# Researchers beware! Unhealthy industries using universities to push their agenda

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| **Author** | Michelle Jongenelis |
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### Why industry-funded research is such a danger to researcher credibility and public health

Dr Michelle Jongenelis, Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Centre for Behaviour Change, recently warned that unhealthy industries invest in so-called “independent” research as a means to promote their own agenda and divert attention away from public health efforts, while legitimising their activities and enhancing their credibility.  Today on Drink Tank, we republish Dr Jongenelis’ original commentary - first published by the Public Health Association of Australia - together with a case study prepared by the Drink Tank editorial team showcasing an example of alcohol industry-funded research and the inherent problems of such an approach.

### Industry-funded research: A smoke-screen for influencing public health policy and practice to increase profits

**Dr Michelle Jongenelis, Senior Research Fellow, Melbourne Centre for Behaviour Change**  As public health advocates, we strive for evidence-based policy and practice. We scour journal articles and reports, making recommendations based on their findings. We publish research ourselves, hoping that our contribution will improve the health and well-being of Australians. Our efforts are frequently the envy of the world. However, these efforts are under threat.  We have become so good at what we do that enemies of public health – the alcohol, tobacco, and sugary drink industries – are having to be sneakier in their attempts to influence public health policy and practice in Australia and ensure their profit margins, rather than their consumers, remain healthy. They set up foundations under the guise of creating “a better world”, engaging in “corporate citizenship”, and being “socially responsible”. They wax lyrical about their attempts to “be part of the solution” while denying there is a problem.  Of greater concern is industry’s involvement in scientific research. Most of us can see right through their corporate responsibility schtick. It’s a lot harder to recognise their attempts to hijack behavioural science. Conflicts of interest are often buried at the end of a report or article (if industry allow their research to be subject to peer-review).  It’s easy to miss these conflict of interest statements. As public health advocates, we are busy. And therein lies the problem. We are busy fighting for public health in Australia. We are busy attempting to foresee the next threat to our efforts. And that is what industry is betting on. They want us to drop our guard.  Don’t be fooled. Financing “independent” research is a means by which industry promotes their own agenda and diverts attention away from our efforts while legitimising their activities and enhancing their credibility. If the results sound too good to be true (Alcohol is good for you! Sugary drinks aren’t responsible for poor health! Electronic nicotine delivery systems are harmless!), they probably are.  It is important that we, as public health researchers and practitioners, pay close attention to the literature and exercise caution when reading industry-funded research and using the findings from this research to inform our practice and advocacy efforts.

### Case Study: Nothing responsible about alcohol industry study into ‘responsible drinking’.

**Drink Tank Editorial Team** One doesn’t need to look very hard to find examples that highlight Dr Jongenelis’ concerns.   Take, for instance, recent research commissioned by Alcohol Beverages Australia and conducted by Professor Simone Dennis from the Australian National University (ANU) and Professor Andrew Dawson from the University of Melbourne. Titled *Risk, Responsibility and Experience: Exploring Complex Relations with Alcohol* the interim report was timed nicely to drop ahead of Christmas and New Year festivities.  A failure to properly declare that the alcohol study was commissioned by the alcohol industry, a glaring inaccuracy, together with problematic framing, and an interim report impossible to access, rang immediate alarm bells at the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education who reached out in writing to the ANU to express our concerns.  **Failure to declare:** The [ANU’s original release](https://drinktank.org.au/wp-content/uploads/ANU-release.pdf), as sent through CCH Parliament distribution service and originally published on the ANU’s online newsroom, failed to declare that the research was commissioned by Alcohol Beverages Australia (ABA), an industry body serving and driven solely by the commercial interests of the Australian alcohol industry. Self-described as “the pan-industry body created to highlight the positive social, cultural and economic contribution of alcohol beverages in Australia”, ABA state their goal as “promoting, explaining and defending the legitimate rights of the industry and the 15 million Australians who responsibly enjoy our drinks.”  To its credit, when alerted to this fact on 23 December, the ANU updated the online media release published on the ANU website within 24 hours.  Further, an ANU spokesperson advised that the declaration had in fact been provided verbally to media.  **Fact check:**The *Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol* are incorrectly referred to as *guidelines for responsible drinking.*  The ANU media release states, “Pretty much no one we spoke to could quote the current public health guidelines for responsible drinking correctly”. Perhaps not at all a surprising result when no such *public health guidelines for responsible drinking*exist*.*  The [*Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol*](https://nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol#block-views-block-file-attachments-content-block-1.)are verydeliberately titled as such because there is no completely safe level of alcohol consumption. The Guidelines do not use the ‘responsible drinking’ terminology, except to refer to the fact that ‘responsible drinking’ means different things to different people. Indeed, a representative national [poll](https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/FARE-Annual-Alcohol-Poll-2019-FINAL.pdf.) undertaken in 2019 found that even 68 per cent of very high-risk drinkers consider themselves to be a responsible drinker.   **Problematic framing:**The framing and subsequent reporting of the preliminary study undermine Government and public health efforts to promote low-risk alcohol consumption and downplays the serious long-term health effects from alcohol, such as cancer and cardiovascular disease.   The alcohol industry in Australia has for decades promoted the idea of ‘responsible drinking’, a deliberately vague and ambiguous concept that is open to interpretation by the consumer and ensures many people will not realise they are drinking at risky levels.  It is problematic because it places the responsibility on the individual and exculpates the industry from any responsibility. Yet it is this very framing that the study attempts to legitimise and leverage.  At the same time, the alcohol industry has failed to promote the official*Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol.*These guidelines, by virtue of assigning a number to the standard drinks that can be consumed to lower the risk of death, are prescriptive in nature and clearly would impact on the alcohol industry’s bottom line if Australians heeded them. In fact, [the alcohol industry relies on heavy drinkers for the vast majority of its profit](https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12901); over half (54 per cent) of all alcohol sold in Australia is consumed by just 10 per cent of drinkers.  **Lack of transparency:** The ANU chose not to publicly release the interim report. Instead, issuing a media release for a report that didn’t exist and could not be accessed.  Without the ability to examine the source material it is not possible to judge the veracity of the claims in the press release. ***Note: The case study above and views expressed within are the views of the Drink Tank editorial team. Dr Michelle Jongenelis’ opinion piece highlights the dangers of unhealthy industry influence in general and is not intended as a commentary on any specific example.***

### Metadata