UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

PHYSICAL SCIENCES & ENGINEERING ETHICS BOARD

ETHICAL APPROVAL OF RESEARCH –

GUIDANCE NOTE FOR UG AND PGT STUDENT APPLICANTS

1. Why is ethical review necessary?

Before embarking on their research projects, applicants must assess whether formal ethical approval is required. Obtaining ethical approval is an integral part of the research process and is designed to encourage good conduct in research and help prevent misconduct. It not only protects the researcher and the research participant(s) but can also improve the research project by helping researchers to clarify the aims, process and outputs from their research.

The main reasons why research projects require ethical review include:

* The research will involve **human participants** (e.g. use of interviews, questionnaires, surveys).
* There are **aspects of the research which might raise ethical concerns** during the proposed research activity (e.g. potential conflicts of interest; the use of artefacts; environmental impact; financial inducements for subjects).

2. Involving human participants in research

Ethical review helps to protect participants; they are a valuable part of the research process and not merely a means of accessing data. Ethical review also helps to protect the researcher, as obtaining ethical approval (where required) demonstrates that they have adhered to the accepted ethical standards required for their research.

Researchers will be expected to provide research participants with sufficient information to enable them to make an informed decision as to whether to take part in the research; ensuring that they are not subject to coercion to take part or penalty for not taking part; ensuring that they are aware they are free to withdraw from the research at any time prior to the analysis of data (without giving a reason and without prejudice); and protecting and respecting the personal data provided by participants through appropriate procedures for confidentiality and anonymisation.

3. Research which might raise ethical concerns

Researchers have an obligation to conduct their research with integrity and transparency. Researchers must declare any actual or potential conflicts of interest that may affect the research proposal.

Researchers must consider the risk of harm that could be caused to research participants or others as a consequence of the research e.g. distress, embarrassment or anxiety, and to explain how this risk will be mitigated.

Covert research involves deception or is conducted without participants' full and informed consent. This research method will require further justification in the ethics application form.

4. Guidance for Applicants

Applications for ethical approval of research from UG and PGT students within these Schools will be subject to the internal School ethical review procedure.

By carefully following this guidance, applicants will avoid the most common errors that cause delays in the approval process. Time spent preparing a well-drafted application, containing concise but clear responses to the questions will ensure that applications can be reviewed timeously and with minimal revisions required by the applicant.

Applicants should submit their application for ethical approval well in advance of the planned commencement of their research, noting that if it is determined that ethical approval is required for their research project, applicants <u>must not</u> commence their research until ethical approval has been granted.

Applicant guidance and documentation, including the Annex A - Ethics Checklist for UG and PGT Students, are available to [download here](#). By following the process outlined below, applicants will identify if any of the other documents will be relevant to their application.

<u>The Application Process for UG and PGT students</u>

<u>Stage 1</u>

To assess if an application for ethical review is required, all applicants must first complete the **Ethics Checklist (Annex A)**.

Frequent Errors:

- *Applicants forget to include their name and their project title at the top of the form.*
- *Applicants misread Q2 'Does the project involve personal data?' Please **read this question carefully**, ensuring that the response provided corresponds with other associated responses on the checklist e.g. if surveys/questionnaires will be used, then the responses constitute **personal data** hence the response in Q2 should be YES.*

If the answer to any of the questions on the checklist is YES then the project must be submitted for ethical review (Stage 2)**.**

<u>Stage 2</u>

UG and PGT Students must submit their ethics application to the appropriate **School ethics review process:**

Research Ethics Review Form (Annex B) must be completed.

- *<u>Page 1</u> - Applicants fail to provide the information requested on this page. A response should be provided in every section, or 'Not applicable' where appropriate.*
- *<u>Page 2, Checklist</u> – tick boxes have not been completed and/or documents are not submitted with the application e.g. completed Annex A must be attached to all applications. Applications for research involving human participants must have a consent form and participant information sheet attached, and a copy of the schedule of questions for surveys and/or interviews.*
- *<u>Page 3, Project start date and duration</u> - Note that the planned 'Start date' for your research must be a date in the future, i.e. AFTER you anticipate ethical approval being granted.*

- *Section 1, Consent procedures* – *if human participants are involved in the research then Qs 12 – 16 should always be answered YES as these issues will be addressed in the consent form and participant information sheet that must be submitted.*
- *Section 1, Possible harm to participants* – *Q18 Applicants must consider the potential for harm to be caused to research participants or others as part of their research, and where potential harm is identified - how this will be mitigated. Q19 - 'Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing a detriment to their interests as a result of participation?' e.g. if research participants are work colleagues or students, consider if the nature of the questions being asked could prove controversial or could elicit negative opinions about their workplace/University; consider also if there is a power imbalance in the relationship with proposed research participants (e.g. if they are subordinates at work, or clients) and how you would avoid any sense of obligation on their part to participate in the research.*
- *Section 2, Data protection, handling and storage* – *The collection and/or processing of non-anonymised data is normally to be avoided unless absolutely necessary for the research. Further guidance can be obtained from the University's Information Governance Team (dpa@abdn.ac.uk).*

Participant Information Sheet – Annex C must be submitted for **all research involving human participants.** All text contained in [square brackets] must be replaced with information specific to the research project.

Frequent Errors:

- The School details (top right of the sheet) are not included.
- The title of the project is missing from the top of the page (underneath PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET).
- The personal email address for the researcher should not be used. Either their University of Aberdeen email address or a work email address should be included in the contact details.
- CONFIDENTIALITY & ANONYMITY - The weblink to the 'Privacy Notice for Research Participants' must be included in this section. **Do not delete this important information.**

Note: AFTER ethical approval has been granted, the final sentence on the sheet should be updated to read: "This research project was approved by the School of X on [approval date]".

All research involving human participants also requires a **consent form.**

Consent Form Template (Interview) – Annex D and/or **Consent Form Template (Online) – Annex E** must be submitted with the application paperwork.

Frequent Errors:

- *The guidance text in bold at the top of the templates should be deleted before submitting for approval*
- *The (Name of Project) at the top of the templates must be replaced with the project title, and also wherever else on the templates this is required (twice in Annex D and three times in Annex E)*

Further Guidance

Further guidance on ethical review is available here.

The UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO) has published a 'Code of Practice for Research' to support researchers in conducting research of the highest quality and standards.