

College of Humanities and Social Science

Research Ethics Framework, May 2008

The University's fundamental mission is the advancement and dissemination of knowledge and understanding.

This framework for the ethical conduct of research within the University's College of Humanities and Social Science is also guided by principles of dignity, respect and care for others, honesty, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, and leadership. Procedures for obtaining ethical approval can be found at the end of the framework.

The principles apply equally to staff and students in the College.

Dignity, respect and care for others, and honesty

These principles of conduct inform all the other principles set out below. Further, in a co-operative research environment, researchers are encouraged to develop their skills and to exchange research ideas and information openly.

In particular, where research involves the participation of individual human beings as the subjects of investigation, the procedures described below must be followed to ensure that its design, implementation and conclusion respects the dignity, health and safety of such participants, as well as taking full account of any ethical guidelines drawn up by relevant professional bodies. Participants in a study have the right to be informed about the aims and purposes of research (except in specific circumstances where disclosure would be prejudicial to the outcome of the research project), the likely publication of its findings, the context in which the findings will be reported and the potential consequences for individuals.

Informed consent should be sought where appropriate, and particular attention should be paid to any code of conduct governing the participation of children, vulnerable adults, the treatment of animals, or the use of human remains. Researchers should respect the cultural, religious, gender and other significant characteristics of sections of the population in planning, conducting and reporting research. Subjects of research are entitled to withdraw from participation at any time.

The storage, processing and disposal of information about individuals who are research subjects must meet legal requirements, including the individual's explicit written consent to the proposed holding and use of the data. Individuals' right to access and correct information held about them should also be explained. .

Integrity

The integrity of research results should always be ensured. In any publication, the author(s) must be able to identify their contribution to the publication, be familiar with the content, and accept personal responsibility for it. The contribution of others,

either as formal collaborators or less formally as supporters of the research, must be properly acknowledged.

Both academic fraud and plagiarism must be guarded against. Academic fraud strikes at the whole basis of academic activity and the quest for knowledge. It may involve fabricating or falsifying research results (such as making false claims in relation to experiments, interviews or surveys; the omission of statements relating to data, results or interviews; or claims which cannot be justified). Plagiarism – the unacknowledged use of another person's ideas, words or work – can arise deliberately as a serious form of cheating, or may occur accidentally through poor standards of scholarship.

Objectivity

Peer review is an important part of research activity. Those who agree to act as reviewers should declare any actual or potential conflicts of interest, should treat any information received in their capacity as reviewers as confidential, and should not take advantage of any information received in this way.

Disagreement on questions of interpretation or judgement must be kept within the bounds of civilised academic discourse.

Accountability

Under the Freedom of Information Acts information held by researchers may have to be released on request, unless an appropriate exemption can be applied. Full, clear and secure records of all stages of research work should be kept, so that data can be released if appropriate or a proper exemption sought. Records, whether stored electronically or as hard copy, should include accurate and contemporary details of primary experimental data and results, in order to provide unambiguous answers to any questions which may later arise regarding the validity of the data and to demonstrate good research practice.

Openness

External scrutiny of research, whether in its preparation, execution or publication, is an important benefit for researchers. Publication of the results of research is generally expected. Account must however be taken of relevant intellectual property rights and the confidentiality of any commissioned research carried out under contract.

Leadership

Those responsible for academic leadership should ensure a climate within which research can be conducted in accordance with the ethical considerations set out in this Code. The health and safety of researchers in conducting research should always be considered, including appropriate support mechanisms. Research should be appropriately supervised, and advice should be available on matters of research integrity and academic conduct. It is the responsibility of experienced staff to inculcate these principles in less experienced researchers and students.

Procedures

Ethical approval for all proposed research projects involving the participation of human subjects, whether carried out by academic staff or postgraduate and undergraduate students, should be sought at the School or (if more appropriate) sub-school level initially. Each School has its own Ethics group or sub-group, and occasionally ethics approval will be dealt with at subject unit level. School Ethics representatives or research administrators will provide briefing on individual School procedures, which are also explained on School websites.

Research work should not begin until clearance has been obtained. Research ethics checklists are available to assist in the identification of ethical issues and appropriate actions in response.

In some cases the School-level committee may seek the advice of an external lay representative. The College has appointed a lay representative to be available to Schools in such cases.

The College Research Ethics Committee is a sub-committee of the College Research Committee and meets annually to receive reports from Schools, to monitor research ethics procedures across the College, and to assist Schools with complex research ethics issues. The College lay representative is a member of this Committee, which is chaired by the Dean of Research.

Some research, particularly in Schools such as Health, will require ethical approval by external bodies such as NHS committees. In general, research in the College must comply with whatever is the most rigorous relevant ethical framework.

Colleagues may also find of comparative interest and value the following seven ethical principles proposed by the then Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government in September 2007:

- Act with skill and care, keep skills up to date
- Prevent corrupt practice and declare conflicts of interest
- Respect and acknowledge the work of other scientists
- Ensure that research is justified and lawful
- Minimise impacts on people, animals and the environment
- Discuss issues science raises for society
- Do not mislead; present evidence honestly

Research Study Information sheets given to participants in surveys, questionnaires, etc should also contain the University's charitable status strapline. See <http://www.cam.ed.ac.uk/documents/cam-charitable-status.pdf> for guidelines.