

Entry

# Ethical Issues in Researching Higher Education Teaching and Learning

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**Definition:** Higher education here is taken to be education beyond school level: often at an institution (a university) that has degree-awarding powers, though some programmes may lead to a diploma, certificate or other award or qualification. Nomenclature around “research” in the associated teaching and learning is contested: professional enquiry, scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogical research... are some of the terms used. Authors discuss and distinguish such terms. An ethical issue is a circumstance in which a moral conflict arises or is implicit and should be resolved in a morally acceptable way. These include privacy, informed consent, insider research and power relationships within higher education research; there are also fluid challenges around the use of digital contributions. Authors present a narrative exegesis of work in the associated areas, which authors argue will be of use to universities promoting such research, and of particular interest to two groups of academics wishing to systematically develop their practice in ways that contribute to the field: those on teaching-only contracts, who would also demonstrate their research credentials; and researchers from non-education-cognate fields. Authors identify directions for further work.

**Keywords:** ethical issues; researching Higher Education; scholarship of teaching and learning; insider researcher; power



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## 1. Introduction, Terminology and Rationale

Research in Higher Education teaching and learning, herewith the acronym RHETL, is well-represented in the academic literature [1], usually with a focus on universities and with a contested vocabulary that this entry interrogates and critiques (see also [2]). Such research is increasingly important, globally, and especially in research-intensive universities. This entry analyses why that might be so. RHETL is, however, unfamiliar for two groups of academics: those who either hold teaching-only contracts or who come to such research from another discipline. Such academics may not fully appreciate the associated ethical issues, especially as the related research may appear as comparatively low-risk [3]. The authors, (thereafter identified as “we”) present a scoping survey of the current literature around the ethical practice of such research, and the issues that may arise in achieving ethical approaches and research integrity in its enactment. We identify challenges in the effective functioning of supporting structures and suggest steps that higher education institutions may take to further support the ethical conduct of research in this field and discuss the purpose and significance of the particular focus adopted here. Finally, we propose areas that merit ongoing or further research.

Higher education, in universities and other institutions, has two core roles: research (contributing to the advance of knowledge) and teaching (usually towards degrees, although other awards are frequently also offered), and although enterprise and engagement feature, these are not universally seen as core roles. These two core activities have different profiles across higher education institutions (HEIs) [4–7], but where both are substantial, research often appears to be more highly valued, for example, in promotion criteria [8–10]. Policy discourse and evidence in the field of higher education are dominated

by research-focused universities and higher education institutions included in international rankings [8]. Most students globally, however, are enrolled in professionally oriented and teaching-intensive institutions that are frequently overlooked by policy and research [11], and any distinctiveness of RHETL-related ethical issues in such institutions is at present unclear. Recent shifts in higher education policy to a focus on performance, economic impact, competition and vertical diversification have contributed to the bifurcation of academic responsibilities and especially the wider adoption of teaching-only roles [8,12]. Particular ethical issues arise from such “academic capitalism” [13] in educational research, with these approaches resulting in particular pressures on (researching and teaching) academics and, indirectly, potential participants in research—through the particular neoliberal publication pressures arising from punitive research funding conditions are less likely to apply to RHETL, which is commonly unfunded [14]. A range of recent evidence has, though, found notable bias towards research merits in academic career appraisal, especially in research-intensive institutions, with teaching performance not translating into parity of esteem with research and generally with less influence on academic career progression [8,10,12].

Learning in higher education represents enormous investment—of time, money and effort: the World Bank [15] forecasts over 300 million HE students globally by 2030, and already higher education accounts for about 2.5% of GDP in the USA, for example [16], with the global higher education market size estimated at USD 736.80 billion in 2023 [17]. Researching teaching and learning in higher education is important, because it is only by knowing what approaches to teaching work well to support learning for particular goals, or in a particular context, that the quality of learning can be improved. Compared with the evidence base in school education, that in higher education is still comparatively poorly developed. It is likely that more can be learned from understanding “what works well” at the school level—but also that some aspects of that need to change for the different group of learners and target learning in higher education. High-quality RHETL can enhance student experiences [5,9,18], and can also support academics in becoming more expert in their teaching practice, thus improving their job satisfaction [18,19].

Academics research-active in other fields, therefore, should also engage in researching teaching and learning in higher education, and will often want to do so in relation to their own or their colleagues’ practice and the associated student learning—though they themselves are often coming from non-cognate research fields. Furthermore, recent years have seen an increase in “teaching-only” contracts in some parts of the world [20–22]. Nevertheless, those on such contracts also need to be research-active if they are to accrue academic respect in the academy. There is also potential benefit to students from research-related teaching if academics have intrinsic interest in both research and teaching [9]. With no working time allocated for such activity, the obvious focus for academics on teaching-only contracts is their own teaching, and the related learning, though they may be ill-prepared for such work. For both groups of academics, education in appropriate research methodologies is needed—and critically, also, if the research is to be conducted with integrity, education in related ethical issues. Of course, there is a third group of academics, namely those whose field of research enquiry is higher education, for whom the issues addressed here should already be familiar.

At present, there is a wide range of literature around RHETL and similar activities, addressed via a plethora of inter-related and contested terminology. For example, within the higher education sector, much has been written about “professional enquiry” (including “evaluation of practice”), the “scholarship of teaching and learning”, “pedagogic research” or, more recently, “close to practice research” [23]. Such terms are often not well-defined, and/or appear to have distinct meanings across different papers. We understand none of these terms to fully and consistently represent academic research into higher education teaching and learning; therefore, we reluctantly introduce yet another term, RHETL, into this crowded space. First, we need to clarify what we mean by “research”. Since we are in an education space, we adopt Stenhouse’s ([24], p. 104) education-derived definition of **research** as “systematic enquiry made public”. Such research should of course be conducted

with regard to prevailing community norms. These include that, if an empirical approach is adopted, its design should be embedded in theory, and centred around the exploration of a stated hypothesis or research question. The research should also be designed to contribute to knowledge on a broader basis than within its original context, so findings should be transferable or indicative of broader generalisability, thus contributing to the field in a systematic way, as in Levin-Rozalis [25].

We understand **professional enquiry** or **evaluation of practice** [26–28] to be focused on questions of practice, but to enjoy lower thresholds of systematicity. Rather, such enquiry is likely to be exploring some area of professional interest in a way likely to be informative for that particular context, but without a necessary expectation of, or need for demonstration of, wider applicability. Further still along a continuum of contribution to knowledge, we use **scholarship** in relation to a practice or professional question to mean critical academic engagement with the body of the research literature in the field. That may include harnessing the underlying discipline-specific literature for professional purposes, for example, asking “what are the implications of literature around the nature of mathematics, for the ways in which mathematics should be taught?”—but in recent years many HEIs have also promoted academics’ engagement with the considerable higher education teaching and learning corpus, including in relation to the underlying discipline, leading to “research-informed teaching”. In particular, the “**scholarship of teaching and learning**” as a term is used variably, and often inclusively, in the scholarly literature. There is a large body of related literature, particularly from North America. Sometimes, the term is interpreted as the above “scholarship” as applied to teaching and learning, but in other instances, for example in the work by Schnurr and Taylor [29], its usage appears to align with Stenhouse’s [24] definition of research; Healey et al.’s [30] usage appears somewhere between the two. It is therefore important that readers of the related literature critically interrogate the intended meaning; Burman and Kleinsasser [31], Hutchings [32], and Sharp [33] give accounts of its development of use.

“**Pedagogic research**”, similarly, is contested in the literature. Stierer and Antoniou ([34], p. 282), for example, claim 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”. Pedagogic research has on occasion [35] been conflated with possibly unsystematic enquiry or with teaching-related scholarship. We take it to be a subset of RHETL, where the focus of the research is on the impact on learning of specific approaches to teaching.

**Close to practice research** is defined by Wyse et al. [23] as “research focused on issues defined by practitioners by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involving collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both” (p. 2): We consider both pedagogic research and close to practice research as particular instances of RHETL (research in higher education teaching and learning), defining that to be research focused on some aspect of an academic’s higher education teaching activity, and/or the related learning.

Any research brings with it ethical issues. Such issues are particularly worthy of attention due to the backgrounds of the two disparate groups of academics identified above, who have reason to come to RHETL unfamiliar with research norms in the field: those whose primary research work lies in another field, and those on teaching-only contracts for whom RHETL is the most realistic option for developing a research profile, as well as enriching their teaching in research-related ways. Both groups are at risk of underestimating the ethical issues that may arise in RHETL: educational research is commonly regarded as being low-risk compared with research in many other fields, and there is often an under-appreciation of the potential ethical conundrums, including the power relations involved and their implications [36,37].

Our rationale for exploring the issues was initially ignited by a desire to support more equitable career progression opportunities for colleagues on teaching-only contracts; only

later did we identify the second and third target readership groups. In our own institution, all academics who teach are expected to develop a “connected curriculum” [38] that makes deep and sustained links with existing research, so supporting “scholarship” in the above sense—but academic promotion, on whatever track, requires evidence of appropriate research activity and publications [39]. Faculty work with colleagues on teaching-only contracts seeking to develop their own research, highlighted challenges they experienced in understanding or accessing ethical consent processes, particularly in a timely way. Such issues were unlikely to be confined to one HEI.

This entry therefore seeks to scope the principal ethical issues associated with RHETL, and particularly if the research seeks to make use of contributions from the researcher’s own students. It also points to emerging issues for RHETL as digital affordances for research, including AI, expand. It is particularly significant for the two groups of academics identified above, namely those wishing to come to RHETL as academics with a research background in a non-cognate field, and those on teaching-only contracts who are not otherwise research-active, since it draws together in one place an overview of key areas for consideration. As such, it should be of interest also to academic development professionals in universities, and to existing or developing institutional research ethics review boards (IRBs), highlighting current knowledge and needs in a relatively concise and focused way.

The entry is organised by area of ethical issue, so as to be easily navigable by the intended readership. We first address general issues likely to arise in such research, and then those that are particularly frequently encountered in RHETL: ethical conundrums such as those inherent to adopting an insider researcher role, and those related to the use of different sorts of student contributions, where the students concerned care taught by the researcher or the researcher’s colleague(s). Finally, given the oft-cited challenges of working with IRBs for those unfamiliar with their processes [40–42], we discuss ways in which IRBs may smooth paths to ethical consent for RHETL without in any way compromising the research ethics standards expected. Among many in higher education, there is a view [29,41] that gaining ethical consent for relatively low-risk projects is a time-consuming and superfluous process that obstructs timely research; we, on the other hand, argue in line with Bond [43] that, while analysis and critique of ethical aspects of research processes can seem slow (and that every effort should be made to complete those in a timely way), the associated preparation and external scrutiny support rigour and an ethics-first and project-long approach. We return to such discussion in Section 4.

However, it is important to note that, while the approaches derived from the dominant literature in the field, and presented here, are widely recognised for the purposes of conducting RHETL in many parts of the globe—and of publication in many respected journals globally—they are western-centric and built on western ethical norms. They pay little attention, for example, to sub-Saharan African concepts of “ubuntu” whereby actions are ethical if they support the honouring of community relationships or community harmony, and so where, for example, individual informed consent may be less highly valued. There is still much work to be conducted in coming to share a global understanding and valuing of the multiplicity of our ways of knowing and of what are considered ethical behaviours in achieving that [44].

Details of the approach used to develop this entry can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

## 2. Key Ethical Issues in Researching Higher Education Teaching and Learning

RHETL brings with it a range of ethical issues common to much research, and yet which may not be familiar to some academics, depending on their research background. We outline some such issues in Section 2.1, as a minimal “checklist”. In comparison with, for example, much medical research, RHETL is comparatively low risk—and yet, we show below that the related ethical issues can be both multi-faceted and significant. If the research is focused on the researcher’s own site of teaching, or on student work associated with that, then it brings significant opportunities—and challenges—as insider research.

Even if it is a colleague's realm of teaching and learning that is being researched, some of those affordances and constraints persist: in common with Dwyer and Buckle [45], we conceptualise "insiderliness" as a continuum, and likely to vary through the lifetime of the research. Some related issues are addressed in Section 2.2.

The RHETL researcher will often wish to draw upon student course-related contributions as data, and the related inherent power imbalance brings significant ethical issues, depending on the nature of the contributions concerned, and the point in time at which they are drawn upon. Further, the nature of potentially relevant such contributions continues to change as AI and other digital affordances evolve. A range of issues associated with using student contributions is discussed in Section 2.3, along with the affordances and constraints of involving students as research collaborators.

### 2.1. General Ethical Issues

General principles for research involving data sourced from human participants, such as RHETL, were laid down in the Belmont Report [46,47]. Those have since been expanded and developed, including for particular research contexts, by a range of national and international bodies [47,48]. The British Psychological Society, for example, reframes principles of human research ethics as "respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities; scientific integrity; social responsibility; and maximising benefits/minimising harm" [48]. Applied to RHETL, those principles include the following considerations:

**Beneficence** (the research should do no harm, and if possible, benefit participants). All approaches should respect participants and genuinely value their time and contributions. That will mean, for example, constraining data collection to that which is minimally necessary for the research [49,50].

**Freely given informed consent** should be sought for all data deriving from human sources, and even for mature participants, also from "gatekeepers" in some contexts (in HEIs, these may include course leaders or heads of departments). It is contestable how fully "informed" participants can be, but information sheets should give sufficient detailed and accessible information for a robust participation decision to be made; declining to participate should bring no negative consequences; and researchers should, if possible, plan for a "cooling off" period during which participants may withdraw their participation or, if already collected, their data [32]. Freely given consent is an ongoing issue for research which is sustained, as RHETL may well be: it is important that researchers identify ways to ensure that willingness to continue participation is a genuinely open question, actively revisited at intervals, as the research continues.

**Anonymity and confidentiality of data:** to support privacy, ethical research often offers participants anonymity. Confidentiality should of course only be offered where there is balance of beneficence involved: where, for example, a safeguarding concern is exposed, the need to follow that up with appropriate authorities will override concerns for individual privacy. There are research contexts wherein participants do not seek anonymity but prefer their contributions to be acknowledged (and if so, that possibility should be interrogated in relation to threats to others' identifiability). If not, pseudonymity can usually be offered. True anonymity can, though, be difficult to achieve—surprisingly little demographic data are needed to identify an individual, and digital markers can be persistent. As above, it is important to restrict data collection to that which is central to the research, and if anonymity cannot be achieved, to ensure that potential participants are alerted to the risks of identifiability. Within RHETL, risk of identification is a particular issue if too many details of the teaching and learning context are given, for example, when the relevant course has a small participation rate, or can be traced back to the researcher [51].

**Inclusion, diversity and equity** in participation: an ethical approach to research design should always interrogate that for inequitable impact on participation: for RHETL, do the opportunities to participate marginalise part-time students or those with family responsibilities, for example? Do they make assumptions about time and location of data



collection that preclude students from particular cultural backgrounds? Any such risks should be addressed before the research begins [52].

**Rigour of research design and planning for impact** are also ethical imperatives, so that productive use is made of the data collected. If the research cannot make a robust contribution to knowledge, then participants' gifts of time and efforts are devalued [49]. In relation to that, researchers new to RHETL, even if experienced in their own research discipline, should ensure they acquire appropriate skills and knowledge before embarking on such research, perhaps drawing on institutional professional development opportunities. It is common for academics coming from other disciplines to regard RHETL, or more broadly, some social science, institutional ethical consent processes as overly intrusive and time-consuming, yet a range of evidence suggests that those processes per se often contribute to the robustness of the proposed research (and to academics' research expertise) through the inherent peer review process [53].

**Incentives to participation:** The principle of beneficence suggests that, where possible, participants should benefit from the research, and so they may if, for example, the design includes reflections on learning—but the benefits of RHETL are often to the next generations of learners. Modest (proportionate) "tokens of appreciation" of the time and effort offered by participants may on occasion be appropriate—but should always be specified in the ethical consent application [51]. The use of any incentives is particularly fraught when RHETL targets data from the researcher's own students, due to the existing inherent power imbalance.

**Data protection:** Data protection requirements, including parameters for the storage of research data, vary by institution, by jurisdiction and by nature of the data, including whether they are "personal" or "sensitive" data, and whether they are primary or secondary as research data. Here, *primary research data* are those which are collected specifically for research (and after ethical consent processes are complete). *Secondary research data*, on the other hand, denotes data which were originally collected for other purposes, but which, after due process, have then been re-purposed as research data. That change in status is not trivial: for example, in many jurisdictions including the UK, potentially identifiable data which have been collected for teaching or assessment purposes may only be stored for as long as they are needed for those purposes: it is not permissible to then keep data *in case* they may then be useful for research purposes. Researchers should be proactive in following local requirements both where their data are collected, and where they are stored [32]. Usual ethical consent processes are needed in order to then use such data as secondary research data. IRBs will usually require that any research data are kept securely for some time after completion of the related research, in order to support transparency or, if owners of the data have given permission, for re-use. Again, the extent of genuine "security" available locally needs to be interrogated and understood by the researcher, and appropriate approaches to data storage then developed [49].

**Use of digital data:** Clark et al. [54] 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). Such data include any form of digital communication, including websites, documents, images or videos... Due to the rapidly changing nature of digital affordances, it can be challenging for both researchers and IRBs to maintain ethically coherent and up-to-date approaches for the use of such data for research [55–57]. We address some specific issues in Section 2.3.3 below, but as an overall approach, researchers in any doubt about the ethics of the research approaches they propose should consult with their IRB.

## 2.2. Insider Research

Much RHETL involves a degree of researcher "insiderliness", whether they are researching their own practice and the associated learning, or that of their colleagues. The associated ethical challenges, including for insiders in higher education research, have

received good attention, for example, from Mercer [58], Collins et al. [59], Dhillon and Thomas [60] and Dwyer et al. [45]. In common with those authors, we understand outsider/insider status to be on a continuum that can vary over the life of the research, bringing with that variation a change in the associated ethical issues. Insiders bring with them familiarity with and access to the research site, and knowledge of internal processes and people. However, they can also make unwarranted assumptions about the research context, and in the context of RHETL, insiders often bring other ethical constraints to the research that need very careful addressing, especially if the researcher has had, or continues to have, teaching or assessment associations with participant students. Insider research can bring possible poorly grounded assumptions, and with it, challenges to the valid interpretation and reporting of data. Anonymity of contribution may be difficult to achieve, there will almost always be issues of unequal power relations, and if the researcher is also the class lecturer there may be tensions regarding roles or the use of time. We address each of those in turn, below. We note that, additionally, particular issues arise with the use of different student course-related contributions. Since those vary with the nature of the contribution, related ethical issues are discussed separately, in Section 2.3.

**Poorly grounded assumptions:** Brock-Utne [61] stresses the importance of an insider researcher taking deliberate steps to “make the familiar strange”, especially important in conjunction with other issues such as imbalance of power relations. It is easy for academics researching their own, or colleagues’, teaching and/or the associated learning, to make assumptions about possibilities or systems or people or behaviours involved that are not grounded in data, so sustained reflexivity over such matters is needed.

**Validity of interpretation and reporting:** Similarly, qualitative RHETL, and interpretation of quantitative RHETL, is often conducted within an interpretivist paradigm: the researcher is aiming to craft one of many valid interpretations of the data. Ethically, such research must be conducted with attention to its trustworthiness [62,63]. In particular, researchers need to pay attention to their positionality: how may personal relationships, the researcher’s own motivations and existing roles affect data, including the selection of what and how accounts are communicated? What steps could be taken to recognise, acknowledge and mitigate the impact of those? [32]. One approach that goes some way to addressing such concerns is that researchers do not conduct research within their own classes, but negotiate that a colleague does so [32].

**Identifiability of contributions:** Whenever there is a degree of insiderliness [58], there is a threat to anonymity, since both researcher and researched are operating within a known course and cohort. Classmates may recognise contributions, or references to particular pieces of work, and students do not have free choice over whether their contributions should be attributed to them since identification brings with it identification implications also for classmates. To mitigate such issues, commitments to between-peer confidentiality may be sought in consent forms, and assurances of genuine anonymity should be limited.

**Unequal power relations,** whether between academic colleagues or between the researcher and students, will almost always merit careful consideration, particularly if participation or consent is sought from students with whom the researcher has an ongoing either teaching or assessment role. That has the potential to distort both the consent and validity of any response to verbal or written response or evaluation. Such issues may be mitigated if, as above, academics research one another’s, rather than their own, classes; if there is no alternative to involving one’s own students, then, provided the research design makes this possible, consent forms are offered to all but are not read and acted upon until after all active relationships have come to an end. However, such actions may still be perceived as including an element of coercion, so are best avoided if possible [64–66].

**Tensions regarding role or use of time:** when an academic is researching their own teaching activity, or the associated learning, there are likely to be tensions between their roles as lecturer and as researcher. Inevitably, the focus on teaching will be different from that adopted if the research were not taking place—and student responses and learning also. If class time and attention are given to data collection, ways should be sought in

which to minimise impact on opportunity to learn—or maybe even enhance that [30]. Attention to possible tensions should be given in advance, and ways in which negative impacts of those can be minimised should be held up to scrutiny in applications for ethical consent [52]. Thus, the ethical consent process per se can serve to strengthen the rigour and trustworthiness of the research.

In summary, such considerations underline that insider researchers, no matter the degree of their insiderliness, should actively interrogate the ethical implications of their research design, especially in relation to unequal power relations that may exist. Related researcher reflexivity should be maintained through the life of the research, and explicit steps taken to support its trustworthiness, including thorough attention to its methodological rigour and the transparency of research data analysis and interpretation (e.g., [63,67]).

### 2.3. Using Student Course-Related Contributions

There are good reasons to involve students' contributions to RHETL: their learning is the target of the focus teaching, and their direct or indirect contributions are key to understanding that. If the research involves contributions independent of planned learning activities, then the additional time and effort involved should be minimised out of respect for students [68]; if course-related contributions made during planned teaching and learning are to be analysed, there is no extra demand on student resource, but in both cases there are additional ethical issues that should be considered, as reviewed below. Our discussion is necessarily non-exhaustive: digital affordances continue to develop apace, and especially with the advent of AI [69], academics continue to need to develop the ways in which they interact with and assess students as part of the planned teaching and learning. First, we review a range of types of student course-related contribution and associated ethical issues, before turning attention to conundrums associated in particular with student contributions as secondary data. We consider whether opt-in consent is always necessary and consider further issues related to digital contributions. Then, we discuss the affordances and constraints of involving students as research collaborators.

Student-generated artefacts or contributions, of whatever nature, are normally their own intellectual property (IP), unless sponsorship, funding or similar contracts specify otherwise. Where artefacts are produced collaboratively, IP may be owned by individuals or shared [68]. In general, therefore, researchers should not use student contributions in any form unless they have owner freely given informed consent (the issue of whether such consent is always necessary is addressed in Section 2.3.2 below). Dissemination of research findings through presentations or publications must be a key consideration for researchers and be part of the initial and ongoing informed consent process for participants. This is particularly so for those researchers who engage in publishing via paid-for contributions and those (a growing number) that publish as open access for increased research impact and accessibility [70–72]. As discussed in Section 2.1, in teaching and learning contexts, it may be difficult to achieve and maintain anonymity, and even if students prefer to be identified, that cannot deny the rights of others [31]. Demographic or contextual details included in contributions should also be analysed for their potential to compromise privacy.

Student contributions arising directly from planned teaching and learning activities can take a variety of forms, each bringing its own ethical considerations if such contributions are to be used as research data. Many of these issues relate directly to generic issues raised earlier, but it is important also to identify how those may play out in the context of research data arising from an academic's own, or colleague's students:

**Oral contributions made during class**, including group discussion: any such data need live recording, since otherwise they will lack authenticity. For audio or video recording, it will usually not usually be possible to constrain that to any one or more target students, so that wide prior informed consent would be needed. Since others will be present, it will very often not be possible to assure anonymity, unless a wide group of students commits to maintain confidentiality. In such circumstances, it is difficult to establish that consent is freely given, without pressure from researcher or peers. Such issues



may be particularly important if the focus for discussion is sensitive, and recording may in any case skew the path of discussion [31]. Active engagement with these challenges should be undertaken, especially if the class is recorded or hosted on a web platform, but it can be seen that there are a number of obstacles to both ethical use of such data and ecological validity.

**Physical or digital written tasks:** These may be part of coursework, in which case their owner is clear, or may be submitted for formal assessment, maybe with some form of pseudonymity. In the latter case, it is possible to include on the cover sheet consent for use as research data—although making it sufficiently detailed that consent is genuinely informed can be challenging. Even then, there are at least two threats to genuine anonymity in making those public. Authorship may be recognised if a colleague has already formatively assessed the work, but more generally, extended assignments used for either formative or summative purposes, and especially if they refer to professional or personal contexts, may be identifiable from their content [31]. They should be examined carefully for such detail.

**Professional materials** are sometimes developed by students as part of their course—for example, where students create school lesson plans. In such cases, others may have a share in IP, and those in the professional context, or other individuals such as groups of school students, may also be identifiable. Issues of anonymisation, or of opt-in identification, are then more complex, and professional gatekeeper permission for the use of such materials should in general be sought.

**Survey/questionnaire responses integral to planned teaching and learning:** Such tools are often employed to evaluate a course or module, and responses can offer a rich source of data for research. In general, it is easy to offer an additional opt-in to use the data for research, at either the beginning or the end of a survey (there are pros/cons to each). Anonymity can add validity, but also precludes the option of withdrawing data after an interval, since it would not be possible to identify which data need to be withdrawn. The demographic or other personal data requested should be on a strictly as-needed basis, to avoid inadvertent identifiability. Advance notice of the opportunity to opt in to research use may balance those arguments in favour of anonymity, although with online surveys and digital identifiers that is not trivial to achieve, and identifiers should always be removed before sharing data with any third party. The security of online surveys can also be an issue, especially for sensitive content, and researchers should always interrogate the location and security of data collected via survey software. Lastly, analysis can also bring challenges to anonymity, and splitting of responses by demographic categories should be limited to minimise such risk.

**Primary research data** may include, e.g., interview, survey or focus group responses. Data collection should, where possible, take place outside core teaching and learning time, unless there is strong justification for doing otherwise, for example, in order to achieve equity of participation. As always, care should be taken to minimise demands on student time, within the needs of the research [51]. Issues of power are very real threats in this sort of additional student commitment. While small “tokens of appreciation” may on occasion be justified, it must always be made clear that there will be absolutely no direct personal consequences of students choosing to opt in or opt out of such data collection.

### 2.3.1. Student Contributions as Secondary Data

In several of the above cases, there is the potential for the related data to be secondary research data, provided they arise from normal teaching and learning needs that require their reliable capture. Such contributions may only be stored longer-term if that is in line with local data protection and privacy regulations, so will not usually include personal, sensitive or identifiable data. The use of such contributions as research data would be subject to the usual ethical considerations, including, if at all possible, in relation to informed consent. There are circumstances, though, in which that is simply not possible: contributions may have been archived for later teaching and learning, or moderation, purposes, but anonymised at submission with links to individual students destroyed; student owner

contact details may no longer be available. If a researcher knows in advance that they may want to access some anonymised submissions for research purposes, it is theoretically possible to seek in-principle consent, for example, on the cover sheet, though details of use would need to be included if that consent were to be “informed”. We recommend instead that students are approached post-assessment in case they are willing to share their work for research purposes [51]. In that case, the precautions noted above regarding potentially identifiable details should be adhered to.

### 2.3.2. Opt-In Consent

In general, a strong case should be made before departing from the principle of informed and freely given opt-in consent, obtained before any data are used for research. There are always exceptions, such as those indicated above wherein previous years’ assignments have been kept, e.g., for standards-setting, but their owners no longer traceable [30], even if they are potentially identifiable as members of a small cohort, or writing in, or responding from, a particular context. As always, considerable care should be taken to avoid the inclusion of potentially identifiable details in the related research.

When an academic knows in advance that their own or their colleague’s practice is to be researched, they should seek ethical consent for collection, opt-in consent to any data collection, including use of secondary data as part of the research process. No primary data should be collected without such consent [30]. Should a researcher also be the lecturer, this potentially brings tensions and likely perceptions of pressure to participate. One possible approach is for the researcher to offer *all* possible participant students a Yes/No consent form in advance of the related teaching and learning, together with assurances that those will be stored securely, and not accessed until after completion of all related teaching and assessment. Related data would then have to be identifiable, so that the researcher could exclude data for which consent for use had not been forthcoming. However, such processes have the potential to perturbate both relationships and teaching/learning processes [51], and are much better avoided altogether, if possible, for example, via the use of academic peer researchers.

### 2.3.3. Digital Contributions: A Rapidly Evolving Landscape

Digital research continues to evolve rapidly, and while significant efforts have been made to interrogate associated ethical issues [48,49], overarching principles often have to be re-interpreted for specific and rapidly changing digital development. For example, an early principle in the field was that there is no need for informed consent to use “public” digital data for research [48]. Recent high-profile cases involving the durability and privacy of social media posts and “WhatsApp” messages underline the contested nature of privacy of such data [73,74], and of their long-term curation. Sometimes, the distinction between public and private fields of digital student contributions may appear blurred, since it depends on student expectations of their access and use. For example, social media are widely construed to be “public”, and so ripe for exploration for research purposes unless beyond the increasing “privacy” controls. However, normal student course-related contributions recorded in similar outlets, such as blogs, responses to blogs and forum contributions, lie beyond such consideration, since students have created those contributions for a specific purpose, in an environment where they do not expect to be publicly observed. In such contexts, informed consent for their use as research data should be sought.

HEIs often produce their own guidance for researchers who may want to access such data, as for example, in [75,76], but the supportive specificity of such documents also means their reliability is necessarily strictly time-limited. The British Psychological Society [48], in common with a number of other national and international organisations, argues that explicit consent for observation should be sought unless people are in a physical or digital space where they may “reasonably expect to be observed by strangers”. The British Sociological Association [49] quotes guidance suggesting any direct interaction

of researcher with participants for research purposes requires informed consent aligned with prevailing data protection requirements. There is, though, a grey area in relation to observation without direct interaction. Such discussion indicates that, if there is any doubt, informed consent should be sought. International organisations have produced a range of guidance documents [49,53], and general principles are discussed further in [47]. We particularly recommend reference to the Association of Internet Researchers ethical guidance [77].

*Particular forms of digital contribution bring specific issues:*

**Course-related online contributions**, for example, to a blog or a forum, may or may not be identifiable in their original form. If they are written anonymously, then consent for use for research purposes should be gained from all possible contributors. Identifiable contributions may be used with post hoc consent—or else may be sought in advance, but preferably accessed only after all teaching- and assessment-related interactions with the researcher have been concluded.

**Emails and personal learning documentation** are clearly identifiable in their raw form, so related issues are around freely given informed consent (preferably post hoc, for validity), and identifiability of such contributions, if that is desired.

**Unsolicited online contributions** in the public domain, such as contributions to X, are dealt with above. In many instances, such data may, within the parameters indicated below, be available for research use, but there remain wider research integrity issues. For example, the researcher should ensure that sampling processes are auditable and fair, paying due attention to equitability and inclusiveness, and both use and interpretation of data should not be misleading. Further guidance can be found in [78]. In this rapidly changing area, any novel methodologies are likely to benefit from early additional advice, likely from the institutional IRB.

Other issues to be considered when planning whether to seek use of student contributions for RHETL include the need for researchers to develop reflexivity in relation to academic research debates such as those around boundaries of data vs. text, or research participant vs. author [53]. Attributions of authorship should be fully discussed, and anonymity, confidentiality and (often, non-) identification addressed for contributions by research participants: such issues should be overtly discussed with the authors of text/data, while also recognising that individual preference for identification of authorship may have implications for others. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee has developed a set of recommendations based on a “dialogic, case-based, inductive, and process approach to ethics” [79] that could be useful to HEIs. The related guidelines include a set of questions for researchers to use to reflect on the ethical decisions to be made. Overall, though, digital affordances continue to change rapidly, and further support should be sought if there is doubt about any of the associated ethical issues.

#### 2.3.4. Student Collaboration in Research

Some of the above ethical issues, including the imbalance of power relations, can be addressed in part if students are involved in RHETL as genuine collaborators [80]. Within such possibilities, there is a continuum of roles that students may play, from source of data through to bona fide novice researcher—although note that even the latter still involves an imbalance of power [68,81]. Such work can educate students in research and research literacy, as well as offering benefits to future cohorts through research outcomes, but it still does not obviate the need for careful reflection on the remaining ethical issues not least in relation to those students who are not so involved [30,80]. Further discussion of related issues can be found in Allin [82].

### 3. Ethical Consent Processes for RHETL

Compared with much medical research, RHETL is often seen as relatively ‘low risk’. However, ‘low risk’ is very far removed from ‘no risk’, and there often remain a range of rather significant ethical issues to be addressed. Most HEIs employ an Institutional Review

Board (IRB) to assess the extent to which those have been considered and planned for in the research design. Such processes open up the rigour—and ethics—of the proposed research to external scrutiny and provide a systematic approach to both protecting the vulnerable and enhancing the quality of the research [43]. There remains a risk, particularly for researchers new to the field, that the related processes may deter academics from embarking on RHETL [42,51,83]. Such threats should be addressed where it is reasonable to do so. They include the following:

**Complexity of the process:** in many HEIs there are simpler procedures available for research designated ‘low risk’—but even so, researchers coming new to the field can still find those daunting. Furthermore, the scope for such processes varies between institutions. In some institutions, identified “vulnerable participants” explicitly include students whom the researcher teaches or assesses; this suggests that, whether they are explicitly identified as vulnerable or not, there are common related ethical issues that should be addressed, not least due to the power imbalances with faculty researchers. Some potential student participants may of course have specific vulnerabilities that the researcher may or may not be familiar with. Since RHETL is increasingly carried out by academics not already familiar with social science research, and in particular by those from the two groups identified previously, it may be helpful for institutions to develop ethical consent guidelines targeted specifically at such colleagues, such as those given by Schnurr and Taylor [29].

**Timeline to obtain consent:** When research is focused on teaching and/or learning tied to particular calendars, time to ethical review can be an issue. Even for comparatively low-risk studies, turnaround from IRB ethical consent application to the first decision is usually of the order of several weeks, unless an argument can be made for the necessity of an expedited review, even where there are fixed submission deadlines: informed and serious engagement with the ethical issues inherent in a research proposal require significant investment on the part of reviewers, and assessment is usually undertaken by active researchers, on a voluntary basis. It is, though, important that IRBs are able to minimise the indicative time to a well-founded decision, if academics are not to be discouraged from carrying out RHETL [29,40].

**Who should review RHETL ethics applications?** It is important that reviewers are sufficiently expert in the focus field of research, to enable the appropriate identification of related ethical issues—and particularly research is likely to involve colleagues with little experience in the field. Other approaches risk critiques that lack validity—and/or that omit the identification of important ethical issues that should be addressed. One possibility is to develop review panels of particular expertise: RHETL could be considered such a specialism [29]; that would also serve to enhance education for ethical literacy.

#### 4. Conclusions and Ways Forward

This entry outlines the importance of RHETL for both faculty and students and identifies key issues in developing an approach which is ethically robust; our intention was to do so in a way that is also accessible to academic colleagues coming to RHETL for the first time. This entry may also serve as a catalyst for the development of HEI guidelines around RHETL. Although the literature drawn upon almost exclusively emanates from western ways of knowing, and western conceptualisations of morally defensible ways to conduct RHETL, we recognise that, in other parts of the globe, there are alternative approaches and values [84] for which the global academic community needs to further develop the shared understanding of, and respect for. It is our view that there is a pressing need for such work. We also point, in Section 2.3.3, to rapidly developing affordances of digital technologies, including AI—and for ongoing work to interrogate and address the ethical issues associated with those.

In parallel, we identify that the evidence base for RHETL lags far behind that for “close to practice” and pedagogic research in schools, and that it is likely that more can be gleaned from exploring synergies, as well as differences, between these two loci. We also note that much recent motivation for RHETL has derived from research-intensive

contexts; it is possible that the ethical issues identified there may not transfer directly to teaching-focused HEIs, even within similar jurisdictions. However, in line with the work by Bond [43], our core argument is that all RHETL researchers, in whatever context, should aim to cultivate sensitivity to, and addressing of, culturally appropriate ethical approaches—throughout the lifetime of RHETL through to dissemination and impact: in particular, responsibilities to (former) students persist. If IRB requirements can be developed to be timely and proportionate to the risks involved in RHETL, then the process of applying for initial ethical consent, and for variations to that as the study develops, can, in our view, only strengthen the quality of the research. In that way, researchers are supported to develop their appreciation of the ethical issues involved, and so to strengthen core virtues of “rigour, responsibility and respect” [43] in RHETL.

In terms of slightly wider issues, we note that much of the literature in the field is comparatively under-developed theoretically, including in relation to the learning theories assumed; moreover, that neoliberal pressures for academics to “perform” in certain pre-determined ways result in ethical issues not only for researchers, who must choose the extent to which they conform, with resultant implications, but also for research participants, who in the case of RHETL may well include university students. Both of these areas are worthy of further attention.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/encyclopedia4030074/s1>. References [85–88] are cited in the Supplementary Materials.

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