

Future Research Leaders Program

Module 3: Governance & Compliance:
Protecting yourself, your research and
your university



You buy an off-the-shelf statistics package and use it on an unchecked supplier's default setting. The statistics package was used to estimate the health risk posed by particulates in the air at Illijamburu which has become a source of fierce environmental controversy. You read that one research group has recognised the potential for error in using the default setting and have published this as a caution. It is expected that all groups using this methodology throughout the world will revise estimates of the health risk and correct any published work. This is despite the effects it would have in lessening the impact of their emission control research data, as in some cases it doubled the estimate of health risk.



Professor Prolific has called an urgent meeting of all Illijamburu project leaders. There have been incidents of slippage in research protocols and processes and in many of the compliance requirements. As one of these projects is likely to generated high media interest when raised with the Illijamburu council, Cozinca representatives have been asked to attend. During a break in the discussion a Cozinca engineer suggest that surely, so far away from your University, the governance issues you have been concerned with can't possibly apply. Surely it would be better to deal with these issues "on-the-ground" and that research of this complexity in such a greenfield setting must expect some initial problems - the University seems to be "always on your case". He asks "Why do you bother, who gets hurt?"



You find your self drawn into a mentoring role with an engaging young researcher in your department who is not a member of your research group. The researcher comes to you excited that he has been asked to take on a residential role in a project related to the Illijamburu Community project. This will be in one of the outlying communities and the plans are all in place. He has nominated you as a formal mentor in this process. You know from a number of after-work sessions that he likes a drink; in fact many drinks are often the best release for his greatest creativity and engaging behaviour. You also know that the outlying community of Illijamburu is a dry community and suspect he will find ways to circumvent this in his typical high-spirited fashion.



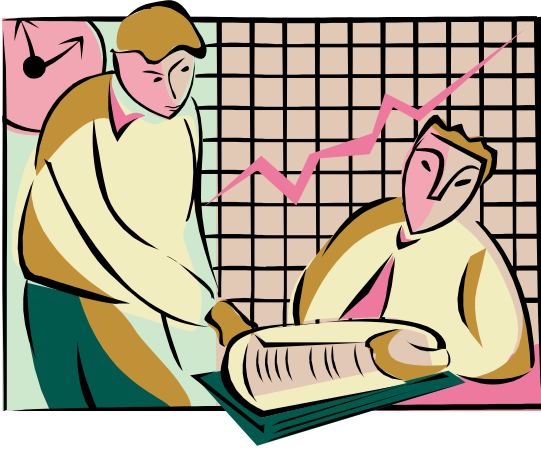
You have a number of parallel projects and have reasoned that with a mix of public-funded and industry support you can even out research funding uncertainly. You realise that your industry-funded work is subsidising the commercial arm of the company sponsoring your research and that publications numbers are falling. Additionally, you reason that no public-funded research ever funds truly innovative studies, so you will commit funds from both the public and private funds to pilot data for your next large submission to a public-funded research body. Accountability to your industry partner and the public-funding body means that some “creativity” will be needed in arriving at a balance of funds used for this purpose.



A senior colleague approaches you for authorship on a paper you have discussed previously in a departmental meeting setting. This colleague has been of great assistance in the past and is in a position to write an extremely favourable supporting letter for a position you are considering. Additionally, this colleague believes s/he losing research momentum and, in the light of the ERA is feeling, for the first time in a contributory career, at a disadvantage.



You are planning an ARC Linkage grant with Cozinca as the Industry Partners and plan to employ Hope Bright in an ethnography project which will be expanded to investigate change management. She wants to spend six weeks in a Northern Territory Aboriginal community to provide some pilot data. Hope is of aboriginal descent and, although she has had no contact with this community, is sure of acceptance through friends who have kinship with this community. As part of her research training, you ask her to make a start on the required Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) forms. Hope is exasperated by the requirements and she sees the HREC questions as an intrusion and the prospect of consent forms as unrealistic. Furthermore, she is limited in her time if she has to obtain approval and cultural intermediaries in advance. She asks, “How can an HREC stop me talking to my people?”



One of your co-project leaders indicates he has the opportunity to move to the US and will be leaving the project. You know from your research meetings that if he left the project now, you do not have much of the data readily to hand and the impact of your joint findings would be considerably reduced. You ask that he begin to duplicate the data and you will create an index for easy joint retrieval. He runs out of time and puts the case to take the data, which is in both hard copy and electronic form, with him. He will take out insurance on the consignment and be in a position to sort and select the data that you will need for joint publications.



The Illijamburu project plans a retreat where major findings will be discussed and future research directions planned. As you will have some free time at the retreat, you load a selection of images from a photographic archive that the Illijamburu elders regard as particularly sensitive and have given to you as confidential information, together with your presentation. You will have a chance to analyse the images in preparation for putting some questions to the elders on the cultural aspects depicted and why these are so sensitive. At the meeting a Conzinca director leans over to ask if she can take a copy of your presentation. You hand over your memory stick and realise she is downloading the two files you brought with you. She races from the meeting to catch her flight.



One of your students holds an Australian Postgraduate Award (APAI) on an ARC Linkage Project you hold with Cozinca. She is destined to be an engineering star and has made some breakthroughs in groundwater flow that, now in the third year of the award, are truly exciting and essentially driven by her as a major investigation. She calls you from Illijamburu, excited that Cozinca have offered to fly her to one of their mine sites in Vietnam, where she will take some measurements and provide as assessment for company hydrologists. “It’s not like there’s a conflict of interest”, she says, “It’s all Cozinca and this will be my first consultancy as they are going to pay me consultant rates”.



Being her supervisor, you are aware that there is a DFAT travel notification for the area she is travelling to and, rather than discuss the conflict of interest aspect, you take the approach that travel is advised against. “You’re not my keeper”, she says.

“I think you just don’t want to see me get ahead. I’m going no matter what you say, and besides, I will have Company security guards with me”.

She hangs up and you find a company plane left an hour later.



She returns safely and happily and on the way through drops into the lab. She apologises for her outburst and is so enthusiastic about “international consultancy” that her trip dominates the conversation over coffee with other research team members. “Guess what?” you hear her say, “I’m an international go-between. One of the local hospitals had samples to send to a project in our university and when they heard I was leaving, they packed them in dry ice and I brought them back. Cozinca really has some reputation. When we arrived back Customs was a breeze. I was introduced as the newest engineer and was through in no time. I didn’t need to declare the samples or anything. I’ve just dropped them off to the address on the label and they were really surprised. I’m off to sleep”.



You are getting ready for a very long discussion about responsible research. Before you can meet, another of your research students asks to talk to you on an important issue. This student says that what was talked about at coffee must be research misconduct. This student adds that you always seem to favour the stars in the lab and they want to take this further, not sweep it under the carpet.