



**PRO**moting integrity in the use of **RE**Search results in evidence-based policy: a focus on non-medical research

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**Document Title: The Accord**

**Work Package: 3**

**Deliverable: D3.2**

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**Project ID: 788352**

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## PREAMBLE

We present here a draft statement of principles that lie behind seeking/using ethical evidence from non-medical research to inform policy. In talking about ethical evidence, we are both tackling the principle of evidence per se and the way this evidence is built throughout the whole research process from inception through to application or use. The short, clear, succinct and actionable statement we present here is designated the 'Accord'. This is the baseline that we intend the further consultation process to be built on. Neither its title nor content is 'fixed' at this point. We aim to explore its potential with the appropriate constituencies and across the range of stakeholders. These include the producers of research, disseminators and intermediaries, influencers, policy advisers, decision-makers and implementers. The section following the Accord statement draws out the elements of the brief Accord statement in terms of slightly more detailed principles together with a rationale for this approach. The draft Accord is based on the work accomplished by the first phase of the PRO-RES Project and based on declared foundational assumptions about the values, principles and standards involved in ethical research conducted with integrity. The Accord will be presented on the PRO-RES website and linked to a 'Toolbox' to aid stakeholders in assessing the ethics and integrity of research evidence and supportive resources to help produce such evidence across the range of non-medical research activities.

We are aiming to develop a culture of ethical research based on ***continuous discursive engagement***. By that we mean:

- There needs to be an ethical *discourse* to be sure that researchers are aware of, and sensitive to, the ethical dimensions of their work. That awareness depends on engagement in ethical discourse as an integral aspect of engagement in research.
- To bring about a cultural change in research activity, there has to be *engagement* of everyone responsible for the process, including researchers, stakeholders, peers and the users of research.
- This engagement needs to be *continuous*. Ethical issues can arise at every stage of research: conception, development, proposal, process, conclusion. Dissemination and use. Ethical consideration cannot be a single-stage process.

## **THE ACCORD**

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**(on ethical evidence in non-medical research)**

**Proposed Draft:**

**As signatories to this Accord:**

- **We commit to only use research that is undertaken ethically.**
- **We recognise that an underpinning by high quality research and evidence, including policy appraisals and evaluations, is a pre-condition for evidence-based policy-/decision-making, and hence rational policy actions and outcomes.**
- **We will seek to employ high quality evidence that has been gathered, collated and analysed using sound, robust and ethical methods.**
- **We will attempt to ensure that the funding, management, conduct, dissemination and governance of research meets high standards of ethics and integrity.**
- **As individuals and institutions involved in collecting and/or using evidence in policymaking, we aim to be transparent on how the high quality of that evidence is assured and will flag up any potential conflicts of interest.**
- **We agree that the independence and integrity of individuals responsible for the gathering of research evidence and its use in policymaking must be respected and supported in ways that ensure the evidence they produce is neither biased nor misleading.**

### THE PRINCIPLES AND RATIONALE BEHIND THE ACCORD

*In seeking to promote ethics and integrity in the evidence produced in all non-medical research:*

- Under a commitment to evidence-based policy, all evidence should be based as far as possible on ethically sound research.
- There are many forms of research. They include not just formal research projects and programmes, but a range of actions relating to investigation, discovery, exploration, practice, and disciplinary development. Every kind of research needs to be done ethically.
- Research should be beneficent (or at least non-maleficent) in its aims, its substantive focus, in the process of research, and its application.
- Ethical issues can arise at every stage of research: conception, development, proposal, process, conclusion and dissemination. It follows that ethical consideration cannot be a single-stage process; it has to be continuous.
- Researchers have to be aware of, and sensitive to, the ethical dimensions of their work. That awareness depends on engagement in ethical discourse as an integral aspect of engagement in research. Ethical conduct cannot adequately be guaranteed by a fixed number of pre-set rules.
- All researchers should aim to develop a culture of ethical research, based on continuous discursive engagement. To achieve this, there has to be engagement of everyone responsible for the process, including researchers, stakeholders, peers and the users of research.
- Research should not be based on pre-formed prejudicial ideologies or biased political or financial interests.
- Conflicts of interest should ideally be avoided in the production of research evidence. If this is not possible, all conflicts of interest should be openly disclosed.
- All sources of information used to formulate research evidence should be acknowledged.
- In order to produce high quality evidence, research must be methodologically robust.
- Only research that has also been conducted ethically and with integrity can be considered 'high quality'.
- All research should be funded, managed, conducted and disseminated ethically and with integrity.
- The processes and institutions involved in the selection of evidence, including research, to inform policy should be independent, open and transparent.
- The effectiveness and impact of all policies should be honestly and transparently assessed or evaluated using high quality research methods.

*To achieve these ends:*

- The Accord must be supported by foundational statements that clarify the values, virtues, principles and standards that are applicable to research and the production of evidence used in policymaking.
- Clear and agreed definitions of terms and concepts are required so that all policymakers should be able to recognise, identify and distinguish the characteristics of high-quality evidence in their field.
- Ethical research practice can often only be understood and explained in context. Illustrative case studies must be made available – with both ethically positive and negative elements – not just success stories. So that users can be aided in their ethical decision making with the insights offered by complex cases.
- A repository of resources must be made available to guide and support the interpretation and application of the Accord.