

The Market Research Society submission in response to the Research Councils UK consultation on the Code of Conduct and Policy on Governance of Good Research Conduct

1. About The Market Research Society

With members in more than 70 countries, The Market Research Society (MRS) is the world's largest association serving all those with professional equity in provision or use of market, social and opinion research, and in business intelligence, market analysis, customer insight and consultancy.

MRS has a diverse membership of individuals at all levels of experience and seniority within agencies, consultancies, support services, client-side organisations, the public sector and the academic community.

It also serves MRS Company Partners – agencies, suppliers of support services, buyers and end-users – of all types and scale who are committed throughout their organisations to supporting the core MRS values of professionalism, research excellence and business effectiveness.

In consultation with its individual members and Company Partners, MRS supports best practice by setting and enforcing industry standards. The commitment to uphold the MRS Code of Conduct is supported by the Codeline service and a wide range of specialist guidelines.

MRS contributes significantly to the enhancement of skills and knowledge by offering various qualifications and membership grades, as well as training and professional development resources.

2. Introduction

MRS welcomes the possibility offered by Research Councils UK (RCUK) to respond to the consultation on the proposed RCUK Code of Conduct and Policy on Governance of Good Research Conduct.

MRS notes the key issues set out in section 1.3 of the consultation response document and has chosen to address in particular the issues in regard to section 3, some in section 4, plus some general observations on the overall Code design.

MRS confirms that the contents of this paper are not confidential and can be attributed to MRS.

3. Response to Consultation

General comments

MRS notes that RCUK proposes that this code should be universally applicable to all researchers (paragraph 3.4). There are a number of self-regulatory codes of conduct and practice currently in operation for researchers. The MRS Code of Conduct is the most widely recognised and adhered to. Furthermore, the MRS Code of Conduct is the only research code which is supported by a compliance framework which covers both individual researchers and research organisations.

The MRS Code of Conduct, last revised in 2005, has been in existence since 1954. MRS currently investigates about 70 cases a year applying the MRS Code of Conduct using two disciplinary procedures, one for MRS members and one for MRS Company Partners. All breaches of the MRS Code of Conduct are published on the MRS website and within MRS publications.

Any new RCUK code must make reference to and share similar principles to those Codes already in operation, e.g. the MRS Code of Conduct.

Whilst MRS welcomes in principle the proposal to strengthen research standards and increase consistency and transparency across the RCUK, MRS has concerns about the scope and coverage of the RCUK Code of Conduct and Governance Policy. The proposed code and standards are disproportionately focussed on issues to do with academic reputation. There is not enough emphasis on protecting respondents and society from harm, further there is limited reference to relevant legal requirements (e.g. the Data Protection Act 1998 which covers data handling and data security).

The document needs to be structured in a format which makes it easy for researchers to understand their obligations. There are a number of structural changes that MRS would recommend to the proposed code:

- ❖ A section detailing who the code applies to, currently it is not clear. Is it just universities?
- ❖ A clear statement about the purpose of the code. Is it to improve standards? Define best practice? Regulate research standards? If so, which types of research?

- ❖ A set of definitions e.g. research, data, participant, etc. The inclusion of this information will make the scope of the Code clearer.
- ❖ A section detailing the principles which underpin the code.
- ❖ If the intention is to regulate the code, a section will need to be added which details what the compliance arrangements are and any sanctions that would result from a breach.

Section 3: Specific comments

MRS recommends that RCUK should adopt a principles based approach, which is consistent and complementary with the MRS Code of Conduct. Moreover, the RCUK document should state and clearly identify those statements which are research principles, those that are rules and those that are guidelines as appropriate.

The RCUK code as proposed appears to be based on the three principles.

1. All research should be conducted to the highest levels of integrity, including appropriate research design and frameworks, to ensure that findings are robust and defensible. (3.1)
2. Research employers, sponsors and publishers must ensure that sound systems are in place to promote best practice (3.2)
3. All individual researchers should ensure that they are properly qualified to, and do, carry out research which meets these obligations (3.5)

The principles of the RCUK Code as currently set out are important to enlighten, guide and support researchers in their work. However if, as is proposed in Section 4, this Code will be used as a basis for formal disciplinary action it will be necessary to set out the extent to which researchers will be responsible for their actions under each of the principles. This means that the principles of the RCUK Code need to be accompanied by a robust set of rules against which conduct can be measured.

By way of example, the MRS Code of Conduct contains a number of rules that address a researcher's responsibility under these principles:

- A6 *Members must not make false claims about their skills and experience or those of their organisation.*

- A7 *Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that others do not breach or cause a breach of this Code.*
- A10 *Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that Respondents are not harmed or adversely affected as a result of participating in a research project.*
- B3 *Members must take reasonable steps to design research to the specification agreed with the Client.*
- B4 *Members must take reasonable steps to design research which meets the quality standards agreed with the Client.*
- B14 *Members must take reasonable steps to ensure all of the following:*
- *that questions are fit for purpose and Clients have been advised accordingly;*
 - *that the design and content of questionnaires are appropriate for the audience being researched;*
 - *that Respondents are able to answer the questions in a way that reflects the view they want to express;*
 - *that Respondents are not led towards a particular answer;*
 - *that answers are capable of being interpreted in an unambiguous way;*
 - *that personal data collected is relevant and not excessive.*
- B49 *Members must ensure that research conclusions disseminated by them are clearly and adequately supported by the data.*
- B51 *Members must ensure that their names, or those of their employer, are only used in connection with any research project as an assurance that the latter has been carried out in conformity with the Code if they are satisfied on reasonable grounds that the project has in all respects met the Code's requirements.*

B59 Members must take reasonable steps to check and where necessary amend any Client-prepared materials prior to publication to ensure that the published research results will not be incorrectly or misleadingly reported.

MRS recommends that the RCUK Code contains additional requirements similar to those found in the MRS Code of Conduct.

The information currently set out in paragraph 3.2 and 3.4 of the RCUK Code could also be rewritten to provide a set of rules or guidelines in regard to specified conduct or performance.

Section 4: Specific comments

In Section 4 the concept of a National Advisory Body is suggested. This idea is fine in theory but more clarity is needed about the remit of such a group and how it would work in practice. Clearly, there is no need for such a Body to regulate the practices of market, social or opinion research, as these activities are already sufficiently covered by the MRS Market Research Standards Board which has responsibility for the MRS Code of Conduct and its associated disciplinary procedures.

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