

# **Research Summary: Investigating International Student Perspectives on the Ethics of Teaching and Learning Research**

## **Research Questions & Study Rationale:**

As the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has developed into a rigorous field of inquiry, it continues to push for faculty to consider ethical best practices in SoTL. However, student perspectives on these questions and approaches have been relatively absent. As students are critical stakeholders and collaborators in the teaching and learning enterprise, this absence is notable. To address this gap in the literature, this study investigates undergraduate student perspectives on the ethics of SoTL work and seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive of ethical implications in the conduct of SoTL projects (in particular, those that assess pedagogical strategies in the classroom)?
2. How do these perceptions vary across differing institutional contexts?

## **Methodology:**

At McMaster, data were gathered through focus groups of first year university students (8 participants). First year university students from four other institutions (Ohio Wesleyan; Elon University; Trinity College Texas, University of Queensland) also participated in the study. Students were asked to respond to five ethical scenarios, and were also given the option of completing a demographic form. Following data collection, focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis, and analyzed using comparative thematic analysis.

## **Key Findings:**

The results gathered at McMaster University speak interestingly to students' perspectives on particular ethical scenarios. When taken as a set, they also suggest particular issues of importance to student participants such as the tension between the professor's research and the students' goals, and the issue of consent.

## **Competing Goals:**

Students demonstrated consideration for the research process and its merits. When asked if it was ethical for a professor to continue with an experiment that improved one section of a course's grades but not another other section's, for example, students engaged in a critical discussion regarding the tension between their own grades and the research process, and brainstormed ways to allow the research to proceed with minimal harm to their grades.

**Consent:**

Consent was another recurring theme that arose in response to several of the scenarios. Students at McMaster unanimously expressed that they should be asked for permission to have their work used in publications and presentations, and that this work should be reported anonymously. One focus group concluded that instructors should ask for a blanket statement of consent before the class has begun, and then follow up with each student explicitly again, asking if the instructor could use a specific aspect of their work for a specific project.

**Next Steps and More Information:**

The research team at McMaster will continue to work with the four other research teams at Ohio Wesleyan University, Elon University, Trinity College and the University of Queensland to analyze data across institutions and prepare a manuscript for publication. An abstract to present a panel discussion of these findings has also been submitted to the 2017 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), which will take place in October.