

## Case study 6. To apply, or not to apply, that is the question

### A hypothetical case about data collection without ethics approval

Seth was getting worried about his conference manuscript. He planned to conduct a small-scale feasibility study prior to the main study of his project to make sure his research design was flawless, and the findings of the feasibility study would be presented in his conference paper. He found himself in a race against time, as the complexity of his project had made him modify his research design several times and also he had spent much of his time on his part-time job. The feasibility study would take at least a month, if everything was smooth. It would then leave him very little time to write up his paper. Seth told his friends about the situation, and they offered to participate in his feasibility study overnight so that he could finish it as soon as possible. Seth was not sure about this at first, but his friends told him that it shouldn't be a problem as his preliminary study was informal and that conference paper requirements were usually less strict than those for journal papers.

Seth managed to complete his conference manuscript three days before the submission due date. Dr Wynne, his supervisor, wasn't at all pleased with his sporadic reporting and the slow progress of his project, but she still wanted to help Seth get through this learning process. After she finished reading Seth's manuscript, Dr Wynne asked Seth, "Can you remind me—when did you apply for ethics approval for your feasibility study?"

#### Reflection corner

1. What is wrong with collecting human data without ethics approval?
2. Are feasibility studies or pilot studies exempted from the human research compliance requirement?
3. What is the consequence of Seth's action in this case?

#### Analysis: What is human research compliance?

Research ethics compliance is an integral part of the responsible conduct of research framed under the principles of research integrity. According to HKU's Policy on Research Integrity, approval of the appropriate research ethics committee(s) must be obtained prior to all experiments and research projects that involve human participants. Data collection such as human-involved pilot studies and classroom-based surveys, regardless of their relative scales, must not proceed without being prospectively cleared by the research ethics committee(s). The research ethics committee(s) would ensure ethical collection of data with informed consent and that the risk of harm is minimised. In this case study, Seth collected data before obtaining ethical approval; this could undermine the safety of the participants as well as the credibility of his study. Human research compliance is part of the University's policy to safeguard the safety and welfare of all parties, especially human participants, involved. Students should make sure that ethics approval is obtained prior to any kind of data collection that involves human participants and that the informed consent of participants is appropriately documented.

See more:

1. HKU Policy on Research Integrity:  
<http://www.rss.hku.hk/integrity/rcr/policy#Research%20Misconduct>
2. Research Integrity: A Guide for Research Postgraduate Students at the University of Hong Kong, HKU Graduate School:  
[https://inraweb.hku.hk/reserved\\_1/gradsch/research\\_integrity.pdf](https://inraweb.hku.hk/reserved_1/gradsch/research_integrity.pdf)
3. Procedures for application for ethics approval in the Faculty of Education:  
<https://web.edu.hku.hk/research/ethics-application>