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. For these activities, whether they are labeled as 'research' or as 'education', ethical considerations warrant attention.

> **If teachers include student research activities in a course, they are responsible for safeguarding that these activities are conducted in ethically acceptable ways.**

1. Teacher obligations and ethical review

To support teachers in fulfilling their responsibility to safeguard that student activities in their course satisfy ethical standards, **the Ethics Committee strongly advises teachers to formulate their assignments in ways that avoid ethical dilemmas** (see section 2 on how this could be done). If this is done, the student projects need not be submitted for ethical review via the BMS application.

However, there may be cases in which teachers have reasons to deviate from this advice. For example, it may be necessary to use deception, target vulnerable populations, addresse sensitive topics, or collect personal information. If so, then **teachers are responsible for ensuring that any student research undertaken in module or course that could be ethically sensitive or problematic is submitted for official ethical review via the BMS web application.** Further, all scientific research publications from BMS require ethical committee approval. Therefore, any **student research activities that could lead to scientific publication** should submitted for ethical review via the BMS web application prior to commencement of said activities, as approval cannot be given retroactively. In the case of modules or course projects, student applications should be combined into one ethical review request via the BMS Ethical Review application where possible. This makes the process the most efficient for all involved.

Regardless of whether the assignments have to be submitted for formal ethical review, **teachers could use the opportunity to discuss with students the ethical aspects of the research activities they will conduct** (see section 3 for suggestions).

2. Formulate assignments that adhere to all ethical standards

The EC strongly advises teachers to formulate their assignment in such a way that ethical dilemmas are mitigated. Since the main purpose of research activities in courses or modules is to train research skills rather than to answer a scientific question, there is usually some leeway for adjusting the research question(s) and/or the methods proposed in the assignment, such that ethical dilemmas can be avoided. 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.

For projects that adhere to **all three** main ethical principles guiding research with human participants (respect for autonomy of participants, no harm, and privacy protection) review by the BMS ethical committee is not required. This can be done as follows:

> ➤ Ensure the research allows for asking for informed consent and that social pressure to participate is unlikely.

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.

> ➤ Ensure the research 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.

> ➤ Ensure the research does not collect sensitive data (including, but not limited to 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 project should be submitted for formal ethical review via the BMS application, and 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.

In case of doubt teachers can always consult the ethics contact person in their department, to discuss whether a (set of) student project(s) should be submitted for ethical review.

3. Train students how to conduct research in ethical ways by organizing internal reviews

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 projects, teachers can organize internal ethical reviews, in which students or student groups, for example, use the questions of the BMS ethical review application (available in pdf on the website) 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 review web application: https://webapps.utwente.nl/ethicalreview/
PDF of the BMS ethical review application questions: https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/research/ethics/explanation-webapplication/guides-bms-ethics-webapp/
BMS Ethics website with info on e.g. general ethical principles, data management, informed consent: https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/research/ethics/
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