

# #6 Researching Internationally

## Practising ethics guides to built environment research

Emmanuel Osuteye

### When planning

1. Why have I chosen to work internationally or abroad?
2. Where exactly is my chosen field and what do I know about it?
3. Who will I work with and when does collaboration begin?

### When conducting

4. How do I ensure maximising mutual benefits and value for all research partners?
5. What are the shared roles and responsibilities needed for the research?
6. How do I navigate and gain a deeper understanding of the field?
7. How do I ensure compliance to institutional ethical requirements whilst in the field?
8. How will I deal with the periods of remoteness, and remote working?

### When producing & communicating

9. What are the range of outputs planned and who is the audience?
10. Will I inadvertently cause harm?
11. Are team outputs representative of collective effort?
12. How have I sought and used feedback prior to dissemination?

## Practising Ethics: Guides

These guides, curated by the [Bartlett's Ethics Commission](#) in collaboration with [KNOW \(Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality\)](#), and edited by Jane Rendell, (Director of the Bartlett Ethics Commission 2015-20), offer insights by experienced researchers into how to negotiate the ethical dilemmas that can arise during a research project. The aim is to help you practise built environment research ethically. David Roberts (Bartlett Ethics Fellow 2015-20) devised the format and structure of these guides to follow the ethical issues that arise during the development of a research process – from planning, to conducting, to communicating and producing outcomes – and Ariana Markowitz wrote some of the introductory text that runs across all guides. The guides focus on the different kinds of ethical issues you might encounter as a result of using specific processes or methods, and pay attention to the particular contexts and ways in which these methods are practised. Because when practising research, methods and context inform one another, we consider this series of guides as embedded in a mode of applied ethics called **situated** or **relational ethics**. Where you see words that are highlighted, they refer back to our definitions of key **ethical** principles and to terms contained in institutional protocols as found on [Practising Ethics](#).

1. *Making Images* (David Roberts)
2. *Asking Questions* (Yael Padan)
3. *Co-producing Knowledge* (Yael Padan)
4. *Staging Research* (David Roberts)
5. *Researching, Risk, and Wellbeing* (Ariana Markowitz)
6. *Researching Internationally* (Emmanuel Osuteye)

### Acknowledgements

The Bartlett Ethics Commission worked alongside the Bartlett Ethics Working Group from 2015-8, and so benefitted greatly from the input of Martin Austwick, Claire Colomb, Helen Dougal, Helen Fisher, Efrosyni Konstaninou, Rowena Lamb, James O'Leary, Niamh Murtagh, Hedley Smyth, and Steve Ridge, but in particular Jens Kandt, Mike Raco, Michelle Shipworth, and Michael Walls. The project was supported educationally and economically by the Bartlett Faculty, and specifically its former Dean, Alan Penn.

## Guide #6 Researching Internationally by Emmanuel Osuteye

*'Field trips, which are increasingly prevalent in built environment education, offer [an] opportunity for learning to take place. They can provide a powerful learning moment for [researchers], enabling the critical and active application of theory and knowledge acquired in the classroom to real-life environments and processes. But they can also take on an unpalatable and extractive dimension. And when the trips involve the crossing of global north and global south, the risk of development tourism becomes particularly acute.'*

Caren Levy and Barbara Lipietz, 'Strategic urban partnerships for change,' *Urban Pamphleteer*, 5 (2015), 38.

### About this guide: why and how built environment researchers work internationally

Built environment research is as much about people as it is about places: the people who use and inhabit the places you are researching, the people who engage with those places emotionally or spiritually even if they are not physically present, the people who build them, and the people who own or manage them. In addition, you the researcher are necessarily a key actor: you devise the research approach, become a participant in the place where you gather data, and you determine how to interpret that data and what to do with it. Because people are unpredictable, research can also be unpredictable, and as a researcher you are likely to encounter unexpected **situations** that require you to think on your feet whilst navigating high expectations with limited time. Even the best-laid plans often go awry when they come into contact with reality and real people and you will need systems in place to support you throughout that process, minimising **harm** to those you are researching and participating with, as well as yourself. **Ethics** is about what kind of lives we should lead, what actions are right and wrong, what qualities of character we should develop and what **responsibilities** we have for each other and our ecosystem. To conduct research **ethically** it is important to consider the **benefits, risks** and **harms** to all connected with and affected by it.

## How to define researching internationally

For the purpose of this guide, working internationally refers to conducting research or research activities in a location other than where you are normally-based, professionally affiliated or funded. In this regard, even when a non-British UCL researcher is conducting research in their country of origin, or any other context that is familiar or linked to their ancestry, this would still be regarded as working internationally, as it is 'international' in terms of their place of employment. The term is used in the broad-sense and somewhat confusingly alongside the term 'abroad' which specifically refers to a researcher working somewhere other than a place where they were born or raised. In this guide, the phrase 'researching internationally' is used rather than working abroad, and aims to raise critical **reflections** on **ethical** issues that arise in the process of producing terminology of this kind.

## The ethics of researching internationally

Researching internationally presents peculiar kinds of **ethical** issues and concerns that range from the risks of conducting field work in what can be an unfamiliar terrain to the need for a nuanced understanding of the culture, politics and **relationships** encountered in the chosen site of research. Although these guidelines present you with a simplified and somewhat linear approach to working internationally across three distinct moments of research, it is in practise a very fluid and iterative experience. Depending on the nature, scale and length of your research, the collaborations and international work will demand multiple field trips and engagements. In that regard, your work will be punctuated by several opportunities, moments and iterations of preparation, execution and documentation of findings. It will be good practice to consider this guide and its specific guidelines afresh each time.

## How to use this guide

These guides to *Practising Ethics* define appropriate ways to engage **ethically** in research. *Researching Internationally* aims to assist you in recognising the **ethical** dilemmas which arise from international research and to address and **reflect** on these with confidence. It is designed to be a point of reference at any stage of your research – from planning your project, to conducting activities in the field, to communicating what you have learned through the production of particular research outputs.

*Researching Internationally* contains **principles, questions, guidelines** and **resources**. The **principles** in the next section inform best practice. These are not just regulatory hurdles for you to jump through at the beginning stages of your research but concepts that ground **ethical** inquiry throughout. They help you develop and refine an approach that it is **sensitive** to the physical and emotional challenges that may arise in the research process, enabling you to be a more effective researcher. The series of guiding **questions** act as prompts for you to **reflect** on the potential **ethical** considerations which emerge throughout a project, before, during, and after you conduct your research. The **guidelines** expand on the questions, illuminate the different **ethical** concerns they raise, and recommend actions which embody these principles. The **resources** section provides additional information.

These guides are not exhaustive and cannot address all the possible **situations** you will face, particularly for research on **sensitive** topics or in places experiencing violence or instability. But learning from the experiences of others, will help you gain the ability to **reflect** on what you encounter, and to make informed judgements about the best way to practise your research **ethically**. Insightful and imaginative research encompasses a range of sites, cultural contexts, and people and there will always be a need for flexibility and **care**.

## Questions

### When planning: *Harnessing the value of researching internationally*

1. Why have I chosen to work internationally or abroad?
2. Where exactly is my chosen field and what do I know about it?
3. Who will I work with and when does collaboration begin?

### When conducting: *Maintaining partnerships and navigating fieldwork*

4. How do I ensure maximising mutual benefits and value for all research partners?
5. What are the shared roles and responsibilities needed for the research?
6. How do I navigate and gain a deeper understanding of the field?
7. How do I ensure compliance to institutional ethical requirements whilst in the field?
8. How will I deal with the periods of remoteness, and remote working?

### When producing and communicating: *Reflecting the field*

9. What are the range of outputs planned and who is the audience?
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## Principles

The people, places and research methods you use and the contexts in which they are practised will each raise their own **ethical** considerations related to a common set of principles that encourage **ethical** conduct and promote interaction based on good faith and mutual **respect**.

**Benefit not harm:** Your research should have a **benefit** to society and any **risks** involved to participants must be minimized, balanced against the potential **benefit** to the overall community, and clearly explained to participants before they give their **consent**.

**Informed consent:** You need to inform your participants about the study and what is being asked of them, including any potential **risks** or **benefits**, in order for them to make an informed and voluntary decision about whether or not to participate in the research.

**Confidentiality:** You need to inform participants of the extent to which **confidentiality** can be assured and **respect** their right to remain **anonymous** in dissemination and display.

## Guideline 1 When planning research: *Harnessing the value of researching internationally*

Researching internationally offers a valuable opportunity to deepen your knowledge and understanding of ideas, concepts and events as they are applicable in other parts of the world. Working this way is increasingly viewed as an opportunity to gain in-depth experience and skills, and allows you to appreciate and integrate academic knowledge in a very practical manner. Doing research internationally is also important in the development and circulation of ideas and innovative approaches that are relevant for shared 'global' challenges. In many respects working internationally also plays a vital role in career development, raising the profile, relevance and impact of research.

Despite the value of working internationally it is essential to **reflect** and consider why you have chosen to work internationally in the first place. Taking time to **reflect** on this is highly important in order to avoid the potential risks of inadvertently reproducing colonial, raced or gendered power relations in your international work. This is a subtle but important activity to consider how researching internationally, regardless of the subject discipline, is actually more than just 'fieldwork' or even a 'research activity'. And definitely much more than a response to a funding call. It is an engagement with people's culture, politics, livelihoods, diverse challenges and varied lived experiences. By thinking this way a sense of humility is evoked at the opportunity to work internationally. To research internationally or abroad, in a place that is not familiar to you, that is perhaps not your place of birth, or the location of the institution or organisation that funds your work, is a privilege that should be valued, **respected** and not taken for granted irrespective of (and sometimes because of) previous experiences.

Think clearly about where you have chosen to work, and why this particular country and locality are fit for your research. Doing some background reading and study often comes with the different stages of preparation, but especially at the outset. This exercise, if done systematically, is particularly useful for confronting any biases, assumptions, stereotypes and expectations that have fed into the research design (both purposively and unconsciously). Again, as a **reflexive** exercise, it exposes the gaps and limits of your knowledge and pushes the

boundaries of the sources of preparatory material that can be consulted (ranging from published academic literature to include blogs, project websites and even social media pages of relevant research organisations). On a practical note, it is helpful to map recent research activities/projects that have been conducted in your chosen site, which in turn can be useful for identifying potential partners/collaborators, and also for taking into account the likelihood of increasing research burden/fatigue in areas that receive a lot of research activity. This has become a growing concern in many locations in low and middle-income countries (LMICs).

International collaborations are seen to be fundamental to the success of researching internationally. How to select partners, and determining when the collaboration will actually begin, are very important steps to consider. Where possible, the involvement of partners in the preparatory phases of the work can yield rich insights, especially during proposal writing if applicable. However, the nature and demands on time need to be tactfully considered and streamlined, as many potential partners in LMICs for instance, have limited staffing and resources. Also in the case of funded projects, a careful scrutiny of the limitations of the use of funds is a vital consideration, as this helps you to ascertain and clarify important needs of partners or field activities that cannot be covered by the funder, and in that respect, gives you an opportunity to explore supplementary or 'top up' funds (if possible) that will allow for an overall successful research engagement. Although it is important to be strategic with time and resources when establishing partnerships, be careful not to reinforce or introduce hierarchies in any negotiation or to coerce, or push partners to make unfair compromises in order to take up the opportunity to work together.

Both an extensive background study of your selected field and the early engagement of partners (if possible) during your preparation, are also instructive for generating information that helps you to properly complete any procedural **ethical** requirements (including risk assessments) of your institution. In some instances, partner organisations may have their own **ethical** processes that may have a bearing on your collection,

processing and use of data, and will feed into writing your own institution's **ethics** application. This allows a comparison of **ethical** concerns to be mapped, and a development of an understanding of **ethics** not just as a set of universals, but universals that are culturally specific and **situated** in particular locations, something that is often overlooked but should be considered in the interest of best **ethical** practice.

## **Guideline 2** When conducting research: *Maintaining partnerships and navigating fieldwork*

The value of working internationally with partners is best seen as a product of relationship-building. Irrespective of the total length of engagement, partners can do more than 'gatekeeping' and playing facilitation functions as you conduct the research. Harnessing this value requires an intentional building of 'partnerships with equivalence'; which implies a **recognition** of the diverse skills, knowledges and values that partners have and can directly contribute to the research. It also means that such relationships with partners are formed through **accountability**, mutual **respect**, **transparency** and **trust** and a commitment to learn together and co-produce knowledge. Conceiving partnership as a relationship of this kind, breaks down the limitations of the transactional nature of interactions that can exist between researchers and international partners, and how their utility and roles may not be confined to only specific components, periods, or research activities that you could prescribe in the research design (notably data collection). Instead, partnerships with equivalence mean that the roles and **responsibilities** that underpin the research, are collectively negotiated and agreed. Although this may lead to some degree of specialisation of tasks, the specialisation should not lead to isolation or the subordination of tasks. For instance, whilst partners may end up doing the bulk of field data collection, you can use the negotiations on roles and responsibilities, to explore what inputs and support you could provide, and see that as a form of remote working! Similarly, invite partners to make inputs or help shape the roles and activities that you will lead.

Be willing to seek and take on board the priorities and concerns of partners, revisiting the assumptions and expectations that were built into the planning stages of the research. For instance, for externally funded research, the short turnaround time of submissions which is commonplace, may mean that a much more meaningful, open and **honest** conversation with partners about the budgets, key concepts, research limitations and other concerns is required when the research finally commences.

Also, bear in mind the power imbalances that may inadvertently have been created or re-enforced through your international work with partners. For instance, coming from an institution in the Global North, being a fund holder, an established/well-published academic, a particular gender or race, or even having a PhD! etc., are scenarios of privilege that may introduce a sense of superiority in some contexts. And although you may not be able to predict all the possible scenarios, re-emphasising and working towards equivalence, equal importance, and **recognition** of the contribution of all partners from the start of the relationship is a useful practice. Pay attention to and welcome the contribution of early career partners, and consider dropping the operational/everyday use or references to functional titles e.g. 'principal' investigator, project 'lead' etc., to flatten the curve of hierarchies in team working.

Working internationally with partners in the manner described above, allows you to deepen your knowledge of the field, and bridge your knowledge gaps. During moments of collective field work, you should take **care** when mediating the cultural and political nuances of navigation in the field or direct engagements with communities. It is good to rely on the wisdom and experience of your partners in **situations** that could raise **ethical** concerns, even if you have previous working experience in a similar context/country or region. The local knowledge of partners is invaluable in this regard. For instance, giving out personal details, tips/cash, cracking insensitive jokes (remember that sarcasm is not universal!) etc., or other **situations** that could raise undue or unfair expectations for research participants. In many LMIC contexts, action research involving international researchers may be easily conflated by community residents as international NGO activity. Furthermore it is important to draw on the knowledge of local partners in the planning and selection of activities aimed at capacity building or sharing. It is common to invite known 'experts' in this endeavour, but bear in mind that 'expertise' is contextual, and partners can help navigate who can be useful for the stated objectives of capacity building. Be willing to consult or invite local/in-country experts to counter or balance the dominance of foreign-based experts in capacity building spaces.

If you are working in a setting that requires the use of a foreign language, do plan ample time for the translation of material, and where possible involve your partners in this exercise instead of outsourcing it through a contracted service. The translation exercise that preserves the contextually relevant meanings of the key concepts and 'ethos' of the research takes more than a linguistic endeavour, and can be a very rewarding collective exercise with partners, and selected participants where possible. It is a vital moment of knowledge co-production.

The mediation of partners is also valuable in assessing and mitigating risk when conducting the research. The risks you may have outlined on paper may manifest very differently from what you anticipate or are used to. For instance, ascertaining the concept of the acceptable standards of safety and **wellbeing**, or how and where to get support in the unfortunate episodes of health and safety threats or crises, should be discussed with partners and periodically reviewed. Similarly, your effective compliance with other aspects of institutional and procedural **ethics** during the course of your research is hinged on the sustained relationship with partners.

## Guideline 3 When producing & communicating research outputs: *Reflecting the field*

Discussing the range and types of research outputs that will be developed from the research is a very important exercise to do with partners right from the beginning. Beyond the usual academic publications, it is good to also consider other kinds of outputs that are useful for partners (especially partners from non-academic organisations) and think about who is the intended audience of every planned output.

Actively involve your partners in defining and interpreting findings from the research, irrespective of the methods of data collection employed. Bear in mind that although the production of outputs may be deferred to latter parts of the research, they may be the result of a series of findings that could emerge right from the beginning and so identifying and correctly interpreting them should ideally be a part of the negotiated relationship with partners. The risk with not being intentional about this, may result in you assuming the sole role of writing up findings, or in some cases partners deferring it to you, especially when time pressures, and other constraints of travel or budgets in later stages could make the research partnership more remote.

The nuances of political and cultural appropriateness encountered in fieldwork, are equally relevant when producing and communicating research outputs, to ensure that the work does **not cause harm** and will be **beneficial**. Collectively work through the language that is used to frame findings in a manner that is not derogatory, and does not discriminate, exaggerate or introduces bias. This is a very important consideration that you can **reflect** upon with partners and any other stakeholders directly engaged in the research, inviting feedback where possible. Confirm consent to cite and use references to stakeholders that are identifiable from your outputs, and check that **confidentiality** is maintained for respondents and data sources that should not be identified. It also means that in some instances, **anonymisation** as a good practice may not be enough, and will require findings to be presented in forms that mitigate against risks of harm. For instance, a survey and mapping of land tenure statuses of informal settlements as part of a large urban study will yield rich insights, however detailed visualisations of findings could put particular households at risk of eviction, despite **anonymisation** of respondents. Such

data could be presented at the settlement level with broad descriptive statistics instead of the disaggregated visualisation in public outputs.

In the specific case of producing publications, you should discuss a plan of authorship with partners as early as possible. Although there are no fixed conventions governing this, the idea is to be fair in according formal credit and **recognition** of research efforts in each output, bearing in mind how important academic authorship is for career progression. In the publication plan, also consider giving lead roles to partners, and early career partners where there is the opportunity to do so. It is also very useful to explicitly acknowledge non-authors and stakeholders who have participated in certain substantive aspects of the research project. Be open and **transparent** with partners about any outputs that you intend to do alone in addition to the team outputs that have been agreed, as well as any plans to re-use the data in the future.

In a very broad sense, also think about other **benefits** of the collaboration and spaces where capacities could be shared and built into the process of conducting the research and generating outputs. These could include sharing reading lists and difficult to access literature, sharing conference calls, funded training events etc.

## Resources

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## **Bio**

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