

Ethical Action Plan (500-750 words)*

This document is a chance for you to **begin shaping your project** while thinking through its ethical considerations, implications, and responsibilities. We know this might feel early in your action research journey, but this short plan is here to help pin down your ideas and work-in-progress.

Use whatever writing format that suits you - lists, bullet points, statements or paragraphs - and follow the suggested links stated alongside some of the questions for guidance.

A good starting point is the [BERA Guidelines for Educational Research, fifth edition \(2024\)](#) alongside the [‘Ethics Files and Resources’](#) on Moodle.

When you’re ready, email your draft to your allocated tutor **48 hours in advance of your first group tutorial** in the week commencing **6 October 2025**, so it can help guide the focus of discussions and support your project development.

Name: Antonia Huber

Tutor: Dr. Rachel Marsden

Date: 05.10.2025

1. What is the working title of your project? Also write a few sentences about the focus of your project.

Title: Improving Cognitive Accessibility in Virtual Learning Environments

Focus:

This action research project examines how the cognitive accessibility of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can be improved within the context of higher design education. *Cognitive accessibility* refers to how easily learners can perceive, understand, and engage with information and course structures. It particularly benefits students with neurodiverse profiles, additional language needs, or high cognitive load demands.

The project focuses on Moodle, the university’s VLE, and explores how its design compares to alternative platforms such as Notion, Miro, SharePoint, and Padlet. It aims to identify barriers to understanding and engagement, and to surface best practices that make digital environments more intuitive and inclusive.

This inquiry forms part of a cycle of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), engaging primarily with the stages of planning, acting, and observing through the design and analysis of interviews, questionnaires, and visual audits. The final reflective stage will involve cycling back to analyse and evaluate findings in relation to pedagogical practice and accessibility principles, documented through a reflective blog. This blog will serve as a record of critical reflection, connecting insights from the enquiry to ongoing professional development in online course design.

The ultimate goal is to contribute evidence-based recommendations toward improving the digital learning experience in the forthcoming MA Graphic Design (Online) course at UAL.

2. What sources will you read or reference? Share 5 to 10.

The full review of relevant literature will be developed later in the project and integrated into my reflective blog, aligning with the cyclical nature of action research, where reading, reflection, and practice inform one another iteratively. At this stage, the following key texts will guide my ethical approach, methodological framing, and understanding of accessibility in digital learning environments:

- BERA (2024). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* which hopefully will guide ethical decision-making and participant engagement.
- Kara, H. (2015). *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences* to help with on ethical, flexible, and creative approaches to qualitative enquiry.
- Lenette, C. (2022). *Cultural Safety in Participatory Arts-Based Research* to frame my participatory approaches and reflexivity.
- Banks, S. (2016). *Everyday Ethics in Professional Life* to enable situating my ethical decision-making within lived professional contexts.
- SRA (2021). *Research Ethics Guidance* to create a practical guide on consent and data storage.
- IVSA (2009). *Code of Research Ethics* to help me consider visual artefact analysis.

3. What action(s) are you planning to take, and are they realistic in the time you have (Sept-Dec)?

The project will employ a qualitative, mixed-method approach combining semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and visual artefact analysis. These methods are designed to provide complementary insights into how cognitive accessibility is considered within Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and other teaching platforms.

1. Semi-Structured Interviews and Questionnaires (Qualitative)

- **Participants:** Two in-depth interviews with course leaders or senior lecturers teaching on either fully online or on a low-residency courses and two to three questionnaire responses from colleagues involved in in-person course delivery .
- **Purpose:** To understand the rationales behind platform use (Moodle, Miro, Notion, SharePoint, and Padlet), identify accessibility challenges, and gather practical examples of how colleagues adapt tools and content structures to support learner engagement.
- **Mode of analysis:** Thematic analysis, identifying recurrent ideas, design principles, and accessibility considerations across participants' responses.
- **Documentation:** Audio-recorded interviews, written questionnaire responses, and anonymised transcription notes.
- **Ethical considerations:** Participation will be voluntary and anonymised. Power relations are minimal, as participants are professional peers. All participants will receive an information sheet and consent form outlining the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and data handling procedures in line with UAL ethics guidance.

2. Visual Audit and User Journey Mapping (Artefactual Analysis)

- **Platforms reviewed:** Moodle, Miro, Notion, SharePoint, and Padlet.

- **Purpose:** To analyse visual structures, navigational patterns, and cognitive load implications by mapping user journeys across different types of online platforms used for learning design.
- **Mode of analysis:** Qualitative visual analysis identifying affordances, accessibility features, and user interface strategies that support or hinder cognitive accessibility. Findings will be compared reflectively across platforms to identify transferable good practice.
- **Documentation:** Annotated screenshots, flow diagrams, and comparative summary tables created from observations and reflective notes.
- **Ethical considerations:** Only publicly available or internally authorised course materials will be included. No identifiable student data will be used. All visual material will be anonymised and used solely for academic reflection.

Mapping to the Action Research Cycle

Each stage of the project will be aligned with the Action Research Cycle (plan > act > observe > reflect). Progress and emerging insights will be documented through a reflective blog post, enabling ongoing critical reflection and linking research findings to teaching practice.

- 4. Who will be involved, and in what way?** (e.g. colleagues, students, local community...). Note, if any of your participants will be under the age years of 18yrs, please seek further advice from your tutor.

Two course leaders — one teaching on a fully online MA and another on a low-residency MA — who will take part in semi-structured interviews exploring their approaches to course design, platform choice, and accessibility considerations. In addition, two to three lecturers involved in online or blended delivery will be invited to complete a short questionnaire reflecting on their experiences with Virtual Learning Environments and related tools.

Recruitment will be voluntary and conducted via email invitations. All participants will receive an information sheet outlining the project aims, what participation involves, and their rights, including anonymity, confidentiality, and the option to withdraw at any stage.

5. What are the health & safety concerns, and how will you prepare for them?

Research activities will be taking place online using UAL-approved platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams) or in secure campus settings. As the subject matter is not inherently sensitive, physical risks are minimal. However, because accessibility discussions may touch on personal challenges (e.g., learning differences or frustrations with institutional systems), participants will be reminded they can pause or withdraw at any point. Researcher wellbeing will be supported through pacing interviews, regular debriefing, and access to UAL support services, following guidance on emotionally demanding research (University of Sheffield, 2018).

6. How will you manage and protect any physical and / or digital data you collect, including the data of people involved?

Data will be collected, stored, and processed in compliance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and UAL policies. All recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on encrypted, password-protected university servers. Personal data will be anonymised during transcription and pseudonyms will be used in all dissemination. Consent forms and participant information sheets will clarify how data will be used, stored, and shared, and participants will have the right to withdraw their data up to an agreed cut-off date.

7. How will you take ethics into account in your project for participants and / or yourself?

Participation is entirely voluntary and based on an informed understanding of the study's aims, process, and data use. Consent will be ongoing, and participants may withdraw at any time without consequence. As a peer researcher, I will ensure transparency in all communications, avoid coercion, and maintain confidentiality in data storage and dissemination.

In line with BERA (2024) and Banks (2016), I will use a reflexive journal and reflective blog to document decisions, positionality, and emerging ethical reflections. Risks are minimal, but participants will be reminded they can pause or withdraw if discussions about institutional platforms become sensitive. Researcher wellbeing will be supported through pacing, peer debriefing, and adherence to University of Sheffield (2018) guidance on emotionally demanding research.

* The form itself is around 300 words, so with your additions the total length will come to a maximum of about 1,050 words.