

Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (AHSS)

Social History / Participant Recruitment

For Trainers

Why case studies?

A core function of the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) is to provide independent, expert, and confidential advice on the conduct of research, from promoting good practice to addressing allegations of misconduct. We have been doing this since 2006.

Each request for assistance received by UKRIO increases our body of knowledge. These 'lessons learned' not only inform our response to subsequent enquiries but also underpin our other activities, especially UKRIO's education and training work.

We have found that illustrative case studies are an excellent way to raise awareness of research integrity and research culture and to illustrate the complexities and 'grey areas' that can occur.

Case studies are not literal accounts of any enquiry to UKRIO. Instead, they are scenarios, based on real-life situations, which illustrate recurring or notable issues and problems that have been brought to our attention. While some case studies may mention a particular discipline or setting, they contain themes that are relevant across subjects.

Please note that this case study is fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, organisations or events is coincidental.

Case study 11

Two *social historians* at your university have been conducting research into squatting, focussing on the large squatting movements involving ex-service personnel and their families following World War II. Their next piece of research will compare these movements with present-day squatting movements. Interviews with homeless families currently (illegally) occupying empty properties will be compared with oral histories of squatting in the years after World War II.

The researchers have submitted their research proposal for ethical approval and are **awaiting an ethical opinion from their Faculty's ethics committee**. The project does not involve any external funding.

The Head of the School of History becomes aware that the researchers have begun recruiting participants to their study before the ethics committee has given its ethical opinion – *i.e., the researchers have commenced the study without having a favourable ethical opinion for the research*. She discovered this when several members of the public contacted the university with questions about a consent form which they had signed for the study.

It appears that the researchers became aware that a rally was to be held in support of families occupying a large, disused local authority property in a nearby city. They felt that this would be a good opportunity to find participants for their study, so they attended the rally and began recruitment. All potential participants were provided with a detailed information sheet describing the research and everyone recruited to the study has completed and signed a consent form.

When approached by the Head of School, the researchers admitted that they had begun recruiting participants before the ethics committee had given its opinion on the research. *They defended their actions, saying that the rally was too good a recruitment opportunity to miss*. They also felt confident that the committee would grant a favourable ethical opinion for their work, and neither reject it nor request any changes. As the researchers are saying this to the Head of School, an email arrives in their inboxes with the decision of the ethics committee.



Please discuss and decide:

1. How should the university address this situation?
2. Does it make a difference on what the ethics committee decides at this stage?
3. Can the research project still go ahead and are there any particular actions the university should take?

Case study 11 resolution

Trainer tips

You should see your role as guiding the discussions. The resolution below is intended as a starting point for debate and reflection, drawing on the major themes of the case study. Certain approaches are proposed but discussion of the case may well suggest others – there is often no single ‘right’ answer.

You can alter details during the discussion to explore the trainees' understanding of good practice.

1 How should the university address this situation?

The university needs to look into the matter and decide the most appropriate response: *whether to initiate the university's research misconduct procedure or another, perhaps informal process?* Regardless of the method chosen, the university would need to act quickly, thoroughly and fairly to gather information on the matter, particularly as the research involves human subjects.

Many universities and other bodies, such as funding agencies, define research misconduct as including deliberate failure to follow accepted procedures for the conduct of research, as well as deliberate breaches of those procedures. These ‘accepted procedures’ include procedures for ethical review of research projects. Indeed, many definitions of research misconduct explicitly state that **deliberately failing to seek appropriate ethical review, or to abide by the outcome of that review, is research misconduct.**

So the university's research misconduct procedure may well be the most appropriate approach. It would normally include a screening or initial assessment stage, which could be initiated quickly. However, depending on additional information available to the university at the time, another, informal route might also be appropriate. Decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, and the reasons for the decision recorded in writing.

As the researchers have admitted what they have done, does the university need to examine the matter further? The researchers' admission does not mean that the university has the full picture. Also, it *cannot rely solely on assurances from involved parties* such as the researchers – both when it decides whether to initiate the research misconduct procedure or not, and when it reaches a conclusion on what took place.

2 Does it make a difference on what the ethics committee decides at this stage?

What are the implications if it turns out that the ethics committee has:

- Given a favourable ethical opinion on the study? or
- had ethical concerns about the researchers' proposal; or
- asked for significant changes to be made (e.g., to the research design, participant information sheet, consent form, etc)?

In many ways, *the issue is not what the ethics committee decided but that the researchers thought it was acceptable not to wait for its decision* – that they 'thought they knew better' than the ethics committee and could just go ahead with their research. Whether the committee rejected the study proposal, approved it without requesting any changes, or asked for amendments to be made, the researchers were still wrong to start the project before they knew the committee's decision.

The researchers could have contacted the ethics committee, explaining that a valuable but time-limited opportunity to recruit participants had arisen and asking if the committee could expedite its decision. Ethics committees often have a specific process in place for when an expedited opinion is needed and the researchers could have explored this but chose not to. Even if such a process was not available, **the researchers should not have just gone ahead with the project without an ethical opinion.**

Equally, *the researchers could have used the rally as an opportunity to raise awareness of their planned research, rather than actually recruiting participants.* For example, a leaflet on the proposed research could be handed out to those attending the rally, including information on how anyone who might be interested in participating could contact the research team.

3 Can the research project still go ahead and are there any particular actions the university should take?

Is the research project irrecoverably ‘tainted’ by the researchers’ actions or could it be salvaged?

The university should consider this as part of its investigation. It would seem sensible to **suspend the research until the university has looked into the matter**, whether through a formal investigation or some other process.

Depending on the outcome, the research might then be reinstated but findings of research misconduct may well lead to the termination of the project.

As the research involves human participants, the university should consider issues around their safety as part of the investigation:

- Have the people recruited as participants been harmed by the researchers’ actions?

It may be necessary to *take certain actions at the start of the investigation rather than wait until its conclusion* (e.g., inform the participants that the project has been suspended and provide a point of contact for if they have any questions or concerns). The investigation should examine whether participants have been harmed, what actions should be taken if they have been, and how to communicate the situation to them and any other involved parties.

It is important to remember that people give their informed consent to be participants in a research project with the understanding that it has undergone an appropriate level of ethical review and that the project will be carried in accordance with that review. Even if the safety, wellbeing or dignity of the participants have not been harmed *per se*, **a breach of not gaining an ethical opinion in human subject research is still a serious matter and undermines their consent.**



Promoting integrity and high ethical standards in research
Providing confidential, independent, and expert support

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