

THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND CULTURES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Using Students as Research Participants
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures (FAHC) Faculty Research Ethics Committee

This briefing is intended to generate discussion and to support understanding of the approach taken by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee to research ethics applications involving students as participants in research projects undertaken by University staff.¹

Background

The increase in pedagogic and other student education research in FAHC is a great achievement and is leading to significant benefit for students as well as scholarly outputs for academic colleagues. However, the growth has led to an increased pressure on the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC), and in particular a notable rise in discussion about the issues related to students as research participants. This briefing uses the themes adopted by the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (and commonly accepted more widely) to identify key issues to consider in research design and applications for ethical approval for research projects involving students as participants.

When does a research project involving students need ethical approval?

All projects involving students as research participants must have ethical approval. Sometimes it is unclear whether the student is a research participant or is contributing to the review and development of an educational activity. Any activity which is part of a standard review process at the University of Leeds (e.g. module review) does not require ethical approval.² If a member of staff is, for example, gathering interim feedback to inform their practice, and this data or the results of the feedback will not be shared with anyone else, then the project does not require ethical approval. Put simply, a project requires approval if any data is to be collected which will be visible to anyone beyond the member of teaching staff and the individual student, and is not part of a standard University of Leeds review process.

Consent

Consent can never be assumed or presumed and must be explicitly given by all participants. As with all research projects, this consent must be properly informed. Students must understand what information is being collected, how it will be stored, and how it will be used (for example, that the data will form part of an academic article in the public domain).

Consent also applies to data gathered for other purposes by the University, and to material such as essays or assessment marks produced as part of a learning or other exercise.

¹ There is separate guidance available on the issues related to students recruiting from their peers for research projects: <https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics/protocols-and-policies/>

² Further guidance on what does and does not require review is available here: <https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics/>

The University Student Privacy notice (<https://dataprotection.leeds.ac.uk/gdpr/student-privacy-notice/>) provides information about what students have agreed to about the use of data collected by the University, and must be adhered to. It is not the case that data already available to the University, or material produced as part of a different process (such as assessment) can be used freely for research. Template information sheets and consent forms are available from the [Research Ethics website](#).

Transparency

Students must understand the purpose of the research and the range of potential implications for them as participants. This is particularly the case where their teacher is simultaneously the researcher and roles may be confused or unclear.

Transparency must also be considered when planning when to conduct the research. It is very unlikely that it will be appropriate to use teaching time for research activity (see comments regarding right to withdraw below).

The benefits of participation must be explicit. It will rarely be the case that participation, e.g. completing a survey, will be a benefit in its own right. 'Engaging with research' is not a benefit unless this provides some clear educational advantage to the student within the context of the module learning outcomes.

Right to Withdraw

Students must be able to withdraw from participation. This means that research conducted during teaching time may be problematic as the student will lose contact time if they withdraw from participation in the study. Right to withdraw (and not to participate) must be considered in research design and must be justified in the application for ethical approval.

Incentives

Incentives are commonly used in research but their interaction with teaching activity must be properly considered and the transparency of the incentives must be clear. For example, students may assume that participation may improve academic performance. This would be unfair on non-participating students and may not be possible to evidence. Some students may have experienced contexts where credit is awarded for participation and it must be made clear whether this is the case (it will rarely be so).

Perceived conflict of interest or harm arising from participation in research

Although the researcher may not perceive any potential for harm, the participant may see such potential. This is especially the case where the teacher is also the researcher and the participant may suspect that participation (or non-participation) may impact on the teaching relationship. The teacher is in a position of power in this respect, which renders the student vulnerable. As such, all projects which involve teaching staff researching their own students must go through the full (not light touch) ethics approval.³

³ The ethics approval documents and process can be found here: <https://secretariat.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics/>

Privacy and Data Storage

Usual rules regarding privacy and data storage must be respected ([see the Information Protection Policy](#)). Importantly, the researcher must be clear about the source of all data used and ensure they are not using in their research data which is available to them as a teacher but for which research is not a permitted use. Small group settings there is the potential for students to be contextually identifiable (e.g. another group member reading the report of a research project may be able to identify individual participants).

Further suggested reading:

The Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research produced by the British Educational Research Association provides a useful overview of key issues and gives additional links and resources:

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

Cleary, M, Walter G and Jackson, D (2015) Editorial: Above all, 'do no harm': Key considerations when including students as research participants in higher education settings. *Contemporary Nurse*. 49:1, 93-95.

Foot, H and Sandford, A (2004) The Use and Abuse of Student Participants. *The Psychologist* 17:5, 256-259. Available at: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/documents/0504foot.pdf>

Rickles, N (2010) Student Participants in Faculty Educational Research. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*. 74: 5 Article 92

Shi, L (2006) Students as Research Participants or as Learners? *Journal of Academic Ethics*. 4: 1, 205-220.

(There is an extensive literature on this issue, these are only indicative of the types of issues raised)