Scottish Qualifications Authority

Code of Research Practice

Version 1, August 2023

Contents

1 Introduction and aims

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is working to place research and evidence at the heart of its decision and policy making, and aims to encourage this across the education sector. This document, developed and owned by the Research and Evaluation team of SQA's Policy, Analysis and Standards Directorate, aims to provide a set of core principles for the production of *good* research, where good research is conceived as research that is not only useful and reliable (for internal and external audiences), but is ethical, equitable, and sustainable. These principles apply to all aspects of the research process, from design, through data collection, analysis and dissemination. By working with these principles in mind, SQA can ensure its research is accessible, authoritative, robust and relevant to as wide a range of people as possible, while also ensuring that researchers themselves are working in an environment where they feel safe, supported, and free from discrimination.

SQA has particular obligations to work in ways that advance the causes of equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and sustainability. As a public body, SQA must ensure that due regard is paid towards the 'three needs' of the Public Sector Equality Duty (2011), and must work within the legislative framework of the Equality Act (2010). Sustainability is core to the National Outcomes for Scotland's National Performance Framework, which is underpinned by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG). SQA has made particular organisational commitments towards sustainability, recognising 'that it has a responsibility to the environment beyond legal and regulatory requirements'[1]. By working to these principles when conducting research, SQA will ensure that it meets its legislative obligations as a public body, while reflecting organisational commitments to wider society.

Furthermore, the principles aim to have a positive impact on research quality in that they will also produce data that is representative, valid and reliable. As such, the principles in the Code of Research Practice (CoRP) should be considered as foundational, integral aspects of SQA's research rather than afterthoughts, or as additional work. For advice and guidance on working to these principles, please contact the Research and Evaluation team researchandevaluation@sqa.org.uk.

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[1] https://www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/SQA-Sustainability-Report_2020-2021.pdf

2 Structure of this document

Ethics, equity, and sustainability are fundamental to the CoRP's framing of research and the research process. These three concepts are interdependent and overlap. In order to facilitate their application to research, and with an additional aim of making this document accessible and easy to use, the CoRP is structured around three points of focus within which these foundational concepts apply individually or in combination: ethics, society, and environment. The CoRP contains 12 principles organised around these points of focus (see Figure 1).

The CoRP relates to various other SQA processes or policies, some of which are currently in development. These are listed at the end of Sections 5, 6 and 7.

Within this document, 'researcher' is used to refer to anyone in any directorate or business area who intends to lead, assist with, or otherwise conduct research on behalf of SQA — either within or outwith the organisation. The CoRP draws on and synthesises best practice in research as set out in the sources that have informed it, listed in Section 10, and interprets this specifically for SQA's role and context. The CoRP applies most readily to primary research, that is to research where data is gathered via direct contact with participants using surveys, focus groups, interviews or other methods. Nevertheless, the principles should be carefully considered when undertaking any research including engaging in secondary analysis of pre-existing data, or desk-based research. For more guidance on this, see Section 8.

Figure 1: The three points of focus for the CoRP and their associated principles
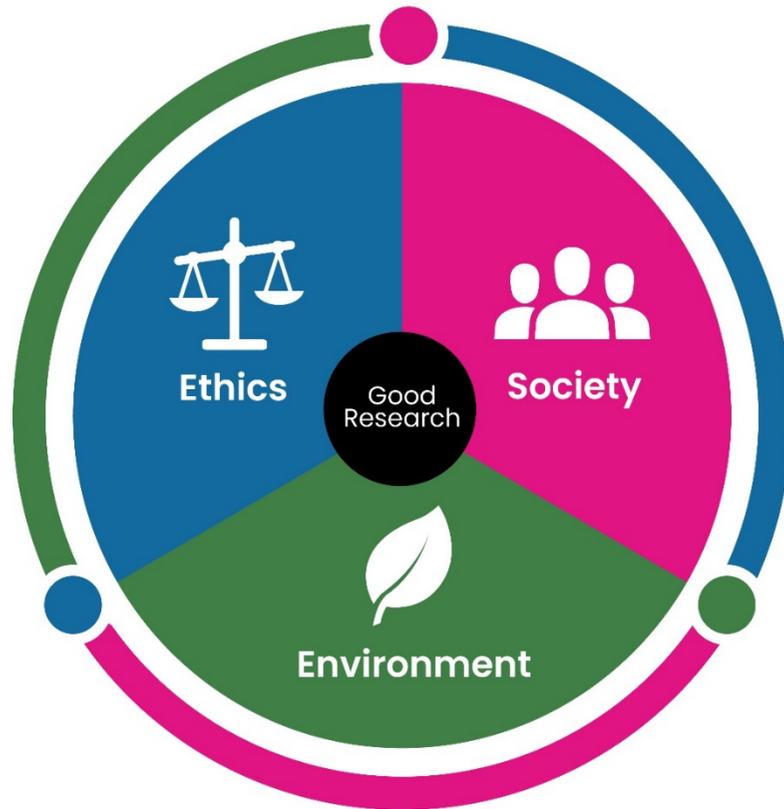
Ethics

Principle 1: Avoid doing harm and safeguard all participants.
Principle 2: Participation must be based on informed consent.
Principle 3: Do not disclose identity or personal information.
Principle 4: Only use data for the purposes collected.
Principle 5: Use appropriate, robust methods and promote the appropriate dissemination and use of findings.

Society

Principle 6: Work collectively and collaboratively.
Principle 7: Proactively consider and address issues of access.
Principle 8: Acknowledge all contributors and participants.
Principle 9: Think intersectionally.
Principle 10: Consider researcher positionality.

Environment

Principle 11: Engage in eco-friendly practice wherever possible.
Principle 12: Plan, organise, and share.

3 Full list of principles

The principles are described in more detail in the following sections.

First focus: ethics

♦ Principle 1: Avoid doing harm and safeguard all participants.

♦ Principle 2: Participation must be based on informed consent.

♦ Principle 3: Do not disclose identity or personal information.

♦ Principle 4: Only use data for the purposes collected.

♦ Principle 5: Use appropriate, robust methods and promote the appropriate dissemination and use of findings.

Second focus: society

♦ Principle 6: Work collectively and collaboratively.

♦ Principle 7: Proactively consider and address issues of access.

♦ Principle 8: Acknowledge all contributors and participants.

♦ Principle 9: Think intersectionally.

♦ Principle 10: Consider researcher positionality.

Third focus: environment

♦ Principle 11: Engage in eco-friendly practice wherever possible.

♦ Principle 12: Plan, organise, and share.

4 Working with the principles

The remainder of this document gives more detail on each principle and gives examples of ways in which researchers at SQA can engage with them throughout the research process. While they should be considered and returned to often throughout the running of a research project, they are particularly important during research design. The Research and Evaluation team can advise on how to design a research project according to these principles. The CoRP is also an integral component of Research and Evaluation's research commissioning and ethical review processes (currently in development).

Before beginning a research project, a researcher should:

♦ familiarise themselves with the CoRP and other connected processes or policies that are relevant to their work
♦ identify any areas where they or their team lack skills or experience needed to carry out their project, or areas where they are unsure of how to proceed, and seek advice from the Research and Evaluation team as appropriate
♦ think carefully about the ways in which their project interacts with the focuses and principles in the CoRP and engage with the ethical review processes at an early point in project development
♦ commit to sharing project findings as widely as possible

The Research and Evaluation team can advise on whether any given project is being conducted in line with the CoRP and offer support where needed (see Section 10). If a research project goes ahead without support from Research and Evaluation, researchers involved should ensure they are confident their work is fully compliant with the CoRP and its principles.

5 Ethics

Ethics play a vital role in the research process by ensuring that all research is conducted in a morally responsible and fair way. Ethical principles ensure that the rights and dignity of participants and researchers are protected, while promoting rigour and validity.

Care must be taken to ensure that trust is developed and maintained between participant and researcher at all stages of research. To ensure SQA's research is conducted in an ethical manner, new research projects should be subject to an ethical review process by the project lead. This process is currently in development. In the meantime, SQA researchers should ensure they adopt the following principles as a minimum commitment to ethical working.

Principle 1: Avoid doing harm and safeguard all participants

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure they recognise and address potential sources of harm to participants, and that steps are taken to safeguard participants and themselves. At a minimum this requires that researchers do their best to put participants at their ease and avoid making excessive demands on them. In advance of data collection, researchers have a responsibility to think through their methodology, and to prepare for and be in a position to minimise or manage any distress or discomfort that may arise. During data collection, any actions that appear to cause undue stress, discomfort, or emotional distress to participants should be immediately reconsidered — even if this involves pausing or cancelling the project. Since vulnerable groups are more likely to experience discomfort or distress as the result of research work, these responsibilities increase proportionally when working with potentially vulnerable participants, including participants from marginalised social groups. Colleagues working with school learners or other learners under the age of 18 must explicitly consider the impact of their research on those learners. Researchers should take steps to minimise the effects of research designs that advantage or are perceived to advantage one group of participants over others.

Researchers must consider how to maximise the benefits of their research while minimising risks or harm to participants, to themselves, and to the wider communities on whom the research may impact. Compromises may need to be made, but these should be justifiable and explicitly accounted for during project planning and during the process of ethical review. Ultimately, the aim is to create a research environment where participants and researchers feel at ease and their wellbeing is safeguarded.

Principle 2: Participation must be based on informed consent

It is crucial that research participants give voluntary informed consent to take part in a research study. During the process of giving informed consent, participants **must**:

♦ be informed about the aims of the study in which they are being invited to take part
♦ be given a clear description of the research method from the participants' perspective
♦ have any potential risks of participation identified
♦ be told what will be done with the data gathered from the activity (see Principle 4)
♦ be given the opportunity to ask any questions they have about the study and to receive answers or have their concerns addressed

Having been given this information, participants should be free to agree or disagree to take part in the study without duress. It is expected that this process will take place before the start of a study. Additionally, researchers must remain sensitive and open to the possibility that participants may wish, for any reason and at any time, to withdraw their consent. In some circumstances, for example survey-based research that does not collect identifying information from participants, it may not be possible to withdraw consent after taking part. Where this is the case, this should be made clear to the participant as part of the informed consent process.

The giving of informed consent by a participant should generally be documented by using a consent form. For survey research it may be appropriate to gain consent by providing participants with all relevant information, and informing them that, by starting the survey they are consenting to take part in the research process. Contact the Research and Evaluation team for advice on constructing a consent form, or on other processes of obtaining informed consent.

Under certain circumstances, it may not be possible to obtain informed consent from everyone involved in a piece of research — for example, when research is carried out in a public space — however attempts to contact those present should nevertheless be documented. Additionally, a research project may occasionally involve or focus on participants whose capacity, age, or other vulnerable circumstance, may limit the extent to which they are able to voluntarily participate. In this situation, researchers should fully explore ways in which they can be supported to understand and agree to take part in the study, seeking the support and approval of those responsible for such participants.

The principle of informed consent applies to children and young people as well as adults. We endorse the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); the best interests of the child are the primary consideration, and children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. We must take into account the rights and duties of those who have legal responsibility for children, such as those who act in guardianship (parents or carers, for example) or as 'responsible others' (that is, those who have responsibility for the welfare and wellbeing of the participants, such as social workers). This process may involve gaining the consent of those responsible for children, such as a parent, carer or guardian.

Principle 3: Do not disclose identity or personal information
Researchers should recognise the entitlement of both individual participants and organisations to privacy and should treat all participant data confidentially and anonymously as standard. This may involve removing identifying information from direct quotes from interviews, or from case studies or other material when reporting. Where research reports contain anonymised material, this should be noted in the text, alongside a full explanation of what has been done and why.

In some cases, anonymity may not be possible, such as when conducting fieldwork within a small community or researching a well-known institution. Similarly, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is not always achievable in historical or archival data research, nor in autoethnographic work published under the researcher's name. In these cases, the specific risks of harm due to the individuals concerned being identified should be carefully

considered and ameliorated where possible as part of Principle 1. Anonymity may also be challenging to maintain in the context of some visual methodologies and participatory methods. In these situations, researchers should be clear with participants over how and in what contexts they will be identified, how the data will be used, and build that into the informed consent process as per Principle 2.

All data generated by research projects should be gathered and stored in line with SQA's data retention policy. If data is shared with other teams, it must be anonymised prior to sharing.

Principle 4: Only use data for the purposes collected

As part of an informed consent process, participants must be informed about the uses to which their data will be put. This process applies to current and potential future use of data, eg in secondary analysis by the same team to answer new research questions, or via the sharing of the dataset for use by other researchers or analysts. If there is potential for data to be reused in this way, it should be made as clear as possible when gaining initial consent. Researchers should inform potential participants how long their data will be stored for and should delete or destroy the data when that time limit is reached.

Principle 5: Use appropriate, robust methods and promote the appropriate dissemination and use of findings

Research conducted by SQA should use robust and relevant methods and should serve the legitimate needs of our organisation and its stakeholders. It is unethical to intrude on people's lives with unsound or unreasonable methods, and research should not unduly burden participants. Researchers should take particular care not to over-research vulnerable groups, and always weigh the demands for people to take part in a particular project against the benefits of the research. As a core component of this principle, researchers should carefully consider the limitations of the methods they are using and be fully transparent about these when reporting.

Since participant time and effort is valuable, it should be considered an ethical obligation to disseminate evidence resulting from research widely, appropriately, and timeously. Researchers have an obligation to consider the most relevant and useful ways of disseminating research findings, and of informing participants about research outcomes for example via debriefing, eliciting feedback, a project website, or other public-facing publication.

Related information, policies and procedures
♦ Ethics procedure (in development)
♦ Data retention and disposal policy

6 Society

Equity and sustainability are critical to ensuring fairness and justice in all aspects of life, including research. Research that is conducted equitably ensures that all individuals, regardless of their background, identity, or status, have an equal opportunity to participate and benefit from research findings, now and in the future. Therefore, research should be designed and conducted in a way that takes into account the diversity and unique experiences of different groups, and that potential barriers to participation and inclusion are addressed — whether considering project participants, audiences, or researchers themselves. It may of course be desirable to focus data-gathering activities on a specific group or groups of people, thereby excluding others. When this occurs, the researcher should think carefully about the motivation behind the work and ensure that the focus is justified.

Principle 6: Work collectively and collaboratively

A collective approach to research, where advice, guidance or support can be freely sought and offered, creates a culture of knowledge-sharing and transparency among researchers, resulting in more comprehensive and impactful research. When researchers work together, they can make use of each other's expertise, experience and perspectives to devise innovative, informative and efficient research projects. This form of collaboration is fundamental to promoting inclusivity in research, ensuring that research is pertinent, impactful, and respectful to all involved.

Similarly, inclusive research involves engaging participants from various backgrounds, including those who are underrepresented in research. Collaborating directly with communities and stakeholders, where possible, will help us gain a better and broader understanding of the needs and concerns of different groups and fosters trust with them. By collaborating with members of a community we seek to include or focus on, researchers can identify the most appropriate research methods, collect data that is culturally sensitive, and interpret the results in a meaningful and equitable manner.

In the context of SQA's research, this form of working may involve open and frank discussions of project design with other relevant teams (eg Research and Evaluation or Equalities), the development of cross-organisational research projects, and/or consultation with internal or external community groups (eg staff networks or external equivalents).

Principle 7: Proactively consider and address issues of access

Minority groups often face structural barriers to access, which reduce or remove their ability to participate in a wide range of activities, including research. For example, a web survey that is not amenable to screen readers can exclude people with visual impairments, while poorly phrased or inappropriate questions can exclude people based on race, sexual orientation or any other of the protected characteristics of the Equality Act (2010). As well as making the research process inequitable, this will skew project data towards more privileged groups, making research findings hard to generalise.

In order to engage participants from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible, it is important to proactively consider the accessibility of research as early as possible in the process of research design. Colleagues undertaking research must consider how their research design could exclude groups or distort participation. Consideration should be given

to issues likely to act as a barrier to participation, and reasonable steps taken to address these. These steps might include offering a choice between self-completion and interviewer assistance when completing surveys; ensuring that focus group venues are fully accessible; or providing translation or interpretation facilities where appropriate. Involving marginalised communities in research design at an early stage in a consultative role (Principle 6) can be a powerful way to ensure a research project is as accessible as possible.

Principle 8: Acknowledge all contributors and participants

Marginalised communities can be disproportionately impacted by exploitative labour practices. In a research setting this can include undervaluing or excluding marginalised voices or perspectives in processes of research design, data gathering, analysis and interpretation, or dissemination. SQA should seek to promote a research climate characterised by equitable labour practices, where the contributions of all individuals are valued and, crucially, recognised regardless of their race, gender, or other features of their identity. To achieve this, we should acknowledge the input of all researchers involved in any given project, and consistently credit or acknowledge the assistance or input of others wherever possible and appropriate. This may involve multiple author credits on presentation slide decks, acknowledgement sections in reports or publications, and/or verbal acknowledgements of assistance or input at meetings. This commitment should extend to crediting or acknowledging the input of community members where participatory methods have been used. In this way we can not only create a more inclusive, equitable environment for research work at SQA, but also expose and challenge systemic inequalities that contribute to the marginalisation processes in educational or research institutions, or within public bodies in general.

Principle 9: Think intersectionally

Working intersectionally means acknowledging that people's perspectives, social positions, and experiences are shaped by different, overlapping, and intersecting aspects of their identities. These aspects include, but are not limited to, age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion, sexual orientation, and sex (ie the protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010), class, and experience of care. Colleagues conducting research should think carefully about which intersections (for example Black women, disabled young people) are excluded from or underrepresented in their work, and take steps to address this. Collecting demographic information, incorporating qualitative data, and/or thinking about ways to reach underrepresented groups are essential steps.

Intersectionality can be considered in both qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research is a powerful tool when taking an intersectional approach, since qualitative data enables exploration of lived experience and allows individual voices to be heard, rather than being overwhelmed by aggregate analysis. Quantitative research should nevertheless also be approached intersectionally, by asking appropriate demographic questions that allow results to be compared across different combinations of identity markers (as practicable and appropriate). As a basic commitment to intersectionality, we should ensure that wherever possible we actively seek out the voices of individuals at greatest risk of marginalisation or discrimination.

Principle 10: Consider researcher positionality

While objectivity is often considered an important component of research, it is seldom possible for a researcher to be entirely objective regarding the focus of a project. Considering positionality means being open and transparent about a researcher's relationship to the topic at hand, the group of participants involved, and/or the methods being used.

As a routine component of research planning or analysis, researchers at SQA should think about the fact that they represent SQA and consider the impact of this on the data they are gathering. The various stakeholder groups from whom we are most likely to be gathering data (for example learners, practitioners, parents and carers) may be likely to respond in particular ways, or withhold certain aspects of their response, because of SQA's position in the social and educational landscapes.

While working collectively and collaboratively (Principle 6) can to some extent address researcher positionality by introducing multiple perspectives, other aspects of a researcher's identity may nevertheless become relevant. This is particularly the case when working with vulnerable or marginalised groups. Throughout the research process, a researcher should reflect on the impact their background, beliefs, identity, or experiences may have on the research process and the findings. This should always be carefully considered and addressed transparently in research reports where relevant (while paying due regard to the researcher's own right to privacy).

It is considered good practice to acknowledge the effect of researcher identity when identity is a particular focus of research. For example, when conducting face to face research with racial or ethnic minorities, the researcher's own racial or ethnic identity may have an impact on how participants respond and contribute. This can be acknowledged transparently in research reports by stating the racial or ethnic identity of the researcher/interviewer as a component of the methods section.

Related information, policies and procedures
♦ [Equality of access to SQA qualifications](#)
♦ [Equalities team intranet site](#)
♦ [Dignity at work policy](#)
♦ [Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) process](#)

7 Environment

Environmental sustainability is important to the research process in that it ensures research is conducted in a way that does not compromise the health and wellbeing of future generations. SQA's researchers should prioritise environmental sustainability in project design, data collection, analysis and dissemination by considering the potential environmental impact of each, and by taking active steps to reduce waste and emissions, and by adopting sustainable practices wherever possible and practicable.

Principle 11: Engage in eco-friendly practice wherever possible

A commitment to sustainable research means considering the environmental impact of activities we might tend to take for granted, such as the ways in which we travel when undertaking research activities. Travel is the main source of global CO_2 equivalent emissions at a number of research institutes. In order to minimise the environmental impact of our research work, we should commit to taking the train rather than the plane whenever practicable when travelling for research purposes (during fieldwork, for example, or to and from a conference), and to taking advantage of online technology to facilitate remote participation in interviews, focus groups, or conference/workshop events whenever possible.

Principle 12: Plan, organise, and share

Research work can impact the environment via the resources it uses. Research projects should be planned and organised carefully to avoid the unnecessary use, or waste, of resources. The reasonable sharing of designs and methods, and research material such as survey questions, code, or interview schedules, can ensure that duplication of work is avoided, and reduce waste of effort and resources.

When planning, steps should be taken to ensure that research outputs will be available when needed to support any activities they are intended to inform. Dissemination should take place timeously, and via appropriate channels in order to reach key teams, decision makers, or stakeholders. This will ensure that time and other resources put into a project are not wasted.

The Research and Evaluation team has specialist knowledge of a range of different research methods, and access to previous research materials from which to draw, including consent forms, survey questions, interview designs and other forms of data production. Early consultation with Research and Evaluation can reduce time spent re-designing materials that already exist and reduce waste.

Related information, policies and procedures

- [SQA environmental strategy info](#)
- [SQA Sustainability Report 2020-21](#)

8 Secondary or desk-based research

The broad approach framed by the CoRP applies to all types of research including secondary analysis of pre-existing data, and desk-based research. In those cases, it is up to the researcher to identify areas where their work is impacted by the CoRP. When working with pre-existing data, the researcher should consider what they know about how the data was gathered, and whether the methods used are consistent with the principles of the CoRP. Questions to ask in this situation might include:

♦ Was this data gathered ethically (Principles 1 to 5)?
♦ Were the methods robust and appropriate (Principle 4)?
♦ Did participants consent for their data to be used in the way I am currently using it (Principle 2)?
♦ Was the method appropriately inclusive and accessible (Principle 7)?
♦ Is the analysis I am currently running likely to impact or exclude a marginalised group (Principles 6 to10)?
♦ Is the work I am currently doing free of environmental impact (Principles 11 and 12)?

If the answer to any of the above questions is 'no', then careful thought should be given to the ways in which the data is being used, and whether it is appropriate or desirable to continue working with it. At the very least, the ways in which the data fails to live up to the CoRP should be acknowledged in resulting reports.

Researchers conducting literature reviews or other forms of desk-based research should think carefully about the approach they are taking to find literature, and whether that approach is excluding particular lines of evidence, points of view or perspectives. Intentionally expanding a literature search to include marginalised or excluded authors or voices is an important way to bring this form of research in line with the principles of the CoRP.

9 Evaluation

A process of evaluation at the end of any research project is important in ensuring we meet our aims to work ethically, equitably, and sustainably. Therefore, colleagues engaging in research should ensure they make time to consider, at the end of a project, where they may have improved to align their work with the principles in this document.

Additionally, the Research and Evaluation team commits to running annual evaluations of research projects that they have led or supported to assess the extent to which the principles are being adhered to, and the CoRP and related policies and procedures are fit for purpose.

10   Roles of the Research and Evaluation team

The purpose of the Research and Evaluation team is to lead on and support the development of a robust evidence base for decision and policy making across SQA. This will be achieved via the production of high-quality research, evaluation and analysis.

An aim of the Research and Evaluation team is to create and maintain a high standard of research activity across SQA via training, advice, collaborative working, and support. In these ways, Research and Evaluation aims to ensure that SQA's research is robust and meaningful, as well as ethical, equitable and sustainable.

In relation to the CoRP, the role of the Research and Evaluation team includes:

♦ providing support, training and guidance across SQA in relation to research opportunities, quality output, and practical research
♦ providing research expertise across the organisation to projects at all stages of development, from early design to data collection, analysis and dissemination
♦ monitoring and reviewing research processes and outcomes
♦ reflecting on and evaluating research practice and policy
♦ encouraging ethical and essential research
♦ promoting equality and diversity in research
♦ promoting sustainable practice in research

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