

Chapter 19: Research ethics: issues and solutions in education research in Ukrainian universities by Oksana Zabolotna and Iryna Kushnir

Introduction

This chapter explores how members of the Ukrainian higher education (HE) community pursue ethical research in education. This area, arguably, plays a central role in societal development, and therefore, deserves special attention due to its long reaching effects (Annan-Diab and Molinari, 2017; Oleksiyenko, 2021; Fim'yar et al, 2019). Existing scholarship on research ethics in Ukraine is limited and fragmented. There are a handful of studies available on this topic (e.g., Basarab and Anderson, 2022; Shykhnenko and Sbruieva, 2022; Sulaieva et al, 2023). However, research ethics practices specifically in the area of education, how this is happening now, particularly in the war context (Howlett and Lazarenko, 2023), while the Ukrainian Higher Education (HE) community are also dealing at the same time with a range of persisting post-Soviet legacies in research, is unploughed terrain in the scholarship.

Relying on the analysis of a survey of and semi-structured interviews with members of the Ukrainian HE community, this chapter problematises research practice in Ukraine and raises persisting issues. The chapter argues that ethical research has become a complex challenge, exacerbated by the war, but also a symbolic tool for scholars striving to align their work with international standards.

Ukrainian educational research and BERA Research Ethical Guidelines

The Ukrainian translation of BERA's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (fourth edition, 2018¹) was initiated by colleagues at Nottingham Trent University (UK), including Dr. Iryna Kushnir, one of the authors of this chapter, and Dr. Gareth Williams. On its

¹ The fourth, rather than fifth, edition of the BERA ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2018) are referred to in this chapter throughout, as those relevant to its content.

website, BERA acknowledges that ‘these guidelines may not always be fully applicable in an international context, but they are intended to provide guidance and support to researchers’ (BERA Guidelines, 2018, n.d.). Thus, the key takeaway is that the translated version has made these internationally recognized ethical principles accessible to Ukrainian researchers, providing them with guidance in conducting ethically sound research. It should be mentioned that this Ukrainian version published by BERA and the Ukrainian Educational Research Association (UERA) is a direct translation of the original guidelines and it has not been adapted for the Ukrainian context yet. The translation process was carried out by professional translators, with further proofreading conducted by another expert to ensure accuracy.

Since their publication in January 2023, the Guidelines have been referenced in various presentations and roundtable discussions organized by the UERA (April 2023; June 2023; September 2023). However, they have yet to spark in-depth, detailed, or thought-provoking debates. Instead, the focus has often shifted towards issues like plagiarism. The study, portions of which we present in this chapter, helps explain why the adaptation of the Guidelines in Ukraine may require additional time and effort. Are there challenges specific to the local research environment, or broader systemic issues at play? These are the foci that guide our study in the following sections.

Adapting BERA Ethical Guidelines: Where do issues come from?

Challenges in establishing ethical oversight in educational research

We seek to uncover the challenges that rise when attempting to adapt the BERA Ethical Guidelines to the Ukrainian context. The approach involves identifying evidence-based contradictions, inconsistencies, or tensions, which signal areas where ethical principles may diverge from or challenge local practices, expectations, or institutional frameworks.

<i>Local practices</i>	<i>BERA Guidelines</i>
<i>The absence of an Ethical Commission authorized to approve research tools for studies in the field of education. Some institutions in Ukraine have ethics boards that focus primarily on medical or bioethical research while education researchers do not have a clear institutional pathway for obtaining formal ethical approval.</i>	<i>Researchers should think about whether they should approach gatekeepers before directly approaching participants, and about whether they should adopt an institution's own ethical approval and safeguarding procedures; this is usually a requirement (BERA Guidelines, 2018).</i>

Table 19.1 Contradictions between local practices and BERA Guidelines – issue 1

Source: Authors

This gap between the necessity to establish ethical oversight in educational research and the absence of relevant services in Ukraine complicated the process of aligning the study with international ethical standards and necessitated alternative solutions. Following a favourable ethics decision from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Nottingham Trent University (UK), the project's mixed-method research design involved two phases: a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. The research design rested on data generation from two sources, both having taken place in 2024: (1) an online survey with the members of the UERA, (2) as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with emerging researchers and experts in the field. The survey received 120 responses, which is 30% of the total UERA membership. An opportunistic/snowball sample of ten members of the HE community in Ukraine was recruited (five Doctoral candidates and five experts, i.e., members of academic staff or senior leadership) for the interviews. The qualitative data helped explain and contextualise

the quantitative findings, offering deeper insights into specific areas of awareness and application ethics research principles identified in the first phase.

The received evidence provided further nuance to the issue associated with ethical committees, contrasting with the provisions outlined in the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018).

Doctoral candidates have struggled with answering the questions about ethical approval as they had never engaged in such practices:

...the only thing we sign at admission is about academic integrity, and I can't even say anything else (Expert 1)

I would only go for it if we had such a commission; I just don't know about it (Expert 1).

They are unsure about the specific requirements for ethical approval in their institutions, indicating a need for clearer guidelines and education on this topic. Experts generally view the absence of a requirement for ethics committee approval similarly. They do not consider it essential in the context of education research.

I don't think it [ethics committee approval requirement] should be endorsed, although perhaps for some types of research it might be appropriate (Expert 1).

Specifically ... medical research, maybe psychological. That is, where it may affect the people being investigated (Expert 1).

I think that one thing is research ethics, for example, in medical sciences, and the other thing is where a person as a social being is concerned (Expert 2).

In our university, for example, there is a different code of research conducted by medical doctors and biologists, which concerns ethics in behaviour with animals (Expert 3).

It is connected with the fact that the environment today does not really feel the need to turn to such commissions and, accordingly, to additional workload (Expert 1)

The experts acknowledge that, while each university has committees or boards addressing ethical issues, these bodies do not always operate actively. Such issues in the work of ethics committees seem to be a trend in Ukraine spanning over a few decades and crossing multiple fields, not just existing in the area of bioethics which is exactly what Pustovit (2006) analysed. When these committees do convene, their primary focus tends to be on cases of plagiarism reported externally.

Even according to documents, these are primarily commissions that if there is an appeal against plagiarism they consider (Expert 1).

Ethics commissions are everywhere, in every faculty at our university. As for checking the quality of research tools, this is terra incognita, and everything depends on the researchers' ethics (Expert 2).

They (ethics commissions) rely on post-factum things (Expert 4)

All in all, the interviewed experts acknowledged that while universities have committees or boards addressing ethical issues, these bodies are not always active and their primary focus tends to be on addressing plagiarism cases. This is an important finding on its own as it demonstrates a limited understanding of the breads of what research ethics entails. The main focus on avoiding plagiarism in research outputs perhaps has its roots in the issues that Ukrainian universities dealt a while ago, concerning the lack of student academic integrity in research (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014). The experts pointed out that these commissions primarily function post-factum, dealing mainly with issues of academic dishonesty after they have been reported, rather than proactively ensuring the ethical

quality of research tools and practices. This highlights a gap in the current system in Ukraine where the ethical oversight is often reactive rather than preventative.

This trend appears to stem from a longstanding historical context in Ukraine, where the emphasis on academic integrity has often been formal and overshadowed a comprehensive understanding of research ethics. As one expert pointed out, *“in most establishments where they should be, they don't actually work,”* (Expert 1) suggesting that the issue is systemic and has persisted for decades. Furthermore, the focus of committees on post-factum evaluations of plagiarism, as opposed to proactive measures to ensure ethical quality, underscores the challenges Ukrainian educational researchers face in adapting to modern ethical standards. As noted by another expert,

this is only a commission on the issue of academic dishonesty, which, already based on the results of the discovered facts, continues work regarding responsibility. (Expert 5)

Struggling to create the culture of respect for any persons involved in or touched by the research.

The BERA Ethical Guidelines are structured around multiple areas of responsibility: to participants, sponsors, clients, and stakeholders; to the educational research community; for the publication, dissemination, and use of findings; and for researchers' wellbeing and professional development. All these domains are important parts of the complex ethical landscape in which educational research operates. Our survey focused mainly on responsibilities to participants and researchers' wellbeing. The rationale behind it is that these are particularly relevant as, in the war context, ensuring participants' rights and safety is of great importance, and researchers are under significant personal and professional pressure. The topics covered in the survey included: awareness and adherence to ethical principles in research; Institutional support and availability of resources for ethical decision-making; frequency and types of ethical dilemmas encountered in educational research;

informed consent and data confidentiality practices; integration of BERA *Ethical guidelines for educational research* into Ukrainian research practices. In the survey responses, we found data that might point to some issues based on contradictions and inconsistencies that require delving deeper into the issues. As a result, we identified some areas that prompted focuses for questions for the in-depth interviews.

<i>Local Practices</i>	<i>BERA Guidelines</i>
<i>There is insufficient awareness of current data protection regulations: 68.33% claim they apply strong data protection measures, yet 60.83% are unfamiliar with relevant laws.</i>	<i>Any changes to the degree of anonymity afforded to participants should be considered in the light of potential harm that may be caused by doing so and, in particular, the rights to confidentiality of other individual participants or institutions (BERA Guidelines, 2018, p. 22)</i>

Table 19.2 Contradictions between local practices and BERA Guidelines – issue 2

Source: Authors.

The respondents' awareness of the importance of conducting ethical research is evident in their statements:

Ethical research is research that does not harm anyone and that does not violate any norms (Expert 1);

I consider it [research ethics] fundamental because I work with people and write about people (Expert 4).

However, the phrasing also demonstrates a somewhat general or intuitive interpretation of ethics, rather than referencing specific frameworks or formal guidelines like the BERA standards.

When the questions went deeper into specific areas, such as awareness of current data protection regulations some researchers admitted practical challenges of navigating legal frameworks and struggled to demonstrate familiarity with the relevant laws. For example, one respondent noted: *“These issues are agreed upon with the research supervisor”* (Expert 4), showing that decisions on data protection are not always based on personal knowledge but rather depend on the supervisor’s input. Another shared: *“...in communication with the scientific supervisor, such a check is constantly passed...”* (Expert 5), indicating that compliance is often ensured through interactions with supervisors, rather than through independent understanding of legal or institutional frameworks. These responses demonstrate a reliance on hierarchical support rather than on personal knowledge or formal institutional mechanisms.

The experts who work for the National Agency for HE Quality Assurance and/or for different commissions dealing with academic integrity issues also focused on the absence of a national legal framework for research ethic. A national framework spelled out in the national legislature for research ethics seems to be an expectation by the participants, perhaps because of the centralised HE governing system in Ukraine inherited from the Soviet times (Kushnir, 2021; Huisman, 2023; Oleksiyenko, 2023). The current situation with producing a national framework in the form of legislature in the field of education can be illustrated by the following quotations:

The work on Academic Integrity Law started in 2020... now four years have passed; it has only reached the first stage of the procedural process.

The committee recommended its adoption as a basis for the first reading (Expert 1).

There is a ministerial document ... all university documents were created based on it... (Expert 2).

The experts admit that although there is no national law on governing research ethics in the area of education in Ukraine, each university has a set of regulations of different kinds that predominantly deal with problems caused by violating academic integrity rules. And the brightest examples of it are the cases when the highest Ukrainian educational officials had to refuse from their doctorate after plagiarism had been detected in their research work (NGL Media, 2024).

This reflects a challenge in aligning individual research practices with international standards like BERA, where ethical responsibilities are expected to be understood and autonomously implemented by all researchers. Furthermore, this situation can be traced back to the Soviet legacy with top-down governance and reliance on authority for guidance. This path-dependency mindset hinders the development of a culture of ethical research autonomy, where researchers engage with ethical standards independently thus complicating efforts to foster a culture of ethical awareness within the Ukrainian HE system.

Local Practices	BERA Guidelines
<i>Neither researchers nor institutions perceive researchers' wellbeing as a core ethical responsibility.</i>	<i>Safeguarding the physical and psychological wellbeing of researchers is part of the ethical responsibility of employing institutions and sponsors, as well as of researchers themselves. (BERA, 2018, p. 35).</i>

Table 19.3 Contradictions between local practices and BERA Guidelines – issue 3

Source: Authors

This lack of recognition further results in the fact that safeguarding mental and emotional health of researchers is not integrated into the broader ethical framework guiding research practices. Consequently, only 52 % of the respondents agreed that there is minimal institutional support or structured initiatives to address the pressures and challenges that researchers face, such as ethical dilemmas, emotional strain, or burnout. This gap contrasts with the emphasis on researcher wellbeing outlined in the BERA Guidelines, thus drawing attention to institutional oversight in prioritizing the holistic care of individuals engaged in academic work.

The above findings about challenges and gaps in research ethics practices in Ukrainian universities cannot be separated from the discussion of the path-dependency (Cairney, 2011) in the wider context in which Ukrainian HE works. This is because both are still influenced by the path-dependency linked to the Soviet past (Kushnir, 2021). Expecting a national framework for research ethics is, arguably, rooted in the legacy of top-down policy-making (Huisman, 2023; Oleksiyenko, 2023), and the absence of which equated to the absence of expected censorship (Malle, 2009) gave way to such practices as not obtaining a favourable ethics opinion for research in many cases discussed by the interviewees.

An important milestone in advancing ethics foundations has been the translation into Ukrainian and adoption of the 2018 edition of the *Ethical guidelines for educational research* from BERA in 2023 (BERA, 2018; UERA, 2023). However, a more comprehensive explanation and dissemination is needed. The translated guidelines have not featured in the responses as the go-to framework, perhaps because it has not come from the 'top' - the government. Additionally, as it turned out, the barrier to understanding, and, consequently, accepting and putting into practice, is not in the language, but in the approach. The ideas

above demonstrate the conceptual differences between the Ukrainian so-called ‘what should NOT be done approach’ and the UK ‘what should be done’, between the Ukrainian ‘how to threaten researchers’ strategy’ and the UK strategy of ‘how to care for researchers and research participants’. While acknowledging the general understanding of academic ethics in Ukraine as primarily focusing on plagiarism, we should highlight the importance of broadening this understanding to include a wider range of ethical considerations with the focus on responsibilities to participants, sponsors, clients, stakeholders, and researchers.

1. Recommendations and Future Directions

Given that the translated BERA guidelines are currently the only framework for education researchers in Ukraine, its review and further adaptation to the Ukrainian context, perhaps also considering the updates from the 5th edition of BERA guidelines (BERA 2024), may be helpful. Following this, UERA could continue its research ethics awareness raising work through liaising with the senior leadership teams from Ukrainian HEIs and organising train-the-trainer events which would equip individuals within each HEI to spread the knowledge about the framework and build on it. Not taking the route of liaising with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine to exercise its top-down implementation would, arguably, be a ‘window of opportunity’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006: 670) to make a step-in response to Shchepetylnykova and Oleksiyenko’s (2024: 1) call for the ‘de-Sovietization in higher education and research’ in Ukraine.

2. Conclusions

Existing scholarship on research ethics in Ukraine is scarce and fragmented, focusing predominantly on the lack of research integrity in the work of students and academics (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2014; Fimyar et al, 2019; Knysh et al, 2020; Shykhnenko and Sbruieva, 2022) and issues in bioethics (Pustovit, 2006; Basarab and Anderson, 2022; Sulaieva et al, 2023). This chapter has made a contribution to this literature by exploring a new niche - how members of the Ukrainian HE community pursue ethical research in the area of education. The chapter has demonstrated that research ethics has become a quest for the members of the Ukrainian HE community. This quest has been complicated by the legacies of the past and the current war context, it has also emerged as a symbolic tool for the members of the Ukrainian HE community to pursue their work, while seeking the alignment of their research practice with international practices abroad, such as those following BERA *Ethical guidelines for educational research*.

The analysis in this chapter has been informed by the path-dependency approach and the analysis of a survey of and semi-structured interviews with members of the Ukrainian HE community. In doing so, this chapter has problematised research practice in Ukraine and proposed solutions to the persisting issues, primarily through developing further the current working version of the translated BERA *Ethical guidelines for educational research* by adapting them to the Ukrainian context and furthering their application.

Reflective Questions

1. How can and should we advance our ethical considerations in doing research in the area of education in war-torn settings?

2. How can we ensure positive practical impact generation by such research for the communities impacted by wars, so this research goes beyond the production of scholarly publications and building their authors' careers?

These questions are inspired by Howlett and Lazarenko's (2023: 722) powerful claim informed by their reflections on how scholars have handled the war in Ukraine, 'We conclude that the production of knowledge about the war requires an elevation of ethics above research outputs to protect our participants, ourselves, and the larger communities affected by the conflict. At its core, this paper thus underscores that ethical knowledge production sometimes requires scholars to remain silent'.

Further Reading

1. Howlett, M. and Lazarenko, V., 2023. How and when should we (not) speak?: Ethical knowledge production about the Russia–Ukraine war. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26(4), pp.722-732.
2. Malejacq, R. and Mukhopadhyay, D., 2016. The 'tribal politics' of field research: A reflection on power and partiality in 21st-century warzones. *Perspectives on Politics*, 14(4), pp.1011-1028.
3. Olson, R.E., 2023. Emotions in human research ethics guidelines: Beyond risk, harm and pathology. *Qualitative Research*, 23(3), pp.526-544.

Data access

The dataset with the English version of the interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the current study, is available in the Research Data Archive of Nottingham Trent University, at [TBC](#).

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