Sheffield Hallam University | Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research

Ethical Guidance for Project Leads 23-24

Institutional Research, Evaluation & Enhancement Projects

Written by STEER and endorsed by the Head of Research Ethics, May 2023

Contents

Overview

This guidance is intended to be read by staff at Sheffield Hallam who are planning to conduct research, evaluation, and enhancement activity. Specifically, those that are applying for funding from the College Research & Enhancement Fund or STEER Evaluation Bursary.

Ethical Principles

Ethical approval is part of the Hallam Research Ethics Policy and ensures that institutional projects consider the interests of participants (typically students) in data gathering, and observe the highest standards of integrity, impartiality and respect for data. Attention also needs to be paid to power imbalance when students are involved as participants.

Project Leads are responsible for undertaking and then demonstrating that ethical scrutiny has taken place in their project design.

Whilst obtaining ethical approval will take some time and energy, it is a worthwhile process. "Ethical approval should not be a hurdle, but an opportunity to reflect on research design and receive pre-study peer review; embracing a more constructive approach may go some way to instil confidence and compliance with the process" (Hack 2015).

Obtaining ethical approval is a condition of receiving the funding for the College Research & Enhancement Fund or STEER Evaluation Bursary projects.

Ethical approval of institutional projects at Hallam is governed by the policies for 'Approval Processes for Staff and Doctoral Research'. Applications are submitted on an electronic ethics review system – Converis (see below).

Ethical Considerations

There are specific ethical considerations to consider when designing institutional research, evaluation, and enhancement projects. These may be different to disciplinary research, so even if you are an experienced researcher, it is recommended that you review and apply the content in this guidance.

Insider research/power dynamics

Researching in one's own workplace presents special ethical challenges as it is a form of insider research.

Ethical approval applications for institutional research, evaluation, and enhancement projects should demonstrate that they have considered the implications of insider research and describe any mitigations put in place.

There are many benefits of insider research, including in depth and specialist knowledge on a subject and a position to influence change. It also raises ethical considerations around consent, managing pre-existing and ongoing relationships, the use of insider knowledge, maintaining confidentiality and the possibility of a duty to disclose confidential research data concerning participants (Toy-Cronin 2018). A consideration of insider research is particularly important if you are recruiting a student sample as there will be a power imbalance between staff and student. This is heightened if your participants are already known to you (e.g., if you are marking their work).

Working with student researchers

These institutional projects should adhere to the highest possible ethical standards, particularly because they are modelling good practice with novice student researchers.

Institutional research, evaluation, and enhancement Project Leads should discuss ethical considerations with their student researchers and co-produce any supporting documentation.

Sometimes, due to the allocation process for student researchers, co-design is difficult. Ethical approval applications should still explicitly reference the role of the student researchers and what support has been put in place for them to carry out this role. Ethical considerations of confidentiality, conflict of interest and student wellbeing should be discussed, especially if student researchers are from the same course/cohort. Think carefully about what students might be told or witness if they are collecting data with fellow students or staff. Project Leads should discuss attendance at the STEER Ethics Training with their student researchers.

Ethical Approval Applications should name student researchers within the applications, particularly if the student researchers are conducting data gathering or analysis. This can be added as a post-approval amendment.

Data access and storage

Project Leads should consider what personal student data (see guidance on Use of Student Data for Research Purposes) they are accessing and what it might be used for (e.g. assessment data, retention data, analytic/engagement data). Use of student data for research purposes is covered by the Student Privacy Notice, which students sign at enrolment each year. Use of this type of data does not require individual consent. **All new data generated will require consent (see below).**

All data (e.g. survey responses, Zoom interview recordings etc) should be stored on the Q drive as this is the most secure storage drive within Hallam.

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*You will not automatically have access to a Q drive. If you are in a professional service team, you can request a Q drive by contacting **l.austen@shu.ac.uk** with details of who requires named access. If you are an academic you can contact your Research Institute Manager. This should be requested prior to gathering data.*

Training & Development

Training is available for Project Leads and student researchers. General Research Ethics Training is available here, and includes a range of resources: https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity/training

Project Leads and student researchers can also attend training on ethical considerations run by STEER. Video recordings from previous years are available here: https://blog.shu.ac.uk/steer/ethics/

Ethics training is recommended for all project Leads and student researchers, regardless of prior experience.

Converis Access

Ethical approval applications are submitted and managed through an online electronic system called Converis. Access to Converis is not automatic and an account request may be required. Please refer

to the Ethics Review System user guide for guidance on how to use the Converis system and to check whether you have access.

Project Leads should check they have access to the online ethical approval portal as soon as possible and request access as needed.

If needed, access requests can be done via your line manager using the ASSYST portal (available here http://itservicedesk.shu.ac.uk/). This request can take a couple of weeks to be actioned.

Existing users of the Converis pre-award module/grants system can log in as normal. If you cannot gain access, please email converis@shu.ac.uk

The Peer Review Process

Ethical approval applications are reviewed anonymously by staff from within the University. For an application for 'All other human participants', a lead reviewer will be assigned, along with one methodology expert and one lay reviewer. For 'Very low risk human participants' one discipline expert revieer will be assigned. They will be asked to submit their peer review of your application within 2 weeks of receiving it. They will decide on an outcome of either; Approved, Approved with Advisory Comments, Referred back for Resubmission. The central Ethics Support Team will allocate reviewers who will be best placed to provide constructive feedback and have received ethical reviewer training. Guidance for ethical reviewers is also available and is useful to see how feedback might be framed. Attending the ethics training for project leads will support you to complete a successful application.

Timelines

When to submit an ethical approval application

When project funding is secured you should start working on your ethical approval application even if you are not planning on collecting data immediately. This can be discussed with students once allocated in Oct/Nov.

It is recommended that applications are submitted as soon as possible so this process does not impact on your project timeline.

How long will it take to obtain approval

It can take a long time to receive ethical approval. Some of this depends on the quality of your application, but this also depends on the availability of your reviewers. Periods of expected annual leave (e.g. December/Christmas and April/Easter) may affect the time taken for review.

It is recommended that you allow 2 months from submission to obtain ethical approval.

Resubmission

You may be required to resubmit your application, and you will not be able to start your project until this has been approved. You may be asked to make some specific change to your methodology or supporting documentation. It is helpful to provide a clear overview and summary of the changes made in response to reviewers' comments when you resubmit – this makes their review job much easier! (And may help speed things up....) Reviewers are asked to review resubmissions within 2 weeks of receiving them.

Amendments

You can make amendments to your application at anytime. Amendments will be sent to your original reviewers. For example, you can use the amendment function to change an aspect of your recruitment approach if you reflect on low sample sizes or need to change the dates for data collection. You should not implement any changes to your data gathering approach until this amendment has been approved. Reviewers are asked to review amendments within 2 weeks of receiving them.

The Ethical Approval Application

Pre-application Guidance

Before your start your ethics application read the reviewer guide which can be found here. Ethics reviewers use this guidance form to review your application so if you can address the majority of the points summarised on the form, it will help you put together a stronger ethics application.

Pre-application

You will need to conduct a Data Protection Impact Screening Questionnaire to ascertain whether a full Impact Assessment is necessary. This is a GDPR condition and relates to the type of personal data being collected. The screening questions are available on page 4 of this DPIA document: https://sheffieldhallam.sharepoint.com/:w:/r/sites/3037/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc=%7BC02F2D77-165C-41B7-9315-761C4D1D3A7A%7D&file=DPIA-Template--v2c----June-29th-2022.docx&action=default&mobileredirect=true

If a DPIA is needed this will be processed by the Information Governance Team and can take 2-3 weeks.

Selecting a project type

Select 'All other research with human participants' as you are exploring your workplace context (insider research).

Title/naming

Include the project title and project type in the title of your application. For example: '*College funded R&E Project: Exploring the experiences of commuter students on the BA Fine Art course*.' This ensures that appropriate ethical reviewers are allocated and enables effective monitoring of project progress.

Project team

Include all members of the project team, including your student researchers.

Overview of the study/background and rationale

You will have researched the background to your study in your proposal for funding. This can be copied from the project proposal document (preferred) or uploaded as an attachment. This section should make a compelling rationale for why your study is necessary.

Research Questions

Include 1-3 overarching research questions which outline what your project as a whole will attempt to answer. These are not the questions in your survey or interviews.

Summary of methods and analysis

Provide as much detail as possible concerning what you have designed and how data will be collected. This should include who you are researching and how large the population is, the number of times your will engage with them (e.g. number of focus groups), any digital platforms which will be used to collect the data (e.g. Zoom) and who will be conducting the data collection and analysis. You can re-use this summary to help draft your information sheet.

Defining vulnerability

The definition of vulnerability used in this process is: 'Vulnerable' people include children and young people, people with learning disabilities, people who may be limited by age, or sickness or disability, etc. In most cases, you can select 'no'; for this response.

Nature of the data, details of anonymisation, storage and disposal procedures

Outline the type of data you will collect (quantitative/qualitative), the form this will take and why this is the most appropriate data to collect. Outline your use of Q drive for data storage and refer to Hallam's data storage policy. Also consider the storage functions of online platforms and avoid cloud based storage or storage which is not within the UK. Guidance is available (Using Zoom for Research)

Include reference to the Data Protection Screening Questions here.

Outline how the data will be anonymised – either at the point of data collection (e.g. anonymous survey) or at the point of analysis (e.g. interview transcript), or whether pseudonyms will be used in reporting. Good practice includes:

- Information sheets should clearly outline when anonymity is assured and the boundaries or confidentiality
- Small samples (<10) should not be disaggregated, and review the use of illustrative quotes
- Apply pseudonymisation (GDPR) - process personal data so the data is no longer attributed to the data subject without additional information.
- Keep data and 'additional information' separate
- Use of secure computer networks (Q drive)
- Ensure that data is stored on secure premises
- Use password protection and data encryption
- Avoid portable data storage devices, such as laptops and USB sticks
- Use of VPN when accessing data away form the university
- Use secure electronic transfer when moving data e.g. Zendto
- Ensure that any third-party users of the data agree to a data-sharing agreement
- Avoid sharing data via email and other media that are vulnerable to hacking

Recruiting, selecting/sampling and briefing potential participants

Describe in detail how you will recruit your participants. This is a particular ethical consideration for insider research and you should ensure there is no coercion. If you are using incentives, disclose this here and discuss any impact and mitigation on bias in the data. You will need to carefully balance payment in recognition of their time (a thank you) whilst avoiding payment which might coerce particpation. As a general rule, the value of any incentives should not exceed £20 for any day of involvement. More guidance can be found here: https://www.shu.ac.uk/-/media/home/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice/research-incentives-2020.pdf

Discuss the information which you have included in your information sheet and how your participants will access this information.

Indicate the activities participants will be involved in.

State the number and scope of activities including a timeline, where possible.

What is the potential for participants to benefit from participation in the research?

Outline the benefits for participants, which may not be immediate. This includes what they might learn from their participation, or a chance to reflect/discuss their experiences Some students tell us that they are motivated by the opportunity to positively impact on the experience of other students.

Describe any possible negative consequences of participation in the research along with the ways in which these consequences will be limited

Quite often, we assume there are no negative consequences of our work. It is not appropriate to assume there are none. Speak to your student researchers about this. For example, does the topic area have a potential to cause upset in participants? Think about how you might mitigate any negative consequences.

Consent

Consent should be **informed,** i.e participants should understand fully what they are consenting to. Consider if there are any risks of coercion / conflict of interest when working with staff or student samples. Good practice would include:

- Enabling an 'opt in' rather than 'opt out' consent process to address power imbalances
- Information sheets which clearly outline what the participant is consenting to
- Consent should be recorded
- Information sheets must be GDPR compliant (See templates)
- Seek ongoing consent (e.g. longitudinal)
- Acknowledge power issues and mitigate

Withdrawal

Consider that withdrawal is not always possible if the data collection is anonymous and it can often be difficult, especially when using innovative methodologies. Good practice would include:

- If you offer withdrawal, you must also outline the process for withdrawal
- Researchers should recognise the right of all participants to withdraw from the research without needing to give a reason, and at any time, and participants should be informed of this right

- Project leads should always provide their own contact details to enable participant withdrawal
- 1-2 weeks from the data collection session is a recommended withdrawal timescale

Debriefing

After gathering data, participants should be provided with information about who to contact if they have concerns about the research or what they have discussed. This should be provided in an information sheet which they are able to keep. This also applies to survey completion.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is not the same as anonymity. Information sheets should clearly outline when anonymity is assured and the boundaries or confidentiality, including if any information would ever be disclosed if there is a perceived threat of harm.

Conflict of Interest

Recognise any power imbalances for insider research in this section and how you will mitigate these.

Expected outcomes, impacts and benefits of the research

It is assumed that there will be an institutional benefit from conducting this funded project. Outline this here, in the short to long term.

Plans for dissemination of the results of the research.

The priority for reporting is to the funder and the institution and to take steps to disseminate your findings within the institution. Additional plans for external dissemination and publication can also be included here.

Heath and Safety

Refer to Hallam Health and Safety policy for this section. Relevant policies, including lone working, are available here: https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity/guidance

Attachments

You will need to include the following as attachments in your application. Incomplete information sheets is one of the most common reasons for unsuccessful applications. GPDR compliance is also based on this information. Templates can be found here and you are encouraged to use them as the basis of your documents: https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity/guidance

- Participant Information Sheet
- Consent Form
- Survey Brief/Debrief
- Indicative questions
- Data management Plan
- Data Protection
- Risk Assessments (if applicable)
- Poster/Adverts etc.
- Letters/Emails of collaboration if collaborating with external stakeholders

Things you ***can do*** before obtaining ethical approval

- Review published literature (subject and methodology)
- Explore whether the research has been done before (at Hallam)
- Design the methodology/intervention

- Assess risk (insider research)
- Secure a research team
- Request Q drive for data storage
- Request access to any software needed, e.g Qualtircs, Nvivo etc.
- Complete data management plans, risk assessments, participant information sheets
- Design survey or other data collection tools

Thingsyou ***shouldn't do*** before obtaining ethical approval

- Approach or recruit participants
- Secure times for data collection
- Create/print resources
- Apply for conferences
- Collect pilot data

Good luck with your projects!
