

Ethics at the Edge: Reimagining Integrity in Research Funding, Institutional Partnerships, and Academic Freedom

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This workshop addresses the growing ethical and structural tensions surrounding how universities — particularly medical institutions — engage with research funding, institutional partnerships, and academic freedom. Central to the discussion is a recent case at the Medical University of Vienna, which accepted funding from a major firearms manufacturer — a company whose weapons are now present in active conflict zones, including the Russia-Ukraine war. While many leading institutions have implemented restrictions on funding from the tobacco and alcohol industries, few have developed consistent frameworks for evaluating other ethically problematic partnerships, such as those involving arms producers or extractive industries.

This workshop asks: What principles should guide institutional decisions about funding sources, and what role should ethics committees and research integrity officers play in upholding these principles? The session also explores how decisions about funding intersect with academic freedom. Increasingly, researchers face not only constraints on the topics they may pursue, but also limitations on the criticisms they may express regarding their institutions' own practices. Ethics committees — originally intended to protect human subjects and vulnerable communities — are at times repurposed as tools of institutional control, stifling critical discourse and reinforcing status quo agendas.

Participants will engage with the following questions:

- How can universities develop transparent, participatory, and independent processes to assess and govern funding relationships?
- How should ethics committees balance the protection of research participants with safeguarding researchers' rights to pursue politically sensitive or critical inquiries?
- How do internal institutional hierarchies shape whose concerns are legitimized — or dismissed — in funding decisions, research agenda-setting, and ethical deliberation?

The workshop will engage participants in small group discussions using a case-based ethical matrix, complemented by international examples and institutional case studies. Discussion topics will include the strategic expansion of university partnerships into oil-rich regions, contrasted with the lack of coordinated institutional support for underserved communities — highlighting the disconnect between universities' stated missions of "health and well-being" and their actual funding practices. Through structured exercises and collective analysis, the workshop invites participants to reimagine a university culture that is not only research-active, but also ethically consistent, transparent, and socially accountable. The language of this abstract was adapted with the assistance of a large language model (LLM); all ideas, interpretations, and conclusions are solely those of the authors.