Ethics and the University

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Peter J. Larkham, Director of Research Degrees in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment, explores the themes which were raised at Birmingham City University's annual Ethics Conference.

For the past four years, Birmingham City University has held an annual Ethics Conference. This is an interdisciplinary event which seeks to promote awareness of ethics across the University, in research and in all of our other activities. This brief comment is an overview of some of the issues arising from the fourth of these events, held in July 2015.

The keynote paper was presented by Dr Sarah Edwards (UCL), drawing principally on medical cases and her experience in editing the journal *Research Ethics*. She used the word "oversight" in relation to ethics. I like this because it has two relevant meanings: that of high level management, and that of omission. I am concerned that ethics are still not fundamentally embedded in all of our activities in BCU. We no longer have a University-wide Ethics Committee, for example. Faculties do have ethics committees, but my concern is that they may function erratically and perhaps unsystematically. Ethics are not embedded at the heart of (all of) our faculties and activities. For example, I know of many academics and research students who say, time after time, that there are NO ethical implications of their research. How could that be true? There *will* be some ethical implications, even if they are relatively minor and easily dealt with. We still, I fear, have quite a journey before us as a university community. Evidence for this is the small number of people attending these annual conferences, and the comments

from Alex Wade in his discussion on teaching ethics, that ethics was perceived by colleagues as "a diversion, a block to research, an horrific process, bureaucratic...". We urgently need to change the perceptions and change the culture.

Sarah Edwards reminded us that, while some ethics issues are relatively new, some enduring questions have remained unanswered for several decades. One key issue is the balance of independence and expertise. For example, at BCU do we have "lay people" on ethics committees, as is recommended by many bodies? What does "lay" mean in this context? And some domains and funding bodies now require public (for example, patient) involvement at all stages of the research. Is this taking over the research, or research planning, process? There are numerous unresolved ambiguities in this. Other domains do not require this, or have not thought of it: maybe they should.

The role and complexity of ethics governance, and the proliferation of paperwork, were mentioned. In some cases, non-researchers have been hired manage the paperwork, but is this really "safe"? Can any researcher, especially a principal investigator, however busy, abdicate responsibility to another?

And, despite this complexity, there is a need for ongoing ethics consideration, throughout and perhaps beyond the life of

a funded project. BUT some research is inherently of low ethical risk or implication. Review should be proportionate. Yet how is this managed effectively and transparently? Examples were given, in some disciplines, of journal editors/publishers rejecting papers where there was no documented evidence of ethics approval. Should they be gatekeepers of ethics review processes? If so, what about research carried out by non-university-based researchers, independent researchers, retired academics – which is common in, for example, my own field?

Several speakers mentioned the benefit of learning across disciplines, especially (but not solely) for 'diffuse' disciplines such as psychology. This is something we should probably do more about, in a structured and specific way. We need to share ideas and experiences, and not just in these annual meetings.

We need to deal with ethics issues for students, and especially for undergraduate dissertations there are problems with ensuring sufficient understanding of these issues (especially for weaker students) and in managing the workload of reviewing hundreds of proposals in each faculty. This is, I think, a big issue. Our experienced researchers do, by and large, understand and engage with the issues. That cannot always be said of all students. How do we deal with this, protecting our students, any research participants, and indeed the university's reputation? But we cannot just sidestep all sensitive research topics, even at undergraduate level. And, if ethics should be conceptualised as affecting the entire research process, not just a one-off box-ticking process, how do we manage that for a short-duration undergraduate dissertation process? Could or should we simply penalise, or even fail, work for which there is no evidence of engagement with ethics processes?

We need to consider, again in a much

more systematic way, the extension of ethics into insurance and risk assessment. Lucy Land showed how this was being done in the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences (HELS), with the experience of the Health disciplines (driven by NHS requirements) now being extended to Education within the new Faculty structure. Likewise, Steve Homer, the University's Information Manager, reminded us that his discussion of data protection issues was a beginning, not an end. We need awareness of the Data Protection Act, its requirements, and also its research exemptions!

The round table discussions in the second half of the conference did raise some interesting issues, and what follows is necessarily a partial and composite overview. As a University and as individual academics/researchers, we need to do the following.

Understand relationships with research partners and stakeholders, whether contractual or otherwise; and - though this might be difficult - learn to trust others, and build rapport with them.

Recognise conflict, including amongst the intellectual baggage we always bring with us, and seek to mediate/manage it. But where does the power lie in these conflicts? Funding bodies will always win.

Deal with personalities - of researchers and participants, including in complex situations such as those involving vulnerable individuals, considering potential causes of distress, and so on. Sometimes people lack social skills – for example children, offenders etc. And, of course, not everyone tells the truth.

All of this demands that researchers are not only ethical in principle, but in practice are very aware, have very well developed skills and abilities, which may well not be

nested within narrow academic disciplines. This places heavy demands on training and mentoring new researchers; and what about updating / CPD for experienced researchers?

Do we need to be flexible, to compromise on some points? What ethical issues are absolute, non-negotiable; or, as someone said frequently, it's all contested!

And can we move away from the "management" culture towards "virtue ethics", although the virtue is always going to be dependent on culture, situation and other variables - teaching this would not be easy.

At the start of today's meeting its principal organiser, Dr James Williams, mentioned the idea of a 'community' for ethics issues, an 'ethics commons' as Dr Tony Armstrong termed it. We should try to develop this, but not just with annual events - communities need to get together much more frequently. Faculties could organise events, as could PGRNet; and we should explicitly consider ethics outside the domain of research.