Ethics guidance for widening participation evaluation and research

Introduction

This guide aims to provide support to teams engaged in widening participation (WP) projects who are considering whether to seek ethics approval to conduct evaluation and/or research.

With the Office for Students (OfS) now encouraging institutions to publish the findings of their WP evaluations and share what works across the sector, the question of ethics has risen up the agenda and institutions are exploring ways to address the associated challenges.[1]

The University's REAMS (Research Ethics Application Management System) is a highly intuitive system that adapts to your specific ethics needs based on your responses to a series of prompting questions. However, it can be daunting when approached for the first time and is more tailored to the needs of academic research (for which it was principally designed and by whom it is overwhelmingly used). Nevertheless, it can be used for non-academic research and evaluation purposes and this guide will help you decide when, why and how you should use it.

In the following guidance, we will answer the following questions:

- When/why should you seek ethics approval?
- What are the steps you should follow?
- What does all that technical jargon mean?

We will begin by explaining the difference between evaluation and research and list the criteria that need to be considered when deciding if you need ethics approval. We have then developed a flowchart that will guide you through the various stages and a glossary of terms to help with deciphering all the jargon. Throughout the text where you see a term underlined and highlighted in blue this indicates that you can find a definition in the glossary, which we have provided at the end of the guide.

When/Why should you seek ethics approval?

Research ethics approval is a standard procedure when working with living human subjects for the purposes of research and where experimental designs are being deployed or you are working with potentially vulnerable groups and subjects (among other factors, see checklist below). It is not ordinarily required for the purposes of service evaluation, where the use of evaluation and research methodologies are intended for an internal audience and to improve the quality of a service. There is also a distinction made for research/evaluation conducted for audit purposes, where evidence is compiled to assess the level of service being provided against a set of pre-determined standards set either institutionally or by an external governing body or regulator.

The emphasis placed on sharing findings (externally as well as internally) by the OfS and on the generation of more robust evidence of impact, utilising experimental design and student data, means ethics approval might be something you require before commencing your project.

[1] TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes), a What Works Centre affiliated with the Office for Students, has produced an ethics guide to help address this problem: Research ethics guidance - TASO.

The majority of the evaluation work we conduct, falls under the label of 'service evaluation', and it is important to decide whether it is necessary and/or appropriate to share the findings drawn from evaluation externally or conduct more sophisticated approaches in your case. If you need support deciding if this is something you wish to pursue, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the Evaluation and Impact team.

A further area to consider, which sits across all evaluation and research activity, irrespective of ethical approval, is Data Protection (GDPR). Whenever you are handling, collating or managing data (including primary and secondary data) about people, whether students, staff or members of the general public, you must abide by GDPR. Consent from your participants must be sought when you are gathering personal information (e.g. surveys, feedback forms, focus groups, interviews), with clear indications of how the data you are collecting will be used, and, where you are accessing institutional data sources, it is important to check if permissions were sought for your intended use. Failure to comply with these rules can result in significant legal ramifications. There is clear guidance and training available to help with understanding GDPR and compliance. If in doubt you can also contact the Information Governance team at Lancaster University (information-governance@lancaster.ac.uk). The Evaluation and Impact team can also help you with developing information sheets, consent forms and consent notices for your evaluations.

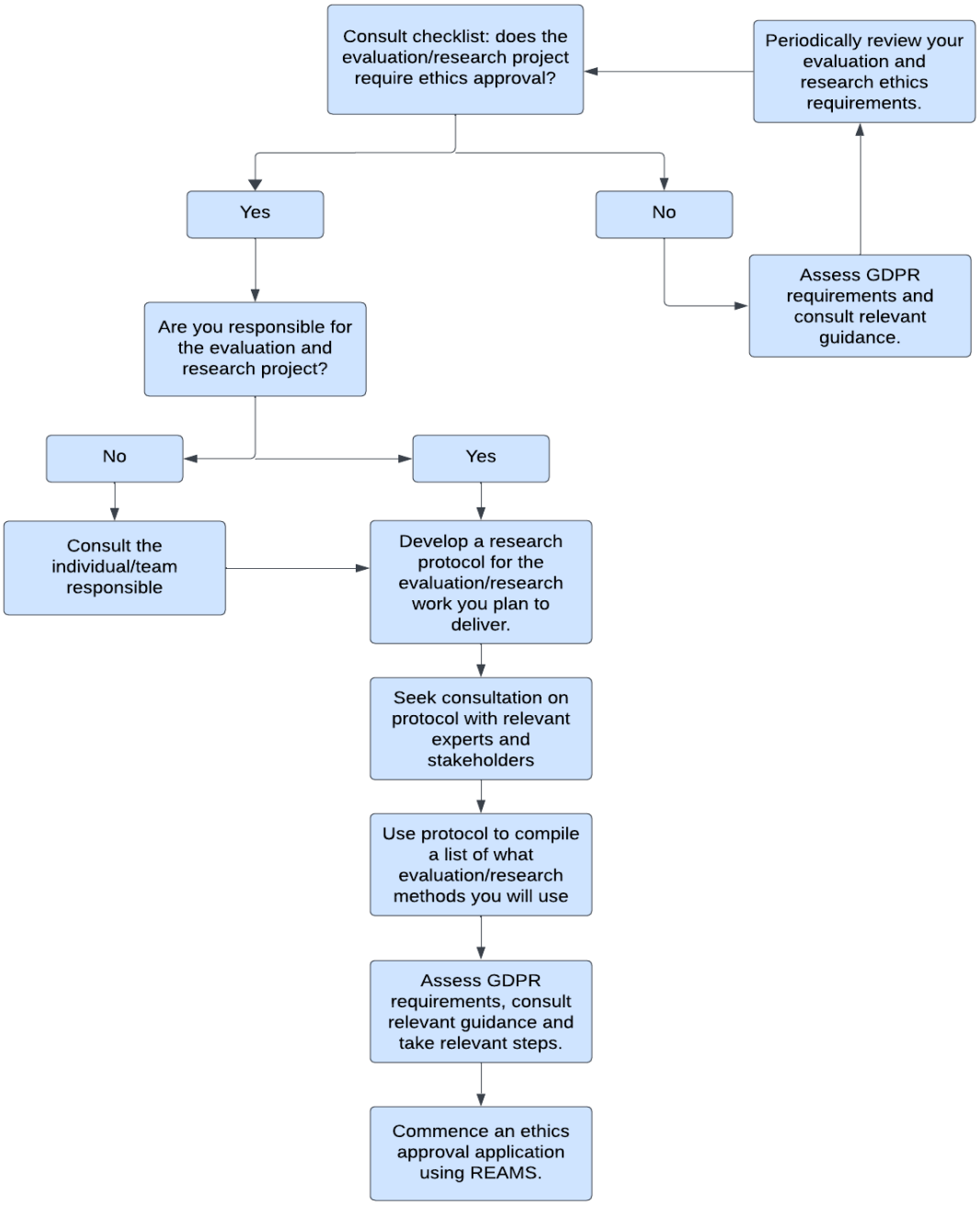
Ethics approval checklist

Below is a checklist you can go through when deciding whether to seek ethics approval. If you check any of the below, then you should consider doing so:

Question	Y	N
Are you intending to publish or share your findings with an external audience?		
Does your evaluation involve experimental design features (e.g. randomisation, or treatment groups)?		
Are you accessing/collating primary data relating to protected characteristics?		
Will your evaluation address potentially sensitive topics?		
Does the work involve participants who are vulnerable and unable to give informed consent?		
Are you using secondary data for which permissions for evaluation or research was not originally sought?		
Will the evaluation/research have a potentially negative impact on participants?		
Are you planning a sustained evaluation study?		
Are you using a third party to conduct the evaluation/research?		
Will participants be compensated for their participation?		

If the answer to any of the questions above is 'yes' then you may be required to seek ethical approval, the next section will take you through the next steps.

What are the steps you should follow?



The above flowchart lays out the steps you should follow prior to commencing your ethics application on REAMS. Once you are ready to commence you should then consult the guidance available online via the REAMS: User guides and useful documents webpage. The application system can be found here: REAMS. If you require additional support, please get in contact with the Evaluation and Impact team.

Glossary of terms

Audit: a way of finding out whether you are doing what you should be doing by asking if you are following guidelines and applying best practice.

Compensated (for taking part): money or items given to research participants that acknowledges the time and effort they have provided in participating in the research.

Data protection (GDPR): General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) involves the legal control over access to and use of data. It provides a legal framework for keeping everyone's personal data safe by requiring those collecting and storing data to have robust processes in place for handling and storing personal data.

Experimental design is the process of carrying out research in an objective and controlled fashion so that precision is maximized and specific conclusions can be drawn regarding causality. Generally, the purpose of an experiment is to establish the effect of an independent variable on a dependent variable.

Informed consent is the practice of ensuring that participants understand exactly what is being required of them and that they voluntarily agree to participate and/or allow any data related to them to be used, shared and disseminated.

Living human subjects: human subject refers to a living individual who is asked to contribute to a research project. The contribution individuals are asked to make can vary e.g. sharing personal information in an interview, taking part in an activity.

Methodologies: Methodology refers to the more 'general approach' to knowledge generation and research taken within an evaluation. Your 'methodological approach' refers to how you, the evaluator, approaches your evaluation and includes what methods you select (e.g. experimental approach vs in-depth interview), the type of data you chose to collect (e.g. numerical vs narrative data) and method of analysis (e.g. numerical analysis vs content analysis). Terms often associated with methodological approaches include qualitative vs quantitative, positivist vs constructivist.

Negative impact: something that threatens the health or well-being of the research participant.

Primary data refers to the first-hand data gathered by the researcher themselves. Examples of primary data include the responses directly drawn from questionnaires, focus groups, experiments.

Protected characteristics are the characteristics that are protected by the Equality Discrimination Act and cannot be used as a reason to discriminate against someone. They include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy or maternity, race (including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin), religion or belief, sexual orientation.

Publish: prepare and issue the findings of research or evaluation for public sale, distribution, readership.

Randomization/randomized control trials involves randomly assigning participants in a study to an intervention or a control group. This is a deliberate act that separates them in a random way in that they are not selected for entry to either group due to any characteristic.

Research is the systematic investigation of an area in order to discover new information or understand the area better.

Secondary data refers to data that is collected by someone other than the primary user. Common sources of secondary data for social science include organisational records and data that was originally collected for other research purposes.

Sensitive topics: these depend on the context, participants involved, social, cultural norms and values. Sensitive issues for research participants might relate to sexuality, substance abuse, body image, family circumstances and experience, violence, mental health etc.

Service evaluation: The aim of service evaluation projects are to define or evaluate a service, often with participants who use or deliver the service.

Sustained evaluation study: an evaluation which is implemented and monitored over a long period of time.

Third party: a person or group besides those primarily involved e.g. in research or evaluation.

Treatment group: also called the experimental group and is the group that receives the treatment (dependent variable) whose effect the researcher is interested in.

Vulnerable participant: any individual who lacks the ability to fully consent to participate in a study e.g. children. This might also relate to individuals at risk because they are social isolated or are dependent on others (e.g. victim of domestic violence.