

Ethical Issues in Researching Higher Education Teaching and Learning

Subjects: [Education & Educational Research](#)

Contributor: Jennie Golding , Amanda Ince

Higher education here is taken to be education beyond school level: often at an institution (a university) that has degree-awarding powers, though some programmes may lead to a diploma, certificate or other award or qualification. Nomenclature around “research” in the associated teaching and learning is contested: professional enquiry, scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogical research... are some of the terms used. Authors discuss and distinguish such terms. An ethical issue is a circumstance in which a moral conflict arises or is implicit and should be resolved in a morally acceptable way. These include privacy, informed consent, insider research and power relationships within higher education research; there are also fluid challenges around the use of digital contributions. Authors present a narrative exegesis of work in the associated areas, which authors argue will be of use to universities promoting such research, and of particular interest to two groups of academics wishing to systematically develop their practice in ways that contribute to the field: those on teaching-only contracts, who would also demonstrate their research credentials; and researchers from non-education-cognate fields. Authors identify directions for further work.

ethical issues

researching Higher Education

scholarship of teaching and learning

insider researcher

power

Research in Higher Education teaching and learning, herewith the acronym RHETL, is well-represented in the academic literature ^[1], usually with a focus on universities and with a contested vocabulary that this entry interrogates and critiques (see also ^[2]). Such research is increasingly important, globally, and especially in research-intensive universities. This entry analyses why that might be so. RHETL is, however, unfamiliar for two groups of academics: those who either hold teaching-only contracts or who come to such research from another discipline. Such academics may not fully appreciate the associated ethical issues, especially as the related research may appear as comparatively low-risk ^[3]. The authors, (thereafter identified as “we”) present a scoping survey of the current literature around the ethical practice of such research, and the issues that may arise in achieving ethical approaches and research integrity in its enactment. We identify challenges in the effective functioning of supporting structures and suggest steps that higher education institutions may take to further support the ethical conduct of research in this field and discuss the purpose and significance of the particular focus adopted here. Finally, we propose areas that merit ongoing or further research.

Higher education, in universities and other institutions, has two core roles: research (contributing to the advance of knowledge) and teaching (usually towards degrees, although other awards are frequently also offered), and although enterprise and engagement feature, these are not universally seen as core roles. These two core

activities have different profiles across higher education institutions (HEIs) [4][5][6][7], but where both are substantial, research often appears to be more highly valued, for example, in promotion criteria [8][9][10]. Policy discourse and evidence in the field of higher education are dominated by research-focused universities and higher education institutions included in international rankings [8]. Most students globally, however, are enrolled in professionally oriented and teaching-intensive institutions that are frequently overlooked by policy and research [11], and any distinctiveness of RHETL-related ethical issues in such institutions is at present unclear. Recent shifts in higher education policy to a focus on performance, economic impact, competition and vertical diversification have contributed to the bifurcation of academic responsibilities and especially the wider adoption of teaching-only roles [8][12]. Particular ethical issues arise from such “academic capitalism” [13] in educational research, with these approaches resulting in particular pressures on (researching and teaching) academics and, indirectly, potential participants in research—through the particular neoliberal publication pressures arising from punitive research funding conditions are less likely to apply to RHETL, which is commonly unfunded [14]. A range of recent evidence has, though, found notable bias towards research merits in academic career appraisal, especially in research-intensive institutions, with teaching performance not translating into parity of esteem with research and generally with less influence on academic career progression [8][10][12].

Learning in higher education represents enormous investment—of time, money and effort: the World Bank [15] forecasts over 300 million HE students globally by 2030, and already higher education accounts for about 2.5% of GDP in the USA, for example [16], with the global higher education market size estimated at USD 736.80 billion in 2023 [17]. Researching teaching and learning in higher education is important, because it is only by knowing what approaches to teaching work well to support learning for particular goals, or in a particular context, that the quality of learning can be improved. Compared with the evidence base in school education, that in higher education is still comparatively poorly developed. It is likely that more can be learned from understanding “what works well” at the school level—but also that some aspects of that need to change for the different group of learners and target learning in higher education. High-quality RHETL can enhance student experiences [5][9][18], and can also support academics in becoming more expert in their teaching practice, thus improving their job satisfaction [18][19].

Academics research-active in other fields, therefore, should also engage in researching teaching and learning in higher education, and will often want to do so in relation to their own or their colleagues’ practice and the associated student learning—though they themselves are often coming from non-cognate research fields. Furthermore, recent years have seen an increase in “teaching-only” contracts in some parts of the world [20][21][22]. Nevertheless, those on such contracts also need to be research-active if they are to accrue academic respect in the academy. There is also potential benefit to students from research-related teaching if academics have intrinsic interest in both research and teaching [9]. With no working time allocated for such activity, the obvious focus for academics on teaching-only contracts is their own teaching, and the related learning, though they may be ill-prepared for such work. For both groups of academics, education in appropriate research methodologies is needed—and critically, also, if the research is to be conducted with integrity, education in related ethical issues. Of course, there is a third group of academics, namely those whose field of research enquiry is higher education, for whom the issues addressed here should already be familiar.

At present, there is a wide range of literature around RHETL and similar activities, addressed via a plethora of inter-related and contested terminology. For example, within the higher education sector, much has been written about “professional enquiry” (including “evaluation of practice”), the “scholarship of teaching and learning”, “pedagogic research” or, more recently, “close to practice research” [23]. Such terms are often not well-defined, and/or appear to have distinct meanings across different papers. We understand none of these terms to fully and consistently represent academic research into higher education teaching and learning; therefore, we reluctantly introduce yet another term, RHETL, into this crowded space. First, we need to clarify what we mean by “research”. Since we are in an education space, we adopt Stenhouse’s ([24], p. 104) education-derived definition of **research** as “systematic enquiry made public”. Such research should of course be conducted with regard to prevailing community norms. These include that, if an empirical approach is adopted, its design should be embedded in theory, and centred around the exploration of a stated hypothesis or research question. The research should also be designed to contribute to knowledge on a broader basis than within its original context, so findings should be transferable or indicative of broader generalisability, thus contributing to the field in a systematic way, as in Levin-Rozalis [25].

We understand **professional enquiry** or **evaluation of practice** [26][27][28] to be focused on questions of practice, but to enjoy lower thresholds of systematicity. Rather, such enquiry is likely to be exploring some area of professional interest in a way likely to be informative for that particular context, but without a necessary expectation of, or need for demonstration of, wider applicability. Further still along a continuum of contribution to knowledge, we use **scholarship** in relation to a practice or professional question to mean critical academic engagement with the body of the research literature in the field. That may include harnessing the underlying discipline-specific literature for professional purposes, for example, asking “what are the implications of literature around the nature of mathematics, for the ways in which mathematics should be taught?”—but in recent years many HEIs have also promoted academics’ engagement with the considerable higher education teaching and learning corpus, including in relation to the underlying discipline, leading to “research-informed teaching”. In particular, the “**scholarship of teaching and learning**” as a term is used variably, and often inclusively, in the scholarly literature. There is a large body of related literature, particularly from North America. Sometimes, the term is interpreted as the above “scholarship” as applied to teaching and learning, but in other instances, for example in the work by Schnurr and Taylor [29], its usage appears to align with Stenhouse’s [24] definition of research; Healey et al.’s [30] usage appears somewhere between the two. It is therefore important that readers of the related literature critically interrogate the intended meaning; Burman and Kleinsasser [31], Hutchings [32], and Sharp [33] give accounts of its development of use.

“**Pedagogic research**”, similarly, is contested in the literature. Stierer and Antoniou ([34], p. 282), for example, claim that “pedagogic research in UK Higher Education is so diverse, in terms of its purposes, contexts and personnel, that it is unreasonable to discuss it as if it were a single, stable and monolithic enterprise, or to apply the same standards and criteria uniformly when judging its quality”. Pedagogic research has on occasion [35] been conflated with possibly unsystematic enquiry or with teaching-related scholarship. We take it to be a subset of RHETL, where the focus of the research is on the impact on learning of specific approaches to teaching.

Close to practice research is defined by Wyse et al. [23] as “research focused on issues defined by practitioners by practitioners as relevant to their practice, and involving collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both” (p. 2): We consider both pedagogic research and close to practice research as particular instances of RHETL (research in higher education teaching and learning), defining that to be research focused on some aspect of an academic’s higher education teaching activity, and/or the related learning.

Any research brings with it ethical issues. Such issues are particularly worthy of attention due to the backgrounds of the two disparate groups of academics identified above, who have reason to come to RHETL unfamiliar with research norms in the field: those whose primary research work lies in another field, and those on teaching-only contracts for whom RHETL is the most realistic option for developing a research profile, as well as enriching their teaching in research-related ways. Both groups are at risk of under-estimating the ethical issues that may arise in RHETL: educational research is commonly regarded as being low-risk compared with research in many other fields, and there is often an under-appreciation of the potential ethical conundrums, including the power relations involved and their implications [36][37].

Our rationale for exploring the issues was initially ignited by a desire to support more equitable career progression opportunities for colleagues on teaching-only contracts; only later did we identify the second and third target readership groups. In our own institution, all academics who teach are expected to develop a “connected curriculum” [38] that makes deep and sustained links with existing research, so supporting “scholarship” in the above sense—but academic promotion, on whatever track, requires evidence of appropriate research activity and publications [39]. Faculty work with colleagues on teaching-only contracts seeking to develop their own research, highlighted challenges they experienced in understanding or accessing ethical consent processes, particularly in a timely way. Such issues were unlikely to be confined to one HEI.

This entry therefore seeks to scope the principal ethical issues associated with RHETL, and particularly if the research seeks to make use of contributions from the researcher’s own students. It also points to emerging issues for RHETL as digital affordances for research, including AI, expand. It is particularly significant for the two groups of academics identified above, namely those wishing to come to RHETL as academics with a research background in a non-cognate field, and those on teaching-only contracts who are not otherwise research-active, since it draws together in one place an overview of key areas for consideration. As such, it should be of interest also to academic development professionals in universities, and to existing or developing institutional research ethics review boards (IRBs), highlighting current knowledge and needs in a relatively concise and focused way.

The entry is organised by area of ethical issue, so as to be easily navigable by the intended readership. We first address general issues likely to arise in such research, and then those that are particularly frequently encountered in RHETL: ethical conundrums such as those inherent to adopting an insider researcher role, and those related to the use of different sorts of student contributions, where the students concerned care taught by the researcher or the researcher’s colleague(s). Finally, given the oft-cited challenges of working with IRBs for those unfamiliar with their processes [40][41][42], we discuss ways in which IRBs may smooth paths to ethical consent for RHETL without in any way compromising the research ethics standards expected. Among many in higher education, there is a

view [\[29\]](#)[\[41\]](#) that gaining ethical consent for relatively low-risk projects is a time-consuming and superfluous process that obstructs timely research; we, on the other hand, argue in line with Bond [\[43\]](#) that, while analysis and critique of ethical aspects of research processes can seem slow (and that every effort should be made to complete those in a timely way), the associated preparation and external scrutiny support rigour and an ethics-first and project-long approach. We return to such discussion in [Section 4](#).

However, it is important to note that, while the approaches derived from the dominant literature in the field, and presented here, are widely recognised for the purposes of conducting RHETL in many parts of the globe—and of publication in many respected journals globally—they are western-centric and built on western ethical norms. They pay little attention, for example, to sub-Saharan African concepts of “ubuntu” whereby actions are ethical if they support the honouring of community relationships or community harmony, and so where, for example, individual informed consent may be less highly valued. There is still much work to be conducted in coming to share a global understanding and valuing of the multiplicity of our ways of knowing and of what are considered ethical behaviours in achieving that [\[44\]](#).

Details of the approach used to develop this entry can be found in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

References

1. Hegna, H.M.; Ørbæk, T. Traces of Embodied Teaching and Learning: A Review of Empirical Studies in Higher Education. *Teach. High. Educ.* 2024, 29, 420–441.
2. Golding, J.; Ince, A.; Cara, O.; Chan, S.; Crisan, C.; Struthers, D. *Researching Higher Education Teaching and Learning: The Use of Student Contributions and Other Ethical Issues*; UCL Institute of Education: London, UK, 2023.
3. Wassenaar, D.R.; Mamotte, N. Ethical Issues and Ethics Reviews in Social Science Research. In *The Oxford Handbook of International Psychological Ethics*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2012; pp. 268–282.
4. Finkelstein, M.J.; Jones, G.A. The Academic Profession Enters a New Global Era. In *Professional Pathways: Academic Careers in a Global Perspective*; Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, USA, 2019; pp. 1–20.
5. Tight, M. Examining the Research/Teaching Nexus. *Eur. J. High. Educ.* 2016, 6, 293–311.
6. Kassaye Alemu, S. The Meaning, Idea and History of University/Higher Education in Africa: A Brief Literature Review. *Forum Int. Res. Educ.* 2018, 4, 210–227.
7. Lange, L. The Public Purposes of the University: A Historical View, 1995–2010. In *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*; Trentham Books: Staffordshire, UK, 2012; pp. 45–57.

8. Bello, S.; Azubuike, F.; Akande, O. Reputation disparity in teaching and research productivity and rewards in the context of consequences of institutionalization of Publish or Perish culture in academia. *High. Educ. Q.* 2023, 77, 574–584.
9. Mägi, E.; Beerkens, M. Linking Research and Teaching: Are Research-Active Staff Members Different Teachers? *High Educ.* 2016, 72, 241–258.
10. Serow, R.C. Research and Teaching at a Research University. *High Educ.* 2000, 40, 449–463.
11. Bassett, R.M. Tertiary Education Systems and Diversification: Adapting the Wisdom of Burton Clark to the World Bank's Support for Effective and Inclusive Reforms; Centre for Global Higher Education: Oxford, UK, 2021.
12. Geschwind, L.; Broström, A. Managing the Teaching–Research Nexus: Ideals and Practice in Research-Oriented Universities. *High. Educ. Res. Dev.* 2015, 34, 60–73.
13. Jessop, B. On Academic Capitalism. *Crit. Policy Stud.* 2018, 12, 104–109.
14. Jessop, B. Varieties of Academic Capitalism and Entrepreneurial Universities: On Past Research and Three Thought Experiments. *High Educ.* 2017, 73, 853–870.
15. Murthi, M.; Bassett, R.M. Higher Education: Understanding Demand and Redefining Values. Available online: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/education/higher-education-understanding-demand-and-redefining-values> (accessed on 1 April 2024).
16. Dyvik, E.H. Expenditure on Higher Education as a Share of GDP in Selected Countries Worldwide in 2020, by Source of Funding. Available online: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/707557/higher-education-spending-share-gdp/> (accessed on 1 April 2024).
17. Grand View Research GVR-4-68040-161-7. Higher Education Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report, 2024–2030. Education Technology Market Size & Share Report, 2030. Available online: <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/> (accessed on 1 April 2024).
18. Kreber, C. The Transformative Potential of the Scholarship of Teaching. *Teach. Learn. Inq.* 2013, 1, 5–18.
19. Bozeman, B.; Gaughan, M. Job Satisfaction among University Faculty: Individual, Work, and Institutional Determinants. *J. High. Educ.* 2011, 82, 154–186.
20. OECD. The State of Academic Careers in OECD Countries—An Evidence Review; Education Policy Perspectives; OECD: Paris, France, 2024.
21. Jones, G.A.; Finkelstein, M.J. Looking across Systems: Implications for Comparative, International Studies of Academic Work In Professional Pathways: Academic Careers in a Global Perspective; Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, USA, 2019; pp. 265–290.

22. Dennin, M.; Schultz, Z.D.; Feig, A.; Finkelstein, N.; Greenhoot, A.F.; Hildreth, M.; Leibovich, A.K.; Martin, J.D.; Moldwin, M.B.; O'Dowd, D.K. Aligning Practice to Policies: Changing the Culture to Recognize and Reward Teaching at Research Universities. *CBE—Life Sci. Educ.* 2017, 16, 4.
23. Wyse, D.; Brown, C.; Oliver, S.; Poblete, X. Education Research and Educational Practice: The Qualities of a Close Relationship. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* 2021, 47, 1466–1489.
24. Stenhouse, L. What Counts as Research? *Br. J. Educ. Stud.* 1981, 29, 103–113.
25. Levin-Rozalis, M. Evaluation and Research: Differences and Similarities. *Can. J. Program Eval.* 2003, 18, 1–31.
26. Leathwood, C.; Phillips, D. Developing Curriculum Evaluation Research in Higher Education: Process, Politics and Practicalities. *High Educ.* 2000, 40, 313–330.
27. Pratt, D.D. Reconceptualizing the Evaluation of Teaching in Higher Education. *High Educ.* 1997, 34, 23–44.
28. McLinden, M.; Cleaver, E.; Lintern, M. (Eds.) Developing and Promoting a Culture of Critical Enquiry within Higher Education: Some Final Reflections. In *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*; Sage: London, UK, 2018; p. 269.
29. Schnurr, M.A.; Taylor, A. Bridging the Gap between the Research Ethics Board and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. *Can. J. Scholarsh. Teach. Learn.* 2019, 10, 12.
30. Healey, R.L.; Bass, T.; Caulfield, J.; Hoffman, A.; McGinn, M.K.; Miller-Young, J.; Haigh, M. Being Ethically Minded: Practising the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in an Ethical Manner. *Teach. Learn. Inq.* 2013, 1, 23–32.
31. Burman, M.E.; Kleinsasser, A. Ethical Guidelines for Use of Student Work: Moving from Teaching's Invisibility to Inquiry's Visibility in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. *J. Gen. Educ.* 2004, 53, 59–79. Available online: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27797976> (accessed on 11 July 2024).
32. Hutchings, P. Competing Goods: Ethical Issues in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. *Chang. Mag. High. Learn.* 2003, 35, 26–33.
33. Sharp, J.G. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL): A Review of Literature and Introductory Guide to the Field. Available online: <https://bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/dist/e/8583/files/2023/02/SoTL-IMPact-JGS-21.2.23-62.pdf> (accessed on 11 July 2024).
34. Stierer, B.; Antoniou, M. Are There Distinctive Methodologies for Pedagogic Research in Higher Education? *Teach. High. Educ.* 2004, 9, 275–285.
35. Carnell, B. *A Short Introduction to Pedagogic Research*; University College London: London, UK, 2021; Available online: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching->

- learning/files/a_short_introduction_to_pedagogic_research.pdf (accessed on 2 July 2024).
36. Fedoruk, L.M.; Mikita, K. The Role of Educational Developer in Supporting Research Ethics in SoTL. In Evidence-Based Faculty Development through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL); IGI Global: Hershey, PA, USA, 2020; pp. 221–236.
 37. Stockley, D.; Balkwill, L.-L. Raising Awareness of Research Ethics in SoTL: The Role of Educational Developers. *Can. J. Scholarsh. Teach. Learn.* 2013, 4, 7.
 38. Fung, D. *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*; UCL Press: London, UK, 2017; ISBN 191157633X.
 39. Schimanski, L.A.; Alperin, J.P. The Evaluation of Scholarship in Academic Promotion and Tenure Processes: Past, Present, and Future. *F1000Res* 2018, 7, 1605.
 40. Grady, C. Institutional Review Boards: Purpose and Challenges. *Chest* 2015, 148, 1148–1155.
 41. Klitzman, R. From Anonymity to “Open Doors”: IRB Responses to Tensions with Researchers. *BMC Res. Notes* 2012, 5, 347.
 42. Schrag, Z.M. *Ethical Imperialism: Institutional Review Boards and the Social Sciences, 1965–2009*; JHU Press: Baltimore, MD, USA, 2010; ISBN 0801899141.
 43. Bond, T. Ethical Imperialism or Ethical Mindfulness? Rethinking Ethical Review for Social Sciences. *Res. Ethics* 2012, 8, 97–112.
 44. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*; Routledge: London, UK, 2018; ISBN 0429960190.

Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/history/show/127799>