

INSIDER RESEARCH GUIDELINES

These guidelines are designed for colleagues thinking about doing pedagogic and/or higher education research. Researching in one's own workplace presents special ethical challenges as it is a form of insider research.

We are aware that staff may be involved in numerous kinds of projects which may include staff and students. Not all of these projects might be deemed to be 'traditional research projects', for example: developmental work, routine evaluation, organisational improvement, etc. Nonetheless, many of these projects contain a research element and therefore thinking about the ethical issues involved is important. We recommend, therefore, that whenever projects are being set up that consideration of ethical issues is integral to project planning. Further information can be found at [ethical approval procedures](#).

In this document we will focus on the questions in section B of the SHUREC2A (or 2B), highlighting some of the special issues which may need additional consideration when embarking on research inside the institution. The intention is not to provide hard and fast rules but to encourage an active dialogue around our own practice.

Describe the arrangements for selecting/sampling and briefing potential participants

There could be some sensitivities here in relation to the power dimension between the investigator and the participants. For example, if students are on course where the investigator is or has been their tutor, students may need reassurance about why they are being included (or not). In briefing participants real care needs to be taken that refusal to participate will not be interpreted by them as potentially damaging. Similar considerations need to be taken into account with staff where line management and other relationships may be understood as a form of pressure.

What is the potential for participants or third parties to benefit from the research?

Describe any possible negative consequences of participation in the research along with the ways in which these consequences will be limited.

It is very important to make the benefits and possible risks clear for the participants. The danger is with insider research that these are assumed to be self evident and often not made explicit. Participants may be anxious that refusal to participate may have negative consequences for them as insider research usually involves ongoing relationships. It is particularly important, therefore, that reassurances are provided and that these are honoured.

Describe the arrangements for obtaining participants' consent.

Describe how participants will be made aware of their right to withdraw from the research.

Participants' consent may be written or verbal but should be seen as an ongoing process whereby the participant is made aware that they can withdraw at any stage, without giving a reason. It may be, for example, that after an interview a member of staff realises the implications of what has been said and may choose to withdraw the data; the participant should be made aware that this is a possibility open to them. **This can be very challenging for a researcher who is working alongside or managing the participant who withdraws some or all of their data. The researcher has to act as if they have no knowledge of what was said and it must not influence their behaviour towards that individual.**

In cases where at the point of data collection was initiated consent was not secured, if the data are to be used as research data then participants should be asked to provide their consent after the event. The same standards relating to the right to withhold that information should apply.

Describe the arrangements for debriefing the participants.

You might need to consider arrangements for students/staff to talk about issues that have been raised in the project, outside of the immediate data collection context. The investigator may or may not be the best person to offer that support. Efforts should be made to think this through in advance so that the offer can be made and where appropriate involve other agencies (such as Student Support).

Describe the arrangements for ensuring participant confidentiality.

Confidentiality may be particularly difficult with staff participants where 'position' may narrow down the number of possible informants. If this is likely, it may be necessary to sacrifice context in any reporting of the data. **Alternatively, participants may be informed that it is not possible to offer complete anonymity because of their position and be offered the opportunity to review what the researcher would like to include from them, before it becomes public knowledge.** These precautions may be necessary in addition to all the usual procedures for ensuring confidentiality. Special care needs to be exercised when sending out questionnaires through an insecure medium, such as staff and/or student email. Other modes (such as paper-based with anonymised returns or web-based surveys) are preferable.