Workshop - IR and research ethics: are we behaving ethically?

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HEIR 2017, Robert Gordon University

Thursday 14th September 2017

Overview of the workshop

The plan for this morning's workshop is as follows…

- Introductions
- Concepts and ideas + discussion (15 mins)
- Group discussion + feedback (20 mins)
- Key issues and summing up (10 mins)

Your backgrounds, and your experiences will help to enrich our discussions

Why run a workshop on research ethics?

….researchers are almost universally critical of the workings of […] RECs, describing them as overly bureaucratic, burdensome, inconsistent, adversarial, and being more concerned with protecting the University from legal disputes rather than the research participants.

Regan *et al*. 2012

Some key issues…..

- Uncertainty about the *need for ethical approval* for IR studies
- Lack of clarity about what constitutes *'research'*
- Increasing need for *good ethical practice* in research & data collection
- *External publication* – opportunities and threats
- Compliance with *data protection + data management* policies
- *Reputation and profile building* + the REF and the TEF

What is research?

- 'Academic' research: Frascati, REF definitions – core elements:
  - Basic (open-ended) or Applied (focused on a problem or issue)
  - Accessible – published and open to challenge and verification
  - Generalisability – seeks applicability in other contexts
  - Original investigation – advancing existing body of knowledge
  - Systematic inquiry – robust, valid, reliable design
- Other research-based activities use similar methodologies (e.g. some SoTL, market research, evaluations, audits, **IR?**) often:
  - 'Quick and dirty'
  - Produce unpublished reports to stakeholders
  - Descriptive - rather than analytical and situated in relevant literature

What does being ethical involve?

Ethics: concerns complex issues and questions concerning right and wrong related to how we live as individuals, and in society – multiple approaches:

- Deontological (duty – basis of many codes of practice)
- Utilitarianism (greatest good for the greatest number)
- Moral universalism (moral objectivism or universal morality)
- Consequentialism (outcomes for individuals, groups, society)
- Situational ethics (relative to the context of a research project)
- Virtue ethics (focused on habits or character of the researcher)

Core dimension is **integrity**

Relativity applies to physics, not ethics
Albert Einstein

A man without ethics is a wild beast loosed upon this world
Albert Camus

Ethical research

- Ensures research integrity

  "…there is an ethical obligation to design research that may contribute to **knowledge development**, that has a sound **methodological basis** and that will be conducted by a researcher who possesses the **knowledge, skills and ability** to carry it out" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p.332)

- Protects participants, researchers, and stakeholders throughout the research lifecycle, and considers:
  - Informed consent and the absence of coercion
  - Privacy – anonymity and confidentiality
  - 'Beneficence' – maximising benefits and minimising potential physical or psychological harm
  - Risks for career and reputational damage

Character is doing the right thing when nobody's looking. There are too many people who think that the only thing that's right is to get by, and the only thing that's wrong is to get caught

J. C. Watts

Ethics policies and procedures

- Involve both compliance and individual responsibility
- Relate to broader institutional ethics policies
- Data protection policies & data management guidelines
- Research ethical approval processes - usually have a developmental dimension (research capacity)
  - Variable practice across institutions in terms of inclusion (data collection, audit?) and focus (methodological rigour, benefit?)
  - All research-based projects should follow good practice in research design, data collection and data management
  - Guidance from Research Funding Councils, Professional Bodies (inc. AIR in the USA)

Does my IR project need approval?

Divergent practice, but some key questions to ask yourself:

- Am I interacting with human subjects or their personal data?
- Am I collecting or using anonymous data? If not….
  - Does my use of personal data comply with my institution's data protection policy?
  - Am I planning to use sensitive personal data?
  - Will the analysis lead to targeted interventions?
- Do I intend to publish my findings?
- Could my project be considered to be an audit or a routine service evaluation (e.g. curriculum improvement, MEQs)?

Typology of ethical approval approaches

- **Inclusive**: all projects involving human subjects and their personal data requires ethical approval
- **Narrow**: only projects classified as 'research' require ethical approval
- **Stratified**: different ethical approval approaches for different types of projects: research, evaluation, data collection, surveys
- **Risk-based**: different approaches for levels of risk – ranging from self-certification, fast track to full committee approval

Cost-benefit issues: bureaucracy, time, resources, risk, etc.

Activity: Challenges & Opportunities

In ***pairs or small groups***, could you take **15 minutes** to discuss the following questions

a) What **challenges** do you face in relation to ethics and data protection in your role/institution?

b) Are you aware of any **good or innovative practice** in relation to these issues, either in your institution or elsewhere?

c) What **opportunities** open themselves to institutional researchers through engaging with good research practice, research ethics and data protection issues?

Please capture your thoughts and ideas and agree on someone to **report back** to the whole group

Data protection & Data management

- UK Data Protection Act (1998) superseded by the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in May 2018 – tightens approaches to consent, storage of data, subject access & control
- Onus on institutions as data holders (of personal, sensitive data) – anonymous data is exempt
- Reasonable use of data – contractually necessary, or in the "legitimate interests" of the organisation
- Student contracts – is consent explicit or implicit regarding the use of personal data for IR? Can IR projects be justified?
- Learner analytics at an early stage – still unclear about the data protection and consent issues

JISC guidance: data protection policies should include requirement for explicit consent when using sensitive data and targeted interventions based on learner analytics

Anonymity & use of individual data

- Anonymous data – no personal information collected
- Anonymised data - measured by a “likely reasonably” test based on risk of identifiability (direct or indirect) (e.g. pseudoymisation, aggregation, link-coded data)
- Only completely un-identifiable data is outside DPA & GDRP can be used for research without ethical approval
- DPA and GDPR contain exemptions for use and retention of personal data *when processed for research purposes* – but this requires ethical approval before the research begins (including seeking consent) – i.e. no dredging of data sets
- If a project is clearly IR vs. ‘academic research’, and is related to operational decision-making, then contractual necessity and legitimate interests are the key issues.

Publishing your findings

- Valuable or unexpected findings? Of wider interest?
- Journals usually require evidence of ethical approval if any potential link to personal data (inc. anonymised data)
- Ethical approval must be received before research commences (and can't be provided retrospectively)
- Turning evaluation projects into research requires:
  - Ethical approval before the research phase begins
  - Seeking consent from participants for re-use of non-anonymised personal data
- Following guidelines on research ethics and research practice will enhance 'publish-ability'

Research Excellence Framework (REF)

- Uo25 (Education) very inclusive – in terms of types of research and publication types (includes scholarship)
- REF review of UoA – encourage more IR, evaluation research and pedagogical research (PedRes)
- Includes applied research, action research, & policy-research
- Need to meet the challenge of demonstrating quality and wider impact (beyond localised practice):
  - Ethical approval
  - Internal peer review
  - Generalisability - methodological rigour, comparative research

Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

- Educational research and IR projects are increasingly used as evidence for the TEF regarding 'teaching excellence'
- IR projects using rigorous methodologies and which follow ethical research practice have greater legitimacy
- Including IR projects in ethical approval process provides a means of:
  - Protecting research participants and stakeholders
  - Ensuring consideration of ethical guideline and data protection and data management policies
  - Quality enhancement in research design
  - Opportunities to log and monitor TEF'able IR projects

Some final thoughts

- Collecting or using data for research on identifiable human subjects *always* requires ethical approval
- Without ethical approval, IR won't be publishable and therefore won't be REF'able – *it's better to be safe than sorry!*
- Use of sensitive data, and interventions based on learner analytics requires informed, explicit, consent
- Defining IR projects as 'research' provides some flexibility in the use and storage of data
- Following good - and ethical practice - in research and the use of data enhances the reputation of IR (e.g. use in the TEF)
- Ethical approval processes must be fit for purpose

Useful sources of information

1. Howard et al. (2012). *The Handbook of Institutional Research.* Wiley. (Chapter 19).
2. AIR Code of Ethics and Professional Practice
3. BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research
4. ESRC Framework for Research Ethics
5. Data Protection under the new GDPR (Exeter University)
6. Anonymization and data protection (LSE)
7. Consent for learning analytics: some practical guidance for institutions (JISC – Niall Sclater)
8. Extreme learning analytics and student consent (Niall Sclater)

Contact details

Thank you very much for your engagement!

For further information please do contact us...

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