

Best Practice in Research

Basic Information

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Status of Paper	Final
Action Required	Consideration of the attached Code of Conduct and decision on the stated resolution.
Draft Resolutions	As set out in sections 4
Alternative Options	Continuing without recommending the documentation for use beyond the Connexional Team.

Summary of Content

Subject and Aims	The paper seeks to address the need for a standard of best practice in research to ensure that all research work done for or by employees of the Council is conducted professionally, competently, and in line with the ethos of the Methodist Church.
Main Points	The covering paper describes the use of this Code of Conduct in the Connexional Team and proposes its use for Council employees. The attached document sets out the purpose of a Code of Conduct in general terms and the Code establishes the broad principles for best practice in research, structured around the core values in <i>Ways of Working</i> .
Background Context and Relevant Documents	Proposals emerge from continuing efforts in the Team to ensure its own policy work is backed up by credible research and the desire to provide resources for this in the wider Connexion. Organisations with similar documentation are listed in footnote 1.
Consultations	Connexional Team Research Forum, Church of England Research and Statistics Department, Training Officers, District Development Enablers, oversight tutors and training institution principals.

Summary of Impact

Financial	Proper research standards should help ensure that the discernment processes for deciding where connexional money is directed are more robust.
Personnel	The Code will require staff employed by the Council to notice and adhere to this document wherever relevant, alongside any other code of conduct for research.
Legal	The Code will ensure that the Council demonstrates an explicit commitment to legal standards in professional conduct and data protection.
Wider Connexional	Adopting the Code should allow for greater confidence in more reliable, targeted policy and strategy making.
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Assurance of high research standards has the advantage of increasing external confidence in the work of Methodist employees.
Risk	Continuing to commission or use research work which is not protected by a code of conduct, or continuing not to provide guidance for employees about professional and legal requirements could lead to future difficulties. This could range from a lack of certainty about the reliability of evidence on which decisions are made to legal difficulties surrounding data protection and human interaction.

Best Practice in Research

1. Background – Connexional Team Code of Conduct

- 1.1 The Connexional Team has recently defined its principles and standards of best practice in research. These are protected by a Code of Conduct which has been approved and adopted by the Strategic Leaders and Cluster Heads to ensure that all research work, from small internal surveys to connexion-wide consultations, is conducted professionally, competently, and in line with the ethos of the Methodist Church.
- 1.2 This code was developed by the Research Officers in collaboration with colleagues from across the Team through the *Research Forum*, a regular meeting of staff members with an interest or responsibilities and skills in research. Much of the material used was adapted from codes of conduct used by professional research bodies, but developed to express a distinctively Methodist approach, focusing on the core values of the Team as set out in the *Ways of Working* document.
- 1.3 The purpose of the Code of Conduct is to ensure that all work done achieves positive and fruitful results for the Church by being ethically and legally sound, conducted professionally and efficiently, and formulated according to working styles that the Church seeks to promote. It is also now the policy of the Connexional Team that no work be used by the Team for formulating strategy or policy that does not reach the standards set out in the Code of Conduct.

2 Developing a Code of Conduct for the Church

- 2.1 When adopting this Code of Conduct, the Cluster Heads and Strategic Leaders identified the likely benefit of promoting it as a standard for as much research work as possible that takes place in or for the Methodist Church. It was therefore proposed that the Code of Conduct be brought to the Methodist Council with a recommendation that it be the best practice standard offered to the whole Connexion, and particularly the standard expected of all Council employees in any research work they do.
- 2.2 The Code of Conduct for best practice in research attached to this paper has evolved out of the Team's Code after consultation with those groups which would potentially be most impacted on by the Council's adoption of such a code. This includes Training Officers, District Development Enablers, One Programme Participants, the Heads of Training Institutions and Connexional Oversight Tutors, as well as the relevant Connexional Team staff with responsibilities for interacting with and/or directing the work of these officers. These groups have been asked for feedback on both the content of the document and the relevance of such a code within their own contexts.
- 2.3 Feedback from this consultation was universally positive regarding the content of the Code. The Urban Theology Unit has already adopted it voluntarily and others have suggested a clear willingness to do the same. Comments included:

"useful and close to the University's guidelines – though written in more accessible language" (Principal, Training Institution)

"it seems to be usable for me in my role" (Training Officer)

*"We welcome it warmly as a valuable addition to our research skills resources"
(Corporate answer from a Training institution)*

- 2.4 Reluctance about the Code emerged only in questions regarding the need for it in particular contexts where research does not take place, where it is library-based rather than of a more practical, empirical nature, or where existing codes and other methods of ensuring high standards (such as peer review) are already used.

*"in the context of formal academic qualifications...research must conform to guidelines issued by the respective award making Universities. In the main these are more not less rigorous and explicit than the proposed Methodist code"
(Tutor, Training institution)*

*"The guidelines are relevant particularly to research methods generating quantitative of [sic] qualitative data, ethnographical research... Fewer ethical issues arise when thinking, say, about Kant's Second Critique"
(Tutor, Training institution)*

- 2.5 These comments have been taken on board in revising the Code for broader application and are reflected both in its content and in the proposed resolutions for the Methodist Council. In addition, the *Research Forum* will begin to consider further proposals for additional methods of review.

3 Proposals

- 3.1 The Research Officers, with the support of the Strategic Leaders and Cluster Heads, propose that the appended Code of Conduct be considered by the Council and recommended to all Council employees as a standard for best practice in research. It is the belief of the Team that this will provide a useful resource for those conducting a range of research projects across the Connexion and help promote a wide regard for high standards from a distinctly Methodist viewpoint.
- 3.2 In recommending the Code to its employees as an expected standard of working, the Council is not asked to suggest that the Code will replace or supplant other methods of ensuring best practice already used elsewhere, nor that it will impose upon those not doing research or not doing relevant types of research any additional or unnecessary burden.
- 3.3 Importantly, the Council is asked that, by recommending this Code, it adopts the same for the purposes of its own discernment. Therefore, just at the Connexional Team's adoption of the original Code now prohibits the commissioning or use of research that contravenes or falls below the stated standards, so the Council is asked to take this approach. Although the Council would doubtless seek to ensure this anyway, there are clear benefits in making this decision explicitly, in writing, which have led to the use and promotion of codes of conduct being standard practice for any institution commissioning research.

- 3.4 In addition, in adopting the Code, it is recommended that the Council instruct the Connexional Grants Committee (CGC) to use it as a basic standard against which all applications for grants which involve a research element should be tested and that agreement to conformity by those receiving the grant become a condition of approval. Conversations with the Chair of the CGC and the Grants Officers suggest that this can easily be achieved and would be welcomed by both.

4. **Proposed Resolution**

The Methodist Council commends the document *Best Practice in Research for the Methodist Church* and its appended Code of Conduct to the wider Connexion. It directs those institutions and other bodies, officers and employees that are accountable to the Council to examine these documents when engaged in, commissioning or making use of research work and to ensure that their methods, and those of people they line manage, conform to the stated principles, alongside those of any further tools of review adopted within their professional contexts.

Best Practice in Research for the Methodist Church¹

Codes of conduct for research exist to promote high quality work, to protect against work which falls below standards of best practice, and so to ensure that research is of the greatest possible use. Such codes, which promote ethical standards, standards of competency and conformity to legal regulations, protect those conducting and participating in research, as well as those using and learning from the results. Codes of conduct therefore promote trust between stakeholders and ensure that research is fitting to its purpose.

The Methodist Council seeks to ensure its officers learn from professional best practice and adopt it wherever applicable and desirable within its distinctively Christian way of being and working. The stated core values in the *Ways of Working* document, to which Council employees are expected to conform, promote commitment to honesty and openness and to personal and professional integrity. The following Code of Conduct seeks to ensure that these values and this particular commitment can be embedded fully into all research work which is conducted or used by Council employees.

Although a Code such as this is clearly most relevant to forms of empirical research, it can be used wherever relevant and appropriate in relation to any form of research work. This document is therefore written for the benefit and use of all members of the Methodist Church who conduct research, who may wish to be guided by the principles espoused in order to ensure that research conducted on behalf of the Church, in association with it, or simply by individuals who are members of the Church, conforms to basic standards of best practice.

More specifically, it is the intention of this Code of Conduct to provide a descriptive and informative set of guidelines commended to all employees of the Methodist Council as a basic level of working practice to which they are expected to conform when performing research that can appropriately and rightly be guided by such a code. By recommending the Code of Conduct to its employees, the Methodist Council seeks to ensure that staff members can live out the Church's core values within the specific remit of best practice in research.

As well as recommending this Code of Conduct to its employees, it will be a principle of the Methodist Council's policy for research that any research work used by the Council for its purposes should be done in conformity with the Code or that of another recognised, professional research body or academic institution of suitable standing. In addition, any research put forward to the wider Church or produced externally which has not conformed to the principles set out will not be promoted or sanctioned by the Council or its employees as providing credible results unless conformity to the principles, or to those of a professional research body or institution, can be demonstrated or credibly vouched for in retrospect.

The following Code is not intended to be rigidly proscriptive or exhaustive. The code is set out as a set of principles that can be applicable to most methodologies and potential subject matters. They are therefore wide in scope and will inevitably be limited in some areas and in some points of detail. Because of this, the Code of

¹ The above guidelines were developed with reference to guidelines and resources from: The Research Councils of the United Kingdom; The Royal Statistical Society; Oxford University; Cambridge University; The Social Research Association; The American Associations of University Professors; The Natural Environment Research Council; The National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences.

Conduct is not intended to be closed or inflexible. If any member of the Methodist Church or employee of the Methodist Council wishes to recommend further changes to the Code which would be of benefit to those to which it is recommended, or for further guidance on the use of ethical codes of conduct for research (for example, on data protection regulations), interested parties should contact the Research Officers in the Connexional Team (tel: 02074865502) or email research@methodistchurch.org.uk.

Code of Conduct

Employees of the Methodist Council conducting any form of research should take steps to promote the core values of the Church alongside ensuring the highest professional standards. This includes all forms of research work, such as surveys and holding small focus groups.

This should include carrying out regular reviews of research policies and procedures and also the careful management and supervision of research projects. Regular reporting on and discussions about the standards of good conduct and ethics in research work that is taking place should happen at the instigation of employees and their managers.

All employees of the Methodist Council are encouraged to consult research specialists when their own training is not in the area of research for which they have taken some responsibility. In such cases, when no more immediately appropriate source is available, the Research Officers in the Connexional Team can be contacted, particularly during the planning and designing phases of research, to provide advice and support, or to identify those who might have the qualifications necessary to provide such guidance.

Where Council employees are associated with organisations that use their own codes of conduct or an equivalent policy or process for ensuring quality and ethical standards in research, the following Code is not intended to supplant these, but to sit alongside them.

When conducting, using and promoting research within the Connexion, employees of the Methodist Council should make sure those conducting the work adhere, or adhered, to the following working principles:

"Trust, Honesty and Openness..."

Honesty

Honestly report data, results, methods and procedures used in research when results of that research are communicated or used. Be honest about the limitations of the work you have done and the uses to which it can be put.

Be honest about yourself, your skills, and your work. Only offer to do work or provide services which are within your professional competence. Failing to do this may lead to the collection of data which cannot be used.

Always provide your most honest professional opinion with regard to a research project or methodology. If, when being asked to complete work, your professional judgement is overruled, indicate clearly the likely consequences. In every case, do not allow a misleading summary of data to be issued in your name.

Openness

Be open to criticism and new ideas. Welcome the input of other research professionals and individuals with skills which may assist you in your work.

"Personal and Professional Integrity..."

Objectivity and Integrity

Research benefits from the observance of fairness and equity in the conduct of researchers.

Research methodologies should be chosen that take account of and value human diversity and diversity of opinion. It is important to acknowledge the way in which research is influenced by decisions made concerning research subjects, especially in respect of age, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, lifestyle or any other significant social or cultural factor. These should not be influencing factors in research methodology or analysis except where appropriate and relevant to the study (and explicitly stated in any communication of results).

Integrity and a reflective approach to research are essential to noticing, understanding and reporting. Strive to acknowledge and take account of bias (unavoidable or deliberate) in methodology, data collection, analysis and interpretation, both by commission and omission. Avoid self-deception in this area and always disclose to your line manager and/or another appropriate person or body any conflict of interest (actual or potential) and discuss this at the earliest possible stage. Make a point of acknowledging your own subjectivity as a researcher when reporting and publishing work for a wider audience.

Care should be taken to acknowledge the difference between views and opinions derived from data and what is assumed knowledge.

Carefulness

Seek actively to avoid errors and negligence in research by carefully and critically examining your own work and the work of your peers. Keep good records of research activities, such as data collection, research design, and correspondence with agencies or journals.

Seek to improve and keep current your professional knowledge and skills in research. Be aware of relevant technological developments, procedures and standards.

Respect

Give credit where credit is due. Give proper acknowledgement for all contributions to research. Do not present the work of others as your own.

Do not use unpublished data, methods, or results without permission.

Balancing Obligations

Researchers' relationships with and commitments to the Council, the Team and/or other commissioning bodies should be made explicit during the course of research work and in the publication of any findings and analysis. These relationships should not compromise a commitment to professional or ethical integrity, nor to the law, nor to the maintenance of rigorous standards of quality and objectivity.

A conflict of obligations may occur when the commissioning person or body of an inquiry wishes to ensure in advance that certain results will be achieved. By agreeing to conduct such work, the researcher would compromise their professional responsibility to ensure that the quality and objectivity of their work is maintained. Council employees should not agree to this course of action.

Obligation to broader research work and research professionals dictates that, without compromising obligations to commissioning bodies, subjects or society at large, procedures and findings should be made to be open to collegial and Connexion-wide review.

Legality

In every case where relevant, familiarise yourself with laws relating to the collection and handling of data required in your work and ensure that your practices are in line with these. Also ensure that your data collection and communication practices are in line with wider Team, Council, Church, other institutional and governmental policies and guidelines, or those associated with appointed bodies involved in the relevant area of research (see below on data protection).

Honour patents, copyrights, and other forms of intellectual property.

Establish from the outset of a project the owner of the research data and results and agree with them the parameters for the wider distribution of that material.

Avoidance of Misconduct

By adhering to the principles in this document, researchers should at all times avoid, either knowingly or through lack of awareness, misconduct in their data collection and analysis. Misconduct includes all action that does or could lead to outcomes which are unsupportable or which are damaging to those who participated in or might use the research work. Action which deliberately,

though recklessness or through carelessness, falls short of the principles for best practice is unacceptable within the Connexional Team or for use by Council employees and will not be used to support policy making or other areas of work conducted by the Council.

Misconduct in research includes (but is not limited to):

- Fabrication
- Falsification
- Misrepresentation
- Plagiarism
- Mismanagement in the preservation of data and primary materials
- Breach of duty of care to research subjects

"Love, Value, Care and Esteem for Others..."

Courtesy

Make clear to those assisting or participating in a research project, before undertaking it, the level of feedback (including the dissemination of results) that can and will be given and ensure that this is timely, comprehensive and as agreed.

Where feedback cannot be given, make this clear and set out the reasons for this before others assist in research.

Protecting People

When conducting research with people, minimise any potential harm and risk and maximize benefits; respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy; take special precautions with vulnerable populations; strive to distribute the benefits and burdens of research fairly.

Inquiries involving human subjects should be based wherever possible on the freely given informed consent of subjects. In voluntary inquiries, subjects should not be under the impression that they are required to participate. They should be aware of their entitlement to refuse at any stage for whatever reason and to withdraw data. Information that would be likely to affect a subject's willingness to participate should not be deliberately withheld.

Have regard to basic human rights and avoid any actions that adversely affect such rights.

Confidentiality

The identities of research subjects should be kept confidential unless consent for disclosure is explicitly obtained.

Protect confidential communications. Do not disclose or authorise to be disclosed, or use for any reason than that which has been agreed in advance, confidential information acquired in the course of research, except with prior written permission of all parties involved.

Data Protection

Data protection legislation guards individuals against possible misuse of information about them held by others. All research done by the Connexional Team or which the Team uses must conform to current data protection legislation. It is the duty of those conducting the research to study this legislation and ensure conformity to it.

The principles of data protection legislation require that personal data shall:

- be processed fairly and lawfully;
- be held only for specified purposes and not used or disclosed in any way incompatible with those purposes;
- be adequate, relevant and not excessive;
- be accurate and kept up-to-date;
- not be kept for longer than necessary for the particular purpose;
- be processed in accordance with data subject's rights;
- be kept secure;
- not be transferred outside the European Economic Area unless the recipient country ensures an adequate level of protection

Data protection legislation provides individuals with rights in connection with personal data held about them. This should be considered in all collection and handling of personal data during research work.

In the case of sensitive personal data, additional restrictions apply and explicit consent should normally be requested of any subject before this data is collected.

The current data protection policy for the Methodist Church can be found at http://intranet.methodist.org.uk/downloads/data_protection.doc