**Research in/on your own place of work/organisation and other situations where there is potential conflict of duty/interest**

**Introduction**

When conducting research in one’s own place of work or an organisation where there is some other involvement extending beyond the pure interests of research, there is potential for conflicts of interests or duties. Examples include:

* Participants who are one’s work subordinates or colleagues who might feel coerced into participation
* Participants to whom one owes duties beyond those associated with research e.g. the general public, students, patients, service users etc.
* Research commissioned by one’s employer or a person / authority in a similar role where there is a vested interest in the outcome of the research
* Research funded by a body with a commercial or other interest in the outcome
* Situations where data are made available as a result of one’s position in an organisation rather than through channels open to all potential researchers

The main ethical concerns include:

* Coercion of participants
* Biased research – where there might be a temptation to ask people who think similarly to yourself
* General threats to voluntary participation
* Threats to participants’ welfare in the event of breaches of confidence e.g. their future employment
* Threats to the services participants would normally expect from the researcher in their normal role
* Threats to the integrity of the researcher

Although the situations outlined above can be avoided by simply conducting research in other organisations, where there are no wider concerns beyond those of ethically conducted research, this simple strategy might not always be possible, or appropriate, particularly for research students on professional doctorate programmes; so, the following guidance is intended to help in such situations.

**Conflict of Interest:** All research, with a favourable ethical opinion, must be undertaken in the name of the University of Portsmouth; it is sponsored by the University which provides indemnity. Any research is not the ‘property’ of employers even though it might take place in the workplace. Students undertaking research in the workplace do so as University of Portsmouth students not as employees of any particular organisation. Researchers must treat their own organisation as though it were external; it is therefore essential to gain permission to undertake the research from suitable managers of their organisation. The Ethics Committee will require documentary evidence of this permission. It follows that potential conflicts of interest can be resolved by students making their researcher roles clear and not making direct contact with potential participants. It is therefore vital to ensure that:

All written communication bears the University of Portsmouth logo and departmental address

All approaches to potential participants must be made through a gatekeeper who should pass on recruitment material on behalf of the researcher. All recruitment material must make it clear that the researcher is approaching them, via the gatekeeper, as a student researcher as opposed to a professional or some other capacity in which the researcher is known to the participant. No participant should feel any obligation to participate as part of their work duties or as part of their professional relationship to the student researcher. A typical invitation might read:

You are being invited to participate in a research project which forms part of the requirement for the award of my .........; I am writing to you in the capacity of a researcher. You are under no obligation to participate, your choice will have no impact, either positive or negative, on any working relationship we might have……………………….

**Access to data:** People in professional (and sometimes voluntary) work often have access to data which is necessary for fulfilling their professional duties. **These data are not provided for research purposes and therefore should not normally be accessed for such purposes without the consent of subjects**. Students wishing to access these data should not use the privileged access they might have. They should approach data custodians, and request access as a researcher – this is also useful in the context of research validity – any other researcher, regardless of status / employment, could equally access the same data. It is sometimes lawful to access personal data without consent but these data must be anonymised for research purposes; only data which are necessary for the specific research project should be accessed.

It is therefore necessary to ensure that:

* The permission of data custodians is obtained before attempting to access data
* The consent of data subjects is obtained before accessing data if those data identify them

**OR**

* The assistance of a third party, willing to anonymise the data and pass them on, is sought – this ensures compliance with data protection legislation.

As a general rule, you can claim that any data you have accessed could equally have been obtained by any other legitimate researcher

**Storage/Destruction of data:** It is wise to retain raw data (e.g. recordings of interviews) until the degree has been awarded – on occasion examiners wish to access raw data. Once the degree has been awarded all raw data is normally destroyed – please consult the University Research Data Management Policy for further advice. Raw data will typically include named persons and locations thus posing a risk to promised confidentiality. It is therefore essential to hold raw data in a secure manner, for example, encrypted on password protected computers. Access to raw data is normally restricted to the student and their supervisor; very occasionally examiners require access and, though rarely, auditors with a responsibility to ensure the quality of research in the University might request access. Anonymised / pseudonymised transcripts of interviews may be retained for future, unspecified research if specific consent has been sought from and granted by participants. Occasionally questionnaires, whilst completed anonymously, are coded enabling the researcher to identify the participant; keys, enabling identification of participants must be stored securely and separately. Arrangements for the safe storage and eventual destruction of data must be communicated to participants – normally in information sheets and consent forms – please use these links to access further guidance and templates.

**Favourable opinion from an Ethics Committee:** The opinion provided by the Ethics Committee is based on the application it received, it therefore follows that changes to the protocol / methodology will void that opinion. Any significant changes must be reported to the Ethics Committee and further review sought. The favourable opinion of the REC confirms that the proposed research is, in its view, ethical. This should not be seen as licensing the research to proceed. Clearly the research per se, ethical or otherwise cannot proceed without the consent of the hosting organisation. It is the researcher’s responsibility to gain relevant permission from research sites before undertaking any research.