

OER Research Hub

Ethics Manual

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Author: Robert Farrow, Research Associate
IET
rob.farrow@open.ac.uk
Ext: 55424

An ethics manual provides principles and guidance based on values and standards of conduct to which researchers are expected to conform. This manual should be used in conjunction with the Open University Ethics Principles for Research Involving Human Participants and Code of Practice.



1.0 Document Control

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1.1 Version History

Date	Version	Stage	Summary of changes
29/04/2013	v0.1	Initial draft	Initial draft by Rob Farrow
05/03/2013	v0.2	Revised draft	v0.2 draft revised by Rob Farrow
05/07/2013	v1.0	Final version	Approved by Patrick McAndrew

1.2 Changes Forecast

The Ethics Manual will be revised following the Phase 1 evaluation. The next planned update will be with Stage 4 deliverables on 30 September 2013.

1.3 Distribution

Name	Organisation/Role
Author(s):	
Rob Farrow	Research Associate
Beck Pitt	Research Assistant
Reviewers:	
Leigh-Anne Perryman	Research Associate
Martin Weller	Co-Investigator
Approvers:	
Project Board	
Patrick McAndrew	Principal Investigator



1.4 Related Documents and Forms

Item	Description of Document
1	Project Proposal
2	Research Framework
3	OU Ethics Principles for Research Involving Human Participants and Code of Practice
4	Work Package 2 Description
5	Work Package 3 Description
6	Work Package 5 Description
7	Data Management & Analysis Strategy

2.0 Purpose of Document

This document is the Ethics Manual for the OER Research Hub (OERRH) project at The Open University's Institute of Educational Technology. It provides an overview of ethical issues that arise in research, and offers strategies for best practice. It discusses some of the particular challenges for openness in research, including confidentiality of data, implications for dissemination strategies, and discusses some of the challenges that may be brought about specifically by working 'in the open'. This manual serves four main purposes.

1. To be used in OERRH when designing, planning and running studies involving human subjects or intellectual property
2. To guide researchers in ways which encourage the right level of involvement and commitment
3. A reference and guide for researchers engaged in similar initiatives
4. To explore the particular ethical consideration that may be connected with openness in research

Throughout the document guidance is offered to researchers in the hope that it can act as a tool for others. While not a separate project deliverable, it is envisaged that a more reflective sister document be written during the life of the project in order to systematically capture our experiences and learn from these.

3. OER Research Hub

The *Open Educational Resources Research Hub* (OERRH) provides a focus for research on the impact of open educational resources (OER) on learning and teaching practices around the world. The project works in collaboration with initiatives across the school, college and higher education sectors as well with informal learners to identify the impact that openness is having on education.



The project combines:

- A targeted collaboration program with existing OER projects
- An international fellowship program
- Networking and connection-building
- A hub for research data and OER excellence in practice

Across the different collaborations the project identifies critical issues and aspires to learn from the practical experience of working to solve them. Meeting the challenges of openness requires research strategies which take account of the different aspects of OER impact. In the OER world, the way forward is associated with greater transparency and sharing of educational materials and research. Similarly, a more useful evidence base should emerge through taking advantage of working openly and in collaboration as it allows for the pooling of limited resources and greater scale and efficiency through co-ordinated action.

The research collaborations cover different sectors and issues, these include: the opening up of classroom based teaching to open content; the large-scale decision points implied by open textbooks for community colleges; the extension of technology beyond textbook through eBook and simulation; the challenge of teacher training in India; and the ways that OER can support less formal approaches to learning. By basing good practice on practical experience and research we can help tackle practical problems whilst building the evidence bank needed by all. Through this research we will build evidence for what works and when, and establish methods and instruments for broader engagement in researching the impact of openness on learning.

This project operates on a collaborative rather than partnership model. We have a dual research approach, combining both remote monitoring of publically available data and the development of research instruments which are applied through a combination of direct and facilitated research.

4. 'Openness' in Education

A range of behaviours and technologies from educational contexts may be described as 'open', including access to education or published research, policies, teaching methods and educational resources. Broadly speaking, Open educational resources encourage the production of high-quality educational materials at minimal cost. They represent a potential solution to many issues facing educators around the world and have attracted media interest around the world. In a time of austerity and fiscal uncertainty, openness has entered the popular consciousness and universities as a whole take steps towards integration of the 'open' model of education or learners take individual initiative to use them as an alternative to learning in debt. It is important to be aware that here are practical, political and commercially sensitive implications of the 'open' educational model.



There are also ethical dimensions to the introduction of open educational resources. The digital nature of OER and the particular methods of producing and using them represent a considerable challenge to existing practice in education, including far-reaching implications for proprietary models of journal publication and academic tenure. To date there has been little research done on the ethics of OER, though it is acknowledged that the field provokes a number of ethical issues, such as proper use (and attribution) of intellectual property; the appropriateness of different licensing options; accreditation; evolving pedagogical responsibilities; blurring boundaries between private and 'connected' life; and structural changes in academia.

There remain particular challenges in the areas of authorship and publishing; how to make best use of technology to support interdisciplinary research; how best to work across political and geographical boundaries; and how to build consensus and influence policymakers. A better understanding of these issues should inform discourses about the role and nature of the university in the digital, networked age.

5. Ethical Research into Openness

Where possible, research into openness in education should naturally aspire to the kinds of ethical expectations made of non-open research projects such as informed consent, data security and anonymization of results. But due to the nature of open research this is not always possible. For instance, a key ethical dimension arises in studying users who make use of educational content where there is no formal relationship. If one were to approach some of these audiences and ask for consent to research their behaviour then this request itself might compromise the reliability of any data gathered. While we may be able to learn much about OER use from observing online activity and information trails, there are risks that the blend between their open and private lives may be compromised by the details they freely reveal.

Our project emphasizes openness in all aspects of research. We aspire to advance and explore a vision of openness through:

- Making our research instruments available on open license
- Openly publishing anonymised raw data where appropriate
- Encouraging greater sharing and transparency

Research into openness in education presents a number of opportunities for innovation as well as fresh challenges. However, it is important that open research conforms to accepted ethical standards for research involving human subjects, and researchers should endeavor to ensure that they receive the requisite approval from their ethics panel or institutional board review (IRB).¹ Our research activities comply with both the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and the USA's Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and where

¹ When collecting research data from informal learners it may not be necessary to achieve institutional approval, but those carrying out this kind of research should still ensure that they design research which conforms to good practice.



appropriate the obligatory institutional approvals have been secured in other national contexts.

Any research project should ensure that institutional standards for ethical research. As a project conducted by employees of the Open University (UK) all the OER Research Hub data collection activities comply with the Ethics Principles for Research Involving Human Participants and Code of Practice. Both of these documents can be accessed via the OU Research School website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/>.

5.1 Assessment of Risk

For all research activities an assessment of risk should be undertaken. The Open University (2011) provides the following risk checklist for research involving human participants.

1. Does the study involve participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent? (e.g. children, people with learning disabilities)
2. Will the study require the co-operation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited? (e.g. students at school, members of a self-help group, residents of nursing home)
3. Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places)

There are many valid ethical issues of a more general nature which should also be considered at the initiation phase (including whether sensitive topics will be discussed, whether drugs or placebo will be administered; whether stress, pain or discomfort are likely to be involved; whether biological samples will be taken, etc.) but these have limited relevance for research into open education.

There is nonetheless some risk involved in all research activities, and researchers need to be aware of their responsibilities in this regard.

5.2 Sampling

OERRH works with a diverse range of subjects across international and cultural boundaries, embracing a range of research instruments, including surveys, structured interviews, focus groups, video recordings, textual analysis and desk research. Subjects should be freely recruited among relevant age groups via appropriate channels but recruitment should remain open to all suitable subjects without bias or coercion. Where human subjects are involved they will first have been identified in conjunction with collaboration partners and review board approval obtained. Researchers may wish to consider possible incentives to encourage participation and the implications this could have for the data that is collected. Subjects should be reminded that participation in the research is completely voluntary.



5.3 Informed Consent

Informed consent can be said to have been given when there is clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications, and future consequences of an action before that action is taken. As such, it is considered the norm for all research participation. Subjects should be aware that they are participating in a research project and know what will be done with any information they share. All participants in research should have access (e.g. through the project website) to an information sheet which describes the aims of the project in clear language; a description of the proposed activities; a statement of the policies regarding the security and confidentiality of any data collected; an outline of any potential risks or harm; contact details for the researcher(s) and a description of possible dissemination uses for any data collected. As the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association put it:

“Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. Social networking and other on-line activities, including their video-based environments, present challenges for consideration of consent issues and the participants must be clearly informed that their participation and interactions are being monitored and analysed for research.” (BERA, 2011)

5.4 Data Collection and Storage

When a range of data is collected across diverse formats it is important to ensure that the correct protocols apply. Survey data, for instance, needs to be made as secure as possible. A number of web-based survey tools provide effective tools for surveying different cohorts. These kinds of supporting technologies can support and promote ethical approaches to research through secure transmission of potentially sensitive data (including SSL encryption of data as well as masking of IP addresses); compliance with PCI SSC Data Security Standards; recorded and time-stamped statements of consent; preserving the right of the respondent to withhold information; and providing options to withdraw from the survey at any point. For interviews and focus groups recordings may be made and these should also be treated as confidential unless a decision is made to use the recording for further research or dissemination and the appropriate consent has been formally obtained. Audio or video recordings from interviews and focus groups but not for general release will be transcribed in strictest confidence by selected employees of The Open University and stored on secure servers. The Open University has a number of data protection specialists who are in a position to advise on this aspect.

Any possible discomfort/risk to participants should be minimized. Further guidance for this may be found in the Market Research Society Code of Conduct (MRS, 2010) and the CASRO Code of Standards and Ethics (CASRO, 2013).



5.5 Use of Third-Party Data

OERRH aspires to consolidate and augment existing research into OER. This may include reports, case studies, research papers, documentaries, diaries and digital artifacts, but could also include previously unpublished data or information about institutional performance which may be commercially sensitive. Where additional data is obtained through desk research or materials that are already publically available then no additional consent is required. Any analysis which makes use of data collected by a third party should respect the consent that was given at the time. Researchers should strive to make all such materials available openly where possible while showing an awareness of the relevant legal and cultural contexts.

Dissemination: The project will disseminate its outputs in a variety of ways which include publication in open access journals, use of social media and open conferences. We have adopted a similarly “open” research approach, grounded in the principles of digital scholarship, whereby the intersection of digital, networked and open practice elicits the greatest benefit. We aim to share all research data, following appropriate modification (e.g. anonymisation) via Creative Commons or other open licensing.

6. Guidance & Principles

The research activities proposed in this project involve low risk for participants. However, the implications of aggregated research findings being made openly available for cross-comparison with existing or future datasets collected from other international collaborations and used by a range of stakeholders are manifold and potentially far-reaching. Participants should be made aware of the legal status of any information provided and provided with opportunities to elect a level of openness and publicity with which they feel comfortable.

It is not possible to anticipate every ethical issue that might arise in the course of a research project, particularly when some research activities are taking place in unmonitored spaces. It is therefore important that researchers use their own judgment according to the situations with which they are faced, taking into account all the relevant aspects when making a decision (see Elliott, 2006; Lally *et al.*, 2012). This intellectual virtue is typically described as a kind of ethically-informed practical reasoning (or phronesis) (Hughes, 2001).

With this in mind may be helpful to think in terms of the following two dimensions.

Standard Research Practice:

- Participation is voluntary
- Subjects must provide informed consent
- Data must be kept securely
- Privacy should be respected
- Researchers should demonstrate awareness of cultural difference
- Harm should always be avoided



Issues connected with 'Openness':

- Understanding the potential for collected information to be personally, professionally or commercially sensitive
- Policies should make it clear when data can be shared with others and under what conditions, licence, etc.
- Dissemination strategies should respect existing agreements with those who have been recorded or provided data
- Publication should be open wherever possible
- Openly available third party materials should be used fairly. Data mined from social networks may need to be treated with caution.

It may also be helpful to think in terms of the general principles suggested by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011) who emphasize:

- Professional Competence
- Integrity
- Professional, Scientific and Scholarly Activity
- Respect for Rights, Dignity and Diversity
- Social Responsibility

The AERA guidelines also suggest that education research should be conducted within an ethics of respect for:

- Persons
- Knowledge
- Democratic Values
- The Quality of Educational Research
- Academic Freedom

In addition, it is important to think about a range of stakeholders who might be affected by the research and the responsibilities the project team have towards them. These include the participants in the research, but also the sponsors, the wider educational community, other research professionals, policy makers and the general public.

7. Evaluation

As part of the project's commitment to ongoing evaluation there will be regular assessments of the activities of the project. In addition, a log will be kept of issues as they arise in the course of the project and its collaborations. These will be revisited in order to assess whether practice can be improved in light of experience, and to record lessons learned. In this way it is hoped the project can take an approach to ethics which is iterative, transparent and participatory.

This manual comprises part of a submission for the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at The Open University. In order to ensure research approved by the Committee has been carried out as planned and to inform the HREC review process, it is a requirement that researchers complete an end of research project final



report within three months of the culmination of the project. Any changes resulting from feedback will be incorporated into updates.

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