

Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (AHSS)

Ethics: Change of Protocol

For Trainees

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 6

There are concerns about the research of **M**, a *PhD student* in the School of Social Sciences. A significant part of M's research involved interviewing a number of vulnerable adults about their experiences with the UK social care system. The interviews involved discussion of the reasons why the participants required assistance from the social care system and the nature and outcome of that assistance. The PhD project has been written up and M is about to sit her viva.

M identified potential interviewees according to the approved research design, provided them with information on the study and sought their consent to participate. All of the actual interviewees gave their consent to participate and did so in writing. *However, it has since been discovered that:*

- The study used a significantly modified consent form rather than that originally given a favourably ethical opinion by the **Ethics Committee**. This meant that participants gave permission for their data to be used for purposes which the Ethics Committee had not given an ethical opinion on
- Some of the questions asked in the interviews were significantly different from those originally seen by the Ethics Committee

The changes that have been made to the consent form and the interview questions are substantial, rather than minor or trivial – both documents have been significantly altered. The changes go far beyond any reasonable alterations to the wording, such as from proofreading or other editing after a favourable ethical opinion had been received.

The university has only begun to look into the matter properly. However, M has already said that her **PhD supervisor** within the university had confirmed that a favourable ethical opinion had been given for the project and that the instructions of the Ethics Committee were being followed – i.e. that M was doing nothing wrong. As a PhD student, M had felt it was reasonable to take on trust the information they received from her supervisor.



Please discuss and decide:

1. What should be done in response to the concerns about M's research?
2. Should M be allowed to sit her viva or not? Might there be an alternative solution?
3. Are there any wider issues to consider?



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

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