

Case study four: Overseas government contracts and appointments

Following a recruitment process, an international professor was appointed to a UK university.

Unknown and undisclosed to the university, the professor maintained paid involvement in a number of overseas government projects, including leading a national laboratory for applied military research.

To progress this work without regular travel, the professor hosted fully funded visiting research students from his overseas laboratory to research in the UK. These students were used to transfer dual-use research and technologies to the overseas lab.

Colleagues became concerned at the professor's workload and ill-health. Following an approach from university staff, the professor confessed to holding an external position and operating a shadow laboratory.

The professor explained that the overseas contract placed him in a legally and ethically compromising position, prevented disclosure of the relationship without consent from the overseas government employer, and required him to work for many additional months a year.

In addition, he had been instructed to curtail his UK employment in the next year and return to the home country and laboratory, in line with the existing contractual agreement. The majority of the funded visiting graduate research students, it transpired, were directly linked to the overseas country's military development activities.

Learning points

Academic staff and students are sometimes recruited to circumvent export control regulations and transfer technology without authorisation.

Although the institution had policies in place to identify overseas appointments and conflicts of interest, these procedures were not suitably robust. Institutions should promote a culture of vigilance, risk minimisation and support to identify vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to high-risk research areas.

University policies must require all staff to disclose all overseas appointments, consultancies or honorary positions held. Universities must take a proactive approach to confirming guest academics' curricula vitae to ensure independent academic research is safeguarded.