Research as Experiential Learning

*From the Office of the Vice-Principal Research*

An experiential learning activity can be defined, in part, as an activity where the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning. Research is defined, in the university’s [Research Administration Policy](https://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/policies/research-policies/research-administration-policy), as including among other things “a studious investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery or interpretation of knowledge; the systematic collection or revision of knowledge or accepted theories in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories”. Since there is significant overlap between research and experiential learning activities, at Queen’s research activities are considered one type of experiential learning activity.

**Is the EL activity research?**

The distinction between research and other types of experiential learning activities is important and will come down to the reasons for engaging in the activity. Key questions to ask include:

* Is the student aiming to publish or otherwise publicly disclose the results of the activity in academic journals, at academic conferences, in poster competitions or at public presentations?
* Is the student being assessed by Queen’s and, if yes, does the research output including any of the results or data, produced from their activities, form the basis for this assessment?
* Is the student intending to use any of the results, including data, produced from their activities for a graduate thesis or dissertation, or for future academic research?

If the activity being undertaken by the student is being evaluated i) on the basis that the student completed the activity, ii) with regard to learning outcomes, often based on skills demonstrated, but iii) without regard to the content of the student’s work output, and iv) the student is not interested in publishing any results generated from the activity, the EL activity is likely not research. If the answer to one or more of the above questions is yes, then the EL activity can be considered research.

The source of funding for an experiential learning activity may also help to determine if it is research. Here are a few examples:

* The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) Alliance grant program will provide funding and facilitate experiential learning interactions between industry and students. Those interactions are primarily for research purposes and NSERC [mandates](https://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/NSERC-CRSNG/policies-politiques/ip-pi_eng.asp) that the results of the students’ activities cannot be kept secret (i.e., results must be publicly disseminated) and that researchers must retain the right to use the results of the activity for future research and teaching.
* The NSERC Collaborative Research and Training Experience (CREATE) program facilitates training and mentoring of students. While this program does not have the same mandates as the Alliance program, NSERC includes in eligible costs dissemination activities including publications authored or co-authored by CREATE trainees, suggesting that academic publications and presentations are encouraged if not required
* Mitacs, mostly through its Accelerate internship program, while not specifically requiring publication, will generally only fund projects where there is a clear connection between a graduate student’s thesis activities and the internship activities. These student interns also stand to benefit from the opportunity to include the results of their internship activities in their theses as well as other academic publications and presentations.

**If the EL activity is research, what else needs to be considered?**

Where there is an expectation on the part of the student or the faculty member that the activity in question will be treated as research, even in part, it is necessary to clearly communicate this to the external organizations with whom the student will be engaging and to ensure that there is a shared understanding and appropriate documentation in place with these organizations. Possible considerations include:

* Intellectual property (IP): IP terms dictate who has the right to use a student’s work product, including data, which could interfere with students’ ability to publish if that right falls exclusively to the external organization.
* Research agreements: These provide documentation of the rights and obligations of Queen’s and the students on the one hand and external organizations on the other in relation to a research activity. Items covered include, expected deliverables, confidentiality, publication rights, payment terms, IP terms, liability for injuries and damages arising from the research activities.
* Ethics review: Where research involves human subject participants or uses data collected from human subjects, research ethics board approval may be required to conduct the research.
* Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S): Depending on the nature of the research, additional considerations may need to involve EH&S, such as bio-safety, export control, controlled goods, radioactive materials, and off-campus work.

**If my EL activity is research, who offers support?**

The EL Hub will refer you to various units within the Vice-Principal Research portfolio that provide support for research activities. The Research Contracts Unit can offer support with documentation. The Research Ethics Office can provide guidance, and where required approvals, to ensure that research involving human subjects or their data meets all necessary compliance measures for such research. The Centre for Advanced Computing also provide support for secure data storage and access solutions for research being conducted at Queen’s.