

Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

Ethical Review Guidelines For Research Involving Students or Other Individuals Related to the Researcher as Research Participants

Ethical research in all but very exceptional cases requires the informed and voluntary consent of research participants. Given the uneven power relationships between students and teachers in formal education contexts, or between employees and supervisors in the business context, it is often very difficult or impossible to ensure that prospective participants in the researcher/teacher's class or the researcher/supervisor's unit of responsibility are in a position to freely give consent, without the possibility of reprisals from the researcher/teacher or researcher/supervisor for non-participation.

Given this constraint, researchers are typically discouraged from using as research participants the students who are currently enrolled in their courses, or the people they currently supervise in a work situation. Research using student groups taught by other teachers or employees supervised by someone else within the company or at another company, postponing research until the course is over, and other strategies are recommended alternatives.

Nonetheless, there may be sufficient value in a research project in which it is essential that subjects are chosen from a researcher/teacher's own class or from a researcher/supervisor's own work unit, or situations in which no other subject pool is available to grant approval from the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB). In such circumstances the REB suggest a variety of measures be put in place to decrease the possibility of individuals being coerced into participation. These include but are not limited to:

- Curtailing of all data collection until the course is over
- Curtailing analysis of data until the course is over
- Having interviews, focus groups and survey administration and other data collection and analysis activities performed by a research assistant, and not in the presence of the researcher/teacher or researcher/supervisor
- Having a third party recruit participants, including distribution/collection of information and consent documents
- Ensuring that informed consent letters explicitly state that the decision to not participate will have no impact on grades or other assessment activities.

As in all ethics approval decisions, the REB assesses the value of the research in relation to the potential for harm to the participants, when making its decisions. Adherence to the above criteria is not a guarantee that research proposals in which researcher/teachers or researcher/supervisors propose to use their own students or people in a power relationship with them will be approved. Alternatively, the REB may determine that the value of the research exceeds minimal risk to participants and may approve applications that do not adopt any of the above measures.