



Research Ethics in Teaching and Learning

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Synopsis

The evolution of enquiry based teaching and learning has broadened the range of research carried out by university students. As a result, the boundaries between teaching and learning and academic research are being blurred to a degree not experienced heretofore. This paper examines whether research undertaken as part of course work should fall under the remit of the research ethics committee (REC). We explore this debate before determining that in-class research should be subject to research ethics oversight. The challenges this poses for RECs are delineated. The paper concludes by advancing a number of potential solutions to the problems identified. The experiences of the authors, both of whom have served on a business school REC for years, inform the discussion.

Introduction and Background

For universities, the creation and dissemination of research is a core activity. While typically associated with academic staff, it is also an important element of their taught programmes. The nature and role of research embedded in taught programmes, however, raises important questions regarding the scope and mandate of RECs within universities. Their acknowledged remit is the protection of research participants and researchers, the promotion of ethical research practices and the protection of the reputation of the academic institution (Doyle, Mullins, & Cunningham, 2010). It is clear that this includes traditional academic research, namely activity undertaken in order to discover things in a systematic manner, thereby increasing knowledge (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). However, in the context of research in teaching and learning, the remit and responsibilities of RECs is less clear. This paper explores this question. Our aim is to assist other RECs in their deliberations on this issue.

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A full copy of the paper can be obtained from the authors at:

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Issues and Questions Considered

The full version of this paper outlines the various arguments for REC overview of in-class research projects and also discusses the counter arguments – see the link below.

While strongly advocating that primary research undertaken by students as part of taught modules should be the subject of RE review, we do acknowledge the significant difficulties this raises. Perhaps the most obvious challenge is the sheer scale of work for the committee. Timing is another significant issue. Even when REC submission deadlines are carefully considered in advance of setting class project timelines, it can be difficult for students to comply with REC procedures within relevant time frames. Indeed, the requirement for in-class research projects to be submitted for RE review might dissuade module leaders from integrating such work into modules. A further challenge is to ensure that faculty involved in teaching engage with and are sufficiently knowledgeable about RE review processes.

Enabling mechanisms

We suggest that identifying suitable individuals to populate and chair RECs is critical to successfully enhancing RE culture. Blindly following rigid rules, and a reluctance to use discretion in considering applications, shatters faculty and student confidence in the process and renders it ineffective in doing anything but adding to an already bureaucratic domain.

REC's could potentially create strict rules concerning the scope and content of in-class projects, particularly at the undergraduate level. A well-defined framework clearly articulating what is and is not allowed, coupled with the use of an abridged application form which would capture any contentious research, while also facilitating the speedy review of innocuous projects, would assist RECs in the oversight of in-class research without creating an onerous process for students, module leaders or the REC.

Universities need to implement procedures to ensure that students have opportunities to undertake primary research without exhausting the research population.

Module leaders might consider requiring students to complete group projects, thereby reducing the number of applications, or, if the project is homogenous, submitting an application on behalf of all the students undertaking the module.

Rather than considering all applications at a REC meeting, it may be possible to screen applications asynchronously before meeting. If all REC members agree that the application raises no issues, it is automatically approved. If, however, any concerns are raised, the application is passed to the REC and processed in the usual manner. Building on this, and on the basis that involvement in the RE process is a positive learning experience, the pre-

screening group might include one or more students, reducing faculty workload.

Perhaps the most effective mechanism for efficiently processing REC applications involving in-class research would be the establishment of a specialist REC, charged with reviewing in-class research.

Conclusion

We strongly endorse Smith and Rust's contention that truly inclusive academic communities of practice can be achieved only if students are facilitated to engage in scholarly activity moving between learning, teaching and research (Smith & Rust, 2011, p. 115). However, their paper omits the RE implications of this aspiration. In this paper, we advocate RE oversight of taught module research.

Our considered position is that for philosophical, educational and practical reasons, REC oversight of in-class projects is a necessity. We contend that the RE review of in-class research involving human subjects will protect researchers, participants and the institution, serve to engender a strong RE culture within universities and ensure that students graduate with an ethical awareness not always evident in recent generations. We would urge RECs to adopt an accommodating approach to in-class RE oversight that will enhance the ethics culture of the institution rather than simply become another bureaucratic layer in an already overburdened domain.

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