Student research in the context of modules or courses: Guidelines for teachers

Ethics Committee, Faculty of BMS

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The ethics policy of the Faculty of BMS requires that research conducted by students in the context of their BSc or MSc project should be subjected to ethical review if it involves human subjects and/or potentially sensitive data about or from individuals, groups or organizations. Both types of research may involve the collection of new data (primary data), as well as the use of existing data (secondary data). Student research in BSc or MSc projects is thus assessed in the same way as staff research. In addition to the BSc and MSc projects, however, there are also bachelor modules and master courses in which students are expected to perform research-related assignments (like interviews, small surveys, or observations), either individually or in groups. These activities, whether they are labeled as ‘research’ or as ‘education’, may also raise ethical concerns that should be addressed.

First of all, if a teacher includes student research activities in a course, s/he is responsible for safeguarding that these activities are conducted in an ethically acceptable way.

1. Ethical review

To support teachers in their responsibility to safeguard that student activities in their course satisfy ethical standards, the Ethics Committee strongly advises teachers to formulate their assignment in such a way that ethical issues are largely avoided (see section 2 on how this could be done). This does not mean that ethics need not be addressed in these courses; on the contrary, teachers should use the opportunity to discuss with students the ethical aspects of the research activities they will conduct (see section 3 for suggestions).

If a teacher has reasons to deviate from this advice, and if student research in the module or course thus could be ethically sensitive or problematic after all (for example because it uses deception, targets vulnerable populations, addresses sensitive topics or collects personal information), the teacher should make sure the student research project is submitted for official ethical review via the BMS web application. This also goes for student research activities that could lead to scientific publication. In these cases, student projects should be combined in one ethical review request via the BMS Ethical Review application where possible, so that different students (or groups) doing the same type of research within a course submit only one request.

2. Formulating the assignment

The EC strongly advises teachers to formulate their assignment in such a way that ethical concerns are reduced or at least mitigated as much as possible. Since the main purpose of research activities in courses or modules is to train research skills rather than to answer a scientific question, there usually is some leeway to adjust the research question(s) and/or the methods proposed in the assignment, and thus to avoid ethical concerns from the start. If the students themselves have to define their own research question and/or methods, they can be explicitly asked to avoid certain types of research topics or methods.

Starting from the three main ethical principles guiding research with human participants (respect for autonomy of participants, no harm, and privacy protection) the following advice seems warranted:
➢ Opt for types of research in which it is possible to ask for informed consent and/or in which social pressure to participate is not very likely.

Make sure that students provide full information to potential participants and ask for consent prior to participation, and make sure that refusal of participants to (further) participate is possible and respected at any time and without having to provide a reason.

➢ Opt for research that puts a low burden and/or risks on participants.

Make sure that the procedures/activities participants have to engage in are not too time-consuming, and/or physically and/or mentally burdensome. For example, opt for brief surveys or interviews with adults, rather than for extensive interviews with children or other vulnerable populations.

➢ Opt for research that does not collect sensitive data and for which it is not necessary to collect personal information.

The privacy of participants and the confidentiality of the data they generate should be protected. The easiest way is to refrain from asking for sensitive information and to collect fully anonymous information only (i.e. also to avoid the use of codes or pseudonyms). If the collection of personal data is necessary, the teacher should make sure that any personal information collected by students is treated confidentially, is stored in proper ways and is not stored longer than strictly necessary for the purposes of the assignment.

3. **Train students how to conduct research in an ethical way by organizing an internal review**

As the advice above already suggests, research training in a module or course offers excellent opportunities to also train students in the basics of research ethics in a very practical manner. Learning how to provide information and ask for consent, and how to deal with personal data, among others, trains students in important aspects of contemporary good research practices.

If students are allowed to (partially) define their own project, teachers can organize an internal ethical review, in which students or student groups, for example, use the questions of the BMS ethical review application ([available in pdf on the website](https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/research/forms-and-downloads/bms-ethics-guidelines-for-student-research-in-modules-courses-final-febr-17-2020.pdf)) to ethically assess each other’s proposal and advise each other how to avoid ethical issues. Alternatively, a teacher can perform the ethical assessment him/herself, either as a marginal check or as part of the formal assessment of the assignment. If necessary, the relevant contact person or EC member in a department can give advice on how to do this. Both student and teacher review has the advantage that students explicitly and collectively reflect on what is or is not ethically acceptable when doing research. Obviously, such an assessment should be included in the timeline for the assignment and take place before students start recruitment and data collection.

**Links:**

BMS Ethical web application: [https://webapps.utwente.nl/ethicalreview/](https://webapps.utwente.nl/ethicalreview/)


BMS Ethics website with info on e.g. general ethical principles, data management, informed consent: [https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/research/ethics/](https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/research/ethics/)