member is an applicant or a participant.

## **6. Managing conflict of interest**

The preceding guidelines cannot completely prevent the occurrence of conflict of interest. Common situations include:

- when a Research Council member or Board member applies for a grant, or
- when an application falls within a highly specialised field where it is not possible to find members for evaluation panels who are not closely connected to the applicant.

In these cases, written evaluations must be obtained from at least two external experts.

In cases of conflict of interest, the following measures must be taken when administering a matter:

- The individual who has a conflict of interest must leave the room. This provision remains in effect for the duration of the administration process.
- Any conflict of interest, i.e., both in cases where it exists and where it has been examined and found not to exist, must be documented throughout the administration process.
- If the minutes of a meeting are not recorded, a record of conflict of interest must be registered regardless.

## **7. Communication of the Conflict of Interest Policy**

Questions and discussions regarding conflict of interest may arise within all of the Swedish Research Council's activities. It is therefore essential that all administrators are well-informed about the Swedish Research Council's Conflict of Interest Policy. To ensure this:

- all new employees should be informed of the Swedish Research Council's Conflict of Interest Policy and its implications should be discussed as part of their work introduction,
- administrators involved with application evaluations should be given the opportunity to discuss conflict of interest and current handling procedures before and after application evaluations, in order to raise suggestions for ways to improve the work,
- the Conflict of Interest Policy should be included in the Instructions for Reviewers,



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- the Conflict of Interest Policy should be communicated to Scientific Councils, councils, committees, the evaluation panel chair and evaluation panel members,
- handling procedures for grants that are evaluated entirely or partially without coordination by Scientific Councils or committees should include methods for managing conflicts of interest,
- the appointed official should play a central role in communicating the Conflict of Interest Policy when evaluations are conducted entirely or partially outside of evaluations coordinated by Scientific Councils or committees,
- it should be made clear during evaluation panel meetings that questions regarding conflict of interest can be raised for discussion at any time, and
- the Chief Legal Adviser should be responsible, in comprehensive terms, for the Swedish Research Council's management of conflict of interest issues.

## **8. Validity**

This Conflict of Interest Policy takes effect on 1 May 2014, and will remain in effect until further notice. It hereby replaces previously adopted Rules for conflict of interest.