

Universities and Mammon: an editor's reflections

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What I want to talk about

- What are universities for, who are their customers, and what are their values?
- What room for collaboration and conflict with business?
- Case studies
- Conflicts of interest
- Academics, funders of research, and journals
- What lessons?

Note well

- In the spirit of a seminar this is all uncertain, much of it thinking out loud
- You must help me
- “All teach, all learn”

What are universities for?

- The generation of new knowledge (research)--who decides what should be researched?
- The pursuit of truth, accepting both that “truth” is probably unobtainable and may be very uncomfortable
- The transmission of skills and knowledge (teaching)--is this just for the students at the university or a wider constituency (including perhaps the public)?

What are universities for?

- A source of “wisdom” for society
- Creating change/improvement?
- Shaping public policy?
- Debate? Generating uncertainty?
- Moral leadership?
- Creating wealth?

Who are the customers of universities?

- Students
- The local community?
- The broader (international) community
- Those who fund/commission research
- Those who fund the university, including in most cases government
- Consumers of its research and thinking
- Employers who take its students
- Media

What are the values of universities?

- Independence--of both the institution and “thinkers” within it
- Freedom to think the unthinkable
- Pursuit of “truth” no matter where it may lead
- Encouragement of debate and multiple ways of thinking

What are the values of universities?

- Rigour
- Integrity
- High quality
- Transparency (?)
- Relevance (?)
- Diversity (?)

What are businesses for?

- To create value for their owners/shareholders by creating value for customers
- A very much narrower mission than universities

Who are the customers of businesses?

- Owners/shareholders
- Those who buy from them
- *Staff*
- *Suppliers*
- Again much narrower

What are the values of businesses?

- Very variable
- Focus on the mission
- Competition
- Financial success
- The best will be concerned with high quality (meaning fitness for purpose) but not necessarily with rigour
- Integrity--but interpreted within the mission

Potential for mutual benefit

- Pursuit of new knowledge that may benefit the mission of the business
- Providing skills to future and existing employees of the business
- Turning ideas into products and services
- Wealth creation

Potential for mutual benefit

- Independent advice from the university to the business
- University achieves new sources of income, and diversity of income increases financial resilience and independence

Potential for mutual benefit

- Business funds projects that may result in public good (the businesses duty to owners/shareholders dictates that this must benefit the business in some definable way or that the owners/shareholders agree for their money to be spent in this way--which is clearly easier with owners)

Potential for loss/conflict

- University is “captured” by business: its research agenda is set by business
- Research produces results that will not benefit the business’s mission
- Research may benefit competitors
- Research that may be beneficial to the company will be harmful to the public good

Potential for loss/conflict

- Business wants to avoid publication; universities are about publication
- Business and the university disagree over the interpretation of results
- Independence of study is eroded by conflict of interest (which operates like bias)

Potential for loss/conflict

- Business wants to stop a study (no longer matters to their mission) university wants to go on
- Business “buys” respectability from the university
- University finds itself promoting the cause of the business

Potential for loss/conflict

- University's ability to speak out against the business is compromised
- Independence of the university is perceived to be compromised
- Business is offended by other voices within the university that act against its interests

Olivieri case

- In 1995 Dr Nancy Olivieri from the University of Toronto agreed with Apotex to test the drug deferiprone in clinical trials on young patients with thalassaemia.
- The agreement included a confidentiality clause, which she later said she should never have signed.

Olivieri case

- Discovered that the drug could cause liver fibrosis. Published her findings.
- When she wanted to publish Apotex reminded her of her confidentiality clause and threatened legal action
- They said they did not want to block publication but wanted the findings to be reported “correctly”

Olivieri case

- Hospital/university refused legal support to Olivieri and threatened disciplinary action
- An internal inquiry supported the actions of the hospital/university, adding to the bad feeling among researchers
- An external inquiry achieved a compromise
- The main conclusion was that relations with third party funders must be clarified

Statin trial

- French academics suggested a trial of statins in elderly patients with mild hypercholesterolaemia
- Novartis agreed to fund study, which began
- Eight months into the study with 1200 patients randomised Novartis stopped funding of the trial because market conditions had changed

Albumin research

- A systematic review suggested that the use of albumin in intensive care may far from benefiting patients be killing them
- The main conclusion is that an RCT is needed

Albumin

- Albumin manufacturers don't want a trial but are funding doctors/academics to speak out against the review, undermine the authors of the review, persuade doctors to use albumin, and do research which will promote albumin
- Universities are likely to be part of this process--but will they know?

BAT and Nottingham

- Nottingham University accepts £3.8m from BAT to fund a centre for corporate responsibility within the business school
- The arrangement supposedly complies with guidance drawn up by the Cancer Research Campaign
- University authorities approve
- A number of professors resign

BAT and Nottingham

- University receives extensive adverse publicity
- Grants from other bodies are withheld
- University is deeply divided

A cautionary tale

- Many trials suggest that thrombolytic therapy may be harmful in acute stroke
- Despite that the American Heart Association has recently recommended tPA as a Class I (“definitely recommended”) intervention for stroke in its Guidelines 2000.

A cautionary tale

- The AHA claims that it assembles ‘independent’ panels to make recommendations but will not release conflict of interest statements signed by panelists.
- Independent verification reveals that most of the AHA’s expert stroke panellists have had ties to the manufacturers of tPA

A cautionary tale

- Genentech, the US manufacturer of tPA, contributed over \$11 million to the AHA in the decade prior to the AHA's recommendation.
- Is this all a coincidence? Even if it is, it looks bad.
- A tale told to me by Jeanne Lenzer, medical investigative journalist

What is conflict of interest?

- Conflict of interest is a set of conditions in which professional judgement concerning a primary interest (such as patients' welfare or the validity of research) tends to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest (such as financial gain).
- Thompson DF. Understanding financial conflicts of interest. N Engl J Med 1993; 329: 573-576

What is conflict of interest?

- Conflict of interest is a **condition** not a **behaviour**.

Do you have a conflict of interest?

- 1. Have you in the past five years accepted the following from an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the results of your study or the conclusions of your review, editorial, or letter:
 - _____ Reimbursement for attending a symposium?
 - _____ A fee for speaking?
 - _____ A fee for organising education?
 - _____ Funds for research?
 - _____ Funds for a member of staff?
 - _____ Fees for consulting?

Do you have a conflict of interest?

- 2. Have you in the past five years been employed by an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the results of your study or the conclusions of your review, editorial, or letter?
- 3. Do you hold any stocks or shares in an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the results of your study or the conclusions of your review, editorial, or letter?
- 4. Do you have any other competing financial interests? If so, please specify.

How common are competing interests?

- 75 articles
- 89 authors
- 69 (80%) responded
- 45 (63%) had financial conflicts of interest
- **Only 2 of 70 articles disclosed the conflicts of interest**
- Stelfox HT, Chua G, O'Rourke K, Detsky AS. Conflict of interest in the debate over calcium channel antagonists. N Engl J Med 1998; 338: 101-105

Why don't authors declare conflicts of interest?

- Some journals don't require disclosure
- The culture is one of not disclosing
- Authors think that it's somehow "naughty"
- Authors are confident that they are not affected by conflicts of interest

Does conflict of interest matter?

- Financial benefit makes doctors more likely to refer patients for tests, operations, or hospital admission, or to ask that drugs be stocked by a hospital pharmacy.
- Original papers published in journal supplements sponsored by pharmaceutical companies are inferior to those published in the parent journal.
- Reviews that acknowledge sponsorship by the pharmaceutical or tobacco industry are more likely to draw conclusions that are favourable to the industry.

Does conflict of interest matter?

- Is there a relationship between whether authors are supportive of the use of calcium channel antagonists and whether they have a financial relationship with the manufacturers of the drugs?
- Stelfox HT, Chua G, O'Rourke K, Detsky AS. Conflict of interest in the debate over calcium channel antagonists. *N Engl J Med* 1998; 338: 101-105

TABLE 3. AUTHORS WITH FINANCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH PHARMACEUTICAL MANUFACTURERS.

MANUFACTURER	SUPPORTIVE AUTHORS (N = 24)	NEUTRAL AUTHORS (N = 15)	CRITICAL AUTHORS (N = 30)	CHI-SQUARE FOR LINEAR TREND	P VALUE FOR TREND
	no. of authors (%)				
Manufacturer of calcium-channel antagonist	23 (96)	9 (60)	11 (37)	22.02	<0.001
Manufacturer of competing product	21 (88)	8 (53)	11 (37)	14.84	<0.001
Any manufacturer	24 (100)	10 (67)	13 (43)	22.68	<0.001

Does conflict of interest matter?

- 106 reviews, with 37% concluding that passive smoking was not harmful and the rest that it was.
- Multiple regression analysis controlling for article quality, peer review status, article topic, and year of publication found that the only factor associated with the review's conclusion was whether the author was affiliated with the tobacco industry.
- Only 23% of reviews disclosed the sources of funding for research.
- Barnes DE, Bero LA. Why review articles on the health effects of passive smoking reach different conclusions. JAMA 1998; 279: 1566-1570

Does conflict of interest matter?: third generation contraceptive pills

- At the end of 1998 three major studies without sponsoring from the industry found a higher risk of venous thrombosis for third generation contraceptives; three sponsored studies did not.
- To date, of nine studies without sponsoring, one study found no difference and the other eight found relative risks from 1.5 to 4.0 (summary relative risk 2.4); four sponsored studies found relative risks between 0.8 and 1.5 (summary relative risk 1.1)
- The sponsored study with a relative risk of 1.5 has been reanalysed several times, yielding lower relative risks; after this failed to convince, a new reanalysis was sponsored by another company.
- One sponsored study finding an increased risk has not been published.
- Vandembroucke JP, Helmerhorst FM, Frits R Rosendaal FR. Competing interests and controversy about third generation oral contraceptives. *BMJ* 2000; 320: 381.

Academics, research funders and journals

- Some 70% of trials in the five major journals are funded by pharmaceutical companies (30% for BMJ)
- Trials used to be conducted by academic investigators but are increasingly designed and analysed by contract research organisations

Academics, research funders and journals

- Some doctors/academics may find that they are participating in trials but do not design or analyse them and have no access to the data
- This is unacceptable if editors and readers are given the impression that these doctors/academics are the authors of the study

Academics, research funders and journals

- A particular problem lies with who controls publication
- The head of the sponsored research office of Massachusetts General Hospital estimates that about 30-50% of contracts submitted by companies have unacceptable clauses on publication that must be renegotiated.
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Academics, research funders and journals

- A survey of over 3300 members of life science faculties in 50 universities found that a fifth had had publication of study results delayed by more than six months at least once in the past three years.
- One reason for this delay was to slow the dissemination of undesired results.
- There are several high profile examples of companies blocking publication

Academics, research funders and journals

- At the moment journals rarely make clear the role of funders in the research and publication process
- We will ask contributors to sign a statement that they accept full responsibility for the conduct of the study, had access to the data, and controlled the decision to publish

How to respond?

- Universities should interact with business
- They may judge that they do not want to interact with some businesses--tobacco companies, pornographers, arms manufacturers
- Universities probably need a broad policy and guidelines in interacting with business

How to respond?

- Each “deal” must be considered in a broad context
- The rules of the game must be spelt out very clearly to both sides--presumably in a legal contract
- Universities should always (?) reserve the right to publish

How to respond?

- “Disclosure is almost a panacea.” John Bailar, professor of statistics, University of Chicago
- “What isn’t transparent is assumed to be biased, incompetent, or corrupt.”
- “Would you be happy to defend the ‘deal’ on live television

Conclusions

- Interactions between universities and business are likely to increase
- There is room for both substantial benefit and substantial loss
- Universities need policies and guidelines on interacting with business
- This talk is on www.bmj.com