Code of Research Practice

Research and Evaluation

Version 2, July 2025

Contents

Authorship and acknowledgements **4**

Part 1: Background and context **5**

1 Introduction 5
- 1.1 Evidence-informed decisions 5
- 1.2 What is research? 5
- 1.3 What makes good research? 5
- 1.4 Our commitments 5
- 1.5 Why the CoRP matters 5

2 Foundational concepts 6
- 2.1 Ethics 6
- 2.2 Equity 6
- 2.3 Sustainability 6

3 Working with the principles 6
- 3.1 Before you start 6
- 3.2 Evaluation 6
- 3.3 Secondary or desk-based research 6
- 3.4 When to contact Research and Evaluation 7

Part 2: The principles **8**

1 The full list of principles 8
- Essential throughout: fundamental to all stages 8
- Before you start: planning and ethics 8
- During research: data collection 8
- Finishing up: analysis, sharing and publication 8

2 Putting the principles into action 9
- 2.1 Essential throughout: fundamental to all stages 9
  - Principle 1: Avoid doing harm. 9
- 2.2 Before you start: planning and ethics 9
  - Principle 2: Plan and organise effectively. 9
  - Principle 3: Use ethical, inclusive, and robust methods 9
  - Principle 4: Keep research accessible and inclusive. 10
  - Principle 5: Consider your own background. 10
- 2.3 During research: data collection 11
  - Principle 6: Ensure participants understand and agree to take part. 11
  - Principle 7: Minimise environmental impact. 11
  - Principle 8: Work collaboratively with participants and colleagues. 11
- 2.4 Finishing up: analysis, sharing and publication 12
  - Principle 9: Only use data for agreed purposes. 12

Principle 10: Protect participant privacy and anonymity. 12
Principle 11: Share findings appropriately and in a timely way. 12
Principle 12: Acknowledge all contributors. 13

Sources **14**

Authorship and acknowledgements

The Code of Research Practice was developed and written by Jamie Lawson and Laura Wilson, with input from Rachel Whitford and other members of the Research and Evaluation Team. We are also grateful for the support of the Internal Research Group, and to colleagues working in equalities and sustainability for their advice on early drafts.

Part 1: Background and context

1 Introduction

1.1 Evidence-informed decisions

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is committed to evidence-informed decision making. High-quality research is essential. It underpins and supports decisions across the organisation. To ensure that all research we conduct is useful, reliable, ethical, equitable, and sustainable — and that it can effectively inform decision making — the Research and Evaluation Team has developed the Code of Research Practice (CoRP).

1.2 What is research?

'Research' is any structured data-gathering or evaluation activity that involves internal or external stakeholders and uses quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods to systematically generate insights or evidence. It also includes any data-gathering activity or desk-based research project which is intended for external publication as a piece of research. A 'researcher' is anyone engaging in these activities.

1.3 What makes good research?

Good research doesn't just produce valid results. It's also designed with sustainability in mind, conducted ethically, and accessible to diverse audiences, The principles of the CoRP guide every stage of the research process, from initial design through to sharing findings, in order to ensure that our research is of the highest quality possible.

1.4 Our commitments

We are committed to contributing to a more sustainable world in which to live, work and learn. We recognise the social, moral, economic, environmental and legal drivers for placing sustainability at the heart of what we do. As a public body, we have legal obligations under the Equality Act (2010) and the Public Sector Equality Duty to advance equality, diversity and inclusion. These commitments have informed the design of the CoRP, along with our duties under the Consumer Scotland Act (2020). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), both embedded in Scotland's National Performance Framework and central to our corporate plan, have also played a key role.

1.5 Why the CoRP matters

The CoRP contains 12 principles which outline how we approach and conduct research. Following these principles ensures that our research:

- produces representative, valid, and reliable data
- meets legal and organisational obligations
- reflects our responsibilities to society and the environment
- creates a safe and supportive environment for researchers
- reaches the widest possible audience

The principles should be considered as foundational, integral aspects of our research rather than afterthoughts or additional work. They are designed to make the researcher's life

easier, to protect and support anyone engaging in research, and to ensure our research outputs are as useful and impactful as possible.

2 Foundational concepts

2.1 Ethics

Ethics are central to responsible research. They ensure work is carried out with integrity, respect, and fairness. Ethical research protects the rights and dignity of all involved, promotes accountability, and supports high-quality, trustworthy outcomes. Trust between researchers and participants must be built and upheld at every stage of the research process.

2.2 Equity

Equity in research means ensuring that everyone, regardless of background, identity, or circumstances, has fair access to participate in and benefit from research. This requires careful design that recognises and addresses barriers to inclusion, considers diverse experiences, and justifies decisions to focus attention on specific groups.

2.3 Sustainability

Sustainability in research involves minimising environmental harm and promoting practices that protect the wellbeing of future generations. Researchers should consider the environmental impact of all aspects of their work — design, data collection, analysis, and sharing and publication — and take active steps to reduce waste and emissions.

3 Working with the principles

3.1 Before you start

The CoRP's principles are designed to support high-quality, ethical, inclusive, and sustainable research across all stages of a project. Sections below provide more detail on each principle, along with examples of how researchers can apply them throughout the research process. Before starting a project, researchers should ensure they understand the principles and have the appropriate knowledge and skills to put them into practice. The Research and Evaluation Team can offer support with planning and carrying out research.

3.2 Evaluation

Like other types of research, evaluation requires careful consideration of how the principles relate to the methods and data used. Whether assessing programmes, policies, or interventions, evaluations must be designed and run according to the CoRP's principles so that the resulting work is ethical, inclusive, and robust.

3.3 Secondary or desk-based research

The CoRP applies to all types of research, including those that don't involve new data collection, such as research using existing datasets or literature reviews. In these cases it's the researcher's responsibility to identify how the principles are relevant.

When using pre-existing data, consider:

- Was the data gathered ethically?
- Did participants consent to the kind of use you're planning?
- Were the methods robust, inclusive, and appropriate?

If the answer to any of these is 'no', think carefully about whether and how to use the data. If you do proceed, be clear in your reporting about where the data may fall short of CoRP standards.

For desk-based research (like literature reviews), reflect on how you're carrying out your search. Are you excluding certain perspectives or types of evidence? Actively including work from underrepresented authors or viewpoints helps bring this type of research in line with CoRP principles.

3.4 When to contact Research and Evaluation

The Research and Evaluation Team aims to create and maintain a high standard of research activity across the organisation via training, advice, support, and collaboration. The team is expert in the CoRP's principles and can advise on their application to any research project, including evaluations and desk-based research.

Research and Evaluation can provide support at any stage of your research project. Contact them early in your planning to:

- ensure that your project follows the correct process and is in line with the CoRP's principles
- avoid duplicating existing work
- access templates, advice and guidance
- design ethical and robust research methods
- ensure that you meet the aims of your project

Research and Evaluation's intranet pages offer a variety of support and guidance, including information on our research commissioning process.

Part 2: The principles

This section outlines the 12 principles that underpin responsible research at SQA. Organised around key stages of the research process, the principles offer clear expectations to help researchers design and carry out high-quality, ethical, inclusive, and sustainable research. These principles apply to all research activity, regardless of scale or method.

Section 1 lists each principle, grouped according to when they're most relevant during a project. Section 2 explores each one in more detail, with practical guidance to support researchers in applying them.

1 The full list of principles

Essential throughout: fundamental to all stages

- Principle 1: Avoid doing harm.

Before you start: planning and ethics

- Principle 2: Plan and organise effectively.
- Principle 3: Use ethical, inclusive and robust methods.
- Principle 4: Keep research accessible and inclusive.
- Principle 5: Consider your own background.

During research: data collection

- Principle 6: Ensure participants understand and agree to take part.
- Principle 7: Minimise environmental impact.
- Principle 8: Work collaboratively with participants and colleagues.

Finishing up: analysis, sharing and publication

- Principle 9: Only use data for agreed purposes.
- Principle 10: Protect participant privacy and confidentiality.
- Principle 11: Share findings appropriately and in a timely way.
- Principle 12: Acknowledge all contributors.

2 Putting the principles into action

2.1 Essential throughout: fundamental to all stages

Principle 1: Avoid doing harm.

This is the most important principle and applies to every stage of research. Researchers must ensure their work doesn't cause physical, psychological, or reputational harm to participants, or violate their rights to privacy. This means carefully considering potential risks before starting research, putting participants at ease during data collection, and being prepared to pause or stop if there's any distress. When working with vulnerable groups, take extra care to prevent harm and protect wellbeing.

- Carefully consider your research design and planned outputs in advance to identify any potential sources of harm to individuals or groups.
- During data collection, put participants at ease and avoid making excessive demands.
- Be prepared to pause or cancel the project if actions are causing undue stress, discomfort, or emotional distress.
- Ensure data is anonymised before sharing with other teams and that participants cannot be identified in reports (See principle 10).
- Take extra care when working with vulnerable participants, including those under 18 or from marginalised groups.

2.2 Before you start: planning and ethics

Principle 2: Plan and organise effectively.

Good research requires careful planning and collaboration with colleagues. Before starting any project, researchers should consult with the Research and Evaluation Team to ensure their work is efficient, ethical, and doesn't duplicate existing research, and that research methods are appropriate for the topic and participants. Discuss any plans to contact centres with Communications colleagues before proceeding. Effective planning helps avoid waste of time, effort, and resources.

- Contact the Research and Evaluation Team early in your planning process for support and guidance.
- Ensure you have the necessary skills and knowledge to work within all principles before starting.
- Check that your project doesn't duplicate existing work or target the same groups at the same time.
- Get approval from Communications colleagues before contacting centres.
- Follow SQA's research planning processes and use appropriate templates or guidance.

Principle 3: Use ethical, inclusive, and robust methods

Research methods must be appropriate for both the research topic and the people taking part. It's unethical to burden participants with poorly designed research, so methods should be carefully chosen to ensure they're robust and fair to all groups involved. Researchers must be transparent about the strengths and limitations of their chosen approach, ensuring findings can be interpreted responsibly and generate valuable insights while respecting participants' rights and experiences.

- Complete a Research Project Plan for any new project, and obtain ethical approval where necessar, or as indicated by the RPP.
- Carefully weigh the potential benefits of your study against the demands placed on participants.
- Choose research methods that are appropriate for both your topic and the people taking part.
- Avoid designs that advantage or are perceived to advantage one group over others.
- Be transparent about the strengths and limitations of your chosen methods.

Principle 4: Keep research accessible and inclusive.

Research should be designed so that people from diverse backgrounds can participate meaningfully. This means considering barriers like disability, language, cultural background, and financial or other social constraints that may prevent participation. Simple steps like offering different ways to take part, ensuring venues are accessible, and involving underrepresented groups in research design can make studies more inclusive. Researchers should also consider how people's multiple identities intersect to shape their experiences.

- Consider barriers like disability, language, cultural background, and financial or other social constraints that may prevent participation.
- Offer different ways for people to participate (online, phone, in-person, and so on).
- Ensure venues and materials are accessible to disabled people.
- Involve underrepresented groups in your research design process.
- Collect appropriate demographic data and use both qualitative and quantitative methods thoughtfully.
- Consult the Research and Evaluation Team for advice and guidance.

Principle 5: Consider your own background.

Researchers should reflect on how their own identity, experiences, and role at SQA might influence the research process and participants' responses. We should work hard to retain our objectivity, while acknowledging that complete detachment from a research topic is rarely possible (or desirable). Transparency about how our identities influence our work is essential for ethical and credible research. Researchers should consider how representing SQA might affect what participants are willing to share, reflect on what other aspects of their identity might impact the research process, and collaborate with colleagues to provide multiple perspectives in their work.

- Reflect on how your identity and experiences might influence participants' responses and your understanding of them.
- Consider how representing SQA may impact participants' willingness to share information.
- Collaborate with diverse colleagues to provide multiple perspectives.
- Where relevant, acknowledge your identity in research reports while respecting your own privacy.
- Be transparent about how researcher identity interacts with the research process.

2.3 During research: data collection

Principle 6: Ensure participants understand and agree to take part.

All research participants must fully understand what they're agreeing to and make a free choice to participate. This means clearly explaining the study's aims, methods, potential risks, and how data will be used. Participants must have the opportunity to ask questions. They should be free to withdraw at any time, and technical limits on the ability to withdraw should be made clear. For surveys, consent can be obtained by providing information and noting that starting the survey indicates agreement. Interviews and focus groups (or other similar methods) typically require documented consent forms.

- Inform participants about the aims of the study and give a clear description of the research method.
- Identify any potential risks of participation and explain what will be done with their data (see principle 9).
- Give participants the opportunity to ask questions and receive answers before they decide whether to take part.
- Allow participants to withdraw their consent at any time and make any limits to withdrawal clear up front.
- Use consent forms or consent text as appropriate and contact Research and Evaluation for guidance on consent processes.

Principle 7: Minimise environmental impact.

Researchers should consider the environmental effects of their research while keeping it ethical and accessible. This means choosing lower-impact travel options like trains over planes, using online technology for interviews and meetings when possible, and reducing printing and waste. However, environmental sustainability must be balanced with accessibility. Remote participation shouldn't create barriers for those with limited digital access. Thoughtful planning can achieve both environmental responsibility and inclusive research practices.

- Choose lower-impact travel options like trains instead of planes when possible.
- Use online technology for interviews, focus groups, and conferences to reduce travel.
- Reduce printing and paper waste in your research materials.
- Balance environmental responsibility with accessibility — ensure remote options don't exclude those with limited digital access.
- Integrate eco-friendly practices into your research design from the start.

Principle 8: Work collaboratively with participants and colleagues.

Research is strengthened when it involves collaboration and knowledge-sharing among researchers and treats participants as partners rather than just data sources. Working together allows researchers to share expertise, to develop skills, and to ensure different perspectives are present during data gathering (for example, in interviews or focus groups). This will lead to more comprehensive, nuanced and impactful research. A collaborative approach promotes inclusivity and ensures research is relevant, respectful, and efficient while avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort.

- Seek advice, guidance, and support from colleagues throughout your research process.
- Share resources like survey questions and interview guides to avoid duplication.

- Treat participants as partners rather than just sources of data.
- Make use of participants' and colleagues' expertise, experience, and perspectives when gathering data.
- Create a culture of knowledge-sharing and mutual support among researchers.

2.4 Finishing up: analysis, sharing and publication

Principle 9: Only use data for agreed purposes.

Researchers must only use participant data for the purposes that were clearly explained and agreed to during the consent process. This includes both current use and any potential future analysis or data sharing. If data might be reused or shared with other researchers, this must be made clear when initially gaining consent. Researchers should inform participants how long data will be stored and must delete it when that time limit is reached.

- Only use data for the purposes that participants agreed to.
- Clearly inform participants about current and potential future uses of their data when gaining consent.
- Make it clear upfront if data might be reused for secondary analysis or shared with other researchers.
- Tell participants how long their data will be stored and delete it when that time limit is reached.

Principle 10: Protect participant privacy and anonymity.

All participant data should be treated confidentially and anonymously as standard practice. This involves removing identifying information from quotes, presentations, and reports, and noting when material has been anonymised and why. While complete anonymity isn't always possible (such as in small communities or with well-known institutions), researchers must carefully consider and minimise risks of participants being identified, especially when this could cause harm (such as harm to reputation). Data should always be anonymised before sharing with other teams.

- Treat all participant data confidentially and anonymously as standard practice.
- Remove identifying information from direct quotes, case studies, and other materials when reporting.
- Note in reports when material has been anonymised and explain what was done and why.
- Anonymise data before sharing with other teams.
- Where anonymity isn't possible, carefully consider and minimise risks of participants being identified.

Principle 11: Share findings appropriately and in a timely way.

Since participants give their valuable time and effort, researchers have an ethical obligation to share research findings widely and promptly. This means considering the most relevant and useful ways to share results and informing participants about outcomes through debriefing, feedback, websites, or publications. Research should be timely and transparent, using appropriate channels to inform decision making and drive meaningful change, while following SQA communication guidance and procedures.

- Consider the most relevant and useful ways to share your research findings.

- Inform participants about research outcomes through debriefing, feedback, websites, or publications.
- Contact Communications colleagues to discuss and develop a communications plan.
- Use appropriate channels to inform decision making and drive meaningful change.

Principle 12: Acknowledge all contributors.

All individuals who contribute to research should be valued and recognised, regardless of their identity, role and grade, or background. This means acknowledging the input of all researchers involved in a project and crediting assistance from others wherever appropriate. This may involve crediting communities that participated or were consulted in the research, but individual participant anonymity should always be maintained. Recognition can take the form of authorship, acknowledgement in reports, or verbal recognition at meetings. This approach creates an inclusive research environment and challenges systemic inequalities in the research community.

- Acknowledge the input of all researchers involved in your project.
- Credit or acknowledge assistance from others wherever possible and appropriate.
- Include multiple author credits on presentations and acknowledgement sections in reports.
- Give verbal recognition of contributions at meetings.
- Credit community members when participatory methods have been used, while maintaining participant anonymity.

Sources

BERA (2024) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fifth edition. Available from: https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-fifth-edition-2024

Bryman, A. (2016) *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Gaddy, M. and Scott, K. (2020) 'Principles for advancing equitable data practice', Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Available from: https://view.ckcest.cn/AllFiles/ZKBG/Pages/141/principles-for-advancing-equitable-data-practice.pdf

Ligozat, A.L et al. (2020) 'Ten simple rules to make your research more sustainable', *PLoS Computational Biology*, 16 (9). doi: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1008148

McMahon, E. and Milligan, L.O. (2023) 'A framework for ethical research in international and comparative education', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 53 (1), 72–88. doi: 10.1080/03057925.2021.1876553

Merriam, S.B. and Tisdell, E. (2016) *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Norström, A.V., Cvitanovic, C., Löf, M.F. et al. (2020) 'Principles for knowledge co-production in sustainability research', *Nat Sustain*, 3, 182–190. doi: https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0448-2

Peters, U., Turner, B., Alvarez, D. et al. (2023) 'Considerations for Embedding Inclusive Research Principles in the Design and Execution of Clinical Trials', *Ther Innov Regul Sci*, 57, 186–195. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s43441-022-00464-3

Ramírez-Castañeda, V. et al. (2022) 'A set of principles and practical suggestions for equitable fieldwork in biology', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119 (34). doi: https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2122667119

Ruzycki, S.M. and Ahmed, S.B. (2022) 'Equity, diversity and inclusion are foundational research skills', *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6, 910–912. doi: https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01406-7

Scottish Government (2020) *Social research: protocols and guidance*. Available from: https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-social-research-publication-protocol/

Scottish Government (2022) *Using intersectionality to understand structural inequality in Scotland: evidence synthesis*. Available from: https://www.gov.scot/publications/using-intersectionality-understand-structural-inequality-scotland-evidence-synthesis/pages/6/

Shaw, R. (2010) 'Embedding Reflexivity within Experiential Qualitative Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 7 (3), 233–243

Tan, T.Q. (2019) ‘Principles of Inclusion, Diversity, Access, and Equity’, *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*, 220 (Issue Supplement_2), S30–S32. doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiz198

UNICEF (2019) A summary of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. Available from: https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf

Waas, T., Verbruggen, A., and Wright, T. (2010) ‘University research for sustainable development: definition and characteristics explored’, *Journal of cleaner production*, 18 (7), 629–636. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2009.09.017

Wolbring, G. and Lillywhite, A. (2021) ‘Equity/Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Universities: The Case of Disabled People’, *Societies*, 11 (2), 49. doi: https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11020049