

Use of Cases in an Ethical Teaching Resource for Tourism and Social Science Students

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Abstract

Ethical problems are an integral part of all professions and academic disciplines (Clarkeburn, 2002). However, it is recognised that the increasing application of technology by students in research is not always matched by consideration of legal and ethical aspects (HEFCW, 2007). Nevertheless, issues of ethical practice linked to broad interpretations of sustainability are high on the agenda of research council objectives in the UK (ESRC, 2009). Additionally an understanding of ethics and responsible practice are an important component of the graduate skills set that seeks to 'promote global sustainability and citizenship' attributes in its students (Aberystwyth University, 2010).

This paper reports on a project to develop a resource to assist teaching in research ethics and responsible practice at Aberystwyth University. Although animal and clinical research ethics training at Aberystwyth was effective as a result of the high degree of regulation, it is felt that social science students were lacking in ethical guidance, particularly when it came to fieldwork practice. Although initially developed for undergraduate tourism students, it is envisaged that the resources can be used by other departments for students carrying out research with human participants (such as geography, psychology, history, education, law, politics and business), as well as research postgraduates.

Hornby et al (2008) identify four key areas in an ethical research curriculum;

- a framework for ethical thinking;
- principles of ethical conduct in human research;
- areas of ethical consideration and responsible practice in the design and conduct of research;
- strategies for how to conduct human research while adhering to the governing ethical and responsible practice principles.

Taking a platform-based, case-study approach is identified as being the most effective method for getting student engagement on these issues (Pimple, 2003). While Pimple (2003, p. 1) concedes that discussing case studies does not beat experience, he suggests it is an effective 'approximation' that enables students to get "involved in the issues". Pimple (2003, p. 1) describes case studies as 'stories', a tool that assists in "organising, understanding, and explaining experience". According to Winston (2000), the use of narrative cases can assist students to develop skills in perception, decision making, logical argument and analysis. The 'real' nature of case studies assists students to understand that ethics is not a 'separate', 'reified field', but rather an important part of daily life (Menkel-Meadow & Sander, 1995, p. 134).

Methods

The primary objective of the project was the development of case-based teaching materials for training students in ethical principles for research involving human participants, to be used across the department and the university. By engaging students in the development and evaluation process they were active partners in the identification of ethical research issues and contributed to greater relevance of the material. This reflective practice further encourages a culture of reflection and innovation identified as being important to the universities' learning and teaching strategy, and in line with Tribes' (2002) call for nurturing 'philosophic practitioners'.

Elements of the platform included;

- A literature review on best practices in teaching ethics to students.
- A PowerPoint slideshow addressing ethics, ethics in research and responsible practice in research. This includes the background of ethics, the role of culture and values in ethics, various ethical and responsible practice issues, strategies for dealing with the various ethical and responsible practice issues, and the university ethics arrangements.
- A matrix framework for constructing context-based scenarios. Included in this are a bank of relevant references and case studies for the associated research method/ethics and responsible practice issues. The matrix framework facilitates the development of context-based materials in other discipline areas. Thus a modified form of the platform may be used in a range of research methods courses being delivered across the university, or indeed embedded in a number of courses dealing with discipline specific ethical issues.
- A suite of test questions for examining ethics and responsible practice.
- Development of an online platform for delivery of these elements to students.

Following completion of the platform and assessment was an 'accreditation' process whereby students are offered a certificate of completion that they could use for their research and their personal development portfolio.

Evaluation

A multifaceted approach was taken to the evaluation of the project, with student evaluation, project team reflections and reference-group evaluation. These included staff experienced in running fieldwork courses, and staff experienced in training, advising and administering research ethics and responsible practice in the university. This ensures the long-term sustainability and scalability of the project in an era when ethical issues will need to be firmly embedded in any university course.

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