

Research Integrity Matters Relating to Students

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Introduction

This note contains information and advice about student interaction with research integrity and engaging with them about it. It may be useful to research integrity and research ethics professionals, Graduate Schools and the equivalent and staff involved in student or researcher development.

The following areas are covered:

- Research ethics and students on taught programmes;
- Academic misconduct - when things go wrong;
- Research students and research/academic misconduct;
- Allegations relating to degrees already awarded.

Research ethics and students on taught programmes

One of the principal ways that undergraduate students may initially encounter research integrity is when they undertake research projects for the first time, especially those that may require ethical scrutiny. Institutions will have in place systems and processes to scrutinize applications that involve participants or animals that are risk-based. Undergraduate students need to learn the ethical principles involved in undertaking research projects at an early stage, but the systems in place should be supportive and proportionate to the level of study. Careful thought is needed as to the value of conducting the research and the educational value of students undertaking research.

These points may be worth bearing in mind:

- **They are not normally undertaking research** – they are learning how to carry out research at a very early stage. Similar standards of rigour will still need to be applied, as the principles of informed consent and minimizing risk to participants still apply. Clear information will need to be in place, preferably

taking a risk-based approach, on the highest level of risk that students undertaking research projects are permitted to carry out. This needs to be set at a level that balances the risks and feasibility of the project within the scale permitted, with the educational and other benefits of carrying out the project.

- **The institution also needs to consider how and where the ethics review process takes place** – whether via the full research ethics committee process or locally. It may not be feasible for very low-risk ethical reviews to take place at the central institutional committee level. In some instances, commonly used methodologies could be ethically reviewed in advance, particularly on taught degrees.
- **Some students may work on funded research projects**, but they will always be under clear supervision and will not be the PI and have overall responsibility for the project.
- **Constant and clear training and guidance are crucial as they instil best practice from the start.** This can be provided at various stages but should be built into the teaching of the course or module so that students are given grounding in the principles of research ethics and good research conduct. This ensures that, as the students are thinking about the research they wish to undertake, they are engaging with the ethical issues that emerge. Ethics committees can spend time on ill-thought-out projects that would have benefited from additional advice and guidance (and on occasion that would mean the project at this point does not see the light of day!). It is also unfair to participants to expect them to take part in a research project that is not well thought out.
- **Training and information** are needed for all those involved in the process. This includes the supervisors of projects, some of whom may not be employed by the institution.
- **Responsibility to the participants:** As noted, regardless of risk level, students should always follow best practice such as in terms of research ethics – including the approval process, informed consent, information provision, GDPR and data storage etc. Whilst imaginative ways of carrying this out can be considered, it can still feel quite bureaucratic to students, the most important aspect must be the impact on the participant and researcher. It can be difficult to achieve the right balance; students may feel deterred from doing the project. But as noted, institutions have a responsibility to the participants for even the lowest risk project to be run properly. It also helps the students think more rigorously about the ethical implications of what they are doing.
- **Student responsibilities:** The key to this is that students are ingrained with the ability to think through the issues with their supervisor and take responsibility for the research they are undertaking. Research integrity is rooted in personal values and integrity and the focus should be on ensuring that students as researchers are encouraged to act responsibly throughout and follow best practice.
- **Another angle that needs to be considered is what parts of a programme are research projects and what are taught assignments.** Students can be

doing very similar things, and taught modules can also raise ethical issues. It will be sensible and pragmatic to **set clear boundaries on what is considered a research project and what is not**, and how the ethical matters raised by taught practical assignments and other taught elements are managed.

- **Masters programmes:** The same principles apply to students in Masters programmes, with the exception that their research project will form a greater proportion of their degree, and a greater level of expectation can be placed on an understanding of what research is, the awareness of the rules and good practice in research. Whilst still a very early-stage researcher in need of clear guidance, support and training, they should have a greater understanding of good research conduct than an undergraduate. It is also likely that they will have received more formal guidance and training on the conduct of research etc, and they can also often be part of funded research projects.

Academic misconduct

For all the reasons above, undergraduate students and students on taught Masters programmes are not normally included under the auspices of an institutional research misconduct procedure. Behaviours such as plagiarism, misrepresentation etc will normally be managed via institutional processes for academic misconduct, that will be in place for dealing with examination misconduct such as cheating in examinations.

Academic misconduct procedures can for obvious reasons be focussed on behaviours relating to teaching and learning and not research. Activities related to research that undergraduate and students on taught Masters programmes carry out must be fully addressed in the relevant procedure. This includes failures to follow any part of the research ethics process such as research undertaken without or before obtaining ethical opinion/approval; also, not carrying out the project in accordance with the approval granted, for example failure to gain informed consent or to comply with GDPR and data storage requirements.

As readers will be aware, a basic principle of research ethics is that providing approval retrospectively is not possible. Generally, the data should be destroyed, and the research not used. This can be challenging to address for at least two reasons. Firstly, the student is carrying out the project under supervision and if difficulties occur resulting from poor supervision, then a balance needs to be struck between the immutable principle above and ensuring the student should not be unduly punished for a failure in the system. **A view will need to be taken on the level of responsibility of both student and supervisor.** Are the rules sufficiently embedded to ensure that both should be expected to know what is required? And if not, how do you resolve the situation given that retrospective approval is not normally given? Scenarios here include permitting the research to be used exceptionally for the assessment process only. There could be a penalty imposed but that does not necessarily involve failing the module entirely.

Also worth considering is the intersection with fitness to practice guidance and procedures. If it is considered that the behaviours demonstrated indicate a concern over fitness to practice, then the fitness to practice procedure may need to be invoked.

Research students and research misconduct

This section provides advice on research students and the operation of research misconduct procedures. It should be of interest primarily to research integrity officers and Named Persons (the person nominated by an organisation who has the responsibility of receiving allegations and other obligations relating to conducting a research misconduct investigation, see a full definition in [UKRIO's Model procedure](#), paragraph 236, page 56).

Locating research students in the governance and management procedures for research misconduct can be complex, sitting as the students do, in some senses between students and researchers. Whilst they are students and have the relationship of a student with the institution, their programme is unique to them, and the way they work is very different from students on taught programmes. The outcome of the research they are undertaking forms the assessment for the award of their degree in addition to being original research. Some students may be staff members as well as registered students with the institution, and others may be studying professional doctorates that involve a significant taught element.

For these reasons, they often do not sit neatly within procedures designed primarily for research and academic staff or students on taught programmes. **It is important to tease out the circumstances specific to these students and ensure that the process used for dealing with alleged research integrity breaches fits those circumstances, rather than shoehorning them into a procedure which is not designed for them, and which does not suit their circumstances.**

The statement in [UKRIO's Model procedure](#) regarding research students aims to help institutions do this effectively:

The decision on which process to use to investigate allegations of misconduct involving students should take account of the nature of the allegation and which process would be most suitable to carry out a full, fair and transparent investigation of the allegation(s) in question, in a timely manner and with appropriate confidentiality. Organisations should also be mindful of legal and other obligations regarding investigations relating to students, including those set by external bodies (e.g., the Office for Students).

For example, an Organisation's examination regulations/academic misconduct process/equivalent may be viewed as a more suitable process to investigate an allegation relating to work submitted as part of the assessment process (including but not limited to a thesis), while the misconduct investigation procedure may be viewed as a more suitable process to investigate allegations relating to the conduct of the research itself.

If the student has an employer relationship with the organisation, then they should be dealt with under employee procedures.

The following questions and statements might help you ensure that the above statement happens in reality:

- **They are researchers.** The aspects of the work they carry out that are research (such as dealing with research participants, collecting qualitative or quantitative data, carrying out experiments, drafting and writing chapters) should be expected to meet the same standards in the conduct of research by staff and they should be treated similarly to staff when the conduct falls short of required standards.
- **They are early career, very junior researchers with supervisors.** This means that there may be elements where they are reliant on their supervisory team for advice and support on their project and the conduct of their research. If something goes wrong, then the level of culpability on supervisors and the student will need to be considered.
- **They are students who are being or going to be assessed for the award of a degree.** Therefore, any work they do for that purpose specifically must meet the academic standards required for the award of the research degree, including meeting the appropriate standards of integrity. They must receive the support and supervision appropriate for level 8 programmes (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland), or level 12 (Scotland).
- **The outcome will normally be made available publicly.** For this to happen, the work must form part of the canon of research in the relevant discipline and be available for other researchers in the field to locate and cite from where appropriate.

Achieving the balance between the areas above is not straightforward. For example, if it transpires that a student did not receive the appropriate information and advice on the conduct of the research, or on gaining the ethical and other approvals required, this would normally mean research cannot be used or published, but it may be considered that the student was not sufficiently culpable to not be awarded their degree. A solution may need to be found that finds a way through that scenario. This may include the award of a lower degree such as an MPhil rather than a PhD or that the research is not published subsequently.

As noted, the relevant procedures need to be appropriately tailored to the situation. Academic misconduct regulations can be designed more for misconduct seen in taught programmes such as plagiarism and examination misconduct, and it can be tricky to tie in behaviour related to the conduct of research and not directly related to assessment behaviours.

Another aspect to be considered will be whether sufficient robust data for a PhD remains, regardless of the disciplinary situation. Compromised data cannot be used. If it is determined that the student should be permitted to continue and submit their PhD, then depending on the stage they are at with the PhD, an extension may need to be considered so that they can gather sufficient robust data. For externally

funded degrees, funders will need to be informed at the relevant stage, and extensions for this reason might not be straightforward.

A situation may arise where students may be able to submit and be awarded their degrees but will not be permitted to use the data or thesis for publications in any way. It is thus used for educational purposes only and not for research purposes subsequently. That could be complicated by any funder or industry involvement as they will wish to secure the benefits of the research.

If an investigation is carried out via the research misconduct procedure, any subsequent disciplinary investigation will normally be carried out via a student disciplinary procedure (unless the person is a member of staff as well). It is crucial that there is clear signposting between the two procedures so that the remit, jurisdiction and referral points are completely clear. It is important to refine existing procedures to ensure appropriate positions are in place before complicated matter arises.

Where a research student is also a member of staff, clarity is needed on which procedures take precedence. Normally this will be the employment relationship and terms and conditions, but account will need to be taken of the student relationship as well, such as in terms of the impact of any decision on the award of the degree.

Allegations relating to degrees already awarded

Occasionally, allegations may be made about a thesis that has already been awarded and published. This can be challenging, and whilst it is a rare occurrence, it is important to have procedures in place to cover that situation. Most institutions will have a procedure in place for the revocation of a degree, but Research Integrity Officers should consider reviewing it to ascertain on what grounds revocation is possible.

One occasion when this might occur is when investigating allegations into a body of work, or a historic allegation relating to events that took place in the past. It will be necessary to check on whether there is a time limit on the potential to revoke a degree.

The research misconduct investigation should take place as normal using the procedure designated. If the outcome of the investigation is that misconduct in research did occur, then the institution will need to consider revocation of the degree awarded resulting from the research, as part of the outcomes stage, and if so, invoking the relevant procedure.

Your feedback

We are very happy to receive comments on this note, or ideas for additional sections. Please email info@ukrio.org with any suggestions.

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