Research Guidance Note 9

Research versus evaluation activities

Introduction

The Code of Practice on Research Integrity applies to research activity carried out by staff and students at the university. However, there can be some debate about when an activity might be research and when it might be evaluation.

This guidance note is designed to illustrate some of the differences between research and evaluation, and to highlight the need for a consideration of the risks to participants arising from any activity before proceeding. There is a university expectation that both research and evaluation are carried out in an ethical manner by staff and students.

What is research?

The distinction between research and evaluation can be blurred. The recent REF2014 defines research:

> "as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared".[26]

The Department of Health defines research as:

> "the attempt to derive generalizable or transferable new knowledge to answer or refine relevant questions with scientifically sound methods".[27]

Research often aims for publication and wider dissemination of its findings. Some forms of research, such as initial pilot studies, may

26 Draft guidance on submissions for REF2021, 2018, page 60 http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref,2021/downloads/Draft%20Guidance%20on%20submissions%20REF%202018_1.pdf[last accessed December 2015]

27 UK Framework for Health and Social Care Research. Available from file:///C:/Users/40013138/Downloads/uk-policy-framework-health-social-care-research.pdf[last accessed September 2018]

not be intended for publication but can form part of a research process.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation "provides practical information to help decide whether a development or service should be continued or not. Evaluation also involves making judgements about the value of what is being evaluated." [28]

Unlike research, the purpose of evaluation is not to generate new generalizable knowledge, but to measure or judge standards of service. Evaluation may cover the process and outcome of education programmes, including the delivery and content of teaching.[29] There are different forms of evaluation which depend on the primary purpose of the evaluation and what exactly is being evaluated, including both formative evaluation and summative evaluation. Formative evaluation can enhance the object of the evaluation. For example, formative evaluation of a new teaching module can help form the new module by examining the delivery and implementation of a practice, such as the teaching practices. Summative evaluation, in contrast, examines the effects or outcomes of an object. For example by assessing whether the object (or practice) can be said to have caused a particular outcome.

Evaluation is generally carried out for local use, for example, collecting data about specific teaching programmes with no intent to generalise the result to other settings or situations. Evaluation data may however be reported at different levels (i.e. at module or programme boards, and academic committee discussions) within an organisation such as the university, or may on occasion be used in external facing publications such as a prospectus or course webpage. The intention, purpose and communication plans of any evaluation activity should be carefully considered when designing an evaluation, as these may increase the perceived risk to participants.

28 'A Practical Handbook for Clinical Audit' by Clinical Governance Support team, 2005, page 27 file:///C:/Users/40013138/Downloads/Practical_Clinical_Audit_Handbook_v1_1%20(1).pdf [last accessed September 2018]

29 Morrison (2003) British Medical Journal, Vol 326, p385–7

Key differences between research and evaluation

Evaluation and research have different primary purposes. Evaluation generates improvements, judgments and suitable follow on actions. Evaluation seeks to judge an expected level of service (or practice, such as teaching) against defined criteria such as a quality framework. Research generates knowledge about how the world works and why it works that way, or gains insight into human experiences and perceptions.

Staff and students must therefore consider the purpose for which the data is collected, and the ways in which it will be used and disseminated to help distinguish between a research project and an evaluation activity.

Research and evaluation activities can both employ quantitative and/or qualitative methods; we cannot therefore make assumptions about the research or evaluation status of an activity by considering the data collection method.

Table one, overleaf, describes several differences to help distinguish between research and evaluation activities.

Research	Evaluation
Purpose is testing a hypothesis and producing generalizable findings, or generating new knowledge or insights on a topic which may not be generalizable	Purpose is to determine the effectiveness, usability or appeal of a specific service or practice
Questions originate with scholars in a discipline	Questions originate with all key stakeholders and intended users of evaluation findings
Quality and importance judged by peer review in a discipline	Quality and importance judged by those who will use the findings to take action and make decisions
Ultimate test of value is contribution to knowledge	Ultimate test of value is usefulness to improve effectiveness, usability or appeal
Requires ethical approval	May not require ethical approval dependant on the approach to the evaluation and the intended type and use of the data

Table 1: Differences between research and evaluation activities[30]

Academic publication	Increasingly, academic journals require proof that a project gained institutional ethical approval ahead of publication. This may apply to both peer reviewed research articles as well as other forms of publication such as conference proceedings. Staff should therefore be aware that if they intend to publish their findings it would prudent to apply for ethical approval at the start of any project, to ensure that they can subsequently share their findings with a wider audience.
Ethical conduct is required for both research and evaluation activities	Both research and evaluation must be carried out to the highest ethical standards. The guiding principles of our Code of Practice on Research Integrity are the ethical imperatives of **do no harm** (non-maleficence) and **do good** (beneficence). This applies equally to evaluation activities. Our Code of Practice on Research Integrity defines and details the research practices to which all students and staff at the University are required to adhere to when undertaking research. It contains guidance notes with examples of good practice for gaining informed consent; maintaining confidentiality, anonymity and data protection, as well as guidance on using online survey tools. The UK Evaluation Society has created 'Guidelines for good practice in evaluation' to help commissioners and practitioners establish good practice in the conduct of evaluation. We would encourage anyone at the university involved in evaluation to consider these as a valuable source of good practice including the need for evaluation participants to: • Be fully informed about the purpose of the evaluation and the procedures for collection and use of data • receive an explanation of the possible outcomes from the evaluation (including use and publication of results)

30 Table adapted from Evaluation Flash Cards authored by Michael Quinn Patton, 2014 (updated 2017) http://ottobremer.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBT_flashcards_201712.pdf[last accessed September 2018]

- have assurance that the data collected is dealt with appropriately and in line with the Data Protection Act; and that any data made public is on the grounds of fairness, accuracy and relevance
- be assured that evaluators have taken all reasonable measures to check that the data are valid and any reporting that is a potential risk for participants has been negotiated
- have their privacy, confidentiality and cultural sensitivities respected.

Assessing the risks to participants, researchers and society

Staff undertaking either research **or** evaluation activities should always reflect on the balance of risks to benefits for participants taking into consideration:

- The individuals involved in the research
- Any potentially vulnerable groups (for example students may be considered a vulnerable group in certain circumstances)
- The sensitivity of any questions being asked
- Any potential risks to participants
- the storage and dissemination of any data collected

In an evaluation activity, because nothing new is being done to participants beyond what they might expect as routine to their programme, evaluations do not generally involve additional risk and therefore do not require the same level of ethical scrutiny as research projects.

Staff should nevertheless consider the vulnerability of the evaluation participants, especially if they are students taught by the staff members carrying out the evaluation, to ensure any risks are reduced. Staff should also carefully consider the sensitivity of the questions being asked during any evaluation activity.

Adopting a risk analysis approach to ethical approval for evaluation activity

All research projects require ethical approval and there are School Research Integrity Committees that consider such proposals. The membership of each committee is drawn from research active staff in the School. School processes are appropriate to the level of potential risk to participants from the proposal; therefore some research may be approved by 'gatekeepers' within School, while other proposals may be reviewed by the full Research Integrity committee of that School.

Evaluation does **not** require ethical review by a School Research Integrity Committee but should conform to good evaluation practices as described on page 42. In certain exceptional circumstances it may be best practice to have increased scrutiny of an evaluation activity by seeking ethical approval, helping to reduce potential risks. Figure 1 illustrates ways to ensure you have reduced potential risks from an evaluation activity.

Seek advice from experienced staff and professional bodies

This guidance note is intended to outline general differences between evaluation and research, however it will not address all situations. Staff can seek further advice from their local designated Research Integrity 'gatekeeper', or the School Research Integrity Committee.

This guidance note does not detract from the professionalism of staff who will be familiar with good practice in their disciplines, and they are encouraged to work within the context of research and evaluation practices appropriate to their fields. Staff are encouraged to refer to codes of conduct or guidelines from appropriate professional bodies/societies to inform their decision making.

Evaluation activities are often carried out by a wide variety of departments within the university; from programme evaluation by academic staff, to service evaluations carried out by Professional Services or Student and Academic Services (SAS). Staff from these areas may be less familiar with the distinctions between research and evaluation and they are encouraged to discuss potential projects with members of School Research Integrity Committees for further guidance.

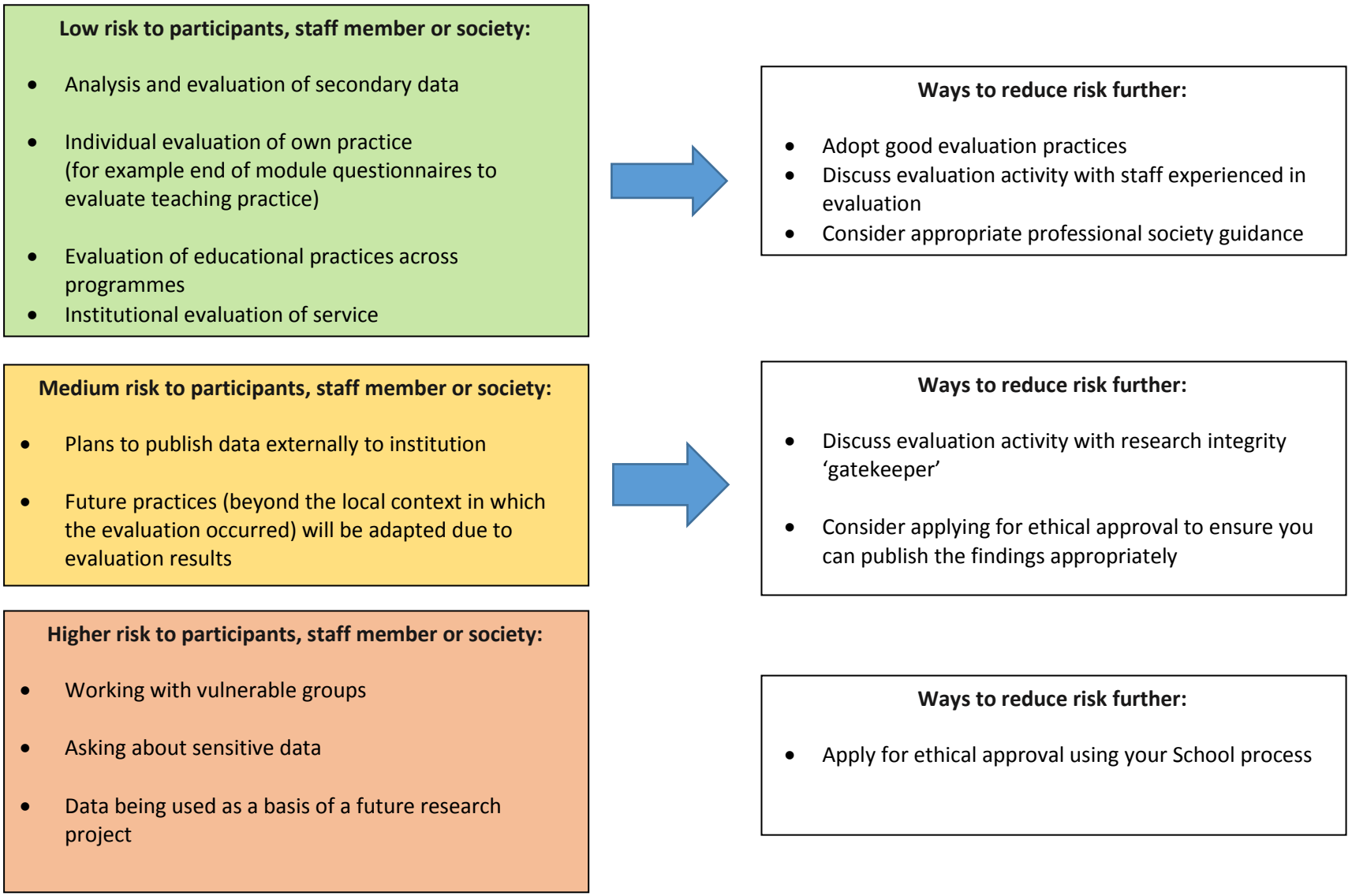

Figure 1: Adopting a risk analysis approach to ethical approval for evaluation activity