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Ethical issues in pedagogic research

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The Research Problem

- Applying for ethical approval for pedagogic research is a new experience for many researchers; even those who are experienced researchers in their own discipline. The research ethics committee (REC) in this study talked anecdotally of 'the same issues coming up time and again' but didn't have the empirical evidence to support such a claim. The committee concluded such evidence might help applicants to consider the ethical issues of their research more comprehensively; prior to making an application.

Objectives of the Study

1. Identify the nature of the concerns expressed by the ethics committee;
2. Identify the most frequently occurring concerns raised by the ethics committee;
3. Utilise the findings in order to improve guidance for applicants by raising awareness of the common ethical issues inherent in conducting pedagogic research.
4. Share these results with a wider audience, through conference and published papers, in order to raise awareness across the sector of ethical issues in pedagogic research.

Methodology

- A documentary research method is the sole method of data collection used to investigate the concerns expressed by the REC to applicants, in the first three years of its existence.
- In this case looking back to what had concerned the REC in the past three years, the most reliable source of data was the documents produced in that time.
- Using questionnaires, or interviews, to ask the REC members what had concerned them over the same period would produce an account influenced by their current thinking, whereas the documents demonstrated the thinking at the time.
- Written feedback given to applicants from September 2007 to September 2010 was included in the study
- In total twenty two applicants were included in the study
- The documental data included in the study comprised 182 pages of A4.
- Qualitative content analysis was adopted as the method of data analysis.

Main Findings

- The hand-out you have been given displays the themes identified and the frequency of occurrence.
- Insufficient information for either the REC (application) or the potential participants (PIS) makes up 40% of all the feedback given.
- The other main area of concern was the potential for bias in data collection/analysis which researchers had not identified or indicated how they would reduce/eliminate this risk.

Discussion

- Our findings and those of others:
- Insufficient information for the REC
 - Attitude to seeking ethical approval in general and/or specifically for pedagogic research
 - Inexperienced researchers
- Insufficient information for participants
 - The nature of practitioner investigation; so common in pedagogic research – particularly Action Research
 - The blurred boundaries between practice development and research
- Potential for bias/invalid data collection and/or data analysis
 - The boundary issue again
 - Poor quality of data collection tools – particularly questionnaires
 - Poor alignment between research questions and type/amount of data being collected
 - A seeming lack of planning about data analysis.

How does this study fit in with other research?

- Literature indicates significant dissatisfaction with RECs
 - Seen as overly bureaucratic and burdensome
 - Inconsistency between RECs
- Main concerns of RECs
 - Blurred boundaries
 - Action research methodology
 - Informed consent and anonymity
- Openness and collaboration between REC and researchers in seeking advance advice (role of REC chair important) improves the process and relations between the two bodies