

Promoting ethical governance of modern slavery and human trafficking research

Guidance note 1

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Authors: Wendy Asquith, Edmira Bracaj, Adam Burns, Helen Stalford; University of Liverpool.
Bethany Jackson and Kimberley Hutchison; University of Nottingham.

Research by:



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Nottingham
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Who is this document for?

In this document we offer guidance on how institutional actors and infrastructural factors may facilitate good ethical governance of modern slavery and human trafficking research. It is aimed primarily at:

1. research institutions
2. research ethics committees
3. research funders.

What is this guidance based on?

This guidance note draws on the findings and recommendations of a study commissioned by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy Evidence Centre, which are available to read in full within the project's [published report](#). This project examined approaches to ethics in the field of modern slavery research. It aimed to identify good practice in embedding ethical survivor engagement within projects asking what is currently working well and where can improvements be made. It focussed on practice in the UK context.

This guidance note (GN1) is accompanied by two others – '[Conducting co-productive research ethically](#)' (GN2) and '[Navigating the ethics of research participation](#)' (GN3).

Content Notice: This guidance note does not discuss in detail any explicit/sensitive topics. Some of the content will, however, refer to topics relating to slavery, servitude, human trafficking, forced labour, forced marriage, child marriage, conflict and forced migration.

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1. Key findings for research institutions

Research institutions, particularly universities, can present barriers to research in partnership. This is particularly the case when working with 'non-HEI' (higher education institution) partner organisations as well as consultants and participants taking up roles in the capacity of lived experience of the issues being researched. Cumbersome financial systems, bureaucracy and large indirect cost rates are some of the issues which present ethical dilemmas that are rarely acknowledged. Specifically:

Equity of funding: research partnerships between universities and external not-for-profit/community organisations are inadequately resourced and rely on significant 'in-kind' and unpaid contributions from the latter:

"I think...there is an inequity in the way that the funding is distributed between when you're partnering with a university and you're a very small charity... It does get to a point in which you're doing 3/4 times more work as a charity than was allocated in the budget, and you feel a little bit resentful just because you know that the budget could have been more generous to the charity had so much not been absorbed by the university."

NGO Partner

Fair remuneration: There is now a standard expectation among researchers and funders that all participants, especially those engaging in the capacity of lived experience, should be compensated for their involvement and time spent engaging on any research project. To do otherwise risks participatory research becoming another form of labour exploitation.

"You look forward to doing your research. You're looking forward to money and there's nothing. That kills our spirit. It's like, "Oh, no, you. You've been tricked again." so that's part of trafficking."

Lived Experience Expert

Flexible and appropriate remuneration: This is particularly important for those with lived experience of modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) who are often in a position of financial precarity, may have limited access to forms of employment and may also have no access to a bank account. Institutions should be mindful of government-imposed policies affecting how lived experience experts can be paid, particularly if they are receiving welfare benefits, legal aid, asylum support or Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC/SVMS) support.

Those in research support and finance roles need to have clear, updated information on what constitutes 'earnings' and 'reasonable costs' for research participation according to HMRC, DWP, Home Office and other relevant government guidance. Payment policies should be mindful of calls for improved action¹ and informed by best practice guidance from other sectors engaged in public-participation activities.² The best method of payment cannot be assumed in these circumstances. The preferred mode of payment needs to be checked with the recipient and agreed on a case-by-case basis, with flexibility built into projects and institutional policies to accommodate different preferences. (More detail on support that should be given to research teams is detailed in GN2 and implications for research participants in GN3).

Timely remuneration: It is important to ensure that payment is made in a timely way (and, where needed, in advance) to prevent participants being out of pocket when participating in research. This is particularly important for any extra or 'hidden' expenses (such as childcare costs or use of mobile data) incurred when taking part in research.

“...making the payment and particularly making it in a timely manner with the university processes [is]... really, really challenging Given the funding models and structures being as they are, there’s a lot of recognition of the value of meaningful participation and of lived experience ... But the frameworks, the mechanisms, the processes and the funding, and mostly the timelines don’t allow for that.”

Research Ethics Committee Member

1. BASNET. (2024). ["Stop using gift vouchers to compensate lived experience experts and community leaders in research projects" – BASNET](#). UK BME Anti-Slavery Network. Accessed 17 December 2024.

2. NIHR. (2024). [Payment guidance for researchers and professionals](#). Accessed 17 December 2024.

Recommendations

Research institutions should:

- Issue clear guidance regarding the conditions, procedures and limitations of payment when researchers are costing up projects and agreeing the terms of research participation.
- Offer tailored guidance to researchers on the impact of payments and any related data sharing (with third parties) on the legal status, welfare benefits, or legal aid entitlements of participants, in line with the most up-to-date government policy.
- Expedite and make payment policies and processes more accessible for those taking part in research in the capacity of lived experience.
- Provide more flexible payment options (e.g. direct payments or cash in advance to cover transport, childcare or mobile data costs).
- Review and reform their internal policies and processes to reflect and share best practice on how to work well with non-HEI researchers and experts by experience.



2. Key findings for research ethics committees

Ethics committees are central to good ethical governance of research. Their role is to ensure that researchers respect the dignity, rights and welfare of all parties involved in and affected by research. They help researchers identify and mitigate potential risks in research. Their oversight of research ethics also protects the integrity and reputation of the institution from poor research practices. To meet these aims in oversight of MSHT research our study found multiple opportunities for improved practice, including:

Upwards scrutiny of institutional ethics: Ethics committees tend to focus their efforts on 'downwards' scrutiny of the ethics of individual research projects but there are limited mechanisms for 'upwards' scrutiny of whether institutional processes and structures are sufficiently ethical in the way that they enable, facilitate and manage research. Yet institutional-level practices currently present many barriers to participatory research.

Responsive ethics across the lifecycle of research: Despite the benefits of reviewing ethical protocols throughout the course of research to respond to new issues as they emerge, there is scant evidence of this occurring in any proactive way following initial ethical approval. (GN2 offers insights into structuring more dynamic and ongoing ethical review processes.)

"As an outsider coming into a university, I was absolutely perplexed by the amount of focus before and nothing during or after. It just seems crazy to me..., the Ethics Committee is not learning from how things went to think about the next project and equally the researcher lacks sort of ongoing ethical support"

Researcher

An assets-focussed approach: When ethics review processes work well, they provide invaluable feedback, share relevant learning and enhance the quality of research. However, the relationship between ethics committees and researchers is all too often experienced as antagonistic, officious and disproportionately risk-averse rather than constructive, collaborative and empowering. Researchers are critical of ethics committees' 'deficit-oriented' and, often, misguided preoccupation with safeguarding and participants' 'vulnerability'. They argue for a more 'asset-focused' emphasis on participants' strengths and unique insights and skills.

Bespoke guidance for ethics committees: Despite an increase in the number of funding calls for MSHT research and particularly for work with those with lived experience of MSHT, there is no specific guidance for ethics committees on how to assess and support such projects.

“I think as an academic, if I come across something, I would tend to learn about it. But I don’t think I’ve received any specific training on modern slavery.”

Research Ethics Committee Member

Recommendations

Research ethics committees should:

- Build more collaborative and constructive relationships with researchers e.g. by organising pre-ethics application consultations and training events.
- Create communities of support amongst researchers within institutions aimed at best practice exchange and confidence-building in ethical research practice.
- Move away from a front-loaded approach to ethics review to a process that responds more routinely to ethics challenges as they arise e.g. by providing drop-in support, advice and peer sharing to researchers involved in approved, ongoing projects.
- Ethical review could provide more detailed consideration and guidance as to how a trauma-informed approach to research might be brought to bear on MSHT research.
- Improve transparency in ethical reviews by disclosing the positionalities of reviewers e.g. discipline, research areas and methods covered by the committee.
- Encourage opportunities for lived experience researchers and those from diverse communities to sit on and offer training to ethics review panels.

3. Key findings for research funders

Funders have an important role to play in supporting research teams to design and deliver projects with budgets for ethical co-productive and participatory research. Such design would adequately resource equitable and accessible project engagement for all involved – including team members and research participants in the capacity of lived experience. Our study highlighted that funders, and particularly specialist or issue-specific funders, have a unique role to play in promoting communities of good governance and ethical practice within and among research institutions at a sectoral level. Opportunities identified for funders include:

Addressing impacts of shorter-term or rapid-response funding calls: Often designed to address pressing policy priorities or debates, these responsive funding calls can be a barrier to building relationships with and meaningfully involving lived experience experts and community groups. Where sufficient time and funding is built into projects to support relationship-building between partners the quality and integrity of research is improved.

“We’ve said short duration awards can be problematic but are a reality of the funding landscape. Some issues around that can be mitigated by... funding for research networking, community-building phases of larger programmes and centres.”

Funder

Investment in peer-researchers: Projects that involve peer researchers in the capacity of lived experience, in particular, require additional time and resources to provide necessary support, but this is often not accommodated by funders. This can severely undermine the ethical integrity of projects.

“Talking about peer researchers, there needs to be an investment in them in terms of their understanding of what the research is.... their understanding of the policy - their understanding of the subject matter.”

Researcher

Best practice budgeting tools: Benchmarking advice is needed from funders on good practice in terms of research teams budgeting. Guidance is needed on costing of, e.g. project-related childcare and trauma-informed support as well as translators and/or interpreters and the running of accessible participant information sessions. This is crucial for ensuring informed consent by participants and their safeguarding in research.

Recommendations

Research funders should:

- Encourage those applying for funding to build in additional time and budget for relationship-building prior to the commencement of research projects. More explicit guidance around how to achieve equitable partnerships with non-HEI researchers would support this.
- Consider the impact of and support required for rapid-response projects, particularly in relation to peer researchers and those with lived experience (e.g. by inviting bids from existing communities of expertise with established support and relationships already in place).
- Develop clear guidance on disclosure and reporting requirements relevant to the field of MSHT that can inform researchers, specialist funders would be particularly well-placed to do this.
- Offer additional resource to research teams to work with translators or interpreters and to deliver accessible information sessions for prospective participants prior to data collection.
- Promote trauma-informed approaches to research by offering best practice guidance on budgeting for trauma-informed support mechanisms and more explicit acknowledgement of trauma-informed principles and practice within funding calls. These should encourage applicants to assess the appropriateness of proposed research methods to address and mitigate any trauma triggered during research.
- Create opportunities to share learning and resources relating to ethical governance across research teams and projects.



The Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) at the University of Oxford exists to enhance understanding of modern slavery and transform the effectiveness of laws and policies designed to address it. The Centre funds and co-produces high quality research with a focus on policy impact, and brings together academics, policymakers, businesses, civil society and survivors to collaborate on solving this global challenge.

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office@modernslaverypec.org

www.modernslaverypec.org

Author(s): Wendy Asquith, Edmira Bracaj, Adam Burns, Helen Stalford, Bethany Jackson, Kimberley Hutchison.

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