

GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE
University of London

CODE OF PRACTICE ON RESEARCH ETHICS

Approved by Academic Board: 25 May 2005

To be read in conjunction with the [Terms of Reference of Research Ethics Committee](#)

Introduction

1. This Code of Practice is intended to promote high standards of ethical awareness and conduct on the part of College, staff and students undertaking research involving human participants. It seeks to provide assurances to the participants in such research, and to representatives of the organisations with which they are associated, that their rights and welfare are of paramount concern, and protect the College's reputation in research governance.
2. In promulgating this Code, the College seeks to respond to increasingly demanding external expectations concerning standards of research governance and probity in higher education, as expressed in benchmarking statements, professional body requirements, disciplinary organisations' codes of practice for its members, and broader concerns about standards in public life. These expectations apply to both to staff research and to that undertaken by students. The College also has a responsibility to educate students in the ethical practices expected of practitioners undertaking research in, and hence contributing to the knowledge base of, their chosen disciplines and professions. This Code should be used within departments to uphold best practice within the several disciplines.

The scope of the Code

3. This Code applies to staff and student activities where primary data concerning human participants are being gathered and processed, and provides also for the expectation that the outcomes will be disseminated beyond the individual who originally collected or processed the information. The Code applies to both funded and unfunded research, and to research projects by students at all levels of study, as well as by staff.
4. The overriding concern of research ethics codes is to protect the interests of those people who are the subjects of the information. Those invited to participate in a study should be able to give, or withhold, their informed consent. They have a right to confidentiality, not to be misrepresented and not to be harmed as a result of being researched. This is very important but it is not an absolute right; there may be circumstances (for example in investigative journalism or organisation studies) in which covert research or deception might be justifiable, where public interest may override the rights of the individual. However, such enquiries **must** be informed by full consideration of their ethical and legal implications at the planning stage of the project, as detailed below.
5. All staff research proposals involving human participants must be submitted for approval to the College's Research Ethics Committee. In the case of student projects, consideration must first be given by departmental Ethics Committees. Where there is uncertainty, the decision about whether or not a project should proceed to the College's Committee must rest with the departmental Committee. This Code sets out core principles and cases where referral to the College committee is mandatory.
6. Researchers themselves, especially if they are inexperienced, may not foresee circumstances where their experimental participants may be harmed. This is why all research proposals, whether from students or members of staff, need to be scrutinised by departments and/or the College's committee. Relevant professional and academic research ethics issues must be addressed within students' curricula, to ensure that they become adequately equipped to make their own informed judgements and to uphold appropriate standards of conduct.

Guiding Principles

7. The guiding principles of this Code of Research Ethics are **non-maleficence** and **beneficence**, indicating a systematic regard for the rights and interests of others in the full range of academic relationships and activities. **Non-maleficence** is the principle of doing, or permitting, no foreseeable harm including infringement of rights as a consequence of the research. **Beneficence** is the requirement to serve the interests and well-being of others, including respect for their rights. It is the principle of doing good in the widest sense.
8. Researchers must not compromise the over-riding principles of non-maleficence and beneficence, legal obligations and any pre-existing rights in the conduct of research, other than in exceptional circumstances and with formal ethical approval of the project proposal (including a justification of this approach).
9. Researchers should consider the principle of justice and the fair treatment of participants in research. Thus the researcher may be required to make judgments about the essential fairness of the activity and to ensure that the interests of all participants, whether directly or indirectly involved, are taken into account.
10. Researchers should consider the ethical implications of the research in relation to the physiological, psychological, social, political, religious, cultural and economic consequences of the work for the participants. This is not to argue that no work should ever be produced which might be capable of causing offence. However, the range of possible outcomes should be fully considered in advance, and the scope for causing harm must be weighed against the potential benefits in order to assess the justification for proceeding.
11. Researchers should consider not only the welfare of their informants and the organisations with which they are associated, but should also seek to avoid actions which may damage the interests of other researchers, and the reputation of their discipline or of the college. Additionally, those directing research should consider their responsibilities towards members of their research teams, anticipating and guarding against the possible harmful consequences of the research. This includes health and safety considerations, both within and outside the college.
12. In order to make a fair judgment about the conflicting needs and interests of direct and indirect participants (for example, in relation to an undergraduate project on a sensitive topic), it is essential that advice is sought from the supervisor, where appropriate, or from the Research Office.

Obligations, Rights and Responsibilities

Legal and procedural requirements

13. Researchers should comply with the legal implications of a piece of research. The Data Protection Act, the Computer Misuse Act, the Equal Opportunities Act, the Race Discrimination Act, the Obscene Publications Act, The Protection of Children Act, and the Human Rights Act are likely to be particularly relevant, along with relevant legislation on Disabilities and Health and Safety.
14. Researchers are expected to comply with the College's Code of Practice on Research Ethics. Research should conform to the College's policies on Health and Safety and Equal Opportunities. Where appropriate a risk assessment should be conducted at an early stage to ensure the protection of all participants in the research (informants and researchers) on the advice of the College's Health and Safety Advisor.
15. Researchers should abide by the Code of Ethics of any professional body or subject association of which they are members, which takes precedence over the College's Code such as the Social Research Association, the British Psychological Society or the British Sociological Association. They should also be aware of any Code of Ethics that applies to potential or actual collaborators on the project and/or other participants (such as NHS research ethics approval procedures). Where the location of the research is external to the College it is essential that the regulations, procedures, practices and guidelines which apply in these situations are taken into account.

Informed consent

16. Ethical conduct in research demands respect for the rights of others who are directly or indirectly affected by the research. Participation in the research should be on the basis of informants' fully informed consent and participants' rights of privacy should be guaranteed, with safeguards concerning confidentiality. Written consent should be obtained where appropriate. There should be no coercion of any kind to participate in the project, and informants should be assured of their right to withdraw at any time, without repercussion. Equally, the means by which participants are recruited should be carefully assessed in relation to possible rewards for participation.
17. Prior to gaining consent the researcher should ensure that participants are fully informed of the nature and the purpose of the research, how it will be conducted, who is undertaking it, who is funding it, and how the outcomes will be disseminated. This should be explained in language which the informant can easily understand, and ideally well in advance of the work being carried out. Where there are third parties marginally involved in the research, for example as members of the public in an observer capacity, or where groups of people are involved, informal consent might be more appropriate than formal consent.
18. Where participants are not in a position to give informed consent (for example, children or mentally incapacitated adults), the researcher should seek advice from the Research Office early in the process of planning the project, as formal legal clearance is likely to be required. Any data-gathering taking place within organisations for children or vulnerable adults, even observational or covert studies will normally require formal approval from the organisation concerned, as well as from the ethics committee.
19. Young persons over the age of 16 are generally thought to be able to give informed consent but it might be appropriate to seek advice, depending on the nature of the project. Research involving children under 16 will require the informed consent of parents, carers or guardians. Notwithstanding the fact that parental consent has been obtained, primary responsibility for safeguarding the rights of the child remains with the researcher who is obliged to obtain Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance prior to commencing the project. Details of the service offered by CRB can be found at <http://www.disclosure.gov.uk/>.
20. Where the nature of the research is such that informing participants before the work is carried out might render the results invalid, for example within aspects of the social and cognitive sciences such as perception, participants must be given appropriate explanations following the study. Covert research within organisations is regarded as generally undesirable since it violates the principle of informed consent by research participants.
21. In both these sets of circumstances, for this reason, justification for the proposed course of action must be submitted for prior approval to the Research Ethics Committee. Researchers must provide convincing reasons why such research should proceed without informants' prior consent, and how the likely benefits outweigh this consideration. Researchers should not mislead participants just because of an expectation that their prior permission will not be obtained. Researchers should be aware of the possibility that their submissions to the Research Ethics Committee may at some future date have to be disclosed under the Freedom of Information Act in the event of an enquiry (although not necessarily with their name attached).

Confidentiality and data protection

22. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity should be maintained and their personal privacy protected. The identity of participants should not be revealed unless their written permission is obtained.
23. Researchers should be vigilant about the risk of identification and breach of privacy and confidentiality posed by all kinds of information storage and processing, including computer and paper files, e-mail records, photographic material, audio and videotapes and any other information in which an individual is named, or from which an individual could be identified.
24. The collection, storage, disclosure and use of research data by researchers must comply with the Data Protection Act 1998 and with the Data Protection Policy and Guidelines published by the College on its website. Members of staff supervising research work by students or other staff must also ensure that the individuals concerned are aware of the requirements of this policy.

Research undertaken in public places

25. Researchers should pay particular attention to the implications of research undertaken in public places. Its impact on the environment is one key issue. Researchers must observe the laws of obscenity and public decency. Those engaged in research should have due regard to religious and cultural sensitivities. Even if those members of the public who are observed are not identified by name, care should be taken to safeguard their anonymity (for example, in the use of photographs, video or film).

Academic integrity

26. The general principle of integrity should inform all research activities. Honesty should be central to the relationship between researcher, participant and other interested parties. Research outputs should contain acknowledgment of the work of others, as appropriate. Particular care should be taken in acknowledging the work of research students. Issues about joint ownership of work by students and supervisors (including authorship of publications) should ideally be discussed at an early point in the student's programme, and confirmed or renegotiated later, as work is written for publication. Issues arising from industrial placements (including the firm's interests) and the protection/registration of materials should also be considered in principle at an early point, and reviewed later.
27. It is good practice to offer participants and other relevant stakeholders access to a summary of the research findings. Research reports should be truthful, accurate and demonstrably the work of the author/s concerned. Readers should be offered sufficient information to assess the justification of the author's inferences and interpretations of information.

Contractual responsibilities

28. The terms of any contract relating to research must not compromise the overriding principles of non-maleficence and beneficence, legal obligations and any pre-existing rights.
29. The terms of research undertaken on behalf of a sponsor must be agreed formally in advance. Terms will include the specification of the research project, the roles and responsibilities of the researchers, the College and the sponsor, and agreement on the dissemination and exploitation of the research outputs. The need for confidentiality or non-disclosure agreements (such as an embargo on a research degree thesis) must be negotiated in advance.
30. Researchers are required to observe the College's policy on intellectual property rights.
31. The terms and conditions of research contracts should be clarified with all parties before the project commences with particular regard to access to research sites and data, the question of which institution is Data Controller under the Data Protection Act, copyright, rights concerning publications, prior disclosure and the disclosure of information, contractual payments and remuneration, dissemination arrangements and any other benefits.
32. The researcher/s should furnish the sponsor with research reports and other deliverables as agreed in the original contract.

Remit and membership of the Committee

33. The College Research Ethics Committee has terms of reference and composition as set out in the College Calendar.¹ Its responsibilities include exercising oversight of compliance with this present code in the College, and updating it as necessary from time to time.

Nirmala Rao
Spring term 2005

¹ Since the discontinuation of the College Calendar (from Summer 2006), now set out on the committee system webpages.