



***Research in Higher Education Teaching and Learning (RHETL): the use of student contributions and other ethical issues***

A report produced for UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee  
Jennie Golding with Olga Cara, Stephanie Chan,  
Cosette Crisan, Amanda Ince, and d'Reen Struthers

## Table of Contents

<b><i>Executive summary and recommendations</i></b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>1. Rationale</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Report aims and target audience</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>3. A glossary of related terms</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>4. Ethics and RHETL in IOE</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>4.1 General ethical issues</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>4.2 Insider research</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>4.3 Use of student contributions</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>4.3.1 Student contributions as secondary data</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>4.3.2 Students as collaborators</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>4.3.3 Is individual opt-in consent always required?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>4.3.4 Learning from digital research</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>4.4 Processes of gaining ethical consent</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>5. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b><i>References</i></b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b><i>Appendix 1: Selected relevant web pages</i></b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b><i>Appendix 2: Additional guidance for RHETL ethics applications</i></b> .....	<b>13</b>

## Executive summary and recommendations

- Academics often wish to research their own, or their colleagues', teaching practice and/or the related learning, in ways that are robust and transferable or generalisable, contributing to the field. For many, this sort of education research lies outside their disciplinary expertise. High quality research of this nature can enhance student experiences in universities, and can also support academics in becoming more expert in their teaching practice, and so improve their job satisfaction.
- There are competing related definitions, and this can lead to confusion. We understand such empirical research to be systematic enquiry made public, theoretically informed and with findings that are generalisable or transferable so that they contribute to knowledge in the field.

**Recommendation 1: IOE should adopt the use of the acronym RHETL ('Research in Higher Education Teaching and Learning') for such research that is focused on an academic's own, or colleague's, teaching, and/or the related learning.**

- This report analyses the ethical issues related to RHETL, in the hope that transparency will support and encourage colleagues' participation in such research. All departments in IOE have a department ethics coordinator (DEC), who can advise and support around the range of research-related ethical issues.
- RHETL will need ethical consent before it can begin, and in IOE that will be via the IOE Research Ethics Committee (REC). We firmly believe that careful engagement with related ethical issues can only enhance the rigour of any research, so rather than being a 'hurdle to jump over', ethical consent processes contribute to a foundation for high quality research. RHETL is likely to involve many common ethical issues, discussed in 4.1, but also two aspects that merit particular ethical consideration: typically, a degree of 'insiderliness', and often also, use of student contributions of some kind, maybe even students as collaborators to some degree. Related issues are discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3.
- Taken together, these discussions underline that although relatively 'low risk' in UCL terms, RHETL necessitates careful consideration of a number of ethical issues. After careful examination of alternatives, we conclude that the current IOE staff ethics application form cannot be significantly improved upon for RHETL purposes, although can still be daunting for colleagues new to the field.

**Recommendation 2: IOE REC should adopt use of an additional guidance sheet for RHETL, similar to that in Appendix 2.**

- Teaching timetables place significant constraints on the development and implementation of RHETL. It is therefore important that applications for ethical consent are dealt with as promptly as possible, and by colleagues with a particular interest, and expertise, in RHETL. Where student contributions are involved, it might be especially helpful to have one of the two reviewers a student member of the REC, or perhaps a PGTA.

**Recommendation 3: The IOE REC should appoint a panel of RHETL specialist reviewers, responsible for reviewing RHETL ethics applications wherever possible (and RHETL research should be identified by a small addition to section 1 of the IOE ethics application form). That panel might include one or more interested student members.**

**Recommendation 4: RHETL panel members should commit to review within 15 working days, so that overall turnaround time to first decision is no more than 20 days.**

- We suggest that adoption of the recommendations here would significantly enhance the confidence with which academic colleagues could embark on RHETL, and the rigour of that research.

## 1. Rationale

Academics who are not primarily education researchers often want to actively research the impact of their own practice, or those of colleagues, in ways which are recognised to be rigorous and are valued by the wider academic community. Such work goes beyond the scholarly use of established research to inform their teaching. If academics do not have a background in educational research of this nature they might not be familiar with the ethical issues associated with such work, so are likely to be challenged in navigating the related hurdles. While 'getting ethics consent' is often perceived as a necessary challenge to be overcome, and is indeed a goal in its own right, we argue for an expanded understanding in two ways: first, that the process of analysing every stage of the research for its ethical robustness in itself contributes significantly to the rigour of the resulting research, and is therefore to be highly valued; and second, that where participant consent needs to be sought, that should always be conceptualised, and enacted, as a requirement for ongoing consent through the life of the research to dissemination and impact.

## 2. Report aims and target audience

This report aims to analyse the principal ethical issues associated with academics researching their own or colleagues' teaching, and students' learning, especially via the use of student contributions of any kind, and to make recommendations which would support colleagues in undertaking such research. That will almost always involve data that derives from human participants, if only the lecturer, and so will need ethical consent from the [IOE REC](#). That must always be given before any data is used for research. If it includes 'personal' data, that is, any data that might conceivably risk identification of the individual concerned, then the Research Ethics Committee (REC) will deal with the related GDPR consent.

The report target readership is twofold: the IOE REC for its considered response to the arguments and recommendations made; and academic colleagues without a background in educational research of this nature who wish to embark on RHETL, and for whom a single report outlining the key issues to be considered, with links to some related literature, might offer valuable information and confidence. We are particularly conscious of the needs of those colleagues on teaching contracts who would like to engage in doing research.

For a newcomer to such work, one early hurdle often encountered is the multiplicity of related terms. Their definitions are often contested, and used in different ways in different academic communities, but for clarity we outline the concepts as we understand them; the reader of the related literature of course should always interrogate that for the implicit or explicit definitions adopted.

## 3. A glossary of related terms

- **Research:** Stenhouse (1981, p.104) defines research as 'systematic enquiry made public'. We adopt Stenhouse's definition and suggest that ethical conduct of such activity requires that it meet current standards of research ethics and rigour that are exposed to wide public scrutiny via coherent communication. We expect empirical research to be designed and based on identified theory, a testable hypothesis or question to which answers are demonstrable, and critically, with findings that aim to be generalizable or transferable so they can contribute to the knowledge base within their respective discipline (cf Levin-Rozalis, 2003).
- **(Professional) E(I)nquiry** (including 'evaluation of practice'): Such enquiry is based in practice and might be systematic; it sets out to explore a question of professional interest, that will remain fairly specific to the context, and for which the findings will remain in local use, rather than exposed to wider peer scrutiny.
- **Scholarship:** critical engagement with the existing research literature relevant to a practice or question. UCL has an expectation that all teaching will be 'research-informed', and that involves critical engagement with the research literature. For many academics, 'the literature' is taken to focus on their discipline, but there is also an argument for scholarly engagement with the literature in Higher Education teaching and learning (including discipline-specific such literature), and

particularly, discipline-specific pedagogic literature. Such scholarship is necessary, but it does not equate with research in our terms.

- **Pedagogic research:** there is little consensus amongst HE practitioners over definitions of ‘pedagogic research’ and Stierer and Antoniou (2004) noted that “that pedagogic research in UK Higher Education is so diverse, in terms of its purposes, contexts and personnel, that it is unreasonable to discuss it as if it were a single, stable and monolithic enterprise, or to apply the same standards and criteria uniformly when judging its quality” (p. 282 ). The term has been [adopted by UCL](#) to mean ‘an established field of academic discourse involving carefully investigating your teaching practice and in turn developing the curriculum’ within Higher Education: it is conflated with educational enquiry and Higher Education teaching-related scholarship. We, in contrast, understand the term to indicate research (as defined above) into the impact of specific approaches to teaching (of young people or adults).
- **Scholarship of teaching and learning:** this term is used variably, and often inclusively, in the literature. Sometimes it means ‘scholarship’ in the above sense, as it applies to teaching and/or learning; at other times, as in Schnurr & Taylor (2019), it is indistinguishable from our understanding of research, whereas Healey et al.’s (2013, p.24) definition straddles both. Readers of the term therefore need to be sensitised to the range of its uses; Burman & Kleinsasser (2004) Hutchings (2003), Sharp (2023) give accounts of the development of use.
- **Close-to-practice research** is defined by [BERA](#) as ‘research focused on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involving collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both’ (p. 2). High quality in close-to-practice research requires the robust use of research design, theory and methods to address clearly defined research questions, through an iterative process of research and application that includes reflections on practice, research and context.

**In the light of the above definitions, we take RHETL (research in Higher Education teaching and learning) to be research as defined above, focused on some aspect of the researcher’s own or colleague’s teaching activity in Higher Education, and/or the related learning.**

*We suggest that the related scholarship is a prerequisite to high quality RHETL, and that both pedagogic research and close-to-practice research in Higher Education are subsets of RHETL.*

***Recommendation 1:* IOE should adopt the use of the acronym RHETL (‘Research in Higher Education Teaching and Learning’) for research (by Stenhouse’s definition) that is focused on an academic’s own, or colleague’s, teaching, and/or the related learning.**

The Cambridge Higher Education Studies Research Ethics Committee CHESREC has a useful table comparing RHETL with evaluation of practice, by which they mean something akin to professional enquiry, at [Research & Evaluation | Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning](#). All the above processes of course bring with them responsibilities and issues that are ethical in nature.

## 4. Ethics and RHETL in IOE

In general, RHETL will involve data derived from human participants (including administrative records), and so requires ethical consent, before any research data may be collected, or any research use is made of data previously collected for another purpose. Two key ethical considerations common in RHETL are that the researcher is often an 'insider' to some extent, and that the research design often draws on student contributions; we focus on each of those issues below.

- Guidance to gaining ethical consent may be found [here](#), and for those unfamiliar with such processes, the department ethics coordinator or a colleague experienced in educational research will be able to support.
- Time must be allowed for this stage: note the indicative times to feedback on the IOE ethics application form.
- Attach any research tools, such as surveys or interview schedules, so they can be evaluated for ethical issues.
- Also attach information sheets and opt-in consent forms for any participants or (potential) owners of the data which is to be used for the research. Information sheets should outline arrangements for storage of research data and how the reader can obtain further information and should outline timelines and time commitment for data collection; all clauses in consent forms should feature Yes/No alternatives rather than assume positive responses.
- As above, these stages can seem frustratingly slow, but they do serve to expose your plans to external scrutiny, and so support rigour.

### 4.1 General ethical issues

- **beneficence** (do no harm, and if possible, benefit participants), including adopting an approach which is respectful and values participants' time and contributions, making minimal demands on time and collecting only data which is necessary for the research.
- **freely given and informed (ongoing) consent** from all human sources of data, and sometimes also from 'gatekeepers' (in HEIs, these might include course leaders or HOADs). Although 'full information' is probably not attainable, the information sheet should give sufficient information for an informed decision about participation to be made; there should be no consequences of declining to participate, and a 'cooling off' period of some sort, including, usually, the possibility to withdraw participation and related data. If the research is sustained, ensure consent, and the opportunity to withdraw, are actively revisited at regular intervals.
- **anonymity and confidentiality in use of data** unless participants wish otherwise (or there is an overriding concern, such as safeguarding). Participants might want their contributions to be acknowledged, but if not, pseudonymity can usually be offered. Surprisingly little demographic data is needed to identify an individual, so restrict that to data which is highly valuable to your research, and if anonymity is not achievable, analyse the risks of identification and share that with potential participants. Identification is also a risk if your reporting describes the research context too closely, e.g. if it's a small course traceable to you. Similarly, take care to remove any electronic identification tags before sharing.
- **inclusion and equity** in the voices heard: it is always important to ensure that no relevant groups are inadvertently marginalised from participation in research, perhaps because of the timing of data collection or the cultural assumptions underpinning the methods used – and that any such risks are proactively addressed.
- **rigour and impact** in research design, so that good use is made of the data made available. If the research is not well-designed and rigorously carried out, reported, and otherwise disseminated in relevant quarters, findings will not make a well-respected contribution to knowledge - and so participants' time and efforts are devalued. Researchers new to this form of research should ensure they develop an appropriate level of expertise before embarking on it, perhaps through reading, drawing on colleagues' experience, or using UCL opportunities delineated [here](#). Of course, the ethics consent process itself can also contribute to research expertise, since the proposed design is held up to external scrutiny.
- **incentives** (perhaps better conceptualised as 'tokens of appreciation') should be employed only sparingly, and only ever as a small and proportionate recognition of the additional time and effort that the research requires of participants. Particular care should be taken when the

participants are one's own students, with the related power imbalance inherent in that, but some funders, e.g. UCL Changemakers, allow for such use. Any such tokens of appreciation must be specified in the ethics application.

- **data storage:** Storage of data depends on its status. **Primary research data** is that collected for research purposes, after ethical (and participant) consent processes have been completed. **Secondary research data** is that which was initially collected for other purposes, but which might, after due consent processes have been completed, become research data. GDPR requires that any personal data, whether in student assignment, teaching session recording, assessment records.... is only stored for the duration of need for intended purpose. Such materials should not therefore be stored for longer than that *in case* it might be wanted for research. However, once ethical consent is obtained for use of such data as secondary research data, different considerations apply. UCL recommends that all research data is kept securely (e.g. in the Data Safe Haven) for ten years after the research, in case of query, or, if permission for such use has been given, for re-use.
- **Use of digital data:** Clark et. al (2019) define digital data "as information created and stored in a computer mediated environment that can potentially be transmitted as discrete information signals over the internet, and may be subsequently processed and/or stored for a range of known and unforeseen purposes." (p. 60) and acknowledge that researchers and research ethics communities are struggling to respond to the ethical issues being raised by collection of such types of data. The nature of such data continues to expand rapidly, but includes text, images, videos, presentations, websites..... Some specific issues are addressed in 4.3 below, and in Schuck et al.(2006), Kornhaber (2015) and Brooker (2017). but as an overriding approach, advice should be sought (e.g. from the DEC) if such issues are not clear; related resources are included at the end of the Reference section.

## 4.2 Insider research

Much RHETL has an insider 'aspect' to it, in that the researcher often shares academic cultures, contexts and perhaps discipline with participants. In common with Dillon & Thomas (2018) and Dwyer et al. (2009), we understand outsiderliness/insiderliness to be multi-dimensional, and on a continuum rather than dichotomous; furthermore, positionality can change over the course of the research, and with that, the associated ethical issues (Collins et al., 2020). Relative insider positioning can bring a number of advantages, including familiarity with contexts, knowledge of structures, personnel and constraints, prolonged exposure to the research site... (Mercer, 2007). However, there are also potential issues and constraints (Ritter & Ergas, 2021), and particularly when the research seeks contributions from students currently or previously taught by the researcher, or assessed by them. These include:

- **Unequal power relations** and so difficulties in establishing freely-given consent (or sometimes, validity of responses given). This can be a particular problem if there is an ongoing teacher-student relationship, and/or the researcher will be assessing the students. One solution, if the research design allows for it, is that all students are offered consent forms, but those are not read and acted upon until after assessment. Another solution is that class teachers do not research their own classes, but only those of colleagues, perhaps on a reciprocal basis; again, that is not always possible.
- **Use of teaching time for research purposes:** even if the research is focusing on a teaching intervention, there are often tensions between roles as lecturer and as researcher. For example, time and focus available for teaching might be compromised by attention to data collection, timing or emphasis in teaching approach modified in order to facilitate the emergence of high-quality research data, ....Such possible tensions should be anticipated and addressed in advance, and conclusions held up to scrutiny in ethics applications.
- **Identifiability of contributions:** the researcher will often know who made the contribution, but more widely, the researcher is usually known to have taught particular classes, narrowing the field of contributor – and class peers will often recognise contributions. Participants might of course be content, or keen, to have contributions attributed to them by name, but if not, steps might be taken to include commitments to peer confidentiality in consent forms, and to limit the assurances of anonymity that can be given.
- **Poorly-grounded assumptions:** a teacher researching their own, or a closely-related, class should take steps to 'make the familiar strange', since alongside the advantages of relative

'insiderliness' come risks of poorly-evidence assumptions, limited awareness of other possible choices, or the constraints of teacherly behaviour or relationships...

- **Validity of interpretation and reporting:** Much RHETL is necessarily within an interpretivist paradigm, aiming for a valid account of the data. Not only are different accounts of data possible, but personal relations and expectations position everyone concerned, the motivation for the research affects what the researcher sees; and participants select what they say and how they say it, leaving other thoughts unsaid. The authorial voice is therefore constructed out of both participant and researcher decisions regarding the data. The possibility of researcher bias should be recognised, acknowledged and mitigated.

Such considerations underline that **there is a need for sustained reflexivity in relation to the researcher's position, and an especial need to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the research** in terms of its methodological rigour and analytical defensibility (e.g. Anfara et al., 2002; LaBoskey, 2004).

### 4.3 Use of student contributions

There are strong ethical arguments for involving students in research focused on academics' own teaching and learning: their voices and other responses are key to understanding those processes and should be valued. On the other hand, it is also important to value student time and effort, and so to minimise the requests that are made for research only, rather than for learning purposes. The use of students' contributions made during teaching and learning makes minimal additional call on students' time but does bring with it several ethical issues that we address below.

Artefacts, of whatever nature, generated by UCL students (as a general principle) become their intellectual property (IP) whether or not they derive from their studies. There are, however, some important exceptions, including when funding contracts or sponsorships stipulate otherwise. In collaborative contexts, students might own IP separately from, or shared with, collaborators. Other exceptional circumstances are addressed [here](#) (and below) but overall, **student contributions should not be used, directly or indirectly, without freely-given and informed owner consent**. Anonymity cannot always be guaranteed, for example if the teaching group is small or the contribution public across a sub-group; or if the demographic or professional details in the contribution might, at least with some effort, reveal the student identity. Sometimes, students will not want anonymity, and would prefer to be named in relation to their contribution. If that is a possibility, consent processes should allow that option.

Contributions as potential research data might take a variety of forms. These include:

- **Written tasks or assignments, including presentations,** available in physical or digital form: Submitted assignments might be anonymised, and consent for use as research data sought for example on a cover sheet, but if a colleague has formatively assessed that submission at an earlier stage, anonymity in publication cannot be assured and that should be recognised in any preamble to seeking of consent. In general, use of assignments submitted for summative assessment should, where anonymity is sought, be carefully examined for identifiability, taking into account the size of the cohort, the replication of the course over time, demographic or contextual information cited, etc. Similar considerations apply to use of contributions submitted for formative assessment.
- **Survey/questionnaire responses:** Research information and consent for the use of responses, as above, might be addressed at the start of a survey or module evaluation. Consideration should be given as to balance between offering withdrawal of data from research use and the identification of participant that would entail. Some survey software is more secure than others, and reports will often include identifiers that link to a particular piece of hardware. In general, even for low-risk data, it is good practice to remove such identifiers before sharing data with a third party. UCL staff and students can use Qualtrics for collecting information that is not highly confidential; more confidential data may be collected via [REDCap in the Data Safe Haven](#). Further considerations around the use of third-party software for its greater functionality, can be found [here](#). General guidelines for use of surveys, whether for purposes of teaching and learning or of research, include requesting the minimum data necessary for the intended purpose. For research, any splitting of responses by demographic categories should protect anonymity.



- **Online contributions requested or required by the lecturer**, e.g. contribution to a forum or a blog, might or might not in their raw form be anonymous. Consent for use of named contributions may be sought post-hoc (or given in advance, but not accessed until later); use of anonymous contributions would require consent from all possible contributors.
- **In-class oral contributions**, including to group discussion, need consent prior to any form of recording; without recording they will lack accuracy as research data. Since recording affects other members of the class, who will also be able to attribute the contribution, consent for recording needs to be from the entire class, and the whole class should consent to maintaining confidentiality of contributor identity. It is often quite demanding to establish that such consent is freely given. Any such contributions are particularly susceptible to the power imbalance between teacher and students (and sometimes intra-students), particularly during discussion of sensitive issues, and any such issue might threaten validity of data. Such issues must be very actively addressed if the class is recorded on Lecturecast or a web platform such as zoom or Teams.
- **Unsolicited online contribution** that is also in the (fully) public domain, e.g. to Twitter. While it might be thought that the use of such data, whether attributable or not, is unproblematic since owners have chosen to make their contributions public, ethical issues remain. These are related to openness, accountability, transparency, and fairness in data, for example establishing an auditable trail of selection, striving for equitability and inclusiveness, not making misleading use..... Further guidance can be found [here](#). Since the availability and approaches to reaping open-source data are changing rapidly, researchers considering a novel methodology in this area should seek further advice, initially from the REC.
- **Emails, personal reflective notes or journals**: the key issue here is likely to be freely-given and informed consent, and identifiability in use (unless the participant wishes to be identified).
- **Professional materials** developed by students: where potential research data takes the form of materials developed for specific contextualised professional practice, e.g. a lesson plan for a particular class in a school, others might have a stake in the related IP. Gatekeeper permission (and opportunity to opt into identification) should be sought if there is any possibility that the professional context might be identifiable from the contribution.
- **Contributions which are research data only, rather than arising from teaching and learning activities**. These include e.g. survey, interview or focus group responses. Participation in such activities should in general take place outside scheduled teaching and learning time (or a strong justification for use of in-class time given). They should be as restricted as is consistent with research needs, in recognition of the value of student time. As always, every effort should be made to avoid coercion at any level, though a small-scale 'token of appreciation' in recognition of students' time and effort might be approved.

#### 4.3.1 Student contributions as secondary data

Where students make contributions as part of their learning, rather than for research purposes, those contributions have the potential later to be used as research data, provided they have been reliably captured in some way as part of the teaching and learning process. They would then potentially comprise secondary research data – to which the usual research ethics processes apply before they may in any way be used as research data. At the point of planning for research use, it might simply not be possible to contact student owners of the contributions: assignments might have been anonymised at submission, current student contact details might not be available,... and that risk increases with time. If it is likely that some (anonymised) student assignments post-grading are to be used for research purposes, consent might in principle be sought on the original cover sheet, but that is a complex process bringing a number of ethical ramifications, and we recommend that instead, students are approached post-assessment in case they are willing to share their work for research purposes. Unless the student chooses for ownership of that contribution to be identified, the extracts quoted, and contextual details given, should, as above, be carefully examined for potential identifiability.

#### 4.3.2 Students as collaborators

Inviting students to collaborate in RHETL begins to address some of the ethical issues identified and supports UCL initiatives such as the [Connected Curriculum](#) and [Changemakers](#) projects. However, within that, an ethical approach will require both informed student opt-in to collaboration and that the collaboration is genuine rather than merely nominal: student roles might lie on a continuum between

provider of data, and genuine co-researcher, though in the latter case they are novice researchers. Such work can be research-educative for students, lending justification to the study, as well as having the potential to enhance teaching and learning for future cohorts. However, power imbalances resulting from staff and student different roles in the university, and different research experience, will persist, and although the use of student collaborator contributions raises fewer issues, the challenges identified above remain where student contributions from beyond the collaborator group are sought. Allin (2014) discusses the issues further.

### 4.3.3 Is individual opt-in consent always required?

Where it is known in advance that an innovation or practice is to be the subject of research as opposed to professional enquiry, an ethics application must be submitted and related opt-in consent to specific data collection should then be sought. No data should be collected for purely research purposes without such consent. Where the researcher is also the teacher, it is good practice to offer all possible sample students a Yes/No consent form, and to keep those secure and unread until after all researcher teaching and assessment is complete, so as to avoid perceptions of undue pressure to participate. Ethical use of data would then entail all potential research data being identifiable, even if later pseudonymised, so that the contributions of students who had not given consent could be excluded. However, such advance consent, unless very carefully handled, has the potential to undermine teacher/student relationships, or even cause student stress, so should be very sparingly used; it might also disturb learning processes (so threatening the validity of research findings).

As with many issues in research ethics, there are circumstances in which opt-in consent is not possible, though every effort should be made to achieve that. For example, the proposed research data might include a comparison with assignments submitted to a similar brief made five years ago, with the named students no longer contactable, or the assignments anonymised. Threats to the assumed anonymity of such contributions include specific demographic or professional details given in the assignment, and small cohorts that otherwise increase the risk of identifiability. Broadly, a strong case should be made, and careful reflexivity used, when contemplating any deviation from the principle of informed and freely-given consent.

### 4.3.4 Learning from digital research

There are some parallels that can be drawn between using student contributions in RHETL and digital research that can help when considering the ethical issues involved and mitigations that may be needed. Firstly, many student contributions will be in digital form which may blur public and private fields. Market Research Society/Market and Social Research (Esomar) states that if it is public data there is no need for informed consent. While most social media data is often seen as public data, student contributions that could be similar to social media content in their form (such as, forum contributions, blogs, and comments) cannot be seen in the same way as students in usual learning context do not expect to be observed and in most cases are asked to create their contributions for a specific purpose. As the British Psychological Society's Report of the Working Party on Conducting Research on the Internet explains (BPS, 2007: 3). 'unless consent has been sought, observation of public behaviour needs to take place only where people would 'reasonably expect to be observed by strangers'. Similarly, to the digital research context and social media and as the Council of American Survey Research Organisations' (CASRO) social media guidelines suggest where participants and researchers directly interact (including private spaces), informed consent must be obtained in accordance with applicable privacy and data protection laws.

Secondly, similarly, to digital and social media research when considering to use of student contributions in RHETL researchers need to reflect on their position regarding data vs text and research participant vs author debates (BSA, Ethics Guidelines and Collated Resources for Digital Research). For example, citations, quotations and references need to be discussed in case of authorship and anonymity, confidentiality, and (non)identification in case of research participants. These issues, need to be decided in conversation with the students who produced the text/data. Here a set of recommendations based on a 'dialogic, case-based, inductive, and process approach to ethics' (AoIR, 2012: 5) developed by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee could be useful as they reflect practice-focused mitigations including a detailed set of questions which researchers can use to help themselves reflect about research ethics decisions.

## 4.4 Processes of gaining ethical consent

While much RHETL is relatively 'low risk' in terms of the range of academic research, the above analysis reminds us that there are some significant considerations to be addressed. Documenting those via an ethical consent process is a systematic route to opening the ethics – and rigour - of proposed research design to external scrutiny. However, there is a risk that the related processes might deter colleagues from embarking on RHETL (Linder et al., 2014; Pool & Reitsmar, 2017), and such risk should be addressed wherever possible. Threats include:

**Complexity of application:** the IOE staff ethical consent process already compares favourably in complexity with the UCL and CHESREC 'low risk' research ethics application procedures but can still be daunting for researchers new to the field; there is potential to simplify it slightly for RHETL. Note that the definition of 'vulnerable participants' for CHESREC includes the researcher's own students (for teaching or assessment purposes); UCL's guidelines are not specific on this point, but the above discussion does suggest there will usually be particular vulnerabilities that should be addressed, as well as any specific vulnerabilities of particular individual or groups of students. Since RHETL might well be undertaken by academics not familiar with this sort of education research, RHETL-specific additional ethics guidelines might be helpful. An example is given in Appendix 2.

**Recommendation 2:** IOE REC should adopt use of an additional guidance sheet for RHETL, similar to that in Appendix 2.

**Timeline to getting consent:** [UCL processes](#) require GDPR registration for studies where any personal data (that is, information relating to an identifiable living person) are collected; RHETL will usually require such approval (which typically takes about two weeks). The IOE REC applies on behalf of the researcher, whereas wider UCL requires the individual researcher to gain GDPR registration before ethical consent application. On examination, we find that UCL low-risk ethics applications are certainly no simpler, and in some ways more complex, than IOE REC ethics applications. UCL low-risk application turnaround is then about two weeks, with a single reviewer, and higher-risk applications have to be submitted three weeks in advance of UCL REC meetings which take place ten times a year. These approaches could be considered for RHETL ethics applications, but we consider that the main disadvantage to the present IOE REC system is the turnaround time to first decision (30 working days unless an argument can be made for expedited review). We suggest ways should be found to reduce that turnaround time to at most 20 days for RHETL applications. That might be achieved as discussed below.

**Who should review RHETL ethics applications?** The IOE REC is already considering identification of specialisms within ethics review, perhaps by methodology. The risk of using reviewers not expert in the proposed methodology, is that critiques made might lack validity. RHETL ethics applications could be considered such a specialism, provided they were identified via an additional question in a question in section 1 of the staff ethics application form (and in the related feedback form). If student contributions are included as part of the research design and a two-reviewers-from-a-panel approach is adopted, some REC student representatives, or PGTAs, might wish to be included in the panel, with any application being reviewed by at most one student.

**Recommendation 3:** The IOE REC should appoint a panel of RHETL specialist reviewers, responsible for reviewing RHETL ethics applications wherever possible (and RHETL research should be identified by a small addition to section 1 of the IOE ethics application form). That panel might include one or more interested student members.

**Recommendation 4:** RHETL panel members should commit to review within 15 working days, so that overall turnaround time to first decision is no more than 20 days.

## 5. Conclusion

Research in Higher Education teaching and learning builds on the related scholarship and has the potential to enrich and enhance the quality of education available in universities. It also supports academic colleagues in becoming more knowledgeable and skilful in their teaching practice, so enhancing job satisfaction. For academics working in Higher Education, though, researching their own or their colleagues' teaching work, and/or the related learning, often brings unfamiliar challenges that are exacerbated by the range of terms in use in this area.

Ethical consent is required before commencement of such research. We reiterate that we believe serious attention to the ethics consent process is an investment in the robustness of the research that can be achieved. RHETL is typically low risk, within the range of UCL's research, and so eligible for consideration by the IOE REC. However, apart from general ethical issues as outlined in 4.1, some aspects of RHETL require particular attention. RHETL is usually insider research, at least to some extent, and the imbalance of power between teacher and student means that especial consideration should be given to the ways in which use of any student contributions is sought. Related ethical issues are discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3. For academics embarking on this sort of research for the first time, it would be helpful to have pointers to such issues readily available.

The *processes* of gaining ethical consent can also be a disincentive to colleagues embarking on RHETL, with teaching commitments and timetables fairly inflexible. Prompt consideration of ethics applications by RHETL-knowledgeable reviewers would enhance the manageability of attempting RHETL, and academic colleagues should always feel free to contact their Department Ethics Coordinator (DEC) for support.

We suggest that the adoption of such comparatively small steps would lead to significantly greater confidence among academics wishing to research their own, or their colleagues', teaching practice and/or the related learning, and support an enhanced profile for, and valuing of, RHETL within the Faculty.

## References

- Allin, L. (2014) - Collaboration Between Staff and Students in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The Potential and the Problems *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 2(1), 95–102. <https://doi.org/10.2979/teachlearningqu.2.1.95>
- Anfara, V.A., Brown, K.M. & Mangioni, T.L. (2002) Qualitative Analysis on Stage: Making the Research Process More Public. *Educational Researcher* 31(7), 28-38
- Brooker, A., Corrin, L., Fisher, J., & Mirriahi, N. (2017). Defining “data” in conversations with students about the ethical use of learning analytics. In *Proceedings of ASCILITE* (Vol. 2017, p. 34th).
- Burman, M. E., & Kleinsasser, A. (2004). Ethical guidelines for use of student work: Moving from teaching's invisibility to inquiry's visibility in the scholarship of teaching and learning. *Journal of General Education*, 53(1), 59-79. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jge.2004.0018>
- Clark, K., Duckham, M., Guillemain, M., Hunter, A., McVernon, J., O'Keefe, C., Pitkin, C., Praver, S., Sinnott, R., Warr, D. & Waycott, J. (2019). Advancing the ethical use of digital data in human

- research: challenges and strategies to promote ethical practice. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 21, 59-73.
- Collins, H., & McNulty, Y. (2020). Insider status: (Re)framing researcher positionality in international human resource management studies. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, 34(2), 202–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2397002220908425>
- Dalhousie University (2017). *Dalhousie university research ethics board guidelines on the scholarship of teaching and learning*. [https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/research-services/REB/SoLT\\_Guidelines\\_final\\_2017Feb10.pdf](https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/research-services/REB/SoLT_Guidelines_final_2017Feb10.pdf)
- Dhillon, J.K. & Thomas, N. (2019). Ethics of engagement and insider-outsider perspectives: issues and dilemmas in cross-cultural interpretation, *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42:4, 442-453, DOI: [10.1080/1743727X.2018.1533939](https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2018.1533939)
- Drake, P. (2010). Grasping at methodological understanding: a cautionary tale from insider research, *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 33:1, 85-99, DOI: [10.1080/17437271003597592](https://doi.org/10.1080/17437271003597592)
- Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 54–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105>
- Healey, R. L., Bass, T., Caulfield, J., Hoffman, A., McGinn, M. K., Miller-Young, J., & Haigh, M. (2013). Being ethically minded: Practising the scholarship of teaching and learning in an ethical manner. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 1(2), 23-33. <https://doi.org/10.2979/teachlearningqu.1.2.23>
- Hutchings, P. (2003). Competing Goods: Ethical Issues in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 35:5, 26-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091380309604116>
- Kornhaber, R., Betihavas, V., & Baber, R. J. (2015). Ethical implications of digital images for teaching and learning purposes: an integrative review. *Journal of multidisciplinary healthcare*, 299-305.
- LaBoskey, V. K. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices*, Springer: 817-869
- Levin-Rozalis, M. (2003). Evaluation and research: Differences and similarities. *The Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 18(2), 1-31.
- Linder, K. E., Elek, E. D., & Calderon, L. (2014). SoTL and the institutional review board: Considerations before navigating the application process for classroom research in higher education. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 14(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v14i2.4217>
- Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas, *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(1), 1-17, DOI: [10.1080/03054980601094651](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980601094651)
- Pool, J., & Reitsma, G. (2017). Adhering to scientific and ethical criteria for scholarship of teaching and learning. *Critical Studies in Teaching & Learning*, 5(1), 36-48. <https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v5i1.98>
- Ritter, J.K. & Ergas, O. (2021) Being a fish inside and outside the waters of self-study, *Professional Development in Education*, DOI: [10.1080/19415257.2021.1902841](https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2021.1902841)
- Schnurr, M. A., & Taylor, A. (2019). Bridging the Gap between the Research Ethics Board and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2019.1.8003>
- Schuck, S., & Kearney, M. (2006). Using digital video as a research tool: Ethical issues for researchers. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 15(4), 447-463. <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/19991/>
- Stenhouse L. (1981). What counts as research? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 29(2): 103-114.
- Stierer, B., & Antoniou, M. (2004). Are there distinctive methodologies for pedagogic research in higher education? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 9, 275–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356251042000216606>
- Wyse, D., Brown, C., Oliver, S., & Poblete, X. (2021). Education research and educational practice: The qualities of a close relationship. *British Educational Research Journal*, 47(6), 1466-1489. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3626>

## Appendix 1: Selected relevant web pages

- [Association of Internet Researchers: Ethical decision-making and internet research 2.0](#)
- [British Psychological Society: Ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research](#)
- [International Visual Sociology Association: Code of research ethics and guidelines](#)
- [PLOS Medicine: Research conducted using data obtained through online communities: Ethical implications of methodological limitations](#)
- [British Educational Research Association: Ethical issues in online research](#)
- [NSMNSS: New social media, new social science?](#)
- [Methodological Innovations – SAGE: Making ethical decisions in an online context: Reflections on using blogs to explore narratives of experience](#)
- [NSMNSS: New Social Media, New Social Science... and New Ethical Issues!](#)
- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: internet research ethics](#)

## Appendix 2: Additional guidance for RHETL ethics applications

### UCL IOE Research in Higher Education Teaching and Learning (RHETL) Draft Supplementary Guidance

Academics often wish to research their own, or their colleagues', teaching practice and/or the related learning, in ways that are robust and transferable or generalisable, contributing to the field. For many, this sort of education research lies outside their disciplinary expertise.

These notes are intended to support colleagues undertaking research in teaching and learning and the navigation of the important ethical issues it involves.

As an "insider" working with students and colleagues in a variety of ways, careful consideration must be given to the power relations and the influence these have on student contributions, permissions and engagement. This includes access to data sets collected for one purpose, e.g: student assessment and then subsequently being used for research purposes. In all cases ethical approval must be sought in advance and the following notes support the completion of the IOE staff low risk research form. A fuller rationale for this guidance can be found in the RHETL report (insert [link to final report](#)).

#### The IOE staff ethics form

All research requires ethical approval prior to commencement. This always needs careful consideration but poses particular issues when we work:

- (a) with students or use their classroom or assessment data for our research purposes;
- (b) when working with our colleagues in a research context involving professional practices in teaching and learning.

**Section 1 of the form asks if your research is RHETL.** If it is, it can be reviewed by a specialist RHETL Panel, with a target 15 working days' turnaround time.

**Section 2 of the form asks about your methods.** For research in teaching and learning this may include student assignments, assessments, class contributions, oral work, directed tasks, presentations, formative and summative feedback.... We advise that you are clear about what data sets will be scrutinised in the research methods summary. For example:

- specify if data in any datasets will be anonymised or if they include any identifiable information. Depending on the type of data included and who is analysing it, these should perhaps also be included in the secondary data section.
- If you are referring to 'student/peer roles', for example, clarify what you mean by the term and consider whether this information is a form of 'personal record'.

- For questionnaires and interviews, it would be useful to specify how any intended anonymity will be preserved (e.g., what basic demographic and questions will be included, will demographics be linked to interviews or only used to describe general characteristics of the module/programme/department.....?)
- Methods – are there any risks of identification caused by the use of datasets from a named or deducible module/Programme or Department/ student roles, etc.?

**Section 3 refers to participants** of the study. Should you be working with students from your own department, it is important you identify here which programme or project (e.g. Changemakers) and your relationship to the students (e.g. module leader, personal tutor). This may impact on the ethical approval that you will require and the ethical issues you need to discuss in section 8.

**Sections 5 and 6 refer to types of data and data analysis.** Careful consideration of who owns the datasets and access to them is advised. Students own their own contributions, for example. Further details can be given in section 8, remembering that it is not possible to gain retrospective ethical approval (6e): you must not start any research activity until you have ethical approval and any appropriate consent.

**Section 8 Ethical issues** There are a variety of potential risks for co-construction and collaboration with students from your department, as well as the implications for yourself and your peers as 'insider researcher/s'.

In collaborative contexts, students might own IP separately from, or shared with, collaborators. Other exceptional circumstances are addressed [here](#) (and below) but overall, **student contributions should not be used, directly or indirectly, without freely-given and informed owner consent.** Anonymity cannot always be guaranteed, for example if the teaching group is small or the contribution public across a sub-group; or if the demographic or professional details in the contribution might, at least with some effort, reveal the student identity. Sometimes, students will not want anonymity, and would prefer to be named in relation to their contribution. If that is a possibility, consent processes should allow that option. (see 4.3. in RHETL Report) [hyperlink here](#)

There are various types of student contributions you might draw upon, for example:

- *Written tasks or assignments, including presentations*
- *Survey/questionnaire responses*
- *Online contributions requested or required by the lecturer*
- *In-class oral contributions*
- *Unsolicited online contribution that is also in the (fully) public domain*
- *Emails, personal reflective notes or journals:*
- *Professional materials developed by students*
- *Contributions which are research data only, rather than arising from teaching and learning activities. These include e.g. survey, interview or focus group responses*

If you are considering using student contributions as secondary sources, the usual research ethics processes apply before they may in any way be used as research data. For example, where students make contributions as part of their learning, rather than for research purposes, those contributions have the potential to be later used as research data, provided they have been reliably captured in some way as part of the teaching and learning process. (see 4.3.1 in RHETL Report) [hyperlink here](#) Ethical considerations also arise when students are research collaborators. Power imbalances resulting from staff and student different roles in the university, and different research experience, will persist, and although the use of student collaborator contributions is often desirable and raises fewer issues, the challenges need to be considered carefully. (see 4.3.2 in RHETL Report) [hyperlink here](#).