

Guidelines for ethical practice and research integrity

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Executive Summary

Framework for ethical excellence

Institutions/providers must have a framework in place for promoting and overseeing ethical practice and research integrity. This will likely involve ethics committees whose role is to develop and oversee policies and procedures that promote ethical practice and integrity and uphold staff and student adherence to them. This framework should be regularly reviewed in order to incorporate, for example, developments in understandings of what constitutes ethical practice and integrity, new legislation, professional standards and codes, and technology both as it is used within various aspects of the research process and also with regard to monitoring research integrity.

Institutions/providers must ensure comprehensive ethics and integrity education and training for staff and students. They must also require that research design involves ethical decisions, the responsible recruitment of participants, data collection, interpretation and analysis, re-presenting research, and data dissemination. Institutions/providers should also prescribe that research relationships are ethical.

Ethics and integrity education and training for staff and students

Institutions/providers must have their own mandatory in-house provision and requirements for ethics and integrity education and training for staff. Curricula of programmes at all levels and in all disciplines should contain compulsory modules in ethics and integrity which provide clear information about: ethics and integrity policies; data protection legislation; instructions about how to obtain ethical clearance; what constitutes academic misconduct; and how to use plagiarism software. Attention should also be given to philosophical and moral questions and issues relating to ethics and integrity. The importance of reflective, **reflexive interrogation of researchers' positionality and how this can affect their research decisions and practices** should be emphasized.

Research design

The design of any research study involves ethical decisions. Those applying for ethical clearance need to make clear how they have addressed the ethical issues their study raises and make robust justification for seeking clearance and permission to proceed.

Recruitment of, and access, to participants

As far as is possible participants should make their own decisions about whether to take part in a study. There should be no pressure to participate.

Procedures of data collection

On the whole, researchers should not ask participants to do anything that they would not wish to do themselves.

Research relationships

Researchers should not manipulate relationships to obtain data.

Interpretation and analysis

Researchers should acknowledge the importance of their own beliefs and values in the interpretation and analysis of research findings.

Re-presenting Research

Researchers should acknowledge the ethical implications of using any particular form of re-presentation. They should ensure that participants are respectfully re-presented. Permission needs to be sought for use of visual (photographic, video, etc.) representations which enables the identification of individuals, whether or not they are participants who have given their consent or people who just happened to be in the frame.

Data dissemination

Participants should be made aware of how data will be disseminated.

Introduction

These guidelines have been developed following wide-ranging review and consideration of the ethics and research integrity policies, practices and requirements of various institutions and organisations, disciplinary and professional bodies, learned societies, and international codes¹, as well as relevant literature². The aim is to support institutions, licensed by the MFHEA, which involve students conducting research, to meet Malta's **Quality Assurance standards**. It is recognised that other jurisdictions may have different notions of, and requirements for, ethical research practice, however research undertaken in Malta is to meet national specifications.

For the purposes of these guidelines the definition of 'research' used by the UK Research Excellence Framework (https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1447/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf) – that is '*a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared*' - has been adopted. This broad definition is seen as being applicable to research of all kinds and at all levels of study. Thus, an undergraduate student engaging in a small-scale study is involved in a process of inquiry which can lead them, and maybe others, to new insights which they then need to effectively communicate. The scope of their work may be much narrower than that of a doctoral student, but the essential characteristics are the same and issues of ethics and integrity also pertain.

High quality research is ethical research regardless of discipline, methodology or methods used, or forms of re-presentation and dissemination adopted. Thus, high quality research is both morally and technically good. It is research which is underpinned by the commitment to do all that can be done to ensure that no harm of any kind, be that, *inter alia*, physical, emotional, mental, financial, or reputational, comes to participants, via their active involvement, through the use of their personal data, their physical tissue, or by making identifiable reference to them, to the communities they belong to, or to the researcher/s. Research which is deemed to necessarily and unavoidably involve animals must treat them humanely and with respect, and should seek to minimise suffering and distress.

In addition to protecting human and animal participants, high quality research can be seen to reflect high standards of '**scientific**' and '**professional integrity**' that allow trust and confidence in how it was conducted, in terms of methods, methodologies, and theoretical framing, and in the consequent findings and interpretations that are reported. Ethical practice and research integrity demand:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• excellence; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• education and training for researchers; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• honesty about all aspects of the research process; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• rigour in terms of methodology, methods and reporting; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• transparency and open communication in all aspects of the research process; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• co-operation between all parties involved; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• care and respect for the well-being of participants and all implicated or touched in any way by the research; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• accountability to all in any way involved; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• procedures to review and monitor good practice; |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• procedures to deal with suspected breaches of research ethics and integrity; and |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• procedures and sanctions to deal with proven misconduct. |

These guidelines address the above by considering key issues and questions of ethics and integrity that arise throughout the various stages of the research process. It is important to note here that MFHEA's stance is that ethical concerns pervade every aspect of the process, from first thoughts and ideas about a study, through to writing up, and dissemination. Ethics and integrity are not 'add ons' or supplementary: they are inherent components of the research process. Unfortunately, the requirement to obtain ethical clearance to proceed with a research project that involves human or animal participants can lead to a view that it is possible to get ethics 'done' early on, in much the same way as putting work through plagiarism detection programmes before submission might be erroneously seen as all that is necessary to deal with integrity. These are, however, areas and concerns which should be subjected to continuous ongoing scrutiny, review and reflection and they should be addressed in policies and procedures.

They will be considered under the following headings:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framework for ethical excellence |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation for research – education and training for staff and students |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research design |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment of and access to participants |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedures of data collection |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research relationships |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation and analysis |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-presenting research |

NB Whilst some of the headings relate specifically to research involving living participants, not all of them do. Although institutions/organisations have often exempted required documentary, text-based studies, and work which do not actively involve other participants, their data or tissues, to go through formal ethical clearance procedures, ethics and integrity issues and concerns can still apply. For instance, autoethnographic studies, which focus on the perceptions and experiences of the researcher always implicate other people who can usually be identified through their relationship to the writer (see Sikes, 2017). Our recommendation is that autoethnographic work should also go through ethical review. Indeed, we suggest that it is advisable to consider the ethical implications of any research study in order to determine whether review is advisable.

Framework for ethical excellence

Institutions should have a framework in place for promoting and overseeing ethical practice and research integrity. This will likely involve an ethics committee whose membership will include staff and potentially, lay representatives, having research ethics and integrity related interests and expertise that cover the disciplines and the range of methodological approaches and methods. The role of the committee is to devise policies and procedures that promote ethical practice and integrity, and to uphold staff and student adherence to them. This will involve providing guidance, education, training and resources that are up to date and which meet the requirements of external developments, policies and regulations (e.g. GDPR). Ethics committees should have systems, and written, recorded and public standard procedures in place for addressing alleged instances of misconduct, hearing appeals and, where misconduct is found to have occurred, they should recommend sanctions. Ethics committees may delegate review of applications for ethical clearance to departments/schools (which can speed up the process), although some may take on this responsibility themselves. It should be noted that there may need to be separate specialised ethics committees for the review of bio-medical research and research involving animals.

Preparation for research – education and training for staff and students

Lecturers and supervisors working with students undertaking research should be up to date with regard to what constitutes ethical practice which has integrity. Institutions should have their own mandatory in-house provision and requirements for ethics and integrity education and training for staff. Institutions should provide details about their practice in this area and give information about how they ensure that their staff have been trained in research ethics and integrity.

Curricula of programmes at all levels and in all disciplines should contain compulsory courses in ethics and integrity which give clear information about ethics and integrity policies, data protection legislation, instructions about how to obtain ethical clearance, and information about how to use plagiarism software. Attention to plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct (e.g. self-plagiarism, collusion, fabrication of data, purchasing work) is necessary for all courses, not just those which involve research. The research ethics and integrity curriculum should also include consideration of philosophical and moral questions and issues. At the least, students should be introduced to the notion that no research is value free but is, rather, located in social, cultural and personal systems of (ontological, epistemological and axiological) beliefs and values which need to be justified because these influence choices about how studies are designed, conducted, reported etc. This may involve an introduction to histories of research ethics (with examples of what has come to be seen as unethical work) as well as opportunities for students to reflect on how they have personally come to hold/take particular positions, beliefs and values. As well as looking at the past, students should also be made cognisant of how technological and social developments raise new issues and areas for concern. For instance, some researchers are interested in exploring social media and virtual networks where it is possible to hide identities and intentions. This clearly raises important questions of ethics and integrity. Similarly it is essential to be aware that notions and practices around research ethics and integrity have often been based on Western, Eurocentric thinking (see Tuhawai Smith, 2021). Providers should submit course outlines of their ethics and integrity curricula.

Research design

Where courses permit students to design their own research project, the following areas (adapted from Sikes, 2004 and the UKRIO Checklist) are pertinent and are appropriate headings to be addressed on ethical clearance or permissions forms:

- What exactly is the research wanting to find out and why is this the focus? Can this interest be justified? (These days some studies are likely to be regarded as inadmissible, e.g. research which seeks to 'prove' the superiority of those deemed to belong to certain social groups or who possess particular characteristics.)
- Research topics which are in any way 'sensitive' (Dickson Swift *et al* 2007, 2008: Renzetti & Lee, 1993) demand careful thought and planning and may best be left to experienced researchers.
- Does the research address questions that are timely and of general concern rather than being solely of personal or vested interest?
- How does the research contribute to existing knowledge or develop methods and methodologies for studying this area?
- Have potential risks of all kinds to participants and the researcher been accounted for, assessed, addressed, and explained clearly to participants?
- If it is intended to do anything that is in any way 'experimental', what are the implications for participants? If a 'control group' is used, will people assigned to it miss out on anything that is suspected to be beneficial? Can this be justified?
- Insofar as is possible, have potential unintended or unexpected consequences either to the people directly involved in the research, or as a result of what is revealed, been accounted for?
- If the research is in any way covert, can this be justified?
- How are participants characterised and described? Is this respectful?
- Does the proposed study comply with all relevant legal and ethical requirements?
- Is the information provided for potential participants, or their proxies, or their guardians/caregivers presented in an appropriate and easily understood format? (Where the institution has *Information For Participant* templates, they may need to be adapted to make them accessible to specific audiences. For example, in many instances children should not be given the same information forms as adults and, in some cases, it may be necessary to ensure the level of literacy required to make sense of what is involved is appropriate.)
- For various reasons, including some which relate to participant safety, it is not always possible to record consent on forms which require signatures. In these cases, how will consent be recorded?
- If circumstances change in the course of a study and affect the nature of participation, researchers should be required to record this, suspend the study and, if changes are deemed sufficiently substantial and/or significant, an additional ethical review made.

Recruitment of, and access, to participants

Empirical research requires the recruitment of participants who, as far as is possible, agree to take part freely, and without coercion of any kind. Ethical clearance applications need to detail the following:

- How are research participants to be recruited and accessed? If research participants lack social power (e.g. children, captive populations, a **teacher's** own students, '**vulnerable**' people, those deemed not to have capacity to consent, animals) can their participation be justified?
- How can it be ascertained that '**gatekeepers**' (e.g. **parents, guardians, employers, senior colleagues**) have fully consulted participants who are able both to understand and give permission, have not applied undue pressure, and are acting in the best interests of the potential participants?
- As far as is possible (acknowledging that emergent methods that develop and evolve during the course of a study, and biomedical research requiring ethically secure randomised trials can be exceptions) full information about what participation involves should be provided to participants or proxies prior to agreement to take part. This will include: honesty about how far confidentiality and anonymity can be maintained; assurance that people can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty; a data management plan detailing how data will be treated and stored and for how long it will be kept AND what use will be made of data and where, to whom and how it will be disseminated; the measures that are in place to deal with any problems (such as emotional distress, or disclosure of abuse) that may arise; and, clarity on who to contact and how, if there is concern about the conduct of the research.

Procedures of data collection

Although it is not always appropriate, because people hold a range of beliefs and values, it can be useful when thinking about whether data collection procedures are ethical, to ask how the researcher would feel if they, or those close to them, were the participants. Thus, researchers should consider carefully if they are asking people questions they would not want to be asked or to do things they would not want to do. Remember too that one of the most precious resources we have is time and, therefore, it is disrespectful to waste other people's.

Research Relationships

- Researchers have a basic human moral responsibility towards the people they are working with. They must be sure that they are doing as they would be done by.

Relationships are at the heart of ethical practice and integrity. Unethical behaviour and misconduct result in harm. It is important to remember that, in the case of research involving human participants, and especially perhaps in **social science research where people know they are being 'observed', and/or are asked for their views**, they will make their own interpretations of what is going on and what the researcher **'wants to know'**. **They may or may not be right**, but there are implications for the data that is obtained. Participants differ in the degree to which they want to engage in a research project. Some are happy just to be interviewed or answer a questionnaire, others would like more involvement and feedback. It is ethical practice to provide as much information and involvement as people want – and if this does not stretch to them providing respondent validation/member checking of analysis and interpretations, no pressure should be applied.

Rape research

Patti Lather coined the term **'rape research' (1986)** to refer to what was the traditional approach to (social science) research whereby the researcher went into the research setting, got what they wanted, and then left without giving anything in return. This is disrespectful given that the greatest benefit of a study – and particularly when it will result in a qualification – is likely to be for the researcher. At the least, due gratitude should be expressed. Therefore the researcher should:

- Avoid manipulating, i.e. using, **people and relationships in order to get 'good' data**.
- Be alert to the implications of any differences in terms of social power between researcher and **'researched'**.

Although it has often been assumed that the balance of power between researcher and **'researched'** is always in favour of the researcher, that is not always the case. Sometimes it is though, and in some settings simply being a university student – at whatever level – carries authority and power which participants may feel they have to defer to. When, for whatever reason, researchers do possess greater social power, they need to be mindful of their ethical responsibility not to exploit people. They should also remember that it is the participant who holds the information researchers want, and that those participants who feel that they **have been 'used' or badly treated may well 'lie'**.

Those claiming to be engaged in emancipatory or empowering research should think carefully about how this positions them vis a vis their informants – and should heed **Barry Troyna's (1994)** warning that such claims are frequently grandiose and at best naive.

Interpretation & Analysis

Researchers are social beings, and all research is grounded in the beliefs and values they hold at any time as a consequence of their biographies. This raises ethical considerations. Choosing to work within the positivist paradigm and holding to tenets of objectivity is a choice that it should not be assumed does not need justification. **Whilst reflexivity and reflectivity and declaring one's positionality is more common practice for researchers using qualitative and interpretative approaches**, natural and physical scientists and those using quantitative approaches should also consider, make explicit, and acknowledge any theoretical frameworks and value systems that underlie their research design and which influence their interpretations and analysis. To fail to do this would not only result in poor research but would also be unethical.

Re-presenting research

- Writing style: the ways in which research is re-presented are not neutral. The most common form of re-presentation is writing. There are various types or styles of research and academic writing, and traditionally, and specifically in relation to writing submitted for assessment, students are usually expected to conform to specified formats, in terms of such things as tone, language, discourse, layout, organisation, and citation conventions. These last are especially important when it comes to avoiding allegations of academic misconduct. Particular forms of writing carry meanings that go far beyond the actual words and phrases that are used. For example, adopting a traditional positivist objective style distances the writer from what they are saying with the aim of conveying objectivity and hence, authority. This sort of style is often necessary for success but it is important for writers to be aware of the implications of such distancing, to 'own' their own work, and to acknowledge responsibility for ensuring that their writing is morally and ethically 'good'. In disciplines where it is possible for them to write in the first person and use 'I', they should: declare their positionality; respectfully and honestly re-present the situations, people and experiences they write about; provide sound evidence for any claims they make; and give accurate references for all sources they include, quote or cite. They also need to show consideration for their readers by making sure that their writing is of 'good' quality with regard to technical issues such as clarity, coherence, fluency, grammar, etc.
- Re-presentation of participants: in small scale research where authors' names are attached to accounts, particularly of qualitative studies, it can be difficult and sometimes impossible to maintain total anonymity. In some cases, this does not matter as participants are willing to be identified. If this is the case, then it could be deemed to be unethical (and patronising) if researchers take the view that they know better and participants should be unidentifiable. What is important is that participants are not misled by declarations - in *Information to Participant* documents for instance - that they will be anonymous.
- Use of photographs: there are issues around using photographs which contain images of people who have not expressly given permission for their image to be captured and used in a document. Steps need to be taken to make sure that this does not happen.
- Using posts and quotations from social media or virtual online communities when the people who made them are unaware that their words are being used in research: it is often argued that taking part in publicly available discourse means that this is not an issue. However, much depends on what the topic being discussed is, regardless of whether or not people are identifiable. Careful thought and robust justification is essential in this area.

Data dissemination

- Are participants sufficiently protected when it comes to data dissemination?

Participants need to be fully appraised of how data will be used and disseminated. If work is only going to be submitted for assessment they should know this, but if there is any further dissemination or publication (as may be the case with doctoral work) they should be made aware of that possibility.

Research integrity and academic misconduct

Academic misconduct is a blanket term which relates to a range of unethical practices which compromise the integrity of academic writing and research and, thereby, harm the academic community as a whole. Plagiarism, self-plagiarism, collusion, fabrication of research data, theft of people's ideas and in some cases, of documents, purchasing of work done by others and submitted under the purchaser's name, and academics putting their name on work done by their students or juniors, are examples of misconduct. Institutions should have policies and procedures to detect, investigate and impose sanctions on proven instances of such misconduct. Staff and students must receive education and training as to what constitutes misconduct, how to avoid it, and what the consequences are.

To conclude: Avoiding Harm/Doing Wrong

Ethical researchers act with integrity and do all that they can to think through eventualities and possibilities and feel confident that insofar as they are able, they have taken all possible precautions to avoid harming and doing wrong to anyone touched by their research. In most cases it can be useful to apply the test of 'how would I feel if I or mine were the research participant/s? Would I be happy to be involved? Did I have sufficient information to make an informed decision to take part? Have I been treated with respect?' and so on. With regard to research integrity, good research and good researchers is/are honest and transparent: they do not cheat, and they acknowledge when they have taken from other people's work.

Notes

1. These include: L-Universita ta' Malta; IAU-MCO (https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:rAgCkuRzKtQJ:https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/ethics_guidelines_finaldef_08.02.13.pdf+&cd=2&hl=fr&ct=clnk&gl=fr); The University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee; European Commission Ethics for Researchers (2013); UK National Health Service Ethics Committees (<https://www.hra.nhs.uk/about-us/committees-and-services/res-and-recs/>); United Kingdom Research Integrity Office *Code of Practice for Research* (2009 and 2021) (<https://ukrio.org/publications/code-of-practice-for-research/1-0-introduction/>); United Kingdom Research Integrity Office *Recommended Checklist for Researchers* (2009 and 2021) (<https://ukrio.org/wp-content/uploads/UKRIO-Recommended-Checklist-for-Researchers.pdf>); Canada's Tri Council Policy Statement *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (2018); British Educational Research Association *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* 4th Edition, 2018 (<https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online>); General Data Protection Regulation EU 2016/679 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679&from=EN>); UKRI Medical Research Council (2022) (<https://www.ukri.org/councils/mrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-involving-animals/>)

2. There is a vast and ever-growing literature dealing with research ethics. Some texts are general, others deal with specific methodologies, methods, disciplines, professional areas, theoretical positions, lifestyle positions, and so on. It is strongly recommended that lecturers and students do their own searches for works which relate to their particular concerns and fields of study. As well as referencing works cited herein we offer the following as indicative:

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