

Ethical practice as a student: Undertaking projects and assignments in workplaces and other institutions

Many assignments in VET subjects involve some sort of research in students' workplace or elsewhere. For example you may be asked to describe the way in which the organisation carries out training of its staff, or you might be asked to discuss workplace communication processes. Sometimes you are just asked to describe and reflect on what you have already experienced, but in other cases you may do some actual research, for example interviewing staff or even administering a short survey. In such cases you need to be aware of the ethical considerations.

The statement below has been prepared by CSU for such cases:

Preamble: The learning objectives and target competencies of various subjects may be enhanced through exercises that require students to collect information from human participants. Such data collection exercises typically involve administering questionnaires, interviewing, observation, case studies, audio/visual recording and other approaches to collecting personal information. These exercises constitute a component of the subject, are circumscribed, and involve a limited number of participants. Ethical approval through the University's Ethics in Human Research Committee is not required for data collection exercises that are not for the purpose of formal research or for publication in any form. However, such data collection exercises involving human participants do incur the same ethical obligations as research projects. Students involved in these activities must adhere to the following principles.

Respect for persons. Students must respect the rights and beliefs of individuals.

Avoid doing harm. Students must avoid doing harm which may be in the form of psychological harm (e.g. embarrassment or exploitation) or physical harm.

Informed consent. Participants must be informed of the nature of their participation and the uses to which the data they provide will be put. Individuals should freely agree to participate only after being made aware of this information. A participant's right to withdraw at any time should be assured and honoured.

Privacy and confidentiality. Students must respect the privacy of participants and avoid unnecessary intrusions. All information should be treated carefully and, where possible, names and personal identifiable information should not be disclosed to others.

Security and integrity of data. All the information collected should be guarded from loss and from uses that were not originally intended. Data must not be tampered with. At completion of the exercise, raw data should be destroyed.

Academic and scientific standards. Students must analyse and report their findings accurately, honestly and in compliance with accepted academic and scientific standards.

Cultural sensitivities. Students should articulate how they will work sensitively and respectfully with diverse populations that may include Indigenous people, non-English speaking background people and speakers of a language other than English.

Normally, elaboration and discussion of the above principles will occur in the context of the subject and the exercise for which data collection is required. If there is any likelihood that data collected by students may lead to publication, ethics approval from the University committee must be obtained. Additional information for subject coordinators and for students is at the following links:

<http://www.csu.edu.au/research/forms>

<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications>

A final word on ethics

Your subject coordinators undertake that the information you give about companies and people is not divulged to anyone else. This ensures your participants' confidentiality. However you might consider, both when you are undertaking such small scale research, and even when simply writing about what you already know about your workplace or other sites, the ethical implications of your discussion of people and their actions. For example, you might wish to ensure that you describe the actions of others in a respectful way even when you wish to critique them.