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STARTING POINTS FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN SCOTLAND

IMPROVING EDUCATION THROUGH RESEARCH

Rachel Shanks (University of Aberdeen), Angela Jaap (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland), Kirsten Darling-McQuistan (University of Aberdeen) and Paul Adams (University of Strathclyde)

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this publication is to facilitate research practice across a range of educational settings. It discusses key issues and responsibilities and wider implications of being involved in research.

1.1 Why do we need educational research?

Research should improve understanding and, at the same time, help to improve the quality of education for all. The involvement of individuals in research should also be seen as providing a valuable opportunity for personal learning and improvement.

There are many developments in Scottish education which might encourage more to take part in research activity. As well as a general call for evidence-informed policy and practice, local authorities, national bodies like Education Scotland, colleges, universities, community groups and schools are increasingly involved in a wide range of initiatives which have a clear research dimension. Research also has a major part to play in professional learning; professionals might themselves wish to carry out research that can contribute to their organisation's improvement as well as their individual personal and professional growth.

Previously it might have been assumed that researchers only work in universities, government agencies or private research companies, but more and more educators are actively investigating their own practice and that of others. Furthermore, children, young people and other participants may be involved as researchers. The starting points below are designed to help researchers to think through how to conduct a research project in an educational context.

1.2 Educators' involvement in research

Educators have a key role to play influencing potential organisational improvement, for example by conducting research. Involvement in small scale more informal, as well as formal, research has a role to play in career-long professional learning.

There are many reasons why educators may become involved in research, including:
- The creation of new understandings about pedagogy and learning environments
- The development and critique of practice and curriculum
- The improvement of practice in teaching and learning
- The creation of new knowledge for the profession
- Collaboration/sharing

Research may also have an important role to play in an educator's career development. Indeed, all educators should be able to research aspects of their practice to facilitate improvement. Engagement with research enables the development of knowledge, understanding and skills which may be applied/extended at various career stages as part of on-going and worthwhile professional learning.

1.3 What kinds of educational research might take place?

Educational research generates evidence that can be shared with others. Which methods are appropriate to use depend on the types of questions one wishes to ask and the evidence that required to answer research questions. There is a wealth of good material available describing different methods and when it is appropriate to use them.

Some examples of the different types of educational research that might take place are outlined below:
- student/learner/participant projects;
- teacher/practitioner research (action research/self-study/professional enquiry);

1.3 What kinds of educational research might take place? (cont.)

- case studies;
- evaluation Studies;
- large Scale International Studies;
- conceptual/theoretical/philosophical/literature-based studies.

1.4 Ethical standards for educational research

Currently, there is a clear expectation that everyone who carries out research – educators, professional researcher or students – should be aware of, and observe, relevant ethical guidelines. The British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), like many similar research associations around the world, revised its guidelines to take account of key legislation such as the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Human Rights Act (1998) and the Data Protection Act 2018 which is the UK's implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). These all set out requirements in terms of researchers' responsibilities. It should be emphasised that ethical scrutiny is a continuous process from specification to dissemination and should not be treated as a one-off screening process.

Higher education institutions require all research conducted by their staff, postgraduate research students and undergraduate students to be subject to ethical scrutiny before it is allowed to proceed. All research involving children or other vulnerable groups requires the researchers to be covered by membership of the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) delivered by Disclosure Scotland.

The position of research in the public domain and the ability of researchers to withhold information is now explicitly outlined in the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002.

1.5 Key ethical considerations

There are a number of important ethical considerations that all researchers must consider and address. These include: child protection and safeguarding procedures; the prevention of harm for both participants and the researcher; the participants give informed consent to participate in the research; the participants participate voluntarily; the anonymity of the participants is protected; the researcher ensures confidentiality and data protection; and that the use of social media and dissemination are considered in relation to these ethical issues.

Child protection and safeguarding procedures

It is imperative that you familiarise yourself with the child protection and safeguarding procedures in place in both your own organisation and the context in which you are conducting your research.

Prevention of harm

Within research ethics, prevention of harm relates to both research participant and researcher. Different studies carry different risks and it is important for researchers to be clear about these in addition to how they will mitigate any (known) issues from the outset. Researcher(s) should ensure that time and care is taken at the design stage of a research project to produce a risk assessment to identify the ethical risks and the possible permission(s) and action which would be required.

Prevention of harm for participants

Researchers have a moral responsibility to protect participants in their study from harm. There is a duty of care from the researcher(s) to the participants that if a response is provided or action observed which indicates potential/actual difficulty that they can be supported appropriately. As such, researchers need to consider who is best placed to provide support and make clear how to obtain this. This support could come from a teacher/lecturer, supervisor, academic advisor or a specialist service.

Prevention of harm for researchers

Researchers should reflect upon how our own safety is being upheld pre-, during and post-research. There is a need to familiarise ourselves with the support resources from the wider institution (i.e., counselling, psychological support, etc) in order to ensure that all involved in the research project (researcher(s) and participant(s) alike) have access to appropriate support and advice where and when appropriate.

Informed consent

Researchers must ensure participants know what is expected of them, why the research is being conducted and how and when they can withdraw from the study. This must all be communicated in plain language to ensure understanding. In certain circumstances, this information will have to be explained verbally, in others, in written form. With some research populations, informed consent may have to be given on their behalf, for example, by carers. It is vital that researchers are clear with participants that they can withdraw, without explanation, from the study, for example before data analysis begins.

Voluntary participation

The importance of the voluntary participation of research participants was enshrined in the Nuremberg Code (1947) following the Nuremberg trials after the Second World War. In educational research it is essential to ensure that there is no feeling of duress on the part of potential research participants, for example if pupils are asked to take part in research conducted by their own teacher or students are approached by their university lecturer.

Anonymity

The principle of the anonymity of research participants is the assurance given to participants that their real identities will not be revealed to anyone else, for example other research participants, or disclosed in the reporting of the research or other dissemination activities. In some situations, participants may provide the appropriate consent to waive their anonymity, but this is quite rare.

Confidentiality

The principle of confidentiality in research requires the researcher to adopt procedures to keep data, and other information relating to the research, secure. Researchers need to consider confidentiality and how to ensure that data related to the participant(s) are secure throughout the duration of the research project.

Data Protection

The Data Protection Act 2018 is the UK's implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Generally speaking, '[d]ata protection is about ensuring people can trust you to use their data fairly and responsibly' (Information Commissioner's Office, u.d.).

The law applies to any 'processing of personal data', i.e. anything you do with data (collecting, recording, storing, using, analysing, disseminating) about a living individual. The rules are not set in stone, but careful consideration is required on the part of the researcher.

Within the context of research, the lawful basis for processing data is most likely to be based on the principle of consent. The GDPR also encourages careful reflection on the rights of research participants, particularly children, in terms of how their data is used. For further information, see: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/individual-rights/
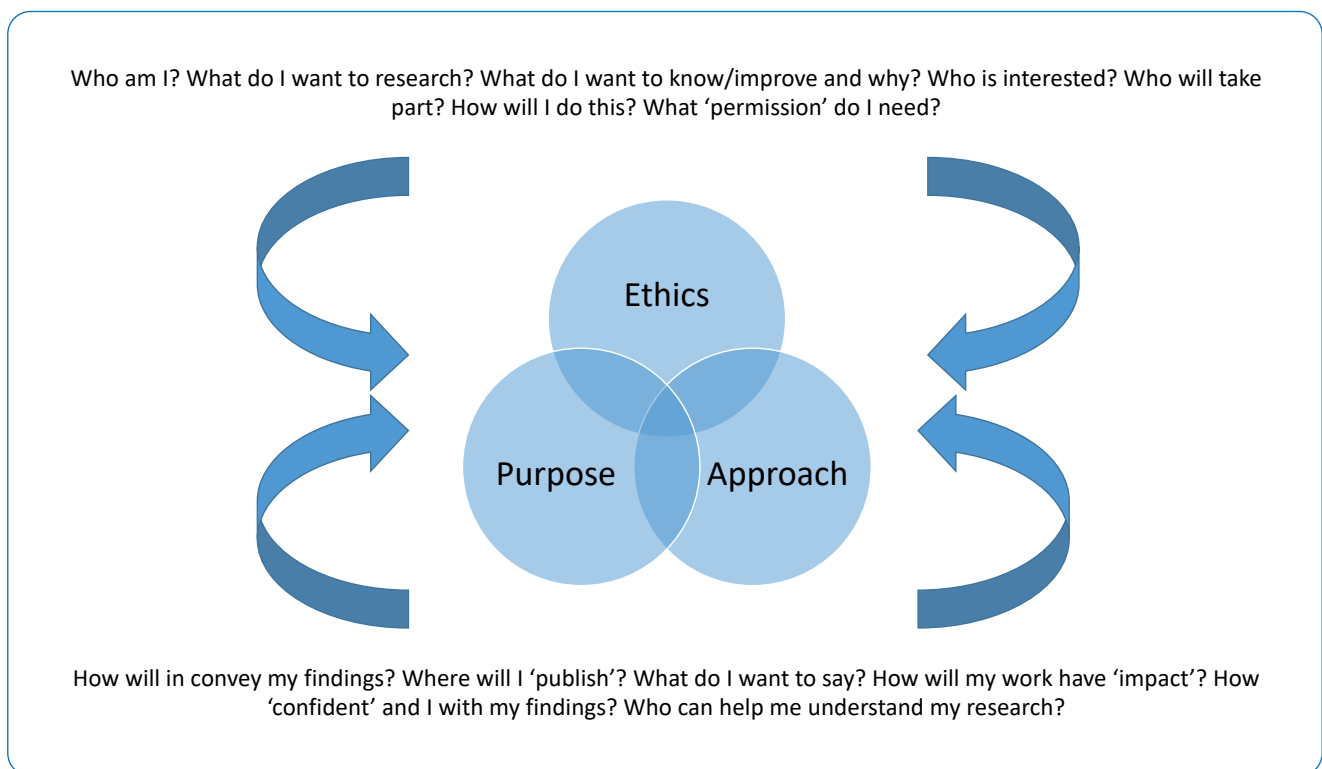
Research and social media

There is growing interest around social media in educational research and the ethical issues which arise as a result of an online/digital and social media presence. Given that a large proportion of researchers (and participants) will have some form of digital 'footprint' researchers must ensure that they utilise digital and social media to good effect within the research. With this in mind, it is important that all of the points related to ethics which have been covered above are followed. There may be additional issues to consider, for example, sharing of information regarding the participants (or between participants) that may add 'noise' to the research and to mitigate against these.

A useful resource to consult is the Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics document by Townsend and Wallace (n.d), which is available online: https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_487729_en.pdf

Dissemination

Disseminating or reporting is an important feature of a research project. The means of dissemination, particularly in academia, has diversified, moving from more 'traditional' peer reviewed journal articles, research reports, conference papers and posters to include websites, blogs and various social media outlets. Regardless of the means of dissemination there is a need to identify the ethical issues which may arise from the sharing process and the possible impact on the participants and mitigate these. Therefore, researchers should develop a dissemination plan which provides a clear and appropriate communication strategy for the project, but which ensures participants are respected, with their anonymity protected and the population which they represent not exposed or put at risk. This is particularly important where participants have distinctive characteristics that make them and/or their community/context identifiable.

Below we present information and guidance that is of particular relevance in certain settings but may be of use generally to all engaged in educational research. Ultimately, each member of the research community has the right and the responsibility to make their own decisions about the nature of their involvement in research activity. This guidance is designed to assist in the decision-making process.

Who am I? What do I want to research? What do I want to know/improve and why? Who is interested? Who will take part? How will I do this? What 'permission' do I need?

How will in convey my findings? Where will I 'publish'? What do I want to say? How will my work have 'impact'? How 'confident' and I with my findings? Who can help me understand my research?

2. EARLY YEARS CHILDREN/ EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

Conducting research with children in the Early Years (pre-birth to 8 years) is a highly worthwhile and insightful activity, particularly in the context of exploring and enhancing practice. Taking a 'participatory' approach, that is research carried out *with* children, as opposed to on them, can provide insights into the experiences of children.

The ethical issues involved in researching with young children may seem overwhelming. However, engagement with appropriate ethical and safeguarding considerations and appropriate professional standards (e.g., General Teaching Council of Scotland, Scottish Social Services Council) will improve research activity and the overall quality of research. Institutional ethical approval should be sought prior to data collection. It is also likely that ethical approval will be needed from the local authority in which the Early Learning and Childcare setting is based, prior to seeking permission from the headteacher/manager. Confirmation of approval of the project should be shared with the manager/headteacher in advance of seeking their approval and commencing data collection.

2.1 Informed consent and assent

There is growing acknowledgement that children are social actors, particularly in relation to matters that affect their lives (see UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, specifically Article 12). As a result of this shift seeking assent from children themselves (as well as their parent/carer) has become a central tenet of ethically sound research practice in the Early Years. Children's assent is the process 'whereby children can exercise choice about their own research participation' (Dockett and Perry, 2011, p.233).

To ensure informed assent is sought in a meaningful and ethically appropriate manner, questions such as below should be considered:

- How will you ensure that children fully understand the purpose of the research and what their participation entails?
- In what ways can children express their assent?
- What mechanisms are in place to allow the children to withdraw their assent?

The following list offers some suggestions to support the process of seeking children's assent:

1. Take time to develop a 'shared language' around the research/enquiry, adapting the language to use to suit the children.
2. Create appropriate ways for children to demonstrate they are happy to be involved in the research for example, inviting children to signal their decision via drawings/painting/putting a personalised object into a jar (this works well as it can also be removed, if a child wants to withdraw their assent). This is essential to ensure that children know they can say no without being disadvantaged/reprimanded in any way.
3. Throughout the research process, ensure that children know they can withdraw their assent at any point. It is appropriate to use a visual signal, e.g., displaying a visual symbol to let children know when they are engaging in activities related to the research.

2.2 Voluntary participation

It is important to establish the necessary conditions for voluntary participation when researching with children in the Early Years to this end, the work of Hart (1992) on participation can be particularly helpful.

2.3 Prevention of harm

It is important that children's well-being is central throughout the research process. This should be constantly assessed and considered in a contextually appropriate manner. Prior to undertaking research in an Early Years setting, you should make yourself aware of the Child Protection Guidelines for the setting and familiarise yourself with the Child Protection officer. If you become concerned about an issue of safeguarding at any point, this must be raised with the Child Protection officer and Key Worker/Class Teacher.

2.4 Confidentiality and anonymity

When considering confidentiality and anonymity in relation to the Early Years, there is an even greater need to protect children who participate within the research. It is important to think carefully about how the identities of participants will be protected. Such questions of anonymity will depend greatly on the nature of data created through the research process, for example, observations, visuals and audio are data rich, they could therefore lead to the identity of children and/or the setting being identifiable. The use of pseudo names/codes/identification numbers, removing distinctive features such as logos, badges and avoiding capturing faces can help to mitigate against these sensitive issues.

2.5 Dissemination

In the context of researching with young children, consider disseminating research findings in a way that is appropriate and meaningful for children: how the children might like to share research findings could be taken into account, for example through the production of images, paintings, three-dimensional models, dance or poetry.

3. RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS

In this section you will find suggested starting points to help with planning formal research in a school or schools.

Ensure the research is relevant and worthwhile, for example think about:

- How will the research be relevant to the research participants' own contexts?
- How will schools recognise how the research outcomes can make a meaningful contribution to the life of the school?
- Do the outcomes of the research have an influence on practice and/or future policy at national or local level?

Make it clear why you are proposing the research, and what you intend to do:

- Do you have a clear rationale for your research project including a specification of your expectations of the research participants (who, when, how much time, where, specific resources, etc.)?
- Have you taken account of the fact that some of the identified participants may not wish to take part?
- Have you identified the intended audience for the research outcomes?

Consider your responsibilities towards the local authority and school/s where you will be carrying out the research:

- Have you sought permission from the local authority to approach the school/s? Please note some local authorities have specific ethical approval procedures.
- Are you aware of how the demands of your research may impact on the school?
- Have you negotiated an indicative timeframe and a strategy for discussing the purposes and methodology with all involved, including parents/carers and pupils?
- Will you require specific assistance from school staff or others?

Consider any ethical and/or safeguarding issues that might be relevant to your project:

- Have you made sure that all researchers have been Disclosure Scotland checked and documentation is provided to support this?
- Have you identified all ethical and safeguarding considerations including, but not limited to, anonymity, confidentiality and informed voluntary consent?
- Has the proposal been monitored by appropriate ethical committee/s prior to any agreement to proceed?
- Have you made explicit, all ethical issues to staff, pupils and parents/carers involved?
- Have you informed participants that other people or authorities may need to be informed of what has been said if it is felt that the participant is at risk of harm?

Consider how you will be communicating about the research to all those involved throughout the life of the project:

- Do you have information leaflets for all those involved, using appropriate terminology and user-friendly language, with the possibility of providing information in other languages or formats?
- Do you have procedures in place to give participants updates on the research and provide initial findings?
- Is there a way for research participants or others interested in the research to find out more as the study progresses, e.g. a project website or social media account?

Plan and conduct an effective dissemination strategy so that others can find out about what has been learned:

- Do you have a strategy for informing participants, schools, local authorities and other interested parties before final dissemination?
- Have you considered how findings will be disseminated and identified a timescale for reporting findings?
- Have you protected the participants' anonymity?

4. RESEARCH IN COMMUNITY LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT (CLD) CONTEXTS

Conducting research with participants in Community Education, Adult Learning, Youth Work or Community Development includes a range of ethical issues that need to be considered and addressed. In Scotland the CLD Standards Council's Code of Ethics for Community Learning and Development (2017) refers to how CLD work 'promotes equality of opportunity and outcome' and 'practice is equitable and inclusive' (p.1) with calls for transparency, co-operation, professional learning and self-awareness. Furthermore, the Code calls for boundaries between CLD practitioners and participants through professional, clearly defined, relationships which 'must be based on mutual trust and must not involve abuse of the constituent/ practitioner relationship' (p.2). There is also a Youth Work Commentary (2011) on an earlier version of the Code of Ethics.

Research methods, including the roles of the researcher/s and participants, should be decided and developed in a manner that minimises the power imbalances that exist between CLD workers and participants.

If you are conducting the research as part of a programme of study remember to follow the education institution's ethical procedures.

4.1 Informed consent

In particular CLD settings, there may be extra concerns that could affect how an individual provides informed consent. For example, in youth work, extra care must be given as all participants will be regarded as vulnerable. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that everyone has access to information on the project, their role within this, what will happen to their data/answers provided and have the opportunity to decline to take part. Different considerations in relation to informed and voluntary consent are needed when working with individuals or with a group. An individual may feel obliged to take part even though voluntariness of participation is emphasised. In a group situation there may be a sense of mutual obligation or peer pressure, particularly when researching one's own students. Therefore, when seeking informed consent, the researcher *must* reflect on the potential power dynamics, the *purpose* of the research and how this is *shared*, clearly, with the prospective participants, including the potential outcomes and the implications these may hold for them. The CLD Code of Ethics states that CLD workers may try to facilitate change in social contexts and environments as well as with individuals. It is important, however, not to raise expectations as a result of the research as this may not be achievable.

4.2 Voluntary participation

Voluntary participation is closely related to informed consent. When considering how to enact and establish the necessary conditions for voluntary participation when researching with participants in CLD contexts, it is important to analyse what this might mean, and look like.

To encourage engagement with research in CLD contexts, a participatory approach is often adopted so that the research process might be inclusive, developmental and accountable. Participatory methods are often chosen so that participants have some degree of 'ownership' over what the research covers and how it is done. This can be a useful means of soliciting consent and encouraging participation in the wider project.

4.3 Prevention of harm

In the Code of Ethics, it is stated that CLD workers are to 'avoid exposing our constituents to the likelihood of harm and/or detriment to their wellbeing' (2017, p.2). Ultimately the research should benefit both the participants and wider society. However, if there are thought to be potential hazards or a risk of harm to participants then as well as risk assessment procedures, it must be decided whether the research should go ahead. The prevention of harm for researchers, links to the duty to self-care stated in the Code of Ethics for CLD (2017). As in all settings, it is important that researchers carry out risk assessments which include assessing risks for their *own* wellbeing and that they let others know when and where research is taking place.

4.3 Prevention of harm (cont.)

Furthermore, in CLD contexts, careful consideration regarding the methods of data collection are required. It is important to ensure that data can be gathered in an appropriate way which respects the dignity of the participants. For example, are focus groups appropriate in case personal information is shared? Or could one-to-one interviews be stressful? Are questionnaires appropriate if you do not know enough about the potential participants' levels of literacy?

4.4 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality is covered by the CLD Code of Ethics (2017). There are legal and confidentiality issues if data collection is conducted via focus groups. In this situation it is imperative that all participants are comfortable with this format. In relation to anonymity of individuals, places and organisations, it can be difficult in small scale research where the researcher is known to work in a particular organisation or in a particular geographical area. It must be remembered that people can be identified through their locality and in CLD contexts. It may sometimes be the case that participants wish to waive their right to anonymity in order to stand by their words and opinions in the hope of making a bigger difference. However, it can also be stigmatising for particular individuals, organisations and places if they are able to be identified.

It is important to weigh up the benefits of the research and the potential harm of, for example, raising issues such as drug/substance abuse or a research project on relationships and a potential disclosure by a participant who refers to domestic abuse. In these situations, it is necessary to make clear to participants that other people or authorities may need to be informed of what has been said if it is felt that the participant/dependent is at risk of physical or psychological harm.

4.5 Dissemination

Disseminating or reporting research is an important feature of a research project/study in the CLD setting. Here, sharing and disseminating research can be used as a means of influencing practices of CLD and may have larger implications for change. However, regardless of the type of dissemination approach(es) chosen by the researcher, there is a need to recognise the potential sensitivities associated with disseminating research about/involving participants. For example, there is a need to treat information regarding participants and their views sensitively and with respect, demonstrating awareness that some information may make the participants and/or their context identifiable. If there is a possibility of participants/contexts being identified, this should be communicated early (at the informed consent stage) and/or be mitigated through pseudonyms or other means.

5. RESEARCH IN POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION

One of the most pertinent ethical issues when researching in post-compulsory contexts is that of power relationships. Indeed, intra- and inter-institutional relationships can add additional layers of ethical complexity when designing and implementing a research project. It is therefore the responsibility of the researcher to demonstrate how power-related issues will be securely dealt with. There is a need to reflect upon and acknowledge the dual role of participants, as both research participants and as learners or colleagues. Participants need to be aware of their rights, and their interests, as both learner and as research participant, and for these to be protected simultaneously. For a research project conducted by a member of staff, institutional approval, through ideally an ethical committee, or through line management, will need to be sought in advance of any data collection. Likewise, depending on the discipline and/or the issue being investigated there may be additional ethical and/or professional requirements/codes or funding requirements which are to be adhered to before the research can commence.

5.1 Informed consent

Informed consent for research projects in post compulsory education should involve recorded, ideally written, consent which demonstrates that participants were able to voluntary provide consent freely and without obligation to the researcher or without fear or harm of any consequences to their studies/involvement at the institution.

5.2 Voluntary participation

Closely tied to informed consent is voluntary participation which is the basic principle that participants should not feel undue influence into contributing to a research study/project. This is especially relevant in contexts where researchers could be seen to rely on gathering data from 'captive audiences' for their studies/projects, for example, from students within their own classes.

5.3 Prevention of harm

Prevention of harm relates to both research participant and researcher. Researchers have a moral responsibility to protect participants and themselves from harm. There is a duty of care from the researcher to the participant so that if a response is provided or action observed which indicates potential/actual concern, researchers need to consider *who* is best placed to provide support and provide clarity around how to obtaining this.

5.4 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity go hand in hand.

Confidentiality is deemed to be the requirement from the researcher to adopt procedures/processes to keep data secure. The parameters and limitations of confidentiality should be made clear to prospective participants at the time of obtaining informed consent. Some institutions/funding bodies require a risk assessment for a research project which details how the researcher(s) uphold confidentiality and the steps which the researcher(s) will take to ensure that data related to the participant(s) are secure across the project.

Anonymity is the assurance to participants that the study/project will not reveal their identities (unless they have provided the appropriate consent). Researcher(s) must be aware that, while utilising pseudonyms can protect identities, the reporting of findings, particularly when shared within institutions, may make the students/participants identifiable to peers and colleagues.

Further information regarding confidentiality, anonymity and mitigating risk in research projects is likely to be found within the ethical guidelines and advice of funding sources and other professional bodies.

6. RESEARCH IN OTHER SETTINGS

6.1 Research in health care settings[1]

Obtaining ethical consent for research in health care settings can be a complex and sometimes lengthy process. Likewise, given the increased vulnerability of prospective participants additional care is required to ensure that all ethical issues are identified and addressed at all stages of the project – from design through to dissemination.

For those who wish to research in health care settings it is advisable to contact National Health Education Service (NHES) who will be able to advise in the first instance.

More information regarding ethical approval for research in health care contexts can be found at the NHS Research Scotland website:
http://www.nhsresearchscotland.org.uk/services/permissions-co-ordinating-centre/permissions

6.2 Research in prisons[2]

For research in prisons, permission is required from the Scottish Prison Service Research Access and Ethics Committee. This, however, may not guarantee access to the prison environment as there are additional factors and gatekeepers to the process. The Research Access and Ethics Committee will evaluate the ethical and research integrity of the project and propose this to the Head of Learning and Skills within the service and subsequently to the prison Governors, who will consider the proposed project in alignment with current establishment objectives and the potential outcomes for the participants. In short, approval from the Research Access and Ethics Committee does not guarantee access to prison-based participants.

It is strongly encouraged to contact the Research Access and Ethics Committee at the initial design stage to ensure that any particular features of your research project would be feasible and in line with current objectives. These initial discussions should take place prior to obtaining institutional approval.

More information on the Scottish Prison Service Research Access and Ethics Committee can be found on the Scottish Prison Service website:
http://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Information/Information-for-Researchers-and-Students.aspx

A thorough document on Research Access Guidance (2019) is available from the Scottish Prison Service Research Access and Ethics Committee. The Committee should be contacted directly via the URL above.

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[1] Thanks to Dr Bethany Whiteside.

[2] Thanks to Dr Jim Carnie.

7. REFERENCES AND USEFUL WEBLINKS

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