UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

COMMITTEE FOR RESEARCH ETHICS & GOVERNANCE IN ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES & BUSINESS

STANDARD OPERATION PROCEDURE FOR RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW

	Board/Committee	Date
Previously considered/approved by	CREGASSB	4th December 2023
Further consideration/ approval required by		

1. Abbreviations:

CREGASSB - Committee for Research Ethics & Governance in Arts, Social Sciences & Business

REC – Research Ethics Committee

EAG – Ethics Advisory Group

RPS Team – Research Policy and Strategy Team, Research & Innovation

RGH – Research Governance Handbook

URC – University Research Committee

SEO – School Ethics Officer

2. Definitions:

Research - Any form of disciplined enquiry which aims to contribute towards a body of knowledge or theory and will produce academic outputs

The Committee – the Committee for Research Ethics & Governance in Arts, Social Sciences & Business

Researcher – any person affiliated with the University that conducts a research project producing academic outputs. This includes amongst others staff, students, honorary members

Triage – A stage within the Worktribe ethic review process in which administrative staff (Triager) assess and process the application

3. Scope:

This Standard Operating Procedure for Research Ethics Review describes the process for ethical review as it is conducted by the Committee for Research Ethics & Governance in Arts, Social Sciences & Business. It applies to and should be read by **all staff, students and associates carrying out research requiring ethical approval within the Schools of Business; Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History; Education; Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture; Law; and Social Science at the University of Aberdeen**.

The Standard Operating Procedure will be reviewed once a year and must be approved by the relevant School Executive Group and the Ethics Advisory Group.

4. Purpose and Background:

The University of Aberdeen Research Governance Handbook (RGH) sets out the expectations for ethical review at the University and aims to provide consistent standards. The University recognises that researchers (and

their supervisors where applicable) are responsible for and best placed to evaluate the ethical issues and the conduct of their research, and are accountable for the design, management and conduct of their research. Independent ethical scrutiny and review should be of sufficient quality to be useful in improving the ethical conduct of the proposed research and in ensuring that ethical standards are applied consistently. While respecting the ethical traditions of disciplines, we can recognise that strong ethical principles are the common ground on which all disciplines meet. High quality and responsive ethical review will:

- Ensure that the safety, rights, dignity and welfare of all research participants are protected
- Assist researchers to develop well-designed, well-conducted and well-managed research projects which can lead to higher quality findings and outputs
- Protect researchers from the significant consequences of unethical, non-compliant or poorly conducted research
- Maintain public trust in research and in the institution. We recognise that members of the public fund and participate in research and consider the impact of damage to trust and reputation on the ability of the University to deliver this core function
- Comply with the Concordat to Support Research Integrity and provides a visible measure of standards for reporting to UKRI and other relevant bodies

The Standard Operating Procedure ensures that all research activity is subject to appropriate ethical scrutiny **before** the research activity commences (and certainly before collecting or using any data). It also ensures that any subsequent changes to the research activity will be submitted for further ethical review.

The Standard Operating Procedure directly considers the ethical review requirements of relevant external funding bodies. The most notable examples of this are the Economic and Social Research Council, which will not fund research in institutions that do not have research ethics review policies that meet their minimum requirements, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which requires Research Organisations to consider ethics in broad terms and grant approval to researchers in advance of the commencement of research activity. In addition, consideration has been given to Professional Associations which have codes of ethical practice to which they require their members to adhere.

5. Committee structure:

The Committee for Research Ethics & Governance in Arts, Social Sciences and Business is responsible for maintaining and reviewing the Committee's Research Governance and Ethics Policy, and for reviewing and adjudicating on all applications for ethical approval made by staff and postgraduate research students within the Schools. The *Committee remit* outlines its responsibilities further.

5.1 Membership

- Chair - A senior academic from Arts, Social Sciences & Business, appointed on the recommendation of the Vice-Principal for Research

- Dean for Academic Research Partnerships and Research Governance (if not Chair)

- One Academic member of staff from each of the Schools of Business; Divinity, History, Philosophy & Art History; Education; Language, Literature, Music & Visual Culture; Law; and Social Science (the School Ethics Officer, or where necessary, the Deputy School Ethics Officer – both nominated by the Head of School)

- A senior academic from outside the Schools with relevant experience (appointed by the Vice-Principal for Research on the recommendation of the Committee Chair)

- A senior representative from IT Services (appointed by the Committee Chair or the Dean for Academic Research Partnerships and Research Governance) to provide advice and guidance on ethical issues as they relate to information technology.

The Committee may also invite other members of staff to participate in Committee meetings, as necessary.

5.2 Chair – Role and responsibilities

The chair to the Committee facilitates and promotes ethical research that is of potential benefit to participants, science and society. The chair is responsible for

- Overseeing the Committee's ethical review function and evaluating involved processes to ensure that every project which undergoes ethical review will be dealt with fairly and appropriately.
- Providing advice and guidance to members of the Committee, researchers, and supervisors.
- Acting as final arbiter in case of reviewers failing to agree on an outcome

5.3 School Ethics Officers – Role and responsibilities

Each School will designate an Ethics Officer and, normally, a Deputy. The responsibilities of the School Ethics Officer are outlined in the *SEO Best Practice Guidance and Duties,* but can be briefly described as:

- Acting as first point of contact on research ethics within their Schools/disciplines; signposting researchers to appropriate support within the University

- Participation in the Committee's discussions, decisions and duties, including the review of ethics applications

- Bringing any policy, guidelines or procedures developed by the University concerning the good conduct of research and research ethics to the attention of staff and students in the School;

- Gaining awareness of relevant professional guidelines and other external guidance relevant to all disciplines within their School, and bring details of ongoing developments to the attention of staff and students within their School and to the Committee

- Manage and monitor the implementation of research ethics procedures within the School

- Report to the Head of School and the Committee where appropriate on research ethics issues

5.4 Clerk

The University will designate an administrator to be responsible for the administration of the Ethics Policy. They will report to the Dean for Academic Research Partnerships and Research Governance (and the Committee Chair where different) and be responsible for:

- The organisation of meetings of the Committee, including the taking of minutes;

- Managing the triage process for all applications submitted to the Committee via the Worktribe Ethics process, and communicating the outcomes of the ethics reviews to applicants

- The maintenance of the Research Ethics webpages

- Providing advice on matters relating to the ethical approval of research, including the preparation of guidance documents on specific aspects of ethical research practice

- Bringing to each meeting of the Committee a report on all decisions made via the Worktribe Ethics process, since its last meeting;

- Drafting reports on the work of the Committee (to be approved by the Chair) to be presented to the University's Ethics Advisory Group.

6. General guidance for researchers:

Prior to, during, and following the completion of all research activities, researchers are expected to consider how they can ensure good practice. In preparation for and during research activity, especially that which involves

human participants, researchers are expected to consider the ethical implications of their research. Considerations include the nature of the research and the cultural, economic, psychological, physical, political, religious, spiritual and social consequences for all participants.

6.1 Requirement for ethical review

Where research activity requires ethics review (as determined by self-assessment through the University's Ethics Checklist), each researcher is responsible for ensuring that they have adequate ethical approval **before** the research activity commences. To gain approval, a researcher must complete an application for ethical approval of research activity.

Where the application relates to a specific research project the application should be made by the Principal Investigator on the project, which in some cases will be students. Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that students abide by this Standard Operating Procedure. Where a researcher is not embarking on a research project with clearly defined start and finish dates, formal ethical approval of any ongoing research activity is required on a biennial basis.

6.2 Training

Completion of the University's online Research Ethics and Governance training course (available on MyAberdeen) is mandatory for all staff and PGR applicants for ethical approval. This is in addition to the online training course in Research Integrity (which is mandatory for all PGRs and researchers, and is also available on MyAberdeen). Applications will be returned to the applicant if this training has not been completed. (Completion of the training by UG and PGT students is not mandatory and will only be required at the discretion of the Course Coordinator/dissertation supervisor.)

6.3 Considerations when applying for ethical approval

When making an application for the ethical approval of research activity, researchers should first refer to the Committee's guidance on Good Research Practice and contact their School Ethics Officer (or deputy) for advice on completing the application. Researchers are also advised to consult the Worktribe Ethics guidance when preparing their application, as this provides further information on the associated question sets. PGR supervisors are responsible for oversight (and initial approval) of applications for ethical approval submitted by their students, hence should be the initial point of contact for their students, with further advice sought from the School Ethics Officer where necessary.

The application process is an opportunity to consider various ethical aspects of their research and the application must provide enough information to show the reviewer that they have fully recognised and addressed the possible ethical implications of their research, allowing for an informed judgement to be taken by the reviewer before granting approval.

Researchers must be as thorough as possible when completing the application as ethical approval can only be granted for those research activities which are specified within it. Should research methods ultimately differ from those presented within an approved application, the researcher will be responsible for ensuring that either an amendment to the application is made (see 7.9), or a new application is submitted to cover any additional activity. Similarly, if a researcher subsequently embarks on a new piece of clearly defined research, they will be required to submit another application for ethical approval specific to the project.

7. Application procedure

7.1 Staff

Staff applications should be created and submitted using the Worktribe Ethics Process. More guidance on the process can be found under 7.4.

7.2 Postgraduate Research Students

Postgraduate Research applications should be created and submitted by the student using the [Worktribe Ethics Process](). When creating an ethics application on Worktribe, the student will be required to indicate that the application is related to a student project, their degree, and who their supervisor is. Further guidance on the subsequent process can be found under 7.4.

7.3 Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students

Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate applications for ethical review are managed within the Schools, using a [downloadable 'Word' application form](). If human participants are involved, the Committee's templates for Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms should be used (see 7.5) The completed application form and all relevant documentation should then be submitted via the School's ethical review process (this may involve emailing it to the student's supervisor or course coordinator for ethical review). The School Ethics Officer will provide advice and assistance to supervisors on request.

7.4 The Worktribe Ethics Review Process

When preparing the ethics application on Worktribe, applicants should consult the [current guidance](). In addition to the application, relevant documentation (e.g. consent forms, participant information sheet, etc) might also need to be prepared and uploaded to the application – see information on relevant documentation and templates in 7.5.

Once a staff member has submitted the online form, it will be forwarded to the triage process. Whenever a student submits the online form, the application will move into the "Submission" stage, during which the supervisor has the responsibility for confirming that the application is of an appropriate standard for submission. The supervisor can either not approve, which returns the application to the student for revisions, or approve it, moving it to the triage process.

The triage process is an administrative check for completeness of the application. If the Triager identifies that essential information or documentation is missing, the application might be returned to the applicant (usually within 48h) with comments that will need to be addressed before the application can be forwarded into formal ethics review. Applications which include all the required information and documentation for reviewers to evaluate the project will be passed to the Committee for review. Based on the nature of the research, the Triager will assign a risk level to the application that reflects the extent of ethical consideration required, as outlined by the Risk Guidance developed by the Ethics Advisory Group. In most instances, all applications (irrespective of the associated risk level) are jointly reviewed by two School Ethics Officers, one of which would normally be from the School the application originates from. Review requests will be issued to the reviewers and, in the first instance, a **review period of three weeks allowed**. Reviewers receive an automated reminder one week prior to the due date. In complex cases, additional review by the chair or the full Committee might be required. Once reviews are marked as complete, Triage will prepare a response to the applicant based on the Committee's feedback (all feedback will be anonymised).

The applicant will be informed about the Committee's decision via an automated Worktribe notification e-mail. Approval for the project is indicated by the status "Favourable Opinion" and the message that "ethical approval has now been granted for [the] project to proceed". Only after receiving this outcome can the research project commence (including recruitment and data collection). The researcher must adhere to the outlined methods and project dates, and if their research plans change, they must request an amendment to the application before proceeding – see 7.6.

Alternatively, the notification might indicate that Triage requests additional information, hence amendments to the application will be necessary to meet the ethical standards expected by the Committee. In the latter case, the application would return to the "Revision" status, allowing the applicant and other editors to revise and resubmit the application. The applicant must address all comments that require changes to be made to their responses within the application and/or to their supporting documentation. Where the applicant does not agree

with a comment, they should indicate in the Comments tab why the reviewer's suggestions are not feasible or appropriate. Once a revised staff application is resubmitted, it moves into the triage process. If a student application is resubmitted, it moves first to the "Revision Submission" stage in which the supervisor is responsible for checking if the Committee's feedback has been sufficiently addressed. The revised application must be approved by the supervisor before it will proceed to the Triage stage.

Based on the type of revisions that were required, the application can either be approved at Triage stage or will need to be reviewed again by the Committee. Where possible, a joint review will be requested from the original reviewers, and a copy of their previous comments provided. In most circumstances, reviewers will be asked to complete their second (and any subsequent) reviews within one week, this however depends on the extent of the revisions requested. Once reviews are marked as complete, the Triager will prepare a response to the applicant based on the new feedback from the Committee.

7.5 Required documentation for ethics applications

When involving human participants, researchers must ensure voluntary and informed participation, which is managed (in most cases) by preparing a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent Form.

In order to support researchers in providing relevant information to the participants and obtaining informed, voluntary and sufficient consent, the Committee provides templates that include standardised text as well as sections which must be adapted to reflect the specific requirements of the project. The templates can be found on the [Committee's guidance page](#).

If semi-structured/structured interviews are planned, a document containing proposed questions should be provided alongside the application. This helps reviewers understand the type of conversation the researcher will have with the participants and the relevant ethical implications. For surveys, a copy of the questionnaire should be attached (URLs are not sufficient as they cannot be kept as permanent record).

Note: All information provided to (potential) participants that provides details of the research must be attached to the ethics application. This includes e.g. recruitment posters, de-brief sheets etc.

If researchers plan to involve vulnerable participants (e.g. those that are underage, have cognitive impairments, find themselves in a dependent or unequal relationship with the researcher), the application may also require a safeguarding plan to be attached. Applicants should consult the [Safeguarding in Research & Innovation Code of Practice.](#)

7.6 Amendment of approved applications

If staff and postgraduate student applicants require to amend their already approved application, this must be done via the amendment process within Worktribe. Amendments will be processed by the Committee as per the guidance note on 'Minor/Major Amendments'. If the objectives of the project change significantly, or if collected data will be analysed within a new context that participants did not originally consent to, a new ethics application may be required. Applicants should contact the Committee's chair to check if a new application is required. Postgraduate taught and undergraduate students should contact the individual who managed their application review process.

7.7 Conflict of interest within the process

To ensure a fair review, the Committee will consider potential conflicts of interest when requesting reviews and approving applications. Where a School Ethics Officer is involved in a research project that requires ethical approval, they cannot review any associated ethics applications and must alert the Triager to their involvement. If reviewers identify any other conflict of interest that could impede an objective review, they must also alert the Triager. If a Triager is involved in a research project that requires ethical approval, they must not process the application.

7.8 Appeals

If staff and postgraduate student applicants wish to raise an issue with the feedback provided on their Worktribe ethics application, they should in the first instance contact the Triager to explain their concerns. The Triager will communicate this to the reviewers for their consideration. If reviewers disagree with the applicant, the Triager will refer the matter to the chair of the Committee. It is expected that in most instances, agreement will be reached by a supportive dialogue between the applicant and the Committee.

If all possible means of informal resolution have been exhausted and discussion with the Committee fails to resolve the issue satisfactorily, an appeal may then be submitted to the University's Ethics Advisory Group via the 'Policy and Procedure on Appeals (Worktribe Ethics)'.

7.9 Record keeping

Records relating to review (applications, correspondence, review and decisions) will be kept for at least 6 years after the completion of the project (for staff projects) or for 6 years after the conclusion of the student's programme of study, or for as long as required by the project funder (where relevant).

Researchers must specify their research data retention periods within their ethics application and also in their Data Management Plan (where a data management plan is required). Where funders or publishers do not require longer retention periods, the University stipulates a minimum retention of 5 years after project end date. Researchers must retain a record of their ethics approval in case evidence of ethical approval is required beyond that date.

7.10 Audit and monitoring procedures, including end of project reporting

Selected research projects and REC review processes may be audited each year by the Research Policy and Strategy team. The research project audit process aims to ensure that researchers have conducted their research in accordance with the information provided within their ethics application e.g. consent forms have been retained, their research record keeping meets the required standards and their research data is being stored correctly. An audit may also be triggered as a result of a complaint or concern. Annual (selected) audits of REC decision-making and record-keeping will be carried out on behalf of the Ethics Advisory Group, reporting to the University Research Committee.

RECs may identify projects during the review process that require additional mid-term reporting or audit. Where this is required, this will be noted as a condition of the favourable opinion and the PI notified.

7.11 Process for reporting adverse events and complaints

All staff, students and associates carrying out research under the auspices of the University of Aberdeen and all REC members are expected to report any complaints and adverse events or incidents that they become aware of. The report must be made to the University's Research Policy & Governance Officer (or nominated delegate during their absence) within 24 hours of occurrence or receipt, or as soon as reasonably practicable (to Dawn.Foster@abdn.ac.uk).

The Research Policy and Strategy Team will follow the University's Research Governance standard procedures on complaints and may request further information, including corrective and preventative measures already undertaken. Depending on the nature of the complaint or adverse events, immediate measures (such as the suspension of the study) may need to be implemented to protect the safety, dignity and wellbeing of participants or staff.

8. Reference Documents:

a) University of Aberdeen Research Governance Handbook and appendices
b) CREGASSB - Committee Remit
c) CREGASSB - SEO Best Practice Guidance and Duties

d) CREGASSB - Good Research Practice
e) University of Aberdeen Worktribe Ethics Approval Processes: Assigning Risk – Questions and Guidance at Triage Stage
f) University of Aberdeen Worktribe Ethics Approval Processes: Minor/Major Amendments
g) University of Aberdeen Safeguarding in Research & Innovation – Code of Practice
h) University of Aberdeen Ethics review appeals process

9. Related Documents – suggested reading:

a) UKRIO/ARMA Research Ethics Support and Review in Organisations
b) Concordat to Support Research Integrity

Applies to	Applies to the applicants to and committee members of the Committee for Research Ethics and Governance in the Arts, Social Sciences and Business
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