

# **PGCE Professional Enquiry Handbook**

## **Open University in Wales PGCE Partnership**

**This document is available in Welsh | Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg**

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# Introduction

This booklet contains guidance and materials to support PGCE students to plan their professional enquiry research study, which is a programme requirement for PGCE 3 (Year 2), Module EE(XP)806. It may also be useful for school staff supporting students with their professional enquiry.

Undertaking a professional enquiry will support students in their professional learning, and supports the Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) descriptor 'The teacher has an informed understanding of the contribution of research, including small scale action research, to the development of practice'.

The research studies undertaken by students will vary in focus.

The sample documents contained here can be adapted to accommodate individual student and school requirements.

## The Open University PGCE students' professional enquiry

A professional enquiry in education is a structured investigation into pedagogical practice, with the aim of finding out more about learning and teaching. Open University PGCE Year 2 (PGCE3) students are asked to design and undertake a small-scale professional enquiry which investigates a specific aspect of their own practice and considers the impact on pupils' learning. Students are also asked to consider how their enquiry focus relates to national education priorities. The enquiry focus should relate to students' chosen phase

(primary/secondary) and, for secondary students, will need to relate to their subject specialism. This is summarised in the table 1.

Table 1: Professional enquiry focus requirements

<b>Primary: research topic/focus must:</b>	<b>Secondary: research topic/focus must:</b>
Support a national education priority	Support a national education priority
Support understanding of pedagogy in the primary curriculum and consider the impact on pupil learning	Support understanding of your subject discipline pedagogy and consider the impact on pupil learning

The process of identifying and refining the professional enquiry question will be supported through university seminars, reading and module study, discussion with tutors and with school staff.

The professional enquiry is designed to support the student in learning about educational research and how data can be collected.

We anticipate that the student will identify an intervention/approach that they would like to try within their own pedagogical practice and will gather data to consider the impact of the approach on learning.

To gather data and consider impact of the approach, the student might:

- observe a teaching and learning situation,
- survey staff or learners using a questionnaire,
- analyse learner work,
- interview a learner or small group of learners.

The student must discuss their approach with their mentor and/or school co-ordinator. Initial discussions regarding the research link to Practice Learning Activity (PLA) 2 for PGCE3. Students are also asked to share their preliminary findings as part of Practice Learning Activity (PLA) 7.

### Examples of previous professional enquiry foci:

How effective is a seating plan in supporting behaviour for learning in a Year 9 ICT classroom?

How do Year 5 learners in mainstream Languages, Literacy and Communication lessons respond to the use of strategies to support Autistic Spectrum Condition learners?

Do mini whiteboards increase learner engagement in a Year 9 English language class?

Investigating the impact of cold calling on learners who are eligible for Free School Meals within a mainstream mathematics Key Stage 3 classroom.

Does the introduction of accountable independent reading support learners eligible for Free School Meals in a Year 8 class?

What is the impact of the introduction of 'Book Talk' on Year 4 learners' enjoyment of reading?

An investigation into how 'Drawing Club', a story-telling based approach, enhances motivation and mark marking among reception age learners.

In what ways does introducing the 'Connections Model' approach to teaching mathematics support learners in Year 3 in learning the multiplicative relationship?

Exploring the use of outdoor learning to promote learner engagement in Year 5 mathematics lessons.

Exploring the impact of peer tutoring on scientific numeracy in a Year 9 physics classroom.

How does weekly interaction with Year 6 learners impact the social learning of nursery learners during invitations to play?

*Figure 1: Examples of previous enquiry foci*

Further examples of professional enquiries undertaken previously by PGCE students can be found [here](#).

# Developing the professional enquiry

Students are asked to attend a meeting with their Curriculum Tutor and, where possible, the mentor or school co-ordinator to outline and discuss the professional enquiry approach. The figure below gives an overview of the professional enquiry process.

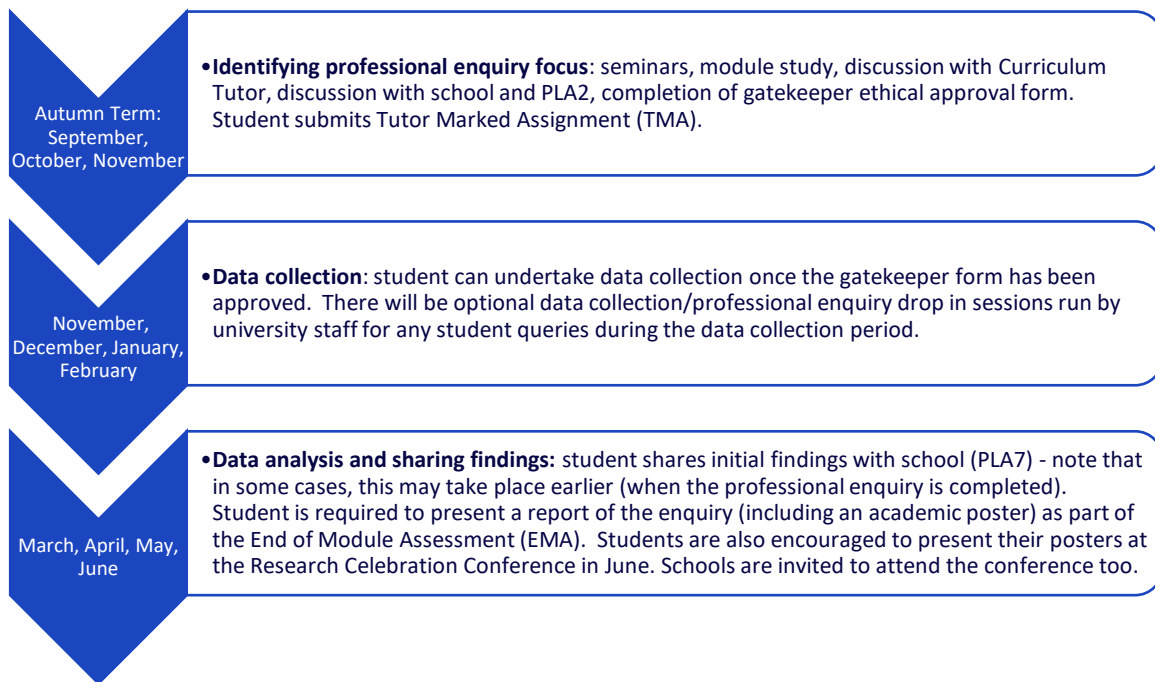


Figure 2: Overview of professional enquiry process

We hope the enquiry will be of value not only to the student, but also others in the setting.

## Ethical considerations

Students should follow ethical guidance for educational research provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024).

Any involvement in the research should be entirely voluntary and should not disrupt learning and teaching. Consent or, in the case of learners below 18,



assent should be obtained from all participants. Table 2 outlines some key ethical considerations, with an overview of recommendations in the context of the small-scale professional enquiry.

*Table 2: An overview of ethical considerations*

<b>BERA (2024) consideration</b>	<b>Recommended ethical practice</b>
Responsibility to participants	<p>Being transparent about selection of participants</p> <p>Respecting participants ongoing choice to be involved as part of data collection: offering voluntary informed assent (for participants under 18)/consent (for participants over 18), parental consent (for learners), and right to withdraw (for all participants)</p> <p>Respecting timing and location of data collection</p> <p>Respecting participants' confidentiality or anonymity</p> <p>Being transparent about small-scale enquiry and findings</p> <p>Storing data responsibly and securely</p>
Responsibility to stakeholders	<p>Gaining informed consent from school for professional enquiry and ethical processes to take place</p> <p>Ensuring confidentiality of school</p> <p>Following school processes and policies (e.g. data protection, ethics, safeguarding)</p> <p>Sharing findings with school</p>
Responsibility in relation to publication and dissemination	Ensuring findings are reported clearly, honestly and openly

At this level, the responsibility for the research being carried out ethically and responsibly sits with the school; this means the school is the gatekeeper for the professional enquiry. The student must work with their setting to ensure any research tasks are carried out in a manner which is acceptable to those responsible for staff and learners (including consultation of the school's safeguarding policy). It is the student's responsibility to gather data and ensure completion of their professional enquiry in line with the ethical practice agreed.

## Supporting the research in school

The PGCE mentor/school co-ordinator will oversee the research and will agree all research activities prior to the student undertaking their enquiry. This will include:

- a) providing permission for the student to access potential participants for research tasks,
- b) agreeing the details of the consent that is required, and
- c) monitoring the collection and storage of data, including signed consent forms, and agreeing the research tools, such as questionnaires/ interview questions.

Guidance is provided including sample information sheets and consent forms. However, if you already have processes in place in your setting to protect participants in research activities then these can be used. The information sheets and consent forms being used should be discussed by student and mentor, with approval recorded in the gatekeeper form. The gatekeeper form

should be shared with the Curriculum Tutor and appended to the student's professional enquiry proposal, which is a Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA).

Personal data will only be collected in the form of signatures on consent forms, and these will be stored securely and destroyed once the task has been completed.

Confidentiality/anonymity is assured – all data collected will be in the form of de-identified notes or anonymous responses. The data will be stored securely and destroyed once the enquiry has been completed.

All school or participant names should be removed from student work that is used for research or dissemination purposes.

## Data collection

As noted previously, we anticipate that the student will design a small-scale professional enquiry that involves students trying out a new approach in their pedagogical practice and exploring the impact on learning. Typically, data collection tools can be a combination of some of the approaches shown in table 3.

*Table 3: An overview of data collection approaches*

<b>Data collection approach</b>	<b>Type of data</b>	<b>Some considerations</b>
Observation	Usually qualitative, may be some	Will the observation be structured (e.g. looking for specific things on identified occasions using an observation

	quantitative data if some aspects are counted	<p>template) or unstructured (e.g. ad hoc notes as and when something happens)?</p> <p>Who will be observing, when and how?</p> <p>How often will the observations occur (e.g. set lessons/as and when/weekly etc.)?</p> <p>How will the observer ensure data is as reliable as possible (e.g. non-subjective)?</p> <p>Will there be any recording (e.g. audio/video recording) to support observation?</p>
Interview	Qualitative	<p>Will the interview/s be with individuals or a group?</p> <p>When and where will they take place?</p> <p>Will the interview/s be structured (set questions asked in the same way), semi-structured (specific questions with the opportunity for follow up) or open/led by participants?</p> <p>Will there be prompts/visuals to support learner responses (if relevant)?</p> <p>Will there be any audio/video recording to support recall of what has been said?</p>
Analysis of learner work	Usually qualitative, may be some quantitative data if some aspects are counted	<p>What will be analysed? Whose work?</p> <p>What will you be looking for in the analysis?</p> <p>How often will you consider learner work?</p> <p>How will you record the analysis of learner work?</p>

Survey/ questionnaire	Can be a mix of quantitative and qualitative data	Who will you survey? How will you survey and when will it take place?  If asking learners, how might you support learners in understanding the questions?  What sort of questions will you ask? How will you ensure the questions are clear and unambiguous?
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For considerations regarding potential benefits and limitations of these approaches see pp.7-8 of Cardiff Metropolitan University (2019).

## Sources of support

### Support from the Open University in Wales

The student's Curriculum Tutor will be supervising the professional enquiry.

Additionally, these people can be contacted if there are any queries:

Name	Contact	Role
Rachel Wallis	rachel.wallis@open.ac.uk	Chair of Year 2 Module
Alison Glover	alison.glover@open.ac.uk	Research Fellow, PGCE

The following sources will be useful guides for the professional enquiry

### Open access sources

The resources below are open access resources available for schools and students to support professional enquiry planning:

Undertaking professional enquiry: an introduction for lead enquirers, available at: [Microsoft Word – SG CONTENT Undertaking Professional Enquiry 10.19 \(002\)–2.docx](#)

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) 'How to' guides, available here: [Research in Schools Guides – NFER](#)

Introduction to research: A selection of videos and guides to support close to practice research, available [here](#)

## **Resources for Open University students**

The resources below are available via the Open University library.

Practical research methods in education: an early researcher's critical guide, available for students as an e-book in the OU library [Practical Research Methods in Education | An Early Researcher's Critic](#)

Doing Classroom Research: a Step-By-Step Guide for Student Teachers, available for students as an e-book in the OU library  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=369498>

Research methods in education, available for students as an e-book in the OU library  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=5103697>

# Gatekeeper/Ethical approval for small-scale professional enquiry

Name of student-teacher:

Name of gatekeeper (school co-ordinator/senior member of staff):

Name of school co-ordinator:

Name of mentor:

At this level, the responsibility for the research being carried out ethically and responsibly sits with the school. Students are provided with detailed guidance for the professional enquiry and the student-teacher must work with their setting to ensure any research tasks are carried out in a manner which is acceptable to those responsible for staff and learners (including consultation of the school's safeguarding policy). It is the student's responsibility to gather data and ensure completion of their professional enquiry.

Detail about the enquiry is provided below.

The gatekeeper is asked to sign to acknowledge this has been discussed with the student-teacher.

The student must email a copy of this completed form to Curriculum Tutor cc'ing gatekeeper, school co-ordinator and mentor and should also place a copy of the completed form in the Teaching Folder.

<b>Professional enquiry overview</b>	To be completed by student (bullet points/clear notes)
Area of focus: Note area of interest and how it relates to your own practice and a national priority	
Research question/s: Note what you are trying to find out	
Key literature related to focus (3-5 references – note that key journal articles should be available in your Teaching Folder)	
Professional enquiry methodology: What will you do in your practice, who are the participants and how will you collect data to inform your professional enquiry? Note: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions/intervention</li> </ul>	



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants (include age range/s and suggested number of participants)</li> <li>• Research tools (what approaches will you use to gather data)</li> <li>• Data types (e.g. quantitative/qualitative)</li> </ul>	
<p>Ethical considerations: how you are ensuring you follow <a href="#">BERA 2024</a> for your enquiry, e.g.:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection of participants</li> <li>• Assent and/or consent</li> <li>• Confidentiality and/or anonymity</li> <li>• Respecting participants – e.g. right to withdraw, location and timing of data collection etc.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Proposed Milestones (dates):</b> [A separate milestone table/ flowchart could also be shared]</p>	<p>In the sections below, add your own dates to support your professional enquiry planning. The dates in bold</p>

	are the assessment dates which cannot be changed.
Research discussion with mentor (link to Practice Learning Activity 2):	
Gatekeeper discussion: professional enquiry conversation with mentor and CT	
Literature review completed	
<b>TMA submission: Professional enquiry proposal and literature review (2,500 words)</b>	<b>20/11/25</b>
Data collection period	
Data analysis	
Data presentation/discussion with school (link to Practice Learning Activity 7)	
Write critical discussion of findings and impact on practice	
Proof reading	

<b>EMA submission Task 1:</b>  <b>Professional enquiry report (1,500 words) along with a research poster</b> (Remember that you will also have to submit task 2 on this date)	<b>30/4/26</b>
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I give my consent for the student-teacher named above to undertake the small-scale professional enquiry outlined above, in line with the ethical considerations noted above and with support from their mentor and/or school co-ordinator.

Signed:

Date:

**If there are any queries regarding the student-teachers' professional enquiry and ethical approval, please email the Curriculum Tutor or [alison.glover@open.ac.uk](mailto:alison.glover@open.ac.uk)**

# PGCE small-scale professional enquiry sample checklist for ethical protocols and consent

The following is a sample checklist/summary of the research-related material for PGCE students to agree with their setting and mentor before undertaking any research activity. This can be adapted according to the individual enquiry.

Please mark the checkboxes once you have agreed your research approach and the information sheets and consent forms have been approved by your mentor. The additional column can be used to note your use of these e.g. suggested return dates, number of participants.

[Cross out or delete any resources that do not apply to your enquiry].

Table 4: Sample checklist for planning enquiry

School gatekeeper/ Curriculum Tutor notes (optional)		Additional
<input type="checkbox"/>	Shared guidance with gatekeeper	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Gatekeeper approval completed	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Approval submitted as part of TMA	
<b>Interviews</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Information letter Interview	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Interview consent / assent form	

Observations		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Information letter for observation (setting)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Observation consent form for setting	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Information letter for participants/ parents/guardian: observation	
Questionnaires		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Information letter: questionnaire	

Mentor approval		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Enquiry focus and plan agreed	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Information letters and consent forms agreed	

# Sample Information letter for observations – setting staff

## What is the aim of this observation?

I, *[add your name]* would like to observe an activity you are leading *[add description]* and would like to ask whether this was possible and, if so, to negotiate a convenient place, date and time. I am studying for a Post Graduate Certificate in Education with the Open University, and this observation is part of a professional enquiry that is a course requirement. My enquiry is investigating *[add a brief description]*. Outline consent has been granted from *[include specific name or title of the Setting Gatekeeper]*

## If I take part in this research enquiry, what will be involved?

The observation would be at a time, place and date which we will negotiate as the most convenient. I will share with you information about how I hoped that data might be collected through an observation schedule. The conclusions from these discussions will inform the information sheet to be shared with those who will be present for the observed activity and, for those below the age of 18, also their parent/carers/guardians. Those who have queries or concerns will be asked to contact me so that we might consider whether the observation should continue or not. We will need to agree a return date for any such responses, which will allow us to discuss how the wishes of these children and their parents/carers are best responded to.

## What will the focus of the observation be?

The focus of the observation will be to find out about [*add brief information*].

### **Will the data collected at the observation remain confidential?**

Your participation will be treated in **strict confidence** in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). No personal information will be shared with anyone else. I will type up my observation schedule notes as soon as practical in a way in which all identifiable features will be removed. Anonymised records will be created and anonymised digital files will be stored on password protected devices. Upon successful completion of the programme these files will be destroyed. I may share the anonymised files with my mentor. I will be submitting an analysis of the data collected from the observation as part of my assignment. Neither you as an individual, those observed, or the setting will be identifiable.

### **What happens now?**

Please review and complete the consent form. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw, even after having given initial consent, up until a week after the observation, and data collected during the observation will be destroyed in this case.

### **What if I have other questions?**

If you have any other questions about the study, I or my mentor would be very happy to answer them. Please contact me on [*add your name and contact email*] or my mentor [*add name and email*].

# Sample Consent form for observation/s – setting staff

Please indicate **YES** or **NO** for each of the questions, by marking the appropriate checkboxes below, and return the completed form by *[date]* to *[name and contact method]*:

**YES    NO**

1. Have you read the information about the planned observation?

☐ ☐

2. Has the nature and aims of this observation been explained to you?

☐ ☐

3. Do you understand what this observation will involve?

☐

☐

4. Do you understand how data will be collected about you from the observation?

☐ ☐

5. Are you happy with how your data will be stored?

☐ ☐



6. Have you asked all the questions you want?

☐ ☐

7. Have you had your questions sufficiently answered?

☐

☐

8. Do you understand that you can withdraw your consent up to

☐ ☐

a week after the observation?

9. Are you happy to take part in the observation?

☐

☐

If any answers are 'NO' feel free to ask for further information. However, if you **do not** want to take part, please let the researcher know and **do not** sign your name.

If you consent to participate, please sign and print your name and today's date. You can withdraw consent up until the week after the observation by letting me know.

Your name:

-----  
-----

Your signature: ----- Date:

-----

The researcher who will conduct the observation, to sign below:

Print name:

-----  
-----

Signature: ----- Date:

-----

**Thank you for your help.**

# Sample Information letter for observations – for participant/ parent/guardian

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that on *[insert date]* *[insert your name]* will be observing *[insert class]* in their *[insert subject]* lesson or *[session]*.

I am studying for a Post Graduate Certificate in Education with The Open University, and this observation is part of a professional enquiry that is a course requirement. My enquiry is investigating *[add a brief description]*. Outline consent has been granted from *[include specific name or title of the Setting Gatekeeper]*

The observation would last *[a time, place and date complete as appropriate including how the data will be collected]*.

## What will the focus of the observation be?

The focus of the observation will be to find out about *[add brief information]*.

## Will the data collected at the observation remain confidential?

Participation will be treated in **strict confidence** in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). No personal information will be shared with anyone else. I will type up my observation schedule notes as soon as practical in a way in which all identifiable features will be removed. Anonymised records will be created and anonymised digital files will be stored on password protected devices. Upon successful completion of the programme these files will be destroyed. I may share the anonymised files with my mentor. I will be submitting

an analysis of the data collected from the observation as part of my assignment. No participant or the setting will be identifiable.

### **What happens now?**

If you have any questions or concerns, or if you think your child is likely to be concerned about my presence in the classroom, please contact me on [*insert email address*] or my mentor [*insert email address*] by [*insert date*].

## **Sample Information letter for interview/s**

### **What is the aim of this interview?**

I, [*add your name*] would like to interview you about [*add description*] and would like to ask whether this is possible please and, if so, to negotiate a convenient place, date and time. I am studying for a Post Graduate Certificate in Education with the Open University, and this interview is part of a professional enquiry that is a course requirement. My enquiry is investigating [*add a brief description*]. Outline consent has been granted from [*include specific name or title of the Setting Gatekeeper*]

### **If I take part in this enquiry, what will be involved?**

The interview will be at a time, place and date which we will negotiate as the most convenient.

### **Will the data collected at the interview remain confidential?**

Your participation will be treated in **strict confidence** in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). No personal information will be shared with anyone else. I will type up my interview notes as soon as practical in a way in which all identifiable features will be removed. Anonymised records will be created and anonymised digital files will be stored on password protected devices. Upon successful completion of the programme these files will be destroyed. I may share the anonymised files with my mentor. I will be submitting an analysis of the data collected from the interview as part of my assignment. Neither you as an individual, others interviewed, or the setting will be identifiable.

### **What happens now?**

Please review and complete the consent form. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw, even after having given initial consent, up until a week after the interview, and data collected during the interview will be destroyed in this case.

### **What if I have other questions?**

If you have any other questions about the study, I or my mentor would be very happy to answer them. Please contact me on [*add your name and contact email*] or my mentor [*add name and email*].

# Sample Consent form for interview/s

Please indicate **YES** or **NO** for each of the questions by marking the appropriate checkboxes below, and return the completed form by [date] to [name and contact method]:

**YES**    **NO**

1. Have you read (or had read to you) the information about the interview?  
☐    ☐
  
2. Has someone explained this interview to you? ☐    ☐
  
3. Do you understand what this interview is about? ☐    ☐
  
4. Have you asked all the questions you want about the interview? ☐  
☐
  
5. Have you had your questions answered in a way you understand?  
☐    ☐

6. Do you understand that it is ok to stop taking part at any time? ☐

☐

7. Are you happy to take part in the interview? ☐ ☐

If any answers are 'NO' feel free to ask for further information. However, if you **do not** want to take part, please let the researcher know and **do not** sign your name.

If you consent to participate, please sign and print your name and today's date.

Your name:

-----  
-----

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:

-----

*If required:*

Parent/Guardian name:

-----

Parent/Guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:  
\_\_\_\_\_

The researcher who will conduct the interview, to sign below:

Print name:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date:  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your help.**



# Sample Information letter for questionnaires

## What is the aim of this questionnaire?

I, *[add your name]* would like you to complete a questionnaire/survey. I am studying for a Post Graduate Certificate in Education with the Open University, and this questionnaire is professional enquiry that is a course requirement. My enquiry is investigating *[add a brief description]*. Outline consent has been granted from *[include specific name or title of the Setting Gatekeeper]*.

## If I take part in this research, what will be involved?

The questionnaire will be completed at your own convenience before *[insert end date]* – *[explain if paper based or online and how long it should take to complete]*

## Will the data collected in the questionnaire remain confidential?

Your participation will be treated in **strict confidence** in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018). No personal information will be shared with anyone else. The questionnaire data will not include any identifiable features. I may share the data set with my mentor. I will be submitting an analysis of the data collected by the questionnaire as part of my assignment. Neither you as an individual, or the setting will be identifiable.

## What happens now?

By completing the questionnaire, you are providing your consent to participate. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw, even after having

given initial consent, up until a week after completing the questionnaire, and data collected will be destroyed in this case.

### **What if I have other questions?**

If you have any other questions about the study, I or my mentor would be very happy to answer them. Please contact me on [*add your name and contact email*] or my mentor [*add name and email*].

# References

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