

# Rules for Dealing with Conflicts of Interest in the Science-Based Advice provided by the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina

Working translation. The German version is authoritative.<sup>1</sup>

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## Preamble

The knowledge and commitment of members of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and other scientists form the basis for the science-based advice that the Leopoldina provides to the political and public spheres in the interest of the common good, independently of political or economic interests. For the contributing scientists, for the Leopoldina, and for the political and public spheres, it is of utmost importance that this focus on the common good and the independence of the advisory process are not compromised by unrecognised conflicts of interest. It is therefore imperative that the handling of conflicts of interest in the context of the science-based advice provided by the Leopoldina be clearly regulated.

This document establishes rules for handling conflicts of interest in the context of the science-based advice provided by the Leopoldina. The Leopoldina is committed to conducting its scientific advisory activities in accordance with these rules and to supporting the contributing scientists in observing them.

Specific questions regarding possible bias on the part of individual scientists are treated confidentially.

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<sup>1</sup> Regeln für den Umgang mit Interessenkonflikten in der wissenschaftsbasierten Beratungstätigkeit der Nationalen Akademie der Wissenschaften Leopoldina.  
[https://www.leopoldina.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Dokumente/2021\\_Leopoldina\\_Regeln\\_f%C3%BCr\\_den\\_Umgang\\_mit\\_Interessenkonflikten.pdf](https://www.leopoldina.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Dokumente/2021_Leopoldina_Regeln_f%C3%BCr_den_Umgang_mit_Interessenkonflikten.pdf)

These rules were adopted by the Presidium of the Leopoldina at its meeting on 26 May 2021. These rules come into force upon publication on the Academy's website.

### 1. The science-based advice provided by the Leopoldina

The Leopoldina provides science-based advice in various formats, sometimes in collaboration with other science academies and other partner institutions. Based on established scientific evidence, scientists work independently and impartially on socially relevant issues, reflect on their significance in a broader historical and political context and identify options for action.

### 2. Scientists as contributors to the science-based advice provided by the Leopoldina

Involvement in providing science-based advice through the Leopoldina places particular demands on the scientists involved. They are obliged to disclose facts that could give rise to concerns about bias. If there are facts that give rise to concerns about bias of the scientists involved, conflicts of interest arise. If new facts arise in the course of the project that could raise concerns about bias, the scientists involved are obliged to report them.

### 3. Grounds for exclusion

In the context of providing science-based advice, it must be determined and documented whether there are any facts that would require the exclusion of scientists from contributing to the advisory process due to potential conflicts of interest. In this regard, the following grounds for exclusion must be assessed.

*A compelling reason for exclusion* exists for scientists if their own financial interests or those of relatives<sup>1</sup> are affected by the advisory activities of the Leopoldina. If there is a compelling reason for exclusion, these scientists may not contribute to the specific advisory activity under any circumstances.

*Relative grounds for exclusion* (concern of bias) do not automatically result in exclusion from participation. It must be examined on a case-by-case basis whether facts exist that

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this regulation, relatives are defined as direct relatives and in-laws, the spouse, the life partner, siblings, spouses or life partners of siblings and siblings of spouses or life partners.

give rise to concerns of bias and justify a lack of trust in the independence of the contributor(s). This applies in particular in the case of:

1. a current or past occupation in return for payment or membership of a governing body in companies for which the advisory activity of the Leopoldina may be of economic significance;<sup>2</sup>
2. any paid advisory service in the matter for third parties in the past three years who might have a non-scientific interest in the outcome of the project;
3. an activity within the meaning of (2.) by a scientist who is a relative<sup>3</sup>;
4. personal, financial or intangible benefits from a person, organisation, association, institution or company that could be affected by the advisory activity of the Leopoldina;
5. a direct advantage or disadvantage (e.g. with regard to ongoing patent proceedings or project applications with third parties) as a result of the Leopoldina's advisory activity;
6. current or prospective research funding whose donors could have a particular interest in a specific Leopoldina advice outcome;
7. current or prospective research funding or other benefits that are so closely connected to the advisory activity of the Leopoldina that they could give rise to concerns about bias;
8. active participation in an organisation, association, institution or company that could be affected by the conclusions of the statement.

#### 4. Procedural rules for handling conflicts of interest in the context of the science-based advice provided by the Leopoldina

The Leopoldina has a particular duty of care to identify conflicts of interest in all matters concerning the provision of science-based advice. In order to fulfil this duty, the scientists involved, the Executive Board, the Mediation Panel and the employees of the Leopoldina work closely together in a climate of mutual trust.

The proceedings are confidential.

The scientists who propose a project to the Presidium and who will usually also lead it must enclose a completed self-disclosure questionnaire with their proposal. The department of the Leopoldina responsible for the project evaluates these questionnaires for facts that could give rise to possible conflicts of interest. In the event that facts are found or otherwise become known which, in the opinion of the department, constitute a compelling reason for exclusion or give rise to concerns about bias, the Mediation Panel must be involved in consultation with the Secretary General. This informs the Executive Board,

<sup>2</sup> *Explanation (June 2024)*: Memberships of controlling bodies of companies (e.g. supervisory boards) must be stated in the self-disclosure (see under 4.), but do not in principle constitute a relative ground for exclusion.

<sup>3</sup> See footnote 1

the General Secretariat and the department of its assessment in accordance with the mediation procedure. The Executive Board shall decide on the participation of the person concerned in the project. The questionnaires are archived in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation. The head of the department supervising the project is responsible for ensuring that the proceedings are carried in accordance with the regulations.

Once the Presidium has approved the project, the responsible department of the Leopoldina collects the questionnaires with the self-disclosure information from all other scientists who are to contribute to the project and will share responsibility in its result, and proceeds according to the above principles.

For discussion papers and other papers that are to be acknowledged by the Presidium, the contributing scientists must submit the completed questionnaires as early as possible and no later than when the text is submitted. The further procedure is determined by the aforementioned principles. In the event that relevant facts are found or otherwise become known, the Presidium decides on the publication of the discussion paper or other paper.

Documents published as part of a project include a note that the contributing scientists were obliged to disclose any facts that could give rise to conflicts of interest. Furthermore, reference is made to these rules at hand.

If it is subsequently found that a scientist has violated the disclosure requirements, an assessment is carried out by the Mediation Panel, which informs the Executive Board and the department of the result.

## 5. Legal consequences

Breaches of the disclosure requirement constitute a breach of the rules of good scientific practice. At the suggestion of the Mediation Panel, the Presidium decides on the consequences pursuant to the rules of the Leopoldina for handling scientific misconduct.

The Presidium decides on the measures to be taken in response to the justified concern of bias under consideration of the paper's visibility.