

## **IT'S NOT THAT HARD BUT IT CAN'T BE TOO EASY: CONDUCTING QUALITY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS**

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Each year educational jurisdictions receive hundreds of applications to conduct research in schools. This paper provides an insight into the processes that support the submission, review and approval (or not) of these research applications. These are likely to involve ensuring applications are of a high quality and feasible; that they address national and departmental priorities, meet the educational needs of students and/or, improve teacher professional practice and, ultimately have the potential to add to the evidence base which informs policy decisions. Further, the paper explores the ways in which mutually beneficial partnerships between education departments and researchers can be established, how researchers can access existing departmental data and how ethical practice is understood. In addition to ethical academic professional practice (as signed off by university-based Human Research Ethics Committees), there are departmental considerations, for example, informed consent for participation in research activities, the impact of "in-kind" support for research from school staff and students, and specific risks when researching children in the school context. Overall the paper raises challenges and opportunities for researchers working with education jurisdictions for improving the quality and relevance of educational research, particularly when conducted in the field.

### **Introduction**

All educational jurisdictions in Australia (both government and non-government) have a process for approving proposals from external agencies such as universities to conduct research in schools. Although school principals have the final say about whether their school participates in a research project, all jurisdictions have a process for evaluating research proposals to advise principals that a particular project is of sufficient quality to justify the time and effort required of school staff and students to participate. We call this process the "research approvals process". Jurisdictions have similar processes in place to evaluate proposals to conduct research in schools – similar application forms and guidelines. Applications are assessed using similar criteria.

Jurisdictions have used the research approvals process to encourage the conduct of high quality research in schools that has the potential to inform the evidence base on policy and practice. Through this process, jurisdictions make available a valuable resource (schools – their staff and students – and in some cases extant data) for research purposes, but only on certain conditions relating to the value and quality of the research.

## **What is the nature of the research approvals process?**

The research approvals process regulates and facilitates researchers' access to a valuable resource - public schools. It is **not** an ethics approval process. The purpose of an Ethics Committee is the ethical review of research and promoting ethically good human research. The research approvals process has a "gate keeper" function - regulating and facilitating access to a resource. Its aim is to assess whether a research project is of sufficient benefit to justify the time and effort required of school staff and students to participate.

In some respects the research approvals process is analogous to a research grant process – such as the Australian Research Council grants (Linkages and Discovery) which provide access to a resource (money) for the purposes of research. The ARC does not give its money away – it applies criteria – again, analogous to the criteria the research approvals process uses. Unlike the ARC applications process, the research approvals process is not a competitive process. Assessment of research proposals is criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced. Nationally over 90% of applications to conduct research in schools are approved.

The research approvals process also has a support function. We provide feedback to researchers on ways to improve their research proposals so that they better meet the criteria for approval for access to schools.

The process supports Principals in making a decision about whether to participate in a research project. Principals will not always be in the best position to assess a research proposal – its benefits and feasibility and whether participants are accorded the respect and protection that is due to them.

## **What is the rationale for the research approvals process?**

The rationale for this process is that research conducted in schools by research organisations such as universities is a *partnership* between the research organisation and the school together with the supporting system, such as an education department. This partnership is reflected in the fact that if a researcher invites schools to participate in a research project, then the schools, together with the supporting system, are being asked to make an *in-kind contribution* to that research project in terms of time and effort on the part of participants (for example, teachers and students) and also non-participants, who may assist in organising the conduct of the research.

The partnership is asymmetrical in that while research is the core business of a researcher, it may not be part of the core business of a teacher or student. Having said that, jurisdictions recognise that research in schools is generally beneficial to schools and their jurisdictions – as learning organisations - and that research is therefore welcomed.

As partners in a research project – making in kind contributions – we have the right, indeed an obligation, to comment on a research proposal and to negotiate the terms on which it is conducted in our schools, to ensure that our interests (understood very broadly) are served in the partnership.

Education jurisdictions have a strong interest, and an obligation to the public, that policy and practice is informed by the best available evidence. Thus we have an interest that the research conducted in schools (especially at the level of PhD or above) relates to policy and practice and that it is of high quality, and feasible so that it can serve as part of an evidence base to inform policy and practice. As partners in research conducted in schools we strive to ensure that it is relevant to education policy and

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practice, that it is feasible in the schooling context and that it has been designed so that it is capable of producing sound results that can serve as an evidence base.

Because as learning organisations, we welcome research in our schools – it is not that hard to gain approval. But because research by external organisations in schools is a partnership, and because the wellbeing of children in our care is our highest priority, it cannot be too easy either.

## **By what criteria are research proposals assessed?**

This rationale is reflected in the criteria by which research is assessed. Jurisdictions are concerned that the partnership between research organisations and education system is worthwhile – that the likely benefits of the research project are commensurate with the time and effort expected of school staff and students

The assessment made in the research approval process is a benefit-risk assessment.

When assessing research applications, jurisdictions give consideration to:

1. Benefit - the potential benefit of the research
2. Feasibility/methodology – the likelihood that these benefits will be realised
3. Cost/Impact – the time, effort and impact required by the Department's staff and students as participants and co-investors
4. Ethics - the participants are accorded the respect and protection that is due to them

Likely benefits (benefits and feasibility) are considered in relation to likely risks (impact and ethics).

## **Benefit**

The extent to which the research has potential benefit to:

- the researchers, in terms of their own professional learning (This is the main benefit required of research at Honours and Masters level)
- participants, as a learning experience
- students, teachers, their schools and communities, education systems and the wider public
- the Department and Government, in terms of supporting the achievement of existing priorities or informing new priorities and/or policies
- the field of education or human services - to theory, knowledge and practice

Some jurisdictions give greater emphasis to the educational benefit of the research. All jurisdictions consider this as a factor. Some jurisdictions consider the direct benefits of the research to schools and regions, for example, in terms of well-being and health.

## **Feasibility/methodology**

The extent to which research has the potential to realise these benefits, that is:

- the design of the project demonstrates care and systematic attention to detail in planning and is capable of producing sound and credible results

- the research goals, questions, strategy, methodology, research instruments, data analysed and the broader purposes to which the research contributes are well matched and the links between all these elements is made explicit
- the sampling strategy is likely to be feasible for answering the research questions (for instance in cases where large numbers of willing respondents from remote or Indigenous backgrounds are needed to support findings, and unlikely to be found, consenting or reachable in a suitable timeframe)
- the research is conducted or supervised by persons or teams with experience, qualifications and competence that are appropriate for the research – with greater care paid in relation to research on some particularly sensitive topics
- the practical and resource requirements of the research, particularly in the context of schooling policies, practices and protocols, have been planned
- discussion with the school communities and authorities is built into the research, and can be acknowledged as such
- dissemination strategies for the findings of the research are clearly articulated

Jurisdictions expect that research conducted in schools be designed to answer specific research questions (although some kinds of exploratory projects can be justified). The research questions should flow from clearly stated goals and the instruments should be designed to elicit information that answers the research questions. Jurisdictions often provide feedback to the researcher on the feasibility of conducting research in the context of schooling policies, practices and protocols.

## Cost/Impact

The extent of potential cost/impact of the research in terms of:

- the likely impact and demands of the research on Departmental and school operations,
- time, resources and commitment required by staff and students in schools
- the extent to which the activities complement activities in school or are additional to them
- potential risks to the Department of the research
- the extent of participation, funding and/or support from other government and non-government bodies

## Ethics

Participants are accorded the respect and protection that is due to them; that is:

- the research conforms with the principles in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Guidelines on the ethical conduct of health research issued by the National Health and Medical Research Centre
- the research design incorporates mechanisms to deal adequately with any harm or discomfort that may occur as a result of participation in the research
- the informed consent of participants and the assent of children is obtained before research begins
- a person's decision to participate in research is voluntary, and based on sufficient information and adequate understanding of both the proposed research and the implications of

participation, including use of translated information and consent forms and of interpreters, where needed

- active consent, where the primary caregiver has explicitly agreed to participate through the return of a completed consent form, is the preferred form of consent
- privacy and anonymity of participants is protected and researchers respect the privacy, confidentiality and cultural sensitivities of the participants and of their communities procedures for maintaining confidentiality when storing, accessing and disposing of data are outlined
- proposals ensure the confidentiality of participating institutions
- the research is undertaken primarily for the public good rather than for commercial or material gain.

## Why should education systems review ethics?

These ethical issues noted above are considered by a university ethics committee. So why the need for a separate review under the Research Approvals Process? There are some areas where education jurisdictions may have a slightly different perspective on ethical issues to HRECs.

## Consent

One issue is to do with consent in research involving children. The National Statement points out that “Research involving children and young people raises particular ethical concerns about their capacity to understand what the research entails, and therefore whether their consent to participate is sufficient for their participation.” Jurisdictions tend to be cautious in relation to these ethical concerns and tend to require the active consent of parents as a condition for a student’s participation in research involving children. For all jurisdictions, and in all research involving children, active consent, (where the student and/or student’s parent/caregiver, provides written consent for the student to participate in the proposed research) is the preferred form of consent.

Some jurisdictions may waive the requirement for active consent in some circumstances. For example, in deciding whether to waive active consent NSW takes into consideration:

- The sensitivity of the research - could parents reasonably object to their child’s participation in the research?
- The degree of risk of harm
- The potential benefits of the research
- The degree of integration/complementarity of the research into regular school programs
- The involvement of school staff in gaining community approval
- The maturity of the participants
- The methodology of the research - the research is done *with* children rather than *on* or *about* them, and in the process give their views legitimacy. The research proposal honours children’s evolving capacities, and the assistance they may need to decide for themselves

## Duty of care

Another ethical issue where education jurisdictions may have a slightly different perspective is in relation to duty of care, and the weight given to it. Duty of care extends to privacy considerations, but it may be able to be guaranteed except as required by law.

Education jurisdictions must be satisfied that research involving the participation of a student who is a child or young person is not contrary to the student's best interest.

Research involving students must provide for their emotional and psychological security and wellbeing. If, at any time during a research project, a researcher identifies a child or young person may be at risk of harm the researcher must report this information, including the identity of the student, to the principal.

Some education jurisdictions regard that its duty of care outweighs confidentiality so that when studies have the potential to identify students as being at risk of harm from themselves or others, then the names of such students will need to be disclosed to the relevant school principal(s) to enable further action to be taken as may be appropriate. In such cases, as there is a possibility of confidentiality undertakings being breached, this should be clearly spelt out in consent forms.

HRECs do not always share the view that duty of care outweighs confidentiality.

### Access to data for research purposes

A number of jurisdiction (NSW and Victoria) use their research application processes to allow access not just to schools, but to extant data held by the Department. These applications are assessed using much the same criteria as those for accessing schools. Risks associated with breach of privacy and reporting limitations are taken into consideration when assessing such requests.

### **Research applications processes are a small part of the activities of research units in jurisdictions**

It needs to be recognised that the research approval process is a small, though significant, part of what jurisdictions do to support high quality research in schools. In addition to the administration of research approvals process jurisdictions also

- cultivate and nurture research partnerships and a research profile with universities
- disseminate research findings within and beyond jurisdictions
- Build research capability within the Department
- Conduct reviews of literature to contribute to an evidence base that can be utilised to inform policy and practice

### **Conclusion**

Research conducted in schools by research organisations is a *partnership* between the research organisation and the school together with the supporting system. This partnership is reflected in the fact that if a researcher invites schools to participate in a research project, then the schools, together with the supporting system, are being asked to make an *in-kind contribution* to that research project in terms of time and effort on the part of participants and also non-participants, who may assist in organising the conduct of the research.

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