

LASER procedures for ensuring that any ethical issues arising from students conducting primary research with participants are addressed

Introduction

LASER acknowledges that centres are experienced in guiding students who choose to undertake primary research with participants either for their Independent Academic Study (IAS) or other project-based unit(s). LASER also acknowledges that centres will also have written guidelines for their supervisors and students. However, LASER must ensure that there is an auditable verification procedure in place at all centres to manage the potential risks to third parties participating within student research. LASER has produced a checklist for this purpose. Centres are asked to use the checklist in annex 1 to provide auditable evidence of verification unless the centre has an equivalent auditable procedure in place.

Primary research

For clarification purposes in respect of Access units, primary research refers to research that involves the collection of original data specific to a particular research project e.g. IAS or equivalent. When doing primary research, the researcher gathers information first-hand rather than relying on available information in databases and other publications¹ (see reference below which provides a link with further information on primary and secondary research). Access students seeking to undertake primary research for their IAS often use interviews, focus groups and/or questionnaires to gather data and this can raise a number of ethical considerations as highlighted below. The requirements of this policy would not extend to include original (primary) statistical research undertaken using an existing data set (although the individual analysis of said data would be the student's original work).

Ethical considerations

The following are some of the main ethical considerations for students undertaking primary research:

- **Voluntary participation**
Access students must obtain and document express consent or permission from participants before they are involved in any aspect of the primary research.
- **Confidentiality and anonymity**
Participants' identities must be kept anonymous when results are written or published. This is important because participants may disclose personal information in interviews or surveys.
- **Safety and dignity**
Research participants should not be subjected to harm in any way and respect for the dignity of research participants should be prioritised.

¹ Reference
[Primary Research | Definition, Types, & Examples \(scribbr.co.uk\)](https://www.scribbr.co.uk/primary-research-definition-types-examples/)

Research approval

The checklist in annex 1 provides a means of ensuring that any ethical considerations have been addressed during the course of the study:

- (a) before the supervisor approves the study
- (b) during the development and implementation of the study
- (c) in the write up of the final report.

Following initial meetings with students, supervisors are asked to 'sign off' the checklist in each case where students are undertaking primary research with participants. Centres are also asked to monitor potential risks to third parties as a facet of on-going supervision meetings and to also offer on-going support to students who may encounter situations involving maleficence which were not foreseeable at the planning stage. A sample of not less than 10% of the checklists should be included within internal quality assurance procedures. LASER hopes that centres and their students will find the checklist helpful in ensuring best ethical practice is undertaken when undertaking primary research.

Approved by AQDC: 8 June 2023
Latest review date: June 2028
Responsible Officer: Access Quality Manager

Annex 1 Checklist for IAS / project supervisors for students undertaking primary research with participants

Ethical consideration	I confirm that following discussions with the student and scrutiny of any related documentation:	Response	Remarks (if any)
1. Approval in principle	I have given approval in principle for the research proposal.	Yes / No	
2. Voluntary participation	The student will ensure that their intended research participants are aware that they can opt in or out of the study at any time and will inform them of their rights.	Yes / No	
3. Informed consent	The student will ensure that participants know the purpose, benefits and risks (if any) behind the study before they agree or decline to join and need to provide consent if they agree to participate.	Yes / No	
4. Anonymity and confidentiality	The student will ensure that any personally identifiable information will not be collected or included in their final report?	Yes / No	
5. Potential for harm	The student will ensure that any risk of harm (physical, psychological, social other) is avoided altogether or remains negligible? ²	Yes / No	
6. Final report	The student is aware that any ethical considerations must be addressed during the research process and how these were addressed included in their final report, otherwise this could impact adversely on the final grade for the unit.	Yes / No	
Supervisor name and signature:		Date:	
Internal verifier: (if included in sampling frame)		Date:	

² For the purposes of this exercise, 'negligible' should be taken to indicate that after due consideration any 'reasonably foreseeable risk' remains at a minimal level such that the potential for harm can be countered swiftly and effectively by the researcher, with no significant on-going risk to the participant. Where a risk cannot be seen as negligible in relation to this definition (for example the risk that a participant might become re-traumatised through participation in research) then the research process should not be agreed due to the fundamental potential for harm that exists.