

## Ethical Guidance for Undertaking Research with Edge Hill University Students

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### Introduction

In some research situations, the use of university students is a requirement of, and therefore integral to, the research question. In curriculum research, research into teaching methods in higher education, and indeed in many other areas within higher education, the participation of university students has become widespread. Student participation in classroom research activities, as well as in broader research (both of which are designed for instructional or educational purposes and primarily benefit lecturers and students) is encouraged. This allows students to experience research activities from the perspective of the research subject.

The teacher/lecturer-student relationship is a pre-existing one, but it is a relationship that may compromise the voluntary character of participants' decisions. Typically such a relationship involves unequal status, where one party has or has had a position of influence or authority over the other. Students, within a lecturer's class setting, for example, may volunteer to participate in the belief that doing so will place them in a (more) favourable situation with the lecturer undertaking the research activity, leading to better marks or good references. On the other hand, they may also believe that failure to participate will negatively affect their relationship with the lecturer/investigator. For example, they may believe that they will receive lower marks, less favourable references, be considered to be uncooperative, or may even be ridiculed for not participating.

This paper presents some suggestions and guidance that should be considered when presenting applications to the Departmental, Faculty or University Research Ethics Committees. It should be read in conjunction with the [Edge Hill University Code of Practice for the Conduct of Research \(RO-GOV-01\)](#) and the [Edge Hill University Framework for Research Ethics \(RO-GOV-03\)](#).

### Considerations for Good Practice

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- This guidance applies only to EHU staff wishing to work with EHU students.
  - The proposal should make explicit how the project will exhibit good practice when undertaking research with EHU students, and how it will conform to professional codes of conduct, Research Councils' guidance and Acts.
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- Students should be of age to give informed consent, typically 18 years of age within the United Kingdom. Research with EHU students that involves minors (under 18 years of age) as subjects may require signed parental (or legal guardian) consent, as well as the signed assent of the student if there is reason to doubt that the individual concerned meets the requirements for Gillick competency.<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the separate [Ethical Guidance for Undertaking Research with Children and Young People \(RO-GOV-10\)](#).
- The underlying principle of the regulations governing use of human subjects in research is that the subject's participation is voluntary, based upon appropriate accurate information and the possibility of seeking further information when required. Where appropriate, research proposals should outline specifically how those considerations will be addressed with regard to research involving EHU students.
- The student should be made aware of the fact that they may withdraw from the research process within a specified time without prejudice.
- A student declining to participate in, or deciding to withdraw from, research should not suffer any negative consequences, such as unfair discrimination, reduction in the level of care, or any other disadvantage either actual or perceived.
- People in the categories of relationship described in the **Introduction** to this guidance are vulnerable to being over-researched because of the relative ease of access to them as research populations. Researchers should take account of this vulnerability in deciding whether to seek out members of these populations as research participants.
- Researchers should take special care to safeguard confidentiality of all information they receive, particularly in shared workplaces.

## Suggestions

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- In pursuing research activities wherein students are your subjects, thoughtful development of a protocol that balances the competing interests of subject protection and valuable research may appear challenging, but it is achievable.
- Generally researchers may not access classroom performance evaluations in any form for the sole purpose of research, whether they be grades, formative or summative assessment tasks, without written permission from the student. Furthermore they may not access information for research purposes in a (current) student's records without prior written permission from the student.
- In the research design, researchers should identify and take steps to minimise potentially detrimental effects of:
  - an unequal or dependent relationship on the conduct of the research; and
  - the research on participants involved in the relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/research/questions/gillick\\_wda61289.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/research/questions/gillick_wda61289.html)

- It is important that when research activities undertaken by students are not part of the required class activities, students should not feel that relationships with their instructors, the level and quality of instruction received and their learning outcomes (including grades) are dependent on participation. Where students are involved in research and instructional activity with the same member of staff, consideration should be given as to whether it is appropriate or acceptable for:
  - knowledge of research participation to be made blind to that member of staff
  - the use of financial incentives with those students
- Solicitation of volunteer student subjects for research must be undertaken in a non-coercive manner.
- Data collection should not be scheduled in time allocated for teaching and instructional activity without justification.
- Where financial rewards are to be offered for participation in research, members of staff should consider whether the use of financial rewards will alter the character of the teacher–student relationship and whether steps could be taken to ensure the separation of teaching and learning activities from paid research participation.
- Altering a student’s grades for participation in research is not permitted.

## Conclusion

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In some research situations there may be a requirement for University students to undertake research that is overseen by lecturers with whom there is a power relationship. In such instances the researchers are expected to treat such participants as vulnerable. Like other research volunteers, students who become research participants must be allowed to withdraw from the study within a specified time from the beginning of the research process without any actual or perceived detriment. The informed consent statement should make clear the consequences of withdrawing from a project prior to completion. Finally, all data should be safeguarded.

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