

## York University Human Participants Review Committee

### Guideline 19: Research Involving Investigators' Students<sup>1</sup>

Reflective teaching and teacher development are part of the teaching enterprise, and the Human Participants Review Committee, through policy and practice, wishes to support these activities. However, its primary responsibility is protection of the research participants, and therefore once a teacher's research moves beyond what would be considered standard reflective practice, measures need to be introduced to address potential risks inherent in the teacher-researcher conflict of interest and ensure ethical observance.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement cautions researchers about the use of subjects who qualify as members of captive or vulnerable populations:

*Voluntariness is especially relevant in research involving restricted or dependent subjects, and is absent if consent is secured by the order of authorities or as a result of coercion or manipulation. (TCPS Article 2.2)*

Given that the relationship between student and teacher is one in which there is an inherent power imbalance, there is potential for coercion and, as a consequence, students enrolled in a university credit course should be considered members of a vulnerable population. Their enrolment places them in a context where he or she is inevitably subject to the influence of power relationships on voluntary choice.

Students who are invited to participate as subjects in research should not have to worry that a decision to decline the opportunity could have a negative impact on their final grades or their relationship with the professor involved. Therefore, research involving students for whom a researcher acts as an advisor, supervisor or instructor is **generally not advised**.

Where possible, those involved in course delivery - faculty members (full-time and contractual), teaching assistants, graduate and undergraduate students - should, seek alternatives to recruiting students currently registered in their own classes for use as research subjects.

### **Classroom Recruitment**

Researchers who feel that they merit exception to this rule are required to clearly state their rationale to the HPRC and append the rationale to their protocol. For example, auto-ethnography, that consists solely of the professors' reflection on self without reference to the students' words, actions or products would be exempt. Researchers should be aware, however, that the decision as to the acceptability of a proposed study

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<sup>1</sup> This guideline utilizes text reproduced and/or modified in whole or in part from three sources: Waterloo University, Office of Research Ethics, "Conducting Research in Classes or with Students as Participants", Lakehead University, Office of Research Ethics, "Guidelines on the Use of Students as Research Subjects" and University of Toronto, Ethics Review Office, "Teacher-Researcher Conflicts of Interest"

involving participants for whom the researcher has a direct educational/advisory/supervisory relationship rests entirely with the HPRC.

In the most general sense, if the activity or exercise to be examined can be integrated into regular classroom activities, is of value to study, and involves the entire class, the teacher can proceed without introducing measures to separate his/her dual role as both researcher and teacher. However, ethics **review is still required**. However, if any materials (e.g. papers, tests, etc.) produced by the students are to be collected and analyzed, or students are directly involved in data creation (through surveys for example) consent/assent is needed by parents and/or students. Fully informed consent on how the materials will be used, with guarantees of confidentiality are essential. The consent form should explicitly state that no penalties will result by not agreeing to “participate”.

If the teacher/researcher intends to involve some students as participants, and not others, the teacher/researcher should not know who has agreed to participate while the teacher-student relationship still exists. It is normally advisable that data be analyzed only after grades have been submitted to the school so that a real or the appearance of, an evaluative effect on student/participants no longer exists.

### **Requirements for Recruitment and Consent**

In the event that the HPRC accepts the researcher’s rationale for the use of his or her own students in the proposed research, the means by which students are recruited as research subjects, the allocation of compensation for participation, and the kinds of alternatives to participation offered should be clearly articulated on the protocol form and consent documents.

A number of considerations are required:

1. *Negotiating Consent:* A third party, who is not connected with the research, nor has any power or authority over the students, must be part of and administer the recruitment, selection and the consent process so as to ensure there is an arms-length relationship between teacher/researcher and student/participant. Researchers need to remove any real or perceived, undue influence from students to ensure that participation is truly voluntary. For example, a department assistant or faculty administrator who has no influence or authority over the students’ marks could send a recruitment email to students indicating that he/she is sending the email on behalf of the researchers.

The information-consent letter must explain and provide assurances to the students that no penalties will result by declining to participate in the research (or by refusing to allow materials/course work or grades to be used for research purposes.) Potential participants should be made aware that as their identity would be unknown until after all grades have been submitted, when course-related recrimination for refusing to participate is no longer possible.

2. *Timing of research:* Researchers must wait until the end of the professor-student relationship before accessing the consent forms collected by the third party (i.e., after all marks have been submitted). This will mitigate any real, or perceived

influence that researchers may have toward the student's grades. Identifiable data must be analyzed only after grades have been submitted to the relevant departmental office so as to ensure that any real, or perceived, influence on the student's grades no longer exists.

3. *Recruitment by members of research team:* Students or staff (including administrative staff) under the supervision of any member of the research team (e.g., for an internship, co-op job, etc.), even though they may be unconnected to the research, should not act as the third party for the purposes of recruitment as a power relationship also exists between the researcher and the student. For example, it is conceivable that a student may pressure other students to participate, perhaps inadvertently, to ensure the success of their supervisor's research

**NOTE:** Data obtained through normal instructional practice may be approved by the HPRC for research purposes provided that it is used in a way that protects the confidentiality of all involved. Such information will normally qualify as secondary data and its use in research will be subject to the restrictions and provisions relevant to the secondary use of data (see HPRC Guideline 5 and/or TCPS, Section 3.4 for further information). Researchers can enhance the anonymity of such data by aggregating it across courses, sections and years. Approval from other institutional offices (such as OIPA) may be required for access/use of some data. Researchers are advised to consult with the Office of Research Ethics for advice and direction to ensure compliance with relevant ethics guidelines and policies.

### **Research Collaboration versus Research Supervision**

In many disciplines, researchers work with their students in a multitude of ways. Some relationships are strictly supervisory and others are more collaborative. However, there are also occasions when the relationship is less clear. Without clarity, it is difficult to assess which ethics review process is required: Delegated (i.e. via student ethics review processes) or Full Board (HPRC review). The level of review and/or rigour of review required are predicated on the nature of the research and those undertaking it. As a consequence, to address such situations, these guidelines provide a reasonably broad definition of what constitutes a collaborator and what constitutes a supervisor as it speaks to Faculty and undergraduate or graduate students who are doing research together. This broad definition similarly recognizes that the definition of "Principal Investigator" may differ by academic traditions and consequently impact the appropriate route for ethics review.

The general understanding of a collaborator is someone who is participating in the research (i.e., development of study materials, data collection, analysis of data, use of data for talks, conferences, reports, publications, etc., i.e., someone who wants to use the data in some manner now or in the future).

The general understanding of a Supervisor is someone who is guiding and overseeing the research.

Put simply, there are 3 possible relationships that a student and supervisor may have: purely supervisory, joint supervisor/collaborator, or purely collaborative. In addition, the

definition of “Principal Investigators” may differ by academic traditions. In those instances, where supervisors are in a joint supervisor/collaborator or purely collaborative relationship, then such research projects should be submitted to the HPRC for full board review; whereas in circumstances wherein the supervisor is in a purely supervisory role, the student would submit their research ethics protocol to the departmental level review committee (for non-thesis, minimal risk research) or FGS (for thesis related research). If the student’s research is deemed to be more than minimal risk, the related ethics protocol should be submitted to the HPRC.

Wherever questions arise as to what is the appropriate committee to which the student’s research should be submitted, researchers should consult with the staff in ORE for advice and direction.