

# ETHICAL GUIDELINES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

2011

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September 2011

Dear Colleague,

On behalf of the Council of the British Educational Research Association, I am very pleased to present the Association's second revision (2011) of the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* to you.

Research related to education is varied and complex, rarely amenable to precise measurement or given to all-encompassing solutions to its many challenges. Nevertheless, the continued pursuit of improved knowledge and understanding of all aspects of education is vital for our democracy and social well-being. To this end, these guidelines are designed to support educational researchers in conducting research to the highest ethical standards in whatever context it is needed.

BERA's *Guidelines* unequivocally recognize and celebrate the diversity of approaches in educational research. They promote respect for all those who engage with it: researchers and participants, academics and professional practitioners, commissioning bodies and those who use the research. They are not rules and regulations but do represent the tenets of best ethical practice that have served our community of researchers well in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

As time goes on, Council will review the *Guidelines* and will update them as necessary. I hope that you will find them of assistance in your work and that you will commend them to everyone who carries out, participates in or makes use of educational research.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Gardner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Gardner  
(President)

# PREAMBLE

- 1 The 2004 revision of the Association's Ethical Guidelines (for Educational Research) built on the 1992 statement to recognize the academic tensions that a multi-disciplinary community generates when dealing with the complex research issues that characterize education contexts and to include the field of action research. This 2011 version refines and strengthens the Association's position on the rights of researchers in commissioned research contexts. A small number of updating revisions have also been made.
- 2 It is intended that deliberation on these guidelines, and compliance where appropriate, will be a binding responsibility on all members of the Association in their research activities. Although they can only be advisory for others engaged in carrying out, sponsoring or using educational research, it is the hope of the Association that they will attract widespread consultation and adherence. In the particular case of groups of educational researchers (e.g. in university departments or private agencies), the Association recommends the setting up of local ethics committees that endorse and employ these guidelines in support of their own work.
- 3 The underpinning aim of the guidelines is to enable educational researchers to weigh up all aspects of the process of conducting educational research within any given context (from student research projects to large-scale funded projects) and to reach an ethically acceptable position in which their actions are considered justifiable and sound. For the vast majority of educational research activity this basic tenet may be non-problematic but dilemmas will arise for others and these guidelines will provide a basis for deliberation and perhaps resolution or compromise.

## Aspirations of Educational Researchers

- 4 Educational researchers aim to extend knowledge and understanding in all areas of educational activity and from all perspectives including learners, educators, policymakers and the public. The Association recognizes that the community of educational researchers is multi-disciplinary and that within the paradigms and methodologies espoused by the various disciplines, and often variously by their sub-disciplines, a variety of concepts may be problematic. Examples among these are the concepts of 'data', 'reliability', 'validity', 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity'. Debates abound, for example, on the relativity or otherwise of 'truth' and 'reality' and such debates are symptomatic of a community undertaking critical analysis of its basic tenets and enjoying the enhancement of its intellectual capital through the creative tension it produces.
- 5 The Association therefore recognizes the legitimacy of the diverse educational research philosophies, theories and methodologies that exist and seeks to ensure that its guidelines do not selectively judge or constrain, directly or indirectly, the methodological distinctions or the research processes that emanate from them. These guidelines, then, are offered as set of principles and advice that will be subject to continuing review as our knowledge, understanding and practice of educational research continues to evolve.

## Principles Underpinning the Guidelines

- 6 The Association considers that all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for:
  - The Person
  - Knowledge
  - Democratic Values
  - The Quality of Educational Research
  - Academic Freedom

- 7 In guiding researchers on their conduct within this framework the Association sets out its guidelines under the following headings:
- Responsibilities to Participants
  - Responsibilities to Sponsors of Research
  - Responsibilities to the Community of Educational Researchers
  - Responsibilities to Educational Professionals, Policy Makers and the General Public

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## GUIDELINES

### Responsibilities to Participants

- 8 The participants in research may be the active or passive subjects of such processes as observation, experiment, auto/biographical reflection, survey or test. They may be collaborators or colleagues in the research process or they may simply be part of the context e.g. where students are part of the context but not the subjects of a teacher's research into his or her own professional practice.
- 9 The Association considers that educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved in the research they are undertaking. Individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity, and within an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant difference. This ethic of respect should apply to both the researchers themselves and any individuals participating in the research either directly or indirectly. Adherence to this ethic of respect implies the following responsibilities on the part of researchers.

### *Voluntary Informed Consent*

- 10 The Association takes voluntary informed consent to be the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway.
- 11 Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported. Social networking and other on-line activities, including their video-based environments, present challenges for consideration of consent issues and the participants must be clearly informed that their participation and interactions are being monitored and analysed for research.
- 12 Researchers engaged in action research must consider the extent to which their own reflective research impinges on others, for example in the case of the dual role of teacher and researcher and the impact on students and colleagues. Dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly.
- 13 Educational research undertaken by UK researchers outside of the UK must adhere to the same ethical standards as research in the UK. Appropriate consent should be sought from local authorities in cultures that adopt a collective approach to consent (e.g. community or religious leaders or local government officials) but cultural sensitivity should not extend to excluding the individuals concerned from making their own informed decision to take part in the research. Any additional regulations and cultural sensitivities of the host jurisdiction must also be

observed, for example if participants wish to be accompanied in data collection activities such as interviews. Especially sensitive ethical issues arise when researching particular communities which are marginalised because of their age, culture, race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic standing or religion. Ethical issues also arise when researching in sensitive situations influenced by contexts of cultural difference and which impact on educational experiences. Where the overseas research involves children or vulnerable adults, the researchers must comply with the child protection clearance procedures of the UK. Where the researchers (e.g. for data collection) are recruited in the overseas context itself, in which UK-style protection clearance is not available, a letter or other formal endorsement of the good character of each researcher should be obtained from a person in authority in the jurisdiction concerned (e.g. school principal).

### *Openness and Disclosure*

- 14 The securing of participants' voluntary informed consent, before research gets underway, is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must therefore avoid deception or subterfuge unless their research design specifically requires it to ensure that the appropriate data is collected or that the welfare of the researchers is not put in jeopardy. Decisions to use non-disclosure or subterfuge in research must be the subject of full deliberation and subsequent disclosure in reporting. The Association recommends that approval for any course of action involving deception should be obtained from a local or institutional ethics committee. In any event, if it possible to do so, researchers must seek consent on a post-hoc basis in cases where it was not desirable to seek it before undertaking the research.

### *Right to Withdraw*

- 15 Researchers must recognize the right of any participant to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time, and they must inform them of this right. In all such circumstances researchers must examine their own actions to assess whether they have contributed to the decision to withdraw and whether a change of approach might persuade the participants to re-engage. In most cases the appropriate course of action will be for the researchers to accept the participants' decision to withdraw. Decisions to persuade them to re-engage must be taken with care. Researchers must not use coercion or duress of any form to persuade participants to re-engage with the work. In cases where participants are required by a contractual obligation to participate e.g. when mandated as part of their employment to facilitate an evaluation study, researchers may, however, have proper recourse to a third party (e.g. the employing authority) to request compliance with a contract.

### *Children, Vulnerable Young People and Vulnerable Adults*

- 16 The Association requires researchers to comply with Articles 3 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 3 requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child must be the primary consideration. Article 12 requires that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent.
- 17 The Association considers that the spirit of Articles 3 and 12 above should also apply in research contexts involving young people and vulnerable adults.
- 18 In the case of participants whose age, intellectual capability or other vulnerable circumstance may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily to undertake their role, researchers must fully explore alternative ways in which they can be enabled to make authentic responses. In such circumstances,

researchers must also seek the collaboration and approval of those who act in guardianship (e.g. parents) or as ‘responsible others’ (i.e. those who have responsibility for the welfare and well-being of the participants e.g. social workers).

- 19 Researchers must ensure that they themselves, and any collaborators or research assistants and students under their supervision, comply with legal requirements in relation to working with school children or vulnerable young people and adults.
- 20 Researchers must recognize that participants may experience distress or discomfort in the research process and must take all necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion and to put them at their ease. They must desist immediately from any actions, ensuing from the research process, that cause emotional or other harm.
- 21 Researchers must recognize concerns relating to the ‘bureaucratic burden’ of much research, especially survey research, and must seek to minimize the impact of their research on the normal working and workloads of participants.

### *Incentives*

- 22 Researchers’ use of incentives to encourage participation must be commensurate with good sense and must avoid choices which in themselves have undesirable effects (e.g. the health aspects of offering cigarettes to young offenders or sweets to school-children). They must also acknowledge that the use of incentives in the design and reporting of the research may be problematic; for example where their use has the potential to create a bias in sampling or in participant responses.

### *Detriment Arising from Participation in Research*

- 23 Researchers must make known to the participants (or their guardians or responsible others) any predictable detriment arising from the process or findings of the research. Any unexpected detriment to participants, which arises during the research, must be brought immediately to their attention or to the attention of their guardians or responsible others as appropriate.
- 24 Researchers must take steps to minimize the effects of designs that advantage or are perceived to advantage one group of participants over others e.g. in an experimental or quasi-experimental study in which the treatment is viewed as a desirable intervention and which by definition is not available to the control or comparison group respectively.

### *Privacy*

- 25 The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants’ data is considered the norm for the conduct of research. Researchers must recognize the participants’ entitlement to privacy and must accord them their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, unless they or their guardians or responsible others, specifically and willingly waive that right. In such circumstances it is in the researchers’ interests to have such a waiver in writing. Conversely, researchers must also recognize participants’ rights to be identified with any publication of their original works or other inputs, if they so wish. In some contexts it will be the expectation of participants to be so identified.
- 26 Researchers must comply with the legal requirements in relation to the storage and use of personal data as set down by the Data Protection Act (1998) and any subsequent similar acts. In essence people are entitled to know how and why their personal data is being stored, to what uses it is being put and to whom it may be made available. Researchers must have

participants' permission to disclose personal information to third parties and are required to ensure that such parties are permitted to have access to the information. They are also required independently to confirm the identity of such persons and must keep a record of any disclosures. Disclosure may be written, electronic, verbal or any visual means.

- 27 The Data Protection Act also confers the right to private citizens to have access to any personal data that is stored in relation to them. Researchers seeking to exploit legal exclusions to these rights must have a clear justification for so doing.
- 28 Researchers must ensure that data is kept securely and that the form of any publication, including publication on the Internet, does not directly or indirectly lead to a breach of agreed confidentiality and anonymity.

### *Disclosure*

- 29 Researchers who judge that the effect of the agreements they have made with participants, on confidentiality and anonymity, will allow the continuation of illegal behaviour, which has come to light in the course of the research, must carefully consider making disclosure to the appropriate authorities. If the behaviour is likely to be harmful to the participants or to others, the researchers must also consider disclosure. Insofar as it does not undermine or obviate the disclosure, researchers must apprise the participants or their guardians or responsible others of their intentions and reasons for disclosure.
- 30 At all times the decision to override agreements on confidentiality and anonymity must be taken after careful and thorough deliberation. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to make contemporaneous notes on decisions and the reasoning behind them, in case a misconduct complaint or other serious consequence arises.
- 31 The Association considers it good practice for researchers to debrief participants at the conclusion of the research and to provide them with copies of any reports or other publications arising from their participation. Where the scale of the research makes such a consideration impractical, alternative means such as a website should be used to ensure participants are informed of the outcomes.

### **Responsibilities to Sponsors of Research**

- 32 A sponsor of research is considered to be any person or body that funds research (e.g. a research charity or government body) or facilitates it by allowing and enabling access to data and participants (e.g. an examinations body).
- 33 The Association expects researchers to bring its Ethical Guidelines to the attention of all sponsors of research.
- 34 Written agreements are considered the norm for funded or commissioned research. Such agreements should wherever possible and especially in the case of publicly funded research take into account the need of a democratic citizenry to be informed by the results of these enquiries. They should minimally cover the purpose of the research, the research methods to be used, any conditions of access to data or participants, ownership of data, the researchers' right to publish, requirements for reporting and dissemination, deadlines for completion of the work and the accounting for the use of funds. In recognition of the dynamics of research, agreements should also include provision for negotiating changes sought by either the researchers or the sponsors.
- 35 Researchers must fulfil their responsibilities to sponsors to the highest possible standards. It is in the researchers' interest that respective responsibilities and entitlements should be



agreed with the sponsors at the outset of the research. Where the sponsor acts essentially as a host or facilitator for research, researchers must, out of courtesy, inform them of the work they propose to undertake e.g. a group of teachers engaging in a process of action research as part of curriculum renewal should inform the school management of their intentions.

- 36 In negotiating sponsored research, researchers must provide honest and complete details of their competence and capacity to undertake the research that is proposed. Researchers will normally take a disinterested approach to research design, analysis and interpretation and where they feel they must take other than a disinterested position this should be made clear and amenable to scrutiny.

### *Methods*

- 37 Researchers must employ methods that are fit for the purpose of the research they are undertaking. Those researchers who prefer or promote specific methods, theories or philosophies of research must have knowledge of alternative approaches sufficient to assure sponsors that they have considered these and that the research needs are being properly addressed. Sponsors should be offered a full, honest and amenable justification on the final choice of methods.
- 38 Researchers must, within the context and boundaries of their chosen methods, theories and philosophies of research, communicate the extent to which their data collection and analysis techniques, and the inferences to be drawn from their findings, are reliable, valid and generalizable.

### *Publication*

- 39 The Association recommends that all members should make themselves familiar with the BERA research writing guidelines: Good Practice on Educational Research Writing.
- 40 The right of researchers independently to publish the findings of their research under their own names is considered the norm for sponsored research, and this right should not be lightly waived or unreasonably denied. This right is linked to the obligation on researchers to ensure that their findings are placed in the public domain and within reasonable reach of educational practitioners and policy makers, parents, pupils and the wider public.
- 41 Researchers must avoid agreeing to any sponsor's conditions that could lead to serious contravention of any aspect of these guidelines or that undermine the integrity of the research by imposing unjustifiable conditions on the methods to be used or the reporting of outcomes. Attempts by sponsors or funding agencies to use any questionable influence should be reported to the Association.
- 42 Researchers have the right to dissociate themselves publicly from accounts of the research that they conducted, the subsequent presentation of which they consider misleading or unduly selective. Sponsors enjoy a similar right. It is in the interests of researchers and sponsors alike to prevent this situation arising by agreements on publication or, if necessary, through arbitration.

### **Responsibilities to the Community of Educational Researchers**

- 43 The community of educational researchers is considered to mean all those engaged in educational research including academics, professionals (from private or public bodies), teachers and students.

### *Misconduct*

- 44 All educational researchers must protect the integrity and reputation of educational research by ensuring they conduct their research to the highest standards.

Researchers must therefore not bring research into disrepute by, for example:

- Falsifying research evidence or findings;
- ‘Sensationalizing’ findings in a manner that sacrifices intellectual capital for maximum public exposure;
- Distorting findings by selectively publishing some aspects and not others;
- Criticizing other researchers in a defamatory or unprofessional manner;
- Exploiting the conditions of work and roles of contract research staff;
- Undertaking work for which they are perceived to have a conflict of interest or where self-interest or commercial gain might be perceived to compromise the objectivity of the research;
- Undertaking work for which they are not competent;
- Using work carried out with co-researchers as the basis of individual outputs without the agreement of the co-researchers concerned;
- Using research for fraudulent or illegal purposes.

- 45 Where researchers become aware of examples of malpractice or potential malpractice they must present their concerns, in the first instance, to the researchers involved. With due consideration to the important principle of the public’s right to know, researchers should avoid bringing the community into disrepute through public accusations or allegations.
- 46 Subject to any limitations imposed by agreements to protect confidentiality and anonymity, researchers must make their data and methods amenable to reasonable external scrutiny. The assessment of the quality of the evidence supporting any inferences is an especially important feature of any research and must be open to scrutiny. Where sponsors initiate the request for scrutiny, and disclosure of aspects of the data may be injurious to participants, researchers should consider assuring the sponsor of the integrity of the work through the scrutiny of a mutually acceptable third-party, who is also bound by the non-disclosure agreements.
- 47 Researchers must accord due respect to all methodologies and related methods. They must contribute to the community spirit of critical analysis and constructive criticism that generates improvement in practice and enhancement of knowledge.

### *Authorship*

- 48 The authorship of publications is considered to comprise a list of everyone who has made a substantive and identifiable contribution to their generation. Examples of substantive contributions include: contributing generative ideas, conceptual schema or analytic categories; writing first drafts or substantial portions; significant rewriting or editing; contributing significantly to relevant literature reviewing; and contributing to data collection, to its analysis and to judgements and interpretations made in relation to it.
- 49 Academic status or other indicator of seniority must not determine first authorship; rather the order of authorship should reflect the relative leadership and contributions made by the researchers concerned.

### **Responsibilities to Educational Professionals, Policy Makers and the General Public**

- 50 Researchers have a responsibility to seek to make public the results of their research for the benefit of educational professionals, policy makers and a wider public understanding of educational policy and practice, subject only to the provisos indicated in previous paragraphs.
- 51 Educational researchers must endeavour to communicate their findings, and the practical significance of their research, in a clear, straightforward fashion and in language judged appropriate to the intended audience.

## HISTORICAL NOTE

The provenance of these guidelines can be traced back to a BERA invitational seminar convened by John Elliott and held at Homerton College, Cambridge in March 1988. The seminar led to a report published in *Research Intelligence* 31 (Feb., 1989), which called for a code of practice to be drawn up. In 1991, BERA Council invited Caroline Gipps and Helen Simons to formulate a set of guidelines, drawing with permission from the Elliott report and the recently published American Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines. They published these for members' comment in *Research Intelligence* 43 (Summer 1992) and later that year they were formally adopted.

As a code of practice the guidelines were universally welcomed but also attracted a degree of criticism in relation to their scope and application. An example of this was the critique presented by Peter Foster at the 1996 BERA conference. Following Peter Foster's death in 1999, his paper was reproduced in *Research Intelligence* 67 as a tribute to his work. Michael Bassey, the then Academic Secretary of BERA, used the paper to promote debate in Council and at the beginning of her presidency in September 2001, Anne Edwards announced her intention to update the 1992 Guidelines.

In the spring of 2002, a working group comprising John Gardner (Chair), Ann Lewis and Richard Pring began the task of revising the guidelines. Over the next 18 months, several consultative exercises were carried out and in the Spring of 2004, the final draft of the *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2004) was moved by John Furlong (President) and formally adopted by Council. These guidelines stood unchanged until concerns began to be raised about aspects of some contemporary research contracts running contrary to the Association's declared principles and ethical code; for example, those that prevent or inhibit publication.

In late 2008, therefore, Pamela Munn (President) set up a working group to examine and make recommendations on these issues. The subsequent report, from David Bridges (Chair), Sean Hayes, Jeremy Hoad, Saville Kushner, Olwen McNamara, Ian Menter and Nigel Norris, came to Council in November 2009. This report recommended a number of changes and updates, the latter including the need for updated guidelines on culturally sensitive issues. Council accepted the majority of the changes and asked another small group, comprising Uvanney Maylor, Pat Thompson and David Bridges, to develop the final amendments on cultural sensitivity. The new *Guidelines* were then moved by John Gardner (President) and formally adopted by Council in June 2011.

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