

# ETHICAL REVIEW FOR STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

Especially BEd honours projects  
and other research projects by undergraduates and taught postgraduates

# General considerations

Ethical issues specific to BEd honours projects

What is minimal-risk research?

# Undergraduates should be encouraged to carefully consider ethical issues



- Most undergraduates choose to do their honours projects during their Teaching Practice, with their own students serving as participants
- Because of their position as TEACHERS, need to be especially careful that they are not **taking advantage of their students**:
  - not asking them to do too much for the research
  - really allowing them the freedom to choose or not choose to participate
- Finally: note that HKIEd supervisor will share responsibility if ethical problems arise

# Undergraduates should only do “minimal-risk” research



- In any research, “Benefits should outweigh the risks”
- **Benefits: Usually only for UG thesis writer**
  - For honours projects, benefits usually only accrue to the HKIEd student; he/she needs to write a thesis to pass the Honours Thesis course... it is rarely published.
- **Risks, therefore, should be lowered as much as possible**
  - HKIEd students are not very experienced with protection of participant rights, good research practices etc;
  - In addition, many HKIEd students will choose to ask their own students, who are *children*, to participate; extra care and protection are needed
  - Therefore, undergraduates should be directed by their supervisors to do low-risk research.

# What is minimal-risk research?

- No excessive **inducements** to participate
  - If student-teacher relationship exists, teachers should emphasize to their own students that they are free to decline to participate, with no adverse consequences
- No **deception**
  - E.g. Purpose of study should be fully disclosed at beginning of the study
- No “**undue psychological stress**” or “**discomfort** higher than a reasonable level”
  - Questions asked in a way that will avoid discomfort for participants
    - E.g. Study on social exclusion among classmates: should avoid interviewing only students who are unpopular in the class (which may make them uncomfortable as they are obviously pointed out).
- No questions asked about “**sensitive** aspects of the participant's own behaviour such as **illegal conduct, drug or alcohol use, and sexual conduct**”
- To avoid problems if data were disclosed, fully anonymous surveys are advisable whenever possible; or at least, “identifiable by codes known only to the researcher” (as stated in model consent form)

# Practical issues

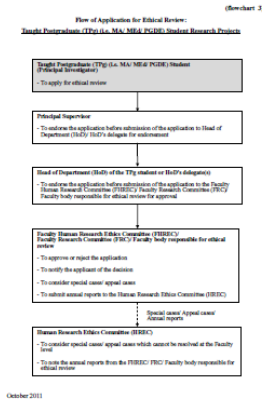
Review process

Timing

Most common mistakes made by students

# Review process for students

- Undergraduate projects
  - Reviewed only at the department level (Supervisor, then HOD / HOD delegate)
- TPg projects
  - First reviewed at department level, then also reviewed at Faculty level
- Students should fill out the form themselves (not done by the supervisor). Supervisor checks for accuracy and both student and supervisor sign form before submitting to HOD / HOD delegate.
- There are specific application forms for Student Research Projects



# An example: PS department review process



- To make things faster (for me and students):
  - Applications are accepted by email (scanned signatures)
  - HOD's delegate uses a review template to give feedback to students
    - This is emailed to principal supervisor, who will email it to student
    - Hard copy is signed by HOD delegate and sent by internal mail to principal supervisor
  - Amended documents are also accepted by email (scanned signatures)
  - Final approval is emailed to principal supervisor
    - Student can immediately begin research
    - Hard copy signed by HOD delegate and sent by internal mail to principal supervisor



## PS department Ethics Review Form

**Principal Supervisor Name:**  
**Student Investigator(s) Name(s):**  
**PS dept. Reference No:**

<input type="checkbox"/>	Approved
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Amendments required before approval
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not approved

### Amendments required:

(typical:)

1. **Ethical Review Checklist:** Check that you are involving children (below age of 16): (a) should be “yes”
2. In **IIIq**, state what age range (e.g. “12-14 years old”) and approximately how many students are involved.
3. Please **attach a brief description of what questions will be asked in the interviews, and a draft of the questionnaire (Chinese OK)**. Please make sure that no questions are asked that would make students uncomfortable.
4. Verbal assent needs to be collected from children below the age of 9. Please **attach a brief description of the verbal description** of the study that you will verbally tell to the students, and how you will ask them to help, making sure the students know they don’t have to participate.

...

### Other comments:

Please amend the documents, have them approved by your Principal Supervisor, and ask him/her to send a copy of the amended documents to Dr. Buchtel for final approval. Soft copy is also OK, if emailed by your supervisor with his/her approval.

Please do not start asking assent from participants or collecting data until the project has been approved by the PS dept. ethics delegate, Dr. Emma Buchtel (or FES for TPg students).

If you have any questions, please contact your supervisor or Dr. Emma Buchtel ([buchtel@ied.edu.hk](mailto:buchtel@ied.edu.hk)).

### Departmental approval officer:

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Emma E.K. Buchtel

D1\_2/F\_08

# Time: A major issue!



- In PS department, almost no UG applications were approved the first time due to basic errors in the application. Time from 1<sup>st</sup> application to approval usually 3-4 weeks, but delays on student side are a big problem.
- Ethics approval must be obtained BEFORE research begins
- Students often try to rush the process, which only leads to incorrectly filling out the ethics forms, incorrectly editing the model consent forms, etc.
- To fill out the ethics approval form, students need to prepare:
  - Research proposal
  - (Draft) Questionnaires, interview scripts
  - Consent forms to be given to participants / parents
  - Application Form for Ethical Review, including 4 open-ended sections describing research & protection of participants
- After ethics approval given: for child participants (age 15 or below), parental consent is required; need to get signatures from parents, which will take time (est. 2 weeks)



# Time: Solutions

- When students are planning project, supervisors should remind them that time for parental consent will be needed if participants are age 15 or below
- Supervisors may want to provide students with model answers / examples for open-ended sections of Application Form for Ethical Review
- Encourage students to submit the Ethics application to their supervisor **at least a month** before they will begin the research
  - Students should be encouraged to submit their “best draft” of the questionnaire / interview script; minor changes after the ethical approval are OK, don’t need another approval, as long as experimental procedures will not change in *ethically important ways, e.g.:*
    - do not **newly** ask any potentially sensitive information of the participants (e.g. drug use; sexual activity; etc.),
    - do not **newly** recruit children as participants,
    - do not introduce **new** recruitment procedures that could pressure potential participants to participate
    - do not **change** anonymity or confidentiality of data (e.g. newly deciding to take videotapes or other recordings)

# Common mistakes 1: What is a “child?”



- In PS department, about 90% of BEd Honours Project students used their Primary or Secondary School students as participants
- If participants are aged 15 or below, must check “Yes” for box (a) on Ethical Review Checklist, and in box (q) explain how many participants will be of what ages:

## PART III

### ETHICAL REVIEW CHECKLIST *(Please click or “✓” the boxes as appropriate)*

- |   | Yes                                 | No                       |
|---|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| a. Will the study involve subjects who are not able to give informed consent?<br>(e.g. children, mentally handicapped people, unconscious patients) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- q. If you have checked “Yes” to any of the above questions, please provide elaboration below:

About 20 students (aged 10-12) will participate in a survey.

# Common mistakes 2:

## Consent from whom?

□ Different people's consent needed for different ages:

- (i) For children aged below 9, only signature of their parents/guardians on consent form is required; completion of the task, after verbal explanation of its nature by the researcher, provides implied consent by the child;
- (ii) For children aged 9 to 15, signature of both the children and their parents/guardians on consent form is required; and
- (iii) For adolescents aged 16 to 17, signature of the adolescents on consent form would be required while consent from their parents/guardians is optional for studies involving minimal risk.

□ Also, please note that as a matter of principle a BEd student's teaching practice supervisor should be informed.

# Other common mistakes



- ❑ Did not attach (draft) questionnaire and/or interview questions
- ❑ Did not say that data will be identified by codes
- ❑ On consent forms, giving information about the purpose of the study, but not giving information about the procedures
  - ▣ Should have basic information for informed consent, e.g. “The participant will fill out a 10-minute survey about his/her opinions about Active Learning Activities”
- ❑ Most common error, however, is saying that students are not children (?!)



Thank you!

Any questions?

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