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**Guidance 3xvi Ethics in the curriculum**

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Academic staff designing programmes need to identify, take account of and incorporate the ethical dimensions of their programmes. All programmes should comply with:

- Acts introduced to protect the rights of individuals such as e.g. Human Rights Act 1998 and the UK Data Protection Act (2018)
- Relevant legislation on Equality, Health and Safety, and Animal Welfare
- Subject benchmarks and/or codes of ethics of relevant subjects and any appropriate professional body or guidance from any relevant subject association.

Programme specifications need to identify which, if any, specific codes of professional conduct are relevant to the programme and use these as a reference point for designing the programme.

Staff designing programmes are entitled to assume that University policy on these matters comply with the relevant legislation.

All programmes should address the following:

**1. Academic Ethics**

Students should be encouraged to reflect on the shared values that underpin and enable academic life to function effectively. These values can be articulated as:-

- \* objectivity and thoroughness in establishing the facts (including the facts about what people have already said).
- \* fairness, both in the sense of allowing differing views to be fully and properly expressed
- \* willingness to understand fully and represent accurately the weaknesses and the strengths of all relevant views, including one's own.<sup>1</sup>

Many students will be aware that plagiarism (defined as the presentation of the work of another as one's own) is unethical; but some may not have encountered this issue. Programme handbooks will contain a legalistic explanation of plagiarism, so students should be aware that it is a legal or quasi-legal issue, simply because it is against University regulations; but students should be encouraged to understand that it is also unethical because it is seeking to gain an unfair advantage over others. They should also be made aware that plagiarism taken too far on the wrong occasion becomes subject to copyright law and even the laws against fraud and deception.

**2. Research Ethics**

Research and research skills are a component of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and serious questions of research ethics and data protection may arise even in the undergraduate curriculum: they may occur in the context of projects or dissertations or even in the consideration of published research in the curriculum. Undergraduate students cannot normally be expected to consider in detail codes of practice and the role of supervising committees. But they should be encouraged to consider such issues as they arise in the context of their curriculum and project activity, and particular when they involve others in their work. Such issues as confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent are

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<sup>1</sup> The key value of academic life is the high value placed on the discovery and dissemination of truth. Academics aim to achieve these ends through exploration of the world, including the world of ideas, and debate between differing views; they believe that from these activities, new discoveries and/or ideas can be developed.

particularly important issues to explore with any students who may be engaging in interviews, use of social media for research or in any kind of experimental work

**The design process for programmes must include the following actions:**

### **1. Evaluate programme aims for relevant ethical dimensions.**

The aim of discussion in the context of an academic curriculum must be to promote ethical awareness, personal integrity and a capacity for ethical reflection, rather than any specific ethical rules or beliefs. It will almost always be a mistake to present specific ethical positions as essential aims for an academic programme.

Programme aims might include, whether explicitly or implicitly:

- *Capacity to discern the ethical dimensions of decisions and actions*
- *Capacity to analyse and reflect on ethical issues in the context of decision and action*
- *Capacity to challenge ethical views and engage in ethical debate in an appropriate way*
- *Capacity to consider and/or experience the role of an ethics or governance committee and processes in leading the organisation, institution or profession in developing best practice*
- *Capacity to understand what is required to promote a culture of research integrity through examination of one's own personal and professional integrity and to make informed observation and feedback on the university's value statements and integrity*

### **2. Review programme outcomes for ethical outcomes**

Most degree programmes are predicated on a profession or professional activity and there may be an ethical code, formal or informal, associated with this. Where acceptance of specific values is necessary for a particular profession, students should be made aware of the ethical principles and/or code of practice that must be followed.

In many cases, there will not be a formal, documented code of professional ethics. Nonetheless, there will usually be an informal understanding, shared by most professional people in the field, about what behaviour is unethical. Such informal understandings should be distinguished from formal codes of conduct and addressed in the curriculum in the same ways as professional codes of conduct.

Wider ethical issues will also be raised, even in programmes that do not have a specific professional aim. Understanding and reflection on these issues need to be embedded into all programmes, although professional practice may require learning outcomes directly related to ethical practice to be met.

It is crucial that students are made aware that ethical decisions are not merely a question of subjective feeling or intuition and that they understand that there are different models, with different implicit criteria, for making ethical decisions. They should also be aware that ethical decisions must often be made in the context of competing requirements, and that there is often no single satisfactory solution to an ethical problem. This can be addressed in a variety of ways within the curriculum and expressed directly or indirectly in learning outcomes.

*Programme learning outcomes might appropriately include, whether explicitly or implicitly:*

- *Explain and critically evaluate the elements of various formal and informal codes of professional ethics*

- *Understanding of the wider ethical context of specific problems and issues and contextual factors*
- *Articulate and evaluate common models for ethical decision making*
- *Systems, procedures and regulations for gaining ethics approval for research and practice; inside the ethics committee, independent evaluation without fear or favour i.e., in an equal and fair way*
- *Critically assess research methodology using human participants and the ethical issues they present*
- *Discuss the ideas of values, ethics and morality in a multicultural context*
- *Explain effective ethical leadership*
- *Demonstrate how to overcome common psychological and contextual impediments for taking ethical action*
- *Explain why integrity and ethics are important for both organisations and individuals in business/media/health/education etc*
- *Discuss the ethical obligations that media providers have towards society*
- *Recognition of ethical problems and the development of skills in analysis of them and evaluation of solutions*
- *Apply these codes and models in various professional contexts showing awareness of the wider ethical context*
- *Capacity to take account of and explain the ethical dimensions of decisions in practical contexts*
- *Understanding of and capacity to exercise tolerance toward disagreement and the ambiguity in dealing with ethical problems.*

### 3. Review curriculum content to ensure that all outcomes are addressed

In the case of many professions, there is a formal, documented code of professional ethics which is promulgated by a professional or statutory and regulatory body (PSRB). At some point, preferably early in the programme of study, students need to be made aware of the PSRB code that applies to them and encouraged to read it and to discuss it as an essential part of the background to their professional activity.

PSRB requirements will need to be covered in practice and with examples from case studies in the curriculum. Where this is the case, the code should be referred to and its impact discussed and explored.

Wider ethical issues may also be raised by topics in the curriculum; they form part of the context of all professions and even of programmes that do not have any specific professional focus.<sup>2</sup> Such wider ethical implications of topics under discussion should always be referenced and, where possible, opportunity provided for student discussion and reflection. It is important to ensure that students and staff understand their responsibilities as researchers at Middlesex University and that they are bound by the principles and procedures of the Code of Practice for Researchers. Students should be involved in discussing these principles and procedures and potential approaches to responding to a breach of good ethics practice.

Practice-based projects, work experience and placements also may give rise to ethical issues. Many of these may involve values specific to the practical situation and/or issues arising from cultural differences within the organizations involved. Students may witness or experience inappropriate behaviour (e.g., bullying, deliberate manipulation of data) or unethical behaviour (e.g., arising from a conflict of interests which is not declared, taking part in classroom based

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes what is a wider ethical issue for one profession is also the subject of specific attention in another profession's ethical code.

research without ethical approval, or consent as a participant, or given tasks that expose them to risks) in external organisations or internally by staff. Such situations can be stressful to students who may feel they have divided loyalties and not know how to proceed. It is important that students are made aware of the ethics committee to discuss potential issues and the importance of independent peer review.

In view of the power relationship between staff and students, when staff engage in any research activity, including pedagogical research and/or include students in their research studies as participants, it is essential that research ethics approval processes are followed and students' rights as participants are made explicit. (See Students as Research Participants: A Guide for Researchers on the MyLearning Middlesex Online Research Ethics area). Failure to do so not only provides an unethical and unprofessional role model to students, but may also place students at risk, and be subject to an academic misconduct investigation (see Middlesex University Code of Practice for Research: Principles and Procedures).

The variety of learning activities and assignments that are included to meet module learning outcomes must also be considered with respect to ethical, legal and safety issues. No student should be required to undertake tasks that may place them at risk legally, physically or online or present them with a conflict of interests such that they feel compelled to engage in unethical behaviour (e.g., research activity without participant consent as part of a module requirement).

*A well-designed curriculum might include:*

- \* *Opportunities to encounter relevant ethical codes, whether formal or informal*
- \* *Opportunities to consider fundamental approaches to ethical decision-making.<sup>3</sup>*
- \* *Opportunities to engage in reflection on these codes and models*
- \* *Opportunities to consider how they might apply to specific practical incidents*
- \* *Opportunities to review 'what if' scenarios e.g., when personal and professional values/behaviour collide.*

Further guidance on any aspect of staff or student research related activity is available from the Chairs of the various Departmental Research Ethics Sub-Committees (DRESCs). The list of Chairs of these committees is available at: MyUniHub Research Ethics Committee Information and Contact Details: <https://mdx.mrooms.net/course/view.php?id=12277#section-2>

It is recommended that module and programme teams contact a relevant DRESC to seek further advice on promoting ethics good practice to their students

Validation of modules and programmes need to consider the ethical dimensions of the learning activities (especially use of technologies and social media). This can be done in consultation with the relevant DRESC.

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<sup>3</sup> The commonly recognized approaches at present are:- Utilitarianism (*Greatest Good of the Greatest Number*), Rights and Duties (*Natural Rights*), Justice (*Veil of Ignorance*), Virtues (*Human Flourishing*).