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PRO-RES

PROmoting integrity in the use of **RES**earch results in evidence based policy: a focus on non-medical research

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Lead Author: Ron Iphofen
With Contribution From: All members of AcSS, EASHH and University of Tartu team.

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PREAMBLE

We present here a draft statement of principles that lie behind seeking/using ethical evidence from non-medical research to inform policy. In talking about ethical evidence, we are both tackling the principle of evidence per se and the way this evidence is built throughout the whole research process from inception through to application or use. The short, clear, succinct and actionable statement we present here is designated the 'Accord'. This is the baseline that we intend the further consultation process to be built on. Neither its title nor content is 'fixed' at this point. We aim to explore its potential with the appropriate constituencies and across the range of stakeholders. These include the producers of research, disseminators and intermediaries, influencers, policy advisers, decision-makers and implementers. The section following the Accord statement draws out the elements of the brief Accord statement in terms of slightly more detailed principles together with a rationale for this approach. The draft Accord is based on the work accomplished by the first phase of the PRO-RES Project and based on declared foundational assumptions about the values, principles and standards involved in ethical research conducted with integrity. The Accord will be presented on the PRO-RES website and linked to a 'Toolbox' to aid stakeholders in assessing the ethics and integrity of research evidence and supportive resources to help produce such evidence across the range of non-medical research activities.

We are aiming to develop a culture of ethical research based on ***continuous discursive engagement.*** By that we mean:

- There needs to be an ethical *discourse* to be sure that researchers are aware of, and sensitive to, the ethical dimensions of their work. That awareness depends on engagement in ethical discourse as an integral aspect of engagement in research.

- To bring about a cultural change in research activity, there has to be *engagement* of everyone responsible for the process, including researchers, stakeholders, peers and the users of research.

- This engagement needs to be *continuous***.** Ethical issues can arise at every stage of research: conception, development, proposal, process, conclusion. Dissemination and use. Ethical consideration cannot be a single-stage process.

THE ACCORD

(on ethical evidence in non-medical research)

Proposed Draft:

As signatories to this Accord:

- **We commit to only use research that is undertaken ethically.**

- **We recognise that an underpinning by high quality research and evidence, including policy appraisals and evaluations, is a pre-condition for evidence-based policy-/decision-making, and hence rational policy actions and outcomes.**

- **We will seek to employ high quality evidence that has been gathered, collated and analysed using sound, robust and ethical methods.**

- **We will attempt to ensure that the funding, management, conduct, dissemination and governance of research meets high standards of ethics and integrity.**

- **As individuals and institutions involved in collecting and/or using evidence in policymaking, we aim to be transparent on how the high quality of that evidence is assured and will flag up any potential conflicts of interest.**

- **We agree that the independence and integrity of individuals responsible for the gathering of research evidence and its use in policymaking must be respected and supported in ways that ensure the evidence they produce is neither biased nor misleading.**

THE PRINCIPLES AND RATIONALE BEHIND THE ACCORD

In seeking to promote ethics and integrity in the evidence produced in all non-medical research:

- Under a commitment to evidence-based policy, all evidence should be based as far as possible on ethically sound research.
- There are many forms of research. They include not just formal research projects and programmes, but a range of actions relating to investigation, discovery, exploration, practice, and disciplinary development. Every kind of research needs to be done ethically.
- Research should be beneficent (or at least non-maleficent) in its aims, its substantive focus, in the process of research, and its application.
- Ethical issues can arise at every stage of research: conception, development, proposal, process, conclusion and dissemination. It follows that ethical consideration cannot be a single-stage process; it has to be continuous.
- Researchers have to be aware of, and sensitive to, the ethical dimensions of their work. That awareness depends on engagement in ethical discourse as an integral aspect of engagement in research. Ethical conduct cannot adequately be guaranteed by a fixed number of pre-set rules.
- All researchers should aim to develop a culture of ethical research, based on continuous discursive engagement. To achieve this, there has to be engagement of everyone responsible for the process, including researchers, stakeholders, peers and the users of research.
- Research should not be based on pre-formed prejudicial ideologies or biased political or financial interests.
- Conflicts of interest should ideally be avoided in the production of research evidence. If this is not possible, all conflicts of interest should be openly disclosed.
- All sources of information used to formulate research evidence should be acknowledged.
- In order to produce high quality evidence, research must be methodologically robust.
- Only research that has also been conducted ethically and with integrity can be considered 'high quality'.
- All research should be funded, managed, conducted and disseminated ethically and with integrity.
- The processes and institutions involved in the selection of evidence, including research, to inform policy should be independent, open and transparent.
- The effectiveness and impact of all policies should be honestly and transparently assessed or evaluated using high quality research methods.

To achieve these ends:

- The Accord must be supported by foundational statements that clarify the values, virtues, principles and standards that are applicable to research and the production of evidence used in policymaking.
- Clear and agreed definitions of terms and concepts are required so that all policymakers should be able to recognise, identify and distinguish the characteristics of high-quality evidence in their field.
- Ethical research practice can often only be understood and explained in context. Illustrative case studies must be made available – with both ethically positive and negative elements – not just success stories. So that users can be aided in their ethical decision making with the insights offered by complex cases.
- A repository of resources must be made available to guide and support the interpretation and application of the Accord.

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A TOOLBOX FOR ASSESSING THE ETHICAL QUALITY OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The final form of the toolbox will be a 'flow chart' or similar tool of how the Accord can be used in practice, for example when necessary to understand whether certain inputs to the policy making process are ethically acceptable.

WHO:

- What are the credentials of the researcher/research agency?

- What is their competence; experience; track record?
- Who do they work for?
- What kind of research agency are they?
- How is the agency funded/by whom?
- How was the specific evidence/project funded?

WHY:

- What was the purpose of the research?
- For what reason was it conducted?
- What were/are the researcher's intentions?

- What are the agency's intentions?
- What were/are the funder's intentions?

HOW:

- How was the research conducted?
- What research design?
- What specific methods?
- What was the original protocol?
- What data were gathered? (Validity, reliability etc.)
- How were data managed and analysed?
- How were the research findings shared/disseminated?
- Were other stakeholders, (community members, research participants, general public etc) involved in any part of the research? If so, why and how?

WHOM/WHAT:

- Who or what were the subject/objects/participants of the study?

(Humans, animals, material objects, ecosystems, organisations, communities, societies etc. – or any combination of the aforementioned)

- How was the welfare of the subject/objects/participants ensured?

WHEN/WHERE:

- What was the context – place, time, institution(s) etc?

- Field site? (permissions…)
- Laboratory (registered…)

AND – WITH WHAT RESULTS?

- Were the research findings implemented in practice?

- What were the consequences of the findings being, or not being, implemented?
- Were there any limitations on what could be done?
- And so on…. (This is the 'evaluation' element.)

These questions can overlap to varying degrees – but answering them all offers the most comprehensive articulation of the quality of a research engagement.

1.1 ILLUSTRATION OF THE 'ACCORD' IN ACTION:

SUBSTANTIVE TOPIC AREA:

1) Research-based evidence is particularly necessary and meaningful in topics such as:

- Environmental Research
- Disasters/catastrophes
- Behavioural Research via Social Media
- Covert/surveillance

- AI/Robotics

2) Clearly identify the relevant actors and their categorisation according to areas at stake:

WHO & WHY:

- academic researchers
- think tanks
- lobbying agencies
- PR consultants
- peer review groups
- advocacy agencies
- others

3) The collection and structuring of the relevant information:

HOW & WHAT:

- Peer reviewed publications
- In-house technical reports
- Commissioned reports
- Independent white papers
- Grey literature e.g. official policy documents
- Other sources

4) Verification and Validation:

ALL above Criteria – plus **WHEN & WHERE**:

- Ethics consistency check (e.g. possible conflict of interests?)
- Evaluation, comparison and modelling of e.g. different schools of thought
- Warning (flagging) mechanisms for identifying any inconsistencies
- Management plan for identified inconsistencies

5) Feedback process:

- Clarification round with selected 'evidence providers' on site
- (ethics panel might be meaningful as a safeguard / endorsement mechanism)
- In case of identification of 'ethics breaches' (misconduct) sanction warning mechanism must be activated (e.g. creation of 'black list').

6) Final acceptance/rejection:

AND – WITH WHAT RESULTS?

Incentive/reward mechanisms:

- Clear acknowledgement (e.g. creation of a network of excellence for outstanding performers)
- Create incentives for further 'ethics-compliant' created knowledge (e.g. label/seal of excellence, special events, etc.)

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIONS

This section outlines some important actions that need to be implemented in the future (outside the project), in order to be able to fully exploit the project results.

1) **Certificated training**: basic training in ethics/integrity for early career researchers. Ensure adequate continuing professional development (CPD) for all stakeholders - researchers, managers, funders, reviewers, evaluators. Establish a graded qualifications system for ethical researchers. An accredited course accreditation to an agreed curriculum.

2) Consider **kitemarking** all 'research producers'.

Kitemarking of research organisations (like the Market Research Society (MRS)). There would then be a need to decide the quality elements to be included for a kitemark to be awarded – together with exploring what organisations or kinds of organisation would be needed to apply the kitemark.

(There are vested interests in maintaining ethical governance structures. Some are economic: www.irb.net their newsletter "…is meant to inform and provoke thought on key issues on research compliance"…. Note the compliance phrase.)

3) Set up an **International Ethics Advisory Forum** – based on our advisors list. (Seek suggestions from ERC and Dorian.) Make available a register of ethically-qualified experts. Establish a pro-bono advice Forum – staff with range of expertise, experience and national knowledge.

4) Find a way to ensure **continuity/durability**.

For all elements of the Framework: a regular (say 6 month) cycle of review. Who and how?

5) **Refine the ethics appraisal (REC) process** – attempt better consistency in SOPs, process and practice.