

Can researchers engage safely with the food industry?

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Researchers from The University of Queensland and University of Cambridge are exploring ways to help scientists better protect their work from the influence of the food industry.

With rising obesity levels, and significant public interest in diet and

health, the ethics surrounding research in this area is centre-stage.

UQ School of Public Health nutrition expert Dr. Katherine Cullerton said scientists have long been divided on the best way to manage industry involvement in diet and [health research](#).

"While some scientists feel that the [food industry](#) should never be involved, many take the view that achieving healthier diets among whole populations will require actions by the [food](#) industry—and for these actions to be effective it requires new research and access to food industry data," Dr. Cullerton said.

"As [government funding](#) for research is poorly available in some nations, more academics are looking to industries to contribute funding.

"This is a particular challenge in low income countries which represent important, emerging markets for food companies."

The study sought to build consensus on this issue by seeking the views of population health researchers and research stakeholders—such as funders, policy officers and journals –internationally.

"Our study showed there was consensus on many of the principles designed to prevent or manage conflicts of interest, however researchers were divided on what is acceptable when it comes to accepting funding and the types of interactions with these companies," she said.

"Companies in the food industry want to influence food and public health policy in their favour.

"They fund certain areas of research for many reasons—one reason can be to deflect attention away from products that are associated with poor [health](#) outcomes."

This research highlights the fact that greater understanding of the risks associated with accepting food industry funding or simply interacting with food companies was necessary.

"Some researchers are unaware that they are susceptible to [conflicts of interest](#) or that they might be at risk of unconscious biases adversely affecting their science," Dr. Cullerton said.

"Ultimately, all of these factors represent significant reputational risks for researchers."

In the final stage of this research, Dr. Cullerton and her colleagues in Cambridge will develop internationally-agreed guidance and a toolkit to help researchers better manage the risks resulting from interacting with the food industry.

This study is published in *PLOS ONE*.

More information: Katherine Cullerton et al. Building consensus on interactions between population health researchers and the food industry: Two-stage, online, international Delphi study and stakeholder survey, *PLOS ONE* (2019). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0221250](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221250)

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