Ethics in primary research (focus groups, interviews and surveys)

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Equality Challenge Unit

Equality Challenge Unit's (ECU's) third research briefing aims to assist equality and diversity practitioners at higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education institutions in the UK to conduct equality and diversity research that is underpinned by ethical standards and considerations.

Contents

This briefing outlines some important principles, methods and guidelines that can help avoid or resolve ethical dilemmas that might occur when planning and conducting primary research through methods such as focus groups, interviews and surveys. Throughout, the document will refer to researchers as individuals who may collect monitoring or research data, without necessarily being employed in a researcher position. These may include equality and diversity practitioners, staff involved in self-assessment teams, research students, or researchers wanting to familiarise themselves with key principles of ethical research from an equality and diversity perspective.

This briefing is structured into three sections:

= Why research ethics?
= The core principles of social research ethics
= Research ethics in practice
    – research design
    – enabling participation
    – data collection
    – data storage
    – data analysis and reporting

Section one: why research ethics?

ECU programmes, such as ***Attracting and increasing student diversity***, encourage higher education institutions across the UK and colleges in Scotland to conduct equality and diversity research in order to develop inclusive approaches to better target underrepresented groups. Under the Equality Act 2010, HEIs and colleges can lawfully use positive action measures to support disadvantaged staff and students in recruitment, retention and progression. However, such measures need to be based on evidence that is underpinned by ethical social research.

Equality and diversity research, which is centred on the experiences and perceptions of human beings, requires particular ethical considerations to protect the dignity, rights and welfare of research participants. By ensuring that research adheres to ethical principles, you can:

= determine the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours
= assess risks and risk-mitigating measures
= prevent the fabrication or falsification of data
= encourage an environment of trust, accountability and mutual respect among researchers and research participants

= encourage participants to be honest and open when sharing their views or experiences (resulting in more reliable research data)
= promote public confidence in your research findings, and
= encourage support for your subsequent actions.

Section two: the core principles of social research ethics

Ethics should be considered from the initial stages of planning a research project and throughout its lifecycle, particularly if it includes primary research components, such as surveys, focus groups or interviews.

The core principles of social research ethics include, but are not limited to:

Social responsibility: At all times, researchers should be aware of their responsibility to the communities and societies in which they live and work, and strive to serve the public. Researchers should aim to maximise the benefits of the research and minimise the potential risk or harm to participants and researchers. All potential risk or harm should be mitigated by robust precautions, including, if applicable, signposting participants to resources or support around sensitive issues that may arise in the research process (see Iphofen 2016, p. 52–57 for a background discussion).

Where a participant discloses a crime or appears to represent a danger to themselves or others, institutional policies should be consulted and followed.

Independence: Independence of research should be maintained and any conflict of interest or partiality on behalf of the researchers, funding or commissioning body should be made explicit before and/or during a specific research project (see Carpenter 2017 for discussion about the impartiality of social researchers).

Informed consent and voluntary participation: Research participants should be given appropriate and accessible information about the purpose, methods and intended uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails, and what risks and benefits, if any, are involved. Participants should give consent free from coercion or undue pressure. They should be made aware of their right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wish, without fear of penalisation or victimisation. They should not have to give a reason for refusing to participate. Participants should also be made aware of where and for how long their data will be stored and how the data will be treated (for example, if they are going to be shared with third parties) (see Crow et al. 2006; Webster et al. 2014).

Anonymity and confidentiality: The identity of research participants should be protected at all times through anonymity or confidentiality, unless research participants explicitly agree to, or request the publication of their personal information. **Anonymity** means that there is no way to identify a person from the information provided (ensured, for example, by keeping personal details separate from survey responses, or by participants not sharing their names with researchers). **Confidentiality** means that while someone could conceivably be identified, only the researchers collecting or analysing the data have access to respondents' personal information, and this information is not shared in a way that would allow individuals to be identified to or by a third party. Any confidential personal information (such as names, job titles, employers, etc) should be securely stored, password protected and possibly encrypted (see Giordano et al. 2007 for more information).

Integrity and transparency: All stages of research design and data collection, cleaning, coding and analysis should be documented appropriately so the research process is transparent and there is an audit trail. This approach has the benefit of making it easy to differentiate between data that is being interpreted in self-interested ways by researchers, and data that is analysed with a transparent logic, therefore representing the best available evidence.

Conducting research in this way provides value to society and generates trusts in the public and private sectors, by enabling them to evaluate their practices and beliefs with respect to credible data and replicable logic.

The following section outlines some practical considerations of the ethical principles listed above that need to be taken into account at every stage of the research process, from research design, participant recruitment, and data collection, to data storage, analysis and reporting.

Section three: research ethics in practice
When conducting equality and diversity research, it may be necessary to balance research ethics with practical considerations throughout the research process. Decisions regarding ethics will depend on the research questions, the particularities of the research sites and participants, and the relationships between the researcher's own positionality (the recognition or declaration of one's own position) and the research process (reflexivity and the positionality of researchers in equality and diversity research will be addressed in a future ECU research and data briefing).

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to conducting ethical research. This section will suggest broad ethical guidelines for the main stages of the research process, which should be adapted to the research context as appropriate. In addition, anyone conducting research or collecting monitoring data should observe the ethical guidelines provided by their own institutions.

Research design:
Ethical considerations should be made from the onset of every project, and embedding them in the development of research design will likely increase the validity and rigour of the project, in addition to being responsible and fair to participants.

One of the first tasks when conducting equality research is **selecting a sample** of people to study, which poses the ethical question of who to include and who to exclude (for intersectional approaches to recruitment, please see **ECU's second research and data briefing** (2017). There always needs to be a clear rationale for involving a particular group of people in the research process, as well as reflection about who

is left out of a study, and how these decisions may impact the validity of the research findings. Reasons for exclusion might be due to a particular group being 'over-researched' (see Sukarieh and Tannock 2013) or being 'hard to reach' (see Flanagan and Hancock 2010). If exclusion based on such criteria is deemed to be necessary, care should be taken not to generalise any conclusions to groups that were not included in the research in the first place. Consideration should also be given to alternative research methods that may increase participation rates from under-represented groups (eg for participants with reduced access to technology, online surveys may be less attractive than face-to-face interviews or focus groups).

Selecting appropriate **research methods** may also raise ethical questions. Consideration needs to be given to how well the intended methods fit the aims of the research, their strengths and limitations, whether they are best suited to investigate the perceptions and experiences of particular respondent groups, and whether they may impede on respondents' capacity or willingness to participate. When writing discussion guides (questions) for interviews or focus groups, and when developing surveys, it is also important to ensure all the questions asked are necessary for the research and researchers are not collecting

data that will not be used, in line with the principle of social responsibility.

Any written materials that researchers provide (eg participant information sheets, consent forms, surveys) should be phrased clearly, free from technical jargon, preferably gender neutral, and worded in a culturally and socially sensitive way.

Enabling participation:
Equality and diversity researchers working in higher education often face the dilemma of how to recruit research participants, particularly when studying minority groups or sensitive subjects.

A commonly used recruitment strategy is **advertising** the research project on departmental/university notice boards, online platforms or through departmental/university email newsletters. This can be an effective way of recruiting participants who may have not previously engaged in this type of research. However, the impersonal nature of advertising can have the drawback of a low response rate. This is why advertising is often accompanied by a more targeted approach of **engaging community gatekeepers** in the recruitment process. In the higher education context, community gatekeepers could be members of specific staff networks,

student representatives, course leaders, HR managers, or administrators of an institution's or department's community groups on social media, such as Facebook or The Student Room.

Frequent participant recruitment strategies:
= Advertising on departmental/university notice boards, online platforms or in email newsletters
= Gatekeeper engagement (eg staff and student networks, student representatives, course leaders, HR managers, social media administrators)
= Snowball sampling

Such gatekeepers can facilitate the research process by providing access to research participants, helping identify less obvious ethical concerns and advocating support for the research project, thus promoting trust between researchers and participants. However, involving gatekeepers in recruitment and the research process can also raise ethical issues that require careful consideration. Researchers need to reflect on the interests and possible (conscious or unconscious) biases that gatekeepers may have with regard to the research topic. Moreover, gatekeepers can also create barriers to accessing research participants, or may provide repeated access to the same

(limited) groups of participants, which could result in potentially misleading conclusions regarding the generalisability of the data to other groups or perspectives. This could potentially invalidate the research findings and the effectiveness of any resulting actions. The same issue can also arise with **snowball sampling**, where a particular contact from a minority group is asked to recruit from their circle of acquaintances directly. While this approach might encourage new respondents to participate in the research with people they already know, and provide an additional level of engaging research participants in the research process itself, it may limit the diversity of people involved in the research.

The use of **incentives** to encourage participation should also be thoroughly considered. As a general rule, incentives should only be used if they are proportionate to the time involved, and do not pressure participants to consent or to take any risks. Sometimes, it might be worth considering offering a reward as a thank you prior to respondents' participation. This strategy shows appreciation for participants' time and contribution, but would not coerce them into participation. Reimbursements should also be considered, particularly when

participants require travel or child/dependent care, or their participation in the research results in a loss of income.

Data collection: providing an inclusive space
It is important to consider the specific needs of the intended research participants from the earliest possible stages of research planning. Inclusive practices can have budget implications, and early planning can ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to primary data collection. Inclusive practices may also influence the choice of research methods, the number of research participants, the location of focus groups or interviews, and approaches to participant recruitment.

Consideration should also be given to the **accessibility** of the research space and any adjustments required to facilitate participation in the research process, such as wheelchair access, a support person, British Sign Language or lip reading services, Braille or easy read versions of text, screen readers, interpreters, or any language support necessary (eg for speakers with low proficiency in the language in which the research is conducted). As each individual may have different needs, it is important to check

with each participant what additional support, if any, would enable them to fully participate in the research. Similarly, if offering refreshments, enquiries about dietary requirements need to be made beforehand.

Focus group or interview planning checklist:
= Does the facilitator or moderator have experience working with people from the target group?
= Are there barriers that may prevent or restrict engagement in any of the activities for participants with learning difficulties or physical impairments?
= Is it necessary to allow additional time for certain activities, for example extra reading time for people with lower levels of literacy or language proficiency?
= Are physical spaces accessible for disabled people, including bathrooms and other facilities?
= Are any refreshments provided suitable for participants' dietary requirements?
= Has the group developed their own set of ground rules with regards to their engagement with one another, and do the researchers need to know these?

Data collection: obtaining informed consent
In line with ethical principles of social research, appropriate information about the research process should be provided, and consent should be obtained from all research participants prior to conducting surveys, focus groups or interviews (among other methods). This consent can be written, or audio/video recorded. Participants who do not give consent should not be included in the research process. Researchers may consider asking participants for different levels of consent, eg whether or not they consent to their responses being featured in resulting reports with names, roles and names of institutions, or with their roles and institutions, just with roles alone or with no identifying information at all.

To ensure that research participants are able to give informed consent, the project should be clearly described to them in written form and verbally (if possible). This information can be provided on a participant information sheet if conducting face-to-face research, or included as an introductory text to a survey. Project details should include the rationale for the project, the voluntary nature of participation, and clear statements regarding the planned use of the data, the length of the research task (eg completing a survey), anonymity or confidentiality, and respondents' right to withdraw before, during and after the research process. If the respondents decide to withdraw within the timeframe stated on the consent form, any data or recordings obtained must be destroyed and cannot be used in any resulting publication.

Before taking part in the research, participants should also be given the opportunity to ask questions about the project, and be provided with the researchers' contact details. A complaints procedure should be in place, and the participant information sheet or introductory text to a survey should list the name and contact details of those responsible for receiving and handling complaints about research conduct within the institution.

Below we provide two examples of consent forms for interviews and focus groups (**Example 1**) and online surveys (**Example 2**). The specifics of the consent required will vary according to the requirements of the project, and the informed consent form should be adapted to reflect the specific project details.

Example 1: Consent form for audio-recorded interviews or focus groups   8
(this may be hard-copy if face-to-face, or electronic in the case of telephone interviews)

Project title: _____

Researcher: *[name and contact details]* _____

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. Before you agree to take part, please read the participant information sheet [provided separately].

If you have any questions regarding the information sheet or explanations provided, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to participate. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for future reference.

Participant's statement:

I confirm that:

☐ I have read the participant information sheet and understand the purpose of the research.

☐ I understand that if I decide I no longer wish to take part in this research I can notify the researcher involved and withdraw within one month after the focus group/interview.

☐ I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of data protection legislation.

☐ I understand that the information I submit, including anonymised direct quotes, may be included in any resulting report.

☐ I understand that my participation will be audio recorded for accuracy and I consent to the use of this material as part of the project.

☐ I agree the project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this research.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

If you would like to receive a copy of any resulting report, please enter your email address below.

Email: _____

Example 2: Consent form for online surveys

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(only respondents who tick all boxes are redirected to the full survey)

Project title: _____

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research. Before you agree to take part, please read the information below that explains the project.

[Insert specific project information here]

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the project, please contact *[researcher's name and contact details]*, otherwise continue on to give your consent and take part in the survey.

Participant's statement:

I confirm that:

☐ I have read the information provided above and understand the purpose of the research.

☐ I understand that I can stop answering questions at any time by navigating away from the survey pages.

[Optional, depending on survey platform]
☐ I understand that the survey submits data as I advance through the pages, and my data may be used even if I do not complete the survey.

☐ I consent to the storing and processing of my data for the purposes of this research. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential.

☐ I understand that any free text or comments I enter may be quoted, anonymously, in resulting reports.

☐ I know who to contact if I have any questions or concerns about the project.

☐ I agree to take part in this research.

Data storage and confidentiality:
Data storage and management procedures must be in place, which comply with data protection principles set out in the **Data Protection Act 1998** or any legislation superseding or replacing it.

It is important to ensure that there is a procedure in place for storing primary confidential research data, such as audio and video recordings, interview and focus group transcripts, and survey responses.

ECU advises that as soon as possible after data are collected:

= files are downloaded/transferred from the collection device or platform (eg audio recorder, video camera, mobile phone, survey platform) and saved on a secure drive that is only accessible to the researchers working on the project. Ensure that data are deleted from collection devices or survey platforms as soon as all of the data have been successfully transferred to the secure drive

= files should be saved in such a way that none of the research participants can be identified:

– audio and video files and transcripts should not contain the names of research participants in the file names; instead, other descriptors should be used, such as dates or pseudonyms
– a separate 'key' should be created as a Word document that matches the file with the participant on a secure separate drive
– when saving survey data, one needs to ensure that first names, last names, and email addresses are removed and saved separately

= where personal data are sensitive, care should be taken to make the minimum number of copies; sensitive personal data include data about a person's race/ethnicity, religion/belief, physical/mental health/condition, sexual life, trans identity and gender reassignment, political opinions, trade union membership, commission or alleged commission of an offence, proceedings or sentences for offences committed or alleged

= personal or sensitive research data should not at any time be emailed or transferred onto a memory stick or other portable electronic file device.

Data analysis and reporting:
Ethical considerations are not limited to research design, data collection and data storage, but also need to underpin data analysis and reporting. Inappropriate or unethical analysis and reporting practices can be detrimental for public trust in equality research, can lead to unjustified spending of resources on actions based on invalid research findings, and can result in the establishment of incorrect benchmarks that can affect future equality research.

Examples of unethical practices include inconsistency in maintaining respondents' confidentiality, 'cherry-picking' qualitative quotes and erroneously implying that these are representative of the data, misrepresenting participants' views, using inconsistent graph ranges to magnify small differences between groups in potentially misleading ways, or 'trimming' data by selectively omitting data from the analysis to obtain the desired result.

In order to avoid misinterpretation and misrepresentation of qualitative data, ECU considers it good practice to share research findings with participants. Apart from verifying

or extending interpretations and conclusions, using participant checks can also help maintain confidentiality, since respondents may notice less obvious information that could help identify them.

Where feasible, it is also helpful to have two or more independent coders identify emerging themes in transcripts of qualitative interviews, focus groups, or open-ended questions in surveys. This can be done either by applying the same coding scheme (deductive coding) or developing independent coding schemes from the data (inductive coding). This can ensure that the interpretation of the content is as objective, therefore as valid, as possible (see Campbell et al. 2013).

If undertaking statistical data analysis, researchers should ensure that they clearly state their *a-priori* hypothesis (what they expected to find from the outset) and outline all statistical tests that were conducted during the analysis. This includes accounting for testing other variables than originally planned, omitting or including outliers, and potentially testing alternative models that fit the data but are based on different theoretical assumptions than the original hypothesis (see Hallahan and Rosenthal 1996).

Finally, it is important to reflect on one's own biases, personal background, values and assumptions, and make them explicit in reports of research findings so that the research is as transparent as possible (see Jones 2001). This includes reflecting on and/or explicitly stating any assumptions researchers may have about participants' experiences due to belonging or not belonging to one or multiple equality groups. For example, the interpretations of a black, gay male researcher studying the experiences of black, gay male university staff or students may be quite different from the interpretations of a white, heterosexual male researcher studying the experiences of black lesbian university staff or students. It is important to understand how researching as an 'insider' or 'outsider' of an equality group can affect the research process and the presentation of research findings (for a discussion of conducting equality research as an 'insider' or 'outsider', see the forthcoming ECU research and data briefing on reflexivity).

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Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) supports higher education institutions across the UK and in colleges in Scotland to advance equality and diversity for staff and students.

ECU provides research, information and guidance, training, events and Equality Charters that drive forward change and transform organisational culture in teaching, learning, research and knowledge exchange. We have over ten years' experience of supporting institutions to remove barriers to progression and success for all staff and students.

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