

## **EdQual: Research Ethics in International Collaborative and Participatory Research**

- Introduction
- Principles
- Guidelines - Relations and Responsibilities
- Applying Principles and Guidelines

### **Introduction**

1. The purpose of this statement is to develop shared understandings of ethical issues that may arise throughout the research process and to encourage EdQual members to take responsibility for their own ethical practice.
2. The statement is to be used not as a set of recipes for resolving dilemmas, but recognises that it will be necessary to make choices based on principles, values, and interests among individuals, communities, cultures, and nations.
3. Disagreements may arise over what constitutes 'right conduct'. The strength of this statement and its binding force therefore rests ultimately on how these disagreements might be resolved through active discussion, reflection and continued use by EdQual.
4. This ethical statement revolves around three concerns; They are:
  - Principles
  - Guidelines
  - Applying Principles and Guidelines
5. The historical and cultural context of this statement is defined by the broad aims of EdQual's research programme. The context of this ethical statement is therefore concerned with:
  - Improving educational quality
  - Addressing disadvantage
  - Promoting gender equity
  - Developing genuine partnerships

### **Principles**

6. A working understanding of 'ethics'
  - The working definition of ethics adopted here is that it is a set of mutually agreed guidelines and processes governing the behaviour of any individual or group in their interactions with another individual or group.
  - In the case of EdQual, these interactions include:
    - Researcher with researcher
    - Researcher with other field workers<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'field workers' is used here in recognition of the participatory nature of much of our research and the possible need to distinguish here between 'academics' and those with whom we

Researcher with research participants  
Researcher with funder  
Researcher with local and national authorities  
Researcher with other end users  
Researcher and local community  
Researcher with his/her institution  
Researcher with his/her professional community

7. Respect for the rights of others.

- Our methodological choice of participatory action research carries with it a moral obligation to respect the rights of others, running through every aspect of the research, from conception through design and implementation to analysis, dissemination, and application.
- Contentious issues include:
  - How do you define those rights?
  - to whom do they apply?
  - Do some (notably children) have their rights invested in a proxy, such as a parent or teacher?
  - Do you prioritise some rights over others when there is a conflict amongst them?
  - Whose rights take precedence - the individual or group/community?
- The commitment in participatory research to the empowerment of all those involved – especially those who are currently disempowered and disadvantaged – means that the determination of rights is a matter for the individuals and communities involved and not something to be imposed by outsiders.

8. The Prevention of harm.

- ‘Harm’ here means physical, emotional, or psychological harm.
- Researchers themselves face a range of potential risks to their safety and therefore physical harm. Safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of research and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers
- No individual or group should come to any harm as a consequence of their involvement in the research activities or the subsequent impact of the research (i.e. the consequences of findings, which may extend beyond the duration of the research activities themselves)
- The prevention of harm to participants involves two aspects:
  - Anticipating possible sources of harm in advance and building into our research design ways of ensuring this harm does not occur. This leads to issues such as confidentiality and informed consent.
  - Being sensitive to the impacts of our research as it proceeds and addressing potential/actual instances in which harm may be caused. Regular or continuous monitoring of the impact of research activities; particularly in action research, is required.

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participate in the planning and implementation of research activities, such as head teachers. The use of the term in no way implies a hierarchy of respect.

- Unfortunately, one cannot always predict how research findings will be applied, now or in the future.
- If research findings are subsequently used in a way which the researcher feels is causing harm, this does not necessarily raise doubts about the ethics of the original research. It might raise ethical questions about the researcher's behaviour following this harmful use, however.
- Does the researcher simply dismiss this use as 'not my responsibility', or recognise unwitting complicity and actively challenge the subsequent harmful use?

9. The precautionary principle

- The 'precautionary principle' states that where there is a plausible argument that adopting a particular course of action may have harmful effects, even if these cannot be proven, action must be taken to eliminate or minimise these effects (For a concise working definition, see especially page 14 of <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001395/139578e.pdf>).
- The principle is about adopting a pre-emptive strategy to risk analysis rather than waiting for harmful effects to emerge, but also indicates the need for continuous and sensitive monitoring of the impact of our actions.
- Two dilemmas in the application of the principle of 'no harm' include:
  - Research in which the benefits of the research to one group are at the expense of another. If, for example by applying research findings – we reduce the disadvantage experienced by one group only by reducing the advantage of another, do we engage in some sort of arithmetic of net social advantage, do we adopt a value stance that sees a reduction in social imbalance as a worthy goal, or do we reject the research as being unethical for causing harm to one of the groups?
  - Situations in which we identify illegal or unprofessional actions by a teacher, school principal, education official, or even a fellow researcher, that is causing harm to a child, children or a school in general. Reporting this individual to the authorities would clearly be the cause of harm to him/her. Not reporting what we have learned not only allows the harm to the children/school to continue but, it might be argued, makes us complicit in inflicting that harm.

## **Guidelines: Relations and Responsibilities of the Researcher**

10. Responsibilities to co-researchers and other 'field workers'
  - A commitment to openness and communication - information available to one member of a team working on a research project should be shared freely with all other members of the team. This includes communication about activities related to the research, from data collection, through analysis to the writing and dissemination of papers.
  - Limitations on such sharing of information are imposed by the need for confidentiality.
  - Data that can be traced to particular individuals or to identifiable schools should not be shared except on a very strict basis of needing to know for clear research reasons.
  
11. Local knowledge and customs

Researchers should respect local customs and rules of behaviour and should recognise the value and authority of local knowledge. This demands that they show a degree of respect and of humility in relation to their own capacities, avoiding any tendency to arrogance based on perceptions of their status or that of the knowledge they bring with them.
  
12. Individual conscience

No researcher or other participant must be placed in a situation in which they are expected to take action that offends their personal ethics.
  
13. Acknowledgement in publications

All publications should acknowledge the involvement of members of the research team (and of EdQual as a whole and DfID as the funding agency), even if their names do not appear as co-authors.
  
14. Informed consent
  - As far as possible participation in the research should be based on, freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the EdQual researchers to explain in appropriate detail, and in language meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken and how it is to be disseminated and used (including any reference to data being placed on websites in the short and long term).
  - Research involving children requires particular care. The consent of the child should be sought. Researchers should use their skills to provide information that could be understood by the child, and their judgement to decide on the child's capacity to understand what is being proposed.
    - Cultural and legal interpretations over children's capacities to give consent are likely to vary across countries.
    - The issue of consent may then be left to local norms, but these need to be made explicit and communicated for discussion amongst the research partners involved. Above all, children must not be coerced into participation.
    - Specialist advice should be sought where relevant.

- For more general concerns over the participation of children in the research, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is useful in terms of statements of general principles, but difficulties have been acknowledged over their application in certain circumstances where they may clash with local norms and customs.
- In such situations, researchers must proceed with care and consult with both local communities and colleagues in EdQual and the wider research community.
- The African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child is based on the UN Convention but recognises specific local contexts. It may be a practically useful document to assist in ethically problematic situations.

#### 15. Right to refuse/withdraw

Research participants should be made aware of their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the research at any time, without any obligation to give reason.

#### 16. Confidentiality

- Research participants should understand how far they will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality and should be able to reject the use of data gathering devices such as tape recorders and video cameras.
- All data collected from participants in the research is to be treated as confidential and participants must be informed and reassured of this.
- Appropriate measures should be taken to store data (including photographs and audio and video recordings) in a secure manner.
- Confidentiality means that names of participants and any other information that might lead to their identification must be removed, or changed, if data are communicated to a third party.
- Only those researchers immediately involved in data collection and analysis have any claim to see data which has not been anonymised or where identifiers have not been removed.
- In general, names and other identifying marks should be removed before data are handed over for transcription or translation.
- In cases where total anonymity cannot be guaranteed, this must be made clear to the participants and their informed consent to waive their right to confidentiality obtained, preferably in writing. This situation may arise, for example, when important contextual data must be presented in any account and this data would allow identification of the institution or of individuals involved, or when it is important to identify the position of a respondent and only one person occupies that position at that time.
- Confidentiality may be broken in two cases.
  - I. Disclosure (see below)
  - II. A participant asks to be identified in any subsequent publications. In this case, this request must be respected, unless it compromises the confidentiality of other participants, and written permission to use the participant's name should be obtained
- In some or all of the participating countries there may be laws that govern the collection, use, and communication of data. In some countries, there may be laws that apply particularly to working with children. It is the responsibility of all researchers to be aware of these laws in the countries in which they are

working and to ensure that they work strictly within these laws. Researchers should also be aware of any laws in their home country that may apply to their work outside that country or to the publication of data in their home country.

- Data pertaining to an individual participant remains the property of that individual. Participants themselves have the right of access to any data pertaining to themselves, such as interview recordings or transcriptions. They have the right to deny use by the researchers of any part of those data even if they gave consent initially to participate. This is a corollary of their right to withdraw.

#### 17. Disclosure

- In cases where the research uncovers illegal activity or which is causing harm to others, serious consideration must be given to disclosing this information to the appropriate authorities. The default position should be that authorities will be informed, but some judgement of the seriousness of the harm or illegality may be a consideration here.
- Any decision on this should be taken in consultation with other members of the research team and the participant should be informed that this action is being considered, unless this would allow interference with the evidence.
- The researcher must be certain of the reliability of any evidence obtained in cases like this and must have clear records of this evidence.

#### 18. Incentives to participate

- In some contexts, it may be customary to give some sort of reward for participation in research. We recognise that the participatory nature of EdQual's research approach will make considerable demands on the time of head teachers and others working in difficult circumstances with very limited resources. In these circumstances, some 'return' for participation may be expected.
- Judgements about incentives must include considering whether they may compromise the reliability of the data collected, by respondents aiming to please their 'benefactor'.
- Where incentives are given, they should be commensurate with the demands resulting from participation. Non-material rewards, such as recognition in publications or invitations to meetings or conferences, should be considered where appropriate.

#### 19. Standards of research practice

- Researchers have a responsibility to carry out research using a research strategy, methods of data collection and analysis that are appropriate to the research aims and context. The strengths and limitations of the strategy and methods should be acknowledged and, in particular, the scope of the applicability of findings must be discussed and delimited. Disagreements within a research team over issues such as interpretation of data, if not resolved through discussion, should be open to public airing, and not suppressed.
- Research should be carried out and reported without bias on the part of the researcher and any relevant personal views held by the researcher should be openly acknowledged.

20. Communication with other communities

- All communities that may have an interest in the process and outcomes of the research should be informed as appropriate, whilst also maintaining the rules of confidentiality.
- Communication with any interested community should be in a form and language that is easily comprehended by that community.
- In their relations with the media, EdQual members should have regard for the reputation of EdQual and refrain from offering expert commentaries in a form that would appear to give credence to material that as researchers, they would regard as having inadequate evidence. In other words, do not make claims about the research, unless you are very sure.
- Communities with an interest in the research process and outcomes have the right to reply and to challenge any aspect of the research, but decisions about the research process must ultimately remain the prerogative of the researchers.
- Communication of research findings or process should acknowledge the role of fellow researchers and participants and EdQual as a whole. It should not make or even hint at any derogatory references to any colleague or EdQual as a whole or in any way undermine the professional integrity of colleagues or the consortium.

### **Applying Principles and Guidelines**

21. 'Guidelines' have to be interpreted and applied in a wide range of practical contexts that cannot be anticipated in detail.
22. The 'Principles', together with the aims and research philosophy of EdQual, should provide some guidance to their application in any situation.
23. We should recognise, however, that we are often dealing with situations which are characterised by risk, uncertainty and limited information, all of which may make ethical considerations less than clear-cut.
24. Keep in mind the 'precautionary principle' when faced with ethically problematic situations, but also adopt a principle of continuous communication and discussion over ethical issues, both in general and in particular circumstances.
25. Three basic rules for action are:
  - If we are certain – after due reflection on the ethical guidelines and principles - that a proposed action is ethically justifiable, we can go ahead.
  - If we are certain that a proposed action is ethically unjustifiable, we must refrain from it.
  - For everything in-between, we should consult and discuss with colleagues and participants.
26. In the discussions over ethical choices, however, we must remain true to the principals of participatory research to which we are committed. These include recognising the equal status and rights of all participants, so that all those on whom the research may have an impact are consulted in an atmosphere that is genuinely emancipatory and not intimidating, and in a way that is comprehensible to all.
27. Open, honest communication, therefore, is the key to ensuring high ethical standards in EdQual practice.