

Child protection in research undertaken by UK universities

In a review of the literature on child protection in research we showed that there is variation in the way researchers deal with protecting children who participate in research. We also found some concerning practices where researchers were not vetted, and some even deliberately avoided reporting child abuse.

In this follow on study we wanted to understand what UK universities are doing to ensure the research they undertake is safe for children. We requested the child protection standard operating procedures from 83 of the highest research ranked UK universities. The procedure documents were included in our study if they applied across the university, rather than to a specific unit or faculty, and if they gave more detail than just stating the implementation of the UK government's disclosure and barring service.

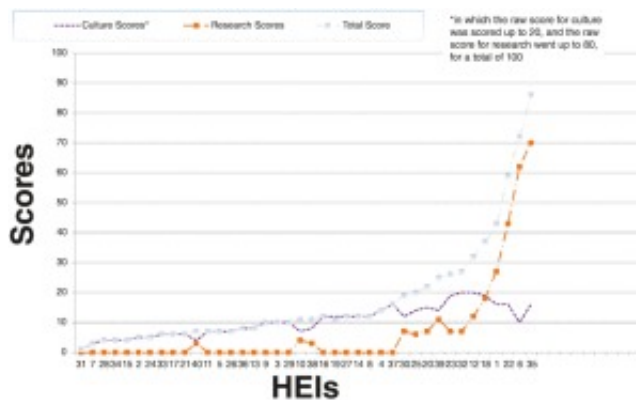


Fig. 1. Child protection standard operating procedures scores for UK universities (from Randall et al 2015)

There was no quality measure available to us to score the university procedures so we had to devise one for this study, which drew on our previous work and our extensive experience in the field. Our scoring had two weighted elements. Firstly, questions that rated the general culture of safeguarding children at the university. This included setting out the legal framework and general training on safeguarding as well as having a disclosure and barring scheme in place. Secondly, we scored the research practice. In this measure we included training in protecting children in research and whether the procedure set out what action was to be taken if abuse were disclosed. The various factors in the two elements, culture and research, were then combined to give a score out of 100.

Only 40 universities provided a procedure of these only 3 scored above 50 on our measure, the mean score was 17.4. With 23 universities not stating what their disclosure and barring practices

were and only eight universities stating they had training in child protection. Very few procedures mention research and only six mention children, with just two procedures fully meeting the criteria we set. Figure 1 below sets out the raw scores of universities.

Some caution is urged, we just looked at the standard operating procedures universities set out to protect children participating in research. It may be that researchers use their experience in working with children and informal networks to identify and report abuse of children uncovered during research. However, in the documents designed to help researchers protect children in research there is very little evidence that a culture to protect children participating in research exists.

It seems that the very children who are helping us to advance our understanding of children and their health and social care cannot rely on well-established procedures to protect them as they participate in research. They may well be cared for by experience researchers, experienced in working with children, their carers and children's services, but equally they may be participating in research with staff who have little, or no training and who have no guidance on their roles and responsibilities in child protection as a researcher.

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Publication

[An analysis of child protection 'standard operating procedures for research' in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom.](#)

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