CONCEPT NOTE

15th ASSAf PRESIDENTIAL ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Academia and Commercial Conflict of Interest

Exploring the integrity of academia-industry partnerships in South Africa's National System of Innovation

DATE: 25 November 2026
TIME: 13:00 – 15:00
VENUE: ZOOM WEBINAR

1. BACKGROUND

Conflict-of-Interest (COI) arises when a difference between an individual's or institution's primary obligations and secondary interest creates the possibility that a professional opinion given, or action taken, may be biased or perceived to be biased (Cohen, 2001; Krimsky & Rothenberg, 2001; Mitsumoto, 2014). Universities and research organisations commonly establish policies addressing COI, typically covering teaching and learning, research, governance and administration, and fundraising. Such policies seek to protect the integrity of processes, institutions, and public trust.

Academia is largely familiar with COI safeguards surrounding core academic activities such as examination, peer review publishing, and research grant application and review. However, the global rise of active citizenship of research and academic institutions raises questions of interface and role-playing in civil society, government, and corporate business environments. The academia-industry nexus is necessary to advance innovation and industrial development, contributing to national socio-economic imperatives. Yet industry-academia partnerships have been flagged with regards to COI risks, owing to evidence of academics' and institutions' conduct and decisions being compromised. Such concerns relate not only to actual or proven COI, but also cases of potential and perceived COI. This has led journals in the medical and life sciences, in particular, to become relatively more stringent on requirements for COI declaration, not only for authors but also editors (Krimsky & Rothenberg, 2001).

The scale of the issue is significant. In 2024, an estimated $ 8.51 billion flowed from industry to academia (Malhotra et al., 2026), confirming industry as a key role-player in the research ecosystem and rendering the potential for COI ever-present. In South Africa, the National System of Innovation (NSI) is generally underfunded (DSTI, 2026), making safeguards against COI all the more pertinent as academics and institutions face increasing financial pressures.

On this basis, the President of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), Prof Thokozani Majozi will convene the **15th ASSAf Presidential Roundtable** focusing on **Academia and Commercial Conflict of Interest**. The webinar will host leading scholars and executives in academia and research to explore these issues.

2. THE AIM OF THE ROUNDTABLE

The primary aim is to critically examine the nature, extent, and management of commercial conflict of interest within the South African National System of Innovation. Specifically, the roundtable seeks to:

- **Assess the Threat:** Evaluate the scale and nature of the risk, whether commercial COI constitutes a genuine threat to the integrity of the South African NSI, distinguishing between actual, potential, and perceived conflicts.
- **Interrogate the Boundaries:** Examine the line between academic freedom and commercial freedom, asking whether commercialisation and industry fundraising imperatives threaten academic integrity.
- **Examine Institutional Conflict:** Consider whether universities and research institutions can themselves experience COI as a result of commercial or funding interests, and what this means for institutional governance.
- **Clarify Academic Roles:** Debate whether academics should hold commercial interests in their research spin-offs or play governance roles in industry, and whether such roles overshadow or compromise research standing.
- **Evaluate Industry Engagement:** Consider the appropriate role of industry in academic research and whether such engagement should be encouraged, regulated, or both.
- **Review Current Safeguards:** Assess whether existing institutional policies and guidelines are sufficient to deter COI, and identify gaps requiring reform.

3. TARGET AUDIENCE

The roundtable is designed for a diverse and high-level audience of stakeholders invested in the integrity of research and innovation in South Africa. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Academics and Researchers:** Particularly those engaged in industry partnerships, commercialisation, and sponsored research across all disciplines.
- **University Leadership and Administrators:** Including Vice-Chancellors, DVCs for Research and Innovation, Deans, and Heads of Research Offices and Technology Transfer Offices.
- **Science Councils and Research Organisations:** Representatives who shape research policy and funding priorities.
- **Policymakers and Government Officials:** Individuals from officials and relevant regulatory bodies.
- **Industry Representatives:** Executives and research leaders from the private sector engaged in academia–industry partnerships.
- **Editors and Publishers:** Key figures from academic journals who manage COI declarations and editorial independence.
- **Early Career Researchers and Postgraduate Students:** The next generation of scholars, whose careers will be shaped by these evolving norms.

4. FORMAT OF THE WEBINAR

The webinar will be a high-level, interactive webinar designed to facilitate a rigorous and inclusive discussion. The format is structured to maximise engagement between the panel and the online audience. The structure will be as follows:

- **Opening and Welcome Remarks:** A formal welcome and scene-setting with an overview of the topic by the ASSAf President, Prof Thokozani Majozi.
- **Moderated Expert Panel:** A facilitated conversation with a diverse panel of 4-5 experts, offering perspectives from academia, industry, ethics, and policy.
- **Interactive Q&A:** Dedicated time for audience engagement through a chat/live Q&A feature.
- **Solution-Oriented Dialogue:** The discussion will be steered toward identifying practical and implementable recommendations.

5. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The ASSAf Presidential Roundtables (PRT) on Science, Scholarship and Society are evidence-based dialogues that bring together high-level experts and stakeholders to address critical issues affecting society at large. This webinar is therefore envisaged to:

1. Identify the diverse manifestations of commercial COI across the South African NSI and provide context-sensitive recommendations for strengthening institutional policies, disclosure requirements, and governance mechanisms to deter COI in academia–industry partnerships.
2. Foster sustained dialogue between academics, industry leaders, ethics officers, and policymakers, breaking down suspicion and building a shared vocabulary for managing COI responsibly.

About the ASSAf Presidential Roundtables (PRT)

The ASSAf Presidential Roundtables (PRT) on Science, Scholarship and Society are evidence-based dialogues that bring together high-level experts and stakeholders to address critical issues affecting society at large and are of interest to a broad audience. The roundtables are hosted bi-annually by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) and are moderated by the President of the Academy.

References

Cohen, J. J. (2001). Trust us to make a difference: Ensuring public confidence in the integrity of clinical research. Academic Medicine, 76, 209–214.

Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI). (2016). Ministerial Working Group on Science, Technology and Innovation Funding Group Report. DSTI, Pretoria.

Krimsky, S., & Rothenberg, L. S. (2001). Conflict of interest policies in science and medical journals: editorial practices and author disclosures. *Science and engineering ethics*, *7*(2), 205-218.

Malhotra, A., Futela, D., Moily, R., Kandala, K., Khunte, M., Payabvash, S., ... & Whitlow, C. (2026). Industry-Sponsored Research Payments in Radiology: A National Open Payments Analysis. *Journal of the American College of Radiology*.

Mitsumoto, H. (2014). Conflict of interest in American neurology and neurological societies. *Neurology and Clinical Neuroscience*, *2*(3), 65-71.