

Guidelines on Use of Students as Research Subjects

Enrolment in a university credit course places a student in a context where he or she is inevitably subject to the influence of power relationships on voluntary choice. Students who are invited to participate as subjects in research should not have to worry that a decision to decline the opportunity would have a negative impact on their final grades. The Tri-Council Policy Statement cautions researchers about the use of subjects who qualify as members of captive or vulnerable populations:

Voluntariness is especially relevant in research involving restricted or dependent subjects, and is absent if consent is secured by the order of authorities or as a result of coercion or manipulation. (TCPS Article 2.2)

Guidelines:

1. The relationship between student and teacher is inherently coercive. In general, those involved in course delivery - faculty members (full-time and contractual), graduate and undergraduate students - should, where possible, seek alternatives to recruiting students currently registered in their own classes for use as research subjects. Where circumstances merit exception to this rule, they should be clearly articulated to the REB.
2. Data obtained through normal instructional practice may be approved by the REB for research purposes provided that it is used in a way that protects the confidentiality of all involved. Such information will normally qualify as secondary data and its use in research will be subject to the restrictions and provisions relevant to the secondary use of data (see *TCPS*, Section 3.4). Researchers can enhance the anonymity of such data by aggregating it across courses, sections and years.¹
3. The practice of rewarding students who serve as research subjects with bonus marks is a well-established tradition in some disciplines. It became controversial with the introduction of the *TCPS* on the grounds that such practices might constitute “undue inducement” compromising voluntary consent (see *TCPS*, Section 2.2). Academic compensation for participation in research is appropriate only when participation is voluntary, students who opt out have alternative ways of earning the marks that would be apportioned for participation in research, and where serving as a research subject can reasonably be expected to result in educational benefits. The benefits of serving as a research subject may include the following:

- (i) participation familiarizes the participant with research methods.

¹ *Recommendation: an article be placed in University Regulations specifying that academic records, or information obtained through normal classroom activities, may be used for research purposes provided that anonymity and confidentiality of those whose records they are is preserved.*

- (ii) participants are debriefed afterward in such a way that they have an opportunity to learn about the research in which they have been involved.
- (iii) participation helps the participant to understand what it means to be a research subject, which is particularly valuable for students who may later become involved in their own human subject research.

The means by which students are recruited as research subjects, how compensation for participation is allocated, and what kind of alternatives to participation are offered, are likely to be discipline-specific. Departments using such measures are encouraged to develop their own policy regarding the use of students as research subjects and to have it approved by the REB.