**Guidelines for Completion of Applications  
for Ethical Review of Research Projects**

**Psychology Ethics Committee (PEC)  
School of Psychology,**

**University of Aberdeen, AB24 3UB**

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1. **Psychology Ethics Committee**

**PEC Membership for 2017/2018**

**Chair:** Dr Constanze Hesse

**Committee members:** Dr Agnieszka Konopka (Deputy Chair), Dr Rama Chakravarthi, Dr Devin Ray, Dr Katharina Schnitzspahn, Dr Helen Saunderson (qualitative research), Dr Clare Kirtley, Lay representative: Prof George Youngson

**Research Secretary:** Ms Carolyn Porter. For ethics-related queries please contact her at [carolyn.porter@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:carolyn.porter@abdn.ac.uk)

**Research Governance within Psychology**: Dr Margaret Jackson

PEC members have a broad range of experience and expertise in the areas of both basic and applied psychological research. Applications for ethical review are carried out in an independent manner and can involve consultation with experts outwith the committee.

The purpose of the committee is (1) to ensure that all projects conducted in the School of Psychology have undergone proper ethical review, (2) to monitor changes to ethical guidelines issued by professional and academic bodies, and (3) to offer training and support to students and staff. The following sources inform our current procedures (listed alphabetically, with hyperlinks as available):

[American Psychological Association](http://www.apa.org) (APA)  
[British Psychological Society](http://www.bps.org.uk/) (BPS)  
[Integrated Research Application System](https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/) (IRAS; online application for NHS projects)  
[National Research Ethics Service](http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/) (NRES; NHS staff and patient projects)  
[Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts](http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/)  
[Economic and Social Research Council](http://www.esrc.ac.uk) (ESRC)  
[North of Scotland Research Ethics Service](http://www.nhsgrampian.net/nhsgrampian/gra_display_simple_index.jsp?pElementID=147&pContentID=2988&p_applic=CCC&pMenuID=2&p_service=Content.show&) (NoSRES, our local NHS ethics service)  
<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/develop/researchers/good-practice-153.php> (University Good Research Practice)  
http://www.abdn.ac.uk/research/governance-framework.php (University Framework for Research Governance)  
[Society for Research in Child Development](http://www.srcd.org/) (SRCD)

A College Ethics Board (http://www.abdn.ac.uk/clsm/services/cerb.php) handles non-Psychology applications generated within the College of Life Sciences and Medicine.

As well as reporting to the School Research Committee, PEC is open to monitoring and audit by the University. **The University considers research malpractice a very serious matter.**

All research projects conducted in the School of Psychology will have undergone prior ethical review. PEC has always used a flexible process to cater for project diversity and expeditious review. School application forms and the review process are following ESRC and BPS guidelines.

Some research projects do not involve human or non-human participants (e.g. meta analysis, computer simulations). For completeness and monitoring/audit purposes, such projects are also submitted for review and entered into the research ethics database. The variety of ethical issues raised by academic research means that some projects can be processed more quickly than others (‘fast track’ rather than ‘full’ applications). PEC has always aimed for timely review within 10 days (compared with other institutional committees who may only meet monthly or bi-monthly to consider full applications). Projects which do not raise ethical issues can be normally considered within a week.

Completing the (electronic) ethics application form is part of a procedure which ensures that research conducted in the School satisfies ethical standards set out by the bodies listed above. Ethical review is an essential component of degree course accreditation by the BPS, and a necessary procedure in the completion of applications for, and receipt, of grant funding. Researchers should always check with funding bodies in order to ensure that the appropriate level of ethical review has been obtained. Any work involving drug trials or recruitment of NHS staff or patients also requires completion of the NRES application form and online submission (see below).

By thinking about the ethical issues raised by your proposed study, you will be able to identify and consider particular problems at an early stage in the research process. Give due consideration to the methods you are using to acquire your data, and think about the procedures you plan to use from the perspective of your participants. Researchers envisaging a series of studies using the same research design may seek **generic approval**, to cover all projects using the same methodology. Updates should then be submitted if any non-trivial changes in methodology or changes in researchers involved in the study are made. Please consult a member of the committee if in doubt.

Additional local procedures have to be followed. These are necessary because of recruitment procedures (sign-up sheets, posters, Facebook ads, Sona PRPS), group participation and practical classes that are features of the Psychology degree programme at the University.

PEC is responsible for considering the ethical issues raised by the conduct of research in the School. **PEC does not have a role to play in peer review of the academic merits or demerits of the proposed project**, although you should be aware that peer review is required for some funding bodies and NHS ethics applications, is undertaken in other schools within the University of Aberdeen and is a mandatory procedure in many other UK institutions.

There are four possible review outcomes: 1) approved, allowing the proposed research to go ahead; 2) conditionally approved, allowing the proposed research to go ahead *conditional* on the implementation of suggested alterations (once conditional changes are made and submitted electronically the application will be approved automatically without further review); 3) resubmit, allowing the researcher to address reviewer(s)’ concerns in a resubmission, 4) reject, for research that has ethical issues that cannot be resolved. In case of conditional approval, reviewers would generally suggest minor changes whose implementation does not raise issues with methods or materials used. Researchers are expected to enact the suggested changes prior to commencing their study. If researchers disagree with conditions suggested by reviewers for conditional approval, they should write a rebuttal and send it to the Chair of the ethics committee ([c.hesse@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:c.hesse@abdn.ac.uk)). They should not commence their research until the committee has resolved whether the suggested changes need to be implemented or whether the study can go ahead without them.

Chapter IV, Article 14 on consent from the Additional Protocol to the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine, concerning Biomedical Research states ‘*No research on a person may be carried out[...] without the informed, free, express, specific and documented consent of the person.’ [document retrieved 25.1.2013,* [*http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/195.htm*](http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/195.htm) *].* Informed consent is thus at the root of ethical research practice. This places a legal obligation on researchers to obtain and record informed consent from participants or their guardians, on the basis of information that should be given to them before their participation begins.

**1.1 Monitoring of research projects and complaints**

Staff that supervise research projects are responsible for routine monitoring of research conduct and for the identification of adverse events that may necessitate alteration, suspension, or discontinuance of a project. Certain projects may involve procedures for which all ethical issues cannot be ascertained from the outset and thus require frequent monitoring in liaison with a member of the committee. PEC welcomes feedback on procedural aspects of research that may have arisen during review and be of use in future applications.

There is also external monitoring, as researchers can and will be audited once in a while. Auditors verify informed consent is obtained from research participants and check if appropriate data storage procedures agreed with the participants have been followed. Therefore it is important that principal investigators store consent forms for the duration of a project and are aware of data storage and access policies. In order to control access and ensure the safety of stored consent forms, please keep paper forms in locked cabinets and computerised consent forms in password-locked/encrypted files. To ensure good practice, principal investigators should be sufficiently familiar with the Data Protection Act and the University regulations (e.g., Good Research Practice guide and Framework for Research Governance).

ESRC guidelines (2012 version, p.18, retrieved from <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Framework-for-Research-Ethics_tcm8-4586.pdf> ) state: *[If PEC] considers that a study is being conducted in a way which is not in accord with the conditions of its approval or in a way which does not protect the rights, dignity and welfare of research participants, it should initially bring together a meeting of all those concerned with a view to resolving the difficulties. In an extreme situation, the REC may withdraw its approval, and require that the research be suspended or discontinued. The ESRC must be informed of this decision and reserves the right to recoup its grant funding, pending further investigation, in extreme cases of ethics misconduct.*

Complaints concerning research malpractice in the School of Psychology should be referred to the Chair of the ethics committee in the first instance. The Chair may then refer expressions of concern to the Director of Research and/or Head of School as necessary.

1. **How to Apply**

It is necessary to complete an online application form, with additional sheets uploaded as necessary. PEC can only evaluate the ethical implications of a proposal if all relevant information is included (particularly methodology and procedure).

PEC applications are made online at <http://w3.abdn.ac.uk/clsm/PsyEthics/> (School of Psychology Ethics Review Website). The online submission system has been optimised for ease of use and allows for collaborative preparation of proposals, automatically archives applications, and enables linking of updates with originally approved PEC applications. In the online submission system, one researcher creates an application, adds the other researchers, fills in all the details and uploads the forms. Upon submitting the application, the other researchers are notified by email to agree with the application (equivalent to a signature, indicating compliance with BPS guidelines). The supervisor of student research is also given an option to open it for editing if it requires further work. Once all the researchers have agreed with the application, it will be sent for review.

It is very likely that you will need to upload a series of documents with your application. Besides consent and debrief forms, which are needed for most applications, depending on the type of research you are conducting, you may also need to enclose letters to parents, headmasters, recruitment posters or various company approvals. There are standard forms for these documents on the Ethics section of the School website. **Always use the latest version of the documents available on the School’s website. Examples of documents are regularly updated to reflect changes in guidance and policy, so please check in order to make sure you are using the most current one.**

As explained earlier, for submissions through the ethics website, all researchers need to sign into the system and indicate their agreement with the application before it can be sent for review. Researchers will be notified by email that an application has been created on which they are a named researcher and provided with a link that will allow them to log in, check the application and sign it if they are in agreement. In case you are submitting a paper/email version, please make sure you sign and date the application/update. Applications and updates that are signed in the absence of or on behalf of the investigator(s) will be returned. **Online confirmations of agreement (or signatures, in case of a paper submission) represent a formal acknowledgement of an undertaking of responsibility for the ethical conduct of the research project and adherence to guidelines set out by associated professional bodies.**

Fast track applications and updates will be normally reviewed within 7 days of receipt. Full applications will normally be reviewed by the committee within 10 days of receipt. Applications which raise serious ethical issues will be deferred for consideration at a committee meeting attended by external member(s) of the committee as necessary. You will receive an email notifying you of the review outcome and will be able to log in and read the review.

*Fast Track Applications:* This is for research that does not raise any or significant ethical issues, including work not involving human or non-human participants. Applications must include a brief description of the procedures intended to serve as a justification for fast track application.

*Full Applications:* For all other research, a full account of experimental procedures and respective implications for participants. Applicants are responsible for identifying which aspects of the research raise ethical issues and describing which procedures will be in place to lessen or counter their impact. Reference to a previously agreed application (including the PEC number) may be helpful, but does not obviate the need to carefully describe measures proposed to deal with adverse responses in participants, whether anticipated or not. See *Section Notes* and *General Notes* below for further guidance. It is expected that most non-undergraduate level submissions will be in the form of full applications so that projects are subjected to an appropriate level of scrutiny.

*Updates:* Updates are necessary if an already approved, on-going study is being modified in a substantial way. The researcher is responsible for determining whether paradigm alteration will impact significantly on participants and thus raise new ethical issues. Examples of changes that warrant an update include administration of an additional questionnaire, increasing testing time in a non-trivial fashion thereby risking discomfort or fatigue, re-recruitment or alternative recruitment method, and so forth. As a rule of thumb, updates are needed if 1) research question changes, 2) what participants do changes in a non-minor way, 3) changes are made regarding access to sensitive/personal data. You can apply for an update using the online submission system. To apply there are two possibilities: 1) for updates to studies originally approved prior to May 2014, use the NEW UPDATE option in the ‘Applications’ drop down menu and enter the PEC number of your previously approved application which you are updating; 2) for updates to studies approved in May 2014 or after, click on the update button next to the original application in the ‘My Applications’ listing from the ‘Applications’ drop down menu.

*Generic Applications:* You may also want to submit an application that covers a broader area and includes several experiments that are still in the planning stage. This may be necessary in some cases due to the requirement of certain funding bodies that ethical approval is already in place at the start of the project. These applications can be fast track or full track, depending on the ethical issues raised and the requirements of your funding body. Careful consideration should be given to the course of the study, both anticipated and actual. It is unethical and unprofessional to alter any scientific procedure ad hoc and without ethical approval to compensate for substantive unanticipated events or data. Update application(s) are required when revisions or paradigm shifts fall outwith the original remit.

*Level 4 Honours dissertation applications*: Supervisors should make sure that the student has read this document and is given guidance in preparing their own ethics application as this constitutes a significant part of conducting a research project. It is the duty of the supervisor to ensure that applications are not submitted incomplete and of inadequate quality. Incomplete applications waste the time of reviewers who have to return them for resubmission. These applications are made using the online submission system. The supervisor should check the application thoroughly for completeness and quality before indicating agreement. If the application needs further work, the supervisor can open it for further editing by using the 'unlock application' button on the declaration page. Application should only be submitted when both the student and the supervisor are content with its quality.

*Level 3 Practical applications*: Supervisors should prepare an application in advance of the practical. It is advised to get the application submitted and approved before the semester commences, so as not to cause delays in the schedule of the practical. The students can be added as researchers to the application using an update. Ethics should be discussed with the students during the initial meetings, in order to develop ethical thinking about research and prepare them for writing and submitting their own ethics for dissertation projects in Level 4. If any changes that warrant an update arise from discussions with the students, an update should be submitted following the usual procedures.

**Research may not commence until applications have undergone ethical review and have been agreed.**

1. **Notes on the Ethics Applications**

These guidelines provide you with assistance in producing a clear presentation of the ethical issues raised by your experiment. They are not rules. Individual experiments require specific treatment and the way you respond to the questions depends on the nature of the research you are proposing to conduct. Although the application requires you to provide YES/NO questions to elucidate which ethical issues are raised by your study, answering these questions should not become a box-ticking exercise and a replacement for thoughtful consideration of ethical principles as they apply to the proposed study. For any answers that do raise ethical concerns in Parts 1-3 of the application, please enumerate responses in the text-box as clearly and concisely as possible.

The level of detail provided should be sufficient for PEC to be able to evaluate foreseeable consequences to participants’ psychological and physical well-being, health, and dignity. PEC is not accountable for ethical elements or dimensions of research protocols that applicants have withheld.

These notes are based on PEC’s previous guidelines, and incorporate important new information. As of January 2006, the major change to our local review procedure involves a shift of onus onto the applicant(s) to clearly identify ethical issues arising, and that the proposed counter measures adequately deal with those issues.

**3.1 Applicants**

Projects must be supervised by a tenured member of academic staff ([see list of personnel on web pages](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/people)); this is the permanent member of staff associated with the project.

**3.2: Participation in experiments and other types of research**

**3.2.1 Informed written consent**

Good practice suggests that participants are aware of what will happen to them or what is required of them in the course of the study. If this is not done then informed consent cannot be obtained. Answering NO to the question on informed consent requires an explanation of why participants will not be fully informed as to the nature of the experiment.

Informed, written consent is a key aspect of participation in all research with human participants. Whenever possible, participant(s) should agree to the procedures that he or she will undergo by providing a dated signature on an appropriate form. This includes most types of observational research. Consent is essential for work with patient groups, whether obtained from the patient or a designated relative. It is also essential when working with children, where parental consent needs to be obtained (see below). You must indicate how you will give participants the information they require in order for them to provide you with informed consent. Circumstances may affect the person’s ability to give free informed consent if that person is detained under legislative power.

With regard to the Data Protection Act, *there is a distinction between anonymity and confidentiality* and participants need to be informed of this clearly. Data held anonymously cannot be linked to individual participants. Individuals should be informed that the data are being treated in this manner. Data cannot be held in this mode if it is possible to refer back to the original consent form and thus identify the participant.

Data protection laws only apply to personal data where consent has not been given to disclose, but they do not apply to anonymised data. This is also relevant for data sharing through, for example, the UK Data Archive (see below).

From ESRC Framework document (p.11, 2012 version, retrieved from <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Framework-for-Research-Ethics_tcm8-4586.pdf> ): *Ethics review may not be required for anonymised records and data sets that exist in the public domain. This includes, for example, datasets available through the Office for National Statistics or the UK Data Archive where appropriate permissions have already been obtained and where it is not possible to identify individuals from the information provided. Specific regulations relate to the use of administrative data and secure data (see website for details in appendix). Other data providers are likely to specify their own restrictions on the access to and use of their data. These must be complied with.*

Data held confidentially are traceable (e.g. used in longitudinal or short-term re-recruitment studies). Participants must be informed that the data are stored in this manner, for how long it will be retained, who will have access to it, and that they have the right to withdrawal (please also see section 4.9 on Data storage). Individuals also have the right to have their data explained to them at any time.

Individuals recruited using the School Participation Panel often revisit the School for follow-up or additional experiments. Similarly, individuals and patients may return for subsequent monitoring or assessment. Proper informed consent regarding future usage of data or re-usage of data as part of another protocol is essential. Individuals whose personal data may be of subsequent use in academic research must be re-approached in order to obtain re-consent. Likewise, many funders recommend or require data sharing or data management planning and some journals make it a condition for submission to store the data in some form of online data repository. Consider these issues carefully. A combination of gaining consent for data sharing, anonymising data and controlling access to data (implemented through archives such as UK Data Archive) can enable the ethical and legal sharing of data.

In Questionnaire studies, return of a completed survey document is taken as an indication of consent to participate. It is, generally, not practical to obtain consent in other ways and the completed form is normally anonymous.

University policy on *Good Research Practice* and *Research Governance* requires particular attention is given to obtaining consent. Two original copies of the consent form should be produced. One is retained by the experimenter; one is retained by the participant. The participant should initial each consent item box on the form, print their name, sign and date the document. The experimenter should only complete *their* name, signature, date and (if applicable, for confidential data) participant ID section on the document. The experimenter should not pre-prepare a consent form by completing the participant’s name or test date. Photocopies of the document are not acceptable. If your research project is audited, the monitoring team will inspect every individual consent document (or a large sample of them) for authenticity.

Although Consent Form(s) may be coupled with the Participant Information Sheet, in many cases it is useful to separate these documents. Under specific circumstances it may not be possible to obtain free consent (e.g. mass distribution of questionnaires) in which case it may be argued that completion of a questionnaire is itself an indication of consent. Nevertheless, individuals must be provided with adequate prior information in order to make an informed decision whether or not they wish to further involve themselves in the study, and that non-completion, response omission, or withdrawal will not penalise them in any way.

Study objectives, information about all aspects of the research (so far as is reasonable) that might be reasonably expected to influence willingness to participate should be included. FORMAL contact details for participant queries should be provided (the senior/supervising investigator); this information may appear both on the Information Sheet and the Debrief Sheet. It is not acceptable to have student researchers putting only their own contact details on the forms. Consent forms should also include the names of all involved researchers together with their status (e.g. undergraduate students Mr Alan Smith and Miss Jane Jenkins, postdoc Dr John Johnson, etc.). Any arrangements that have been made to safeguard both identity and data during and after the study must be made clear; this includes studies involving recording or transcription of identified personal records (e.g. medical, academic) and/or use of audio and video media.

[A sample consent form is](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/documents/ethics/PEC4.00_consent_conf.docx) on the School’s research ethics pages.

**Use of data for a purpose other than that designated in the original experiment to which the individual gave their informed consent is unethical. Therefore, provisions for data sharing need to be made on the consent form.**

As you can see, the question of informed consent is highly related to questions on Confidentiality and Anonymity. Answering NO to the question on written consent requires an explanation of why written consent is not to be obtained.

**3.2.2 Voluntary participation and withdrawal**

It is essential that participants are clear that their involvement in the procedure(s) is voluntary. Financial incentives to participate should not be used, as this could be perceived as coercion or inducement, and may have ramifications for those who may feel disadvantaged or advantaged by this. Participants must also be informed that they are free to withdraw themselves or their data from the study at any stage. Participants must not be required to provide a reason for withdrawal and must not be penalised for withdrawing. You must therefore judge the balance between justifying remunerated and voluntary participation, as well as the consequences this may have for data completeness. Answering NO to the question on voluntary participation requires an explanation of why participants are not told that they can withdraw, and/or why remuneration is necessary for recruitment.

**3.2.3 Response omission**

Participants should be allowed to not answer questions in a questionnaire or interview. Requirement to complete the entire protocol could be construed as coercion. You must provide reassurance to volunteers that they are not obliged to divulge answers to personal information. Ideally, refusal to answer some of the questions should not prejudice participation in the experiment although in some circumstances, participants may be screened in this respect if experimental variables depend on specific information being provided. Describe how you will assure participants that they are not obliged to respond. Answering NO to this question requires a very strong justification.

**3.2.4 Confidentiality/Anonymity**

How will you ensure that any personal information you receive from participants will be kept confidential? Confidentiality covers information recorded on data sheets as well as on computer media. It is important to acknowledge that it is not always possible to treat data anonymously; however, identifiable personal data should not be stored on computer disks (either on-line or off-line). If you are uncertain as to the issues regarding data protection and disclosure you should seek advice from the University's Data Protection Officer (dpa@abdn.ac.uk) or refer to the current Data Protection Act (1998) documentation. See also [BPS page](http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards).

It is normal practice in experiments to treat participants’ data anonymously, often by assigning a numerical reference number to individuals’ data sets. In observational experiments when participants or ‘actors’ are filmed, it is frequently the case that their facial identities will be revealed, in which case it is important that volunteers are made aware of (1) who will view the material, and (2) for how long the data will be stored and where, before consent is obtained (i.e. verbally and/or in the printed Participant Information Sheet). You may not publish illustrative material featuring individual participants (e.g. an identifiable photograph) without their express written consent.

The Data Protection Act (1998) was updated under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act (2000). The implication of this was to include personal information stored in written form, i.e. written paper records stored on file in relation to your experiments, including materials that can identify an individual contained in lab books. Click [here](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/all?title=data%20protection%20act) to view some relevant sections of the amendment on the Government’s [web site](http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/). If identifiable personal information is stored in any file or document which also contains identifiable information pertaining to another individual(s), you are not obliged to disclose the document to the requester (since the disclosure could be used to identify other individuals).

Confidentiality of the testing procedure itself also has to be observed by not posting any content on internet social networking sites (twitter, Facebook, etc.) that includes information on the participant or the session. Posting of such information would constitute misconduct and could put the researcher in breach of the Data Protection Act and the research itself at risk of being suspended.

In answering NO to the question on anonymity, a case should be made for disclosure of or potential access to participant’s or participants’ identity (see section on Informed written consent).

**3.2.5 Debriefing information**

A sample debriefing form has been provided on the Ethics section of the School website. Debrief should provide participants with further information on research objectives and procedures. Reasons for providing verbal-only information (as opposed to print) should be given. Answering NO to this question requires an explanation of why adequate information is not to be provided upon conclusion of the experimental session(s), as well as outlining mechanisms for participants to ask questions concerning their involvement in the experiment.

Good practice should be observed when debriefing. While researchers should answer questions about research objectives, methods and procedures, they should refrain from providing participants with individual feedback on their performance. Experimental participation is also an important aspect of the Group Participation experience for students. Adequate and accessible information concerning experimental design, experimental manipulations/conditions, and analysis should be given. Bear in mind that most participants will be unfamiliar with experimental terminology and concepts, so it needs to be explained in lay terms.

If during an experiment you withhold information, you are required to indicate how you will avail participants of the nature of the investigation. In some cases a verbal description is insufficient. For example, if your experiment induced negative mood or encouraged the recall of negative or emotional events, your debriefing procedure may include induction and measurement/verification of a happy mood state before the participant leaves the experimental setting. Full consideration must be given to the elimination of all possible harmful after-effects of your experiment.

In order to enhance learning (particularly for experiments involving undergraduate volunteers), the debriefing information should provide information about analysis and interpretation of hypotheses although it should still be written in a style that would be clear to an average layperson.

**3.3 Procedure**

**3.3.1 Observation and covert recording**

This often relates to usage of acquired data or filmed material, for example. Covert recording can be highly problematic and result in objections from ‘participants’ often long after the event. Answering YES to this question will probably require a full application including a detailed explanation of why written consent to participation as an observational subject/cohort cannot be or will not be obtained.

**3.3.2 Deception**

Some study protocols inevitably require withholding of information that could otherwise adversely influence the outcome of the experiment. Deceptive tactics should be minimised and, crucially, resolved at the earliest possible opportunity. The level or degree of deception involved must be entirely commensurate with the experimental hypotheses (and no greater than necessary) and, implicitly, there must be adequate evidence that the experimenters are able to deal with participants’ objections and/or expectations.

Deception may create mistrust between the experimenter and volunteer, and lead to erroneous results; participants may deliberately invoke alternate response strategies, or provide cynical responses under report conditions. Because many psychological processes are modifiable by the experimenter (even something as apparently innocuous as environmental factors), you must indicate that you are aware of potential factors that could influence your results and the steps taken to control for them.

Consideration should be given to the following excerpt from the BPS guidelines (p.26, 2010 document, retrieved on 25.1.2013. from <http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/code_of_human_research_ethics.pdf> ): ‘*There is a difference between withholding some of the details of the hypothesis under test and deliberately falsely informing the participants of the purpose of the research, especially if the information given implies a more benign topic of study than is in fact the case. This Code expects all psychologists to seek to supply as full information as possible to those taking part in their research, recognising that if providing all of that information at the start of a person’s participation may not be possible for methodological reasons. If the reaction of participants when deception is revealed later in their participation is likely to lead to discomfort, anger or objections from the participants then the deception is inappropriate. If a proposed research study involves deception, it should be designed in such a way that it protects the dignity and autonomy of the participants.*’ It should be appreciated that use of deception is sometimes necessary in order to conduct experimental research, but the dignity of participants must be protected at all times (see also 3.2.5 Debriefing).

Deception or withholding of information requires justification and submission of a full application is expected.

**3.3.3 Risk and inconvenience**

All procedures should be scrutinised for potential risks or inconvenience, however unlikely or small, volunteers may experience by participating in the experiment. Risk may be characterised by a psychological, emotional, or physical disturbance. Commonly, mood induction experiments, questionnaires, and emotional images can cause anxiety or produce reflections on upsetting personal experiences. Use of certain types of equipment can induce negative physical responses (e.g. administration of some types of food or liquid, skin irritation, headache, fluctuation in blood pressure). Thinking about w*hat could possibly go wrong* and looking at *Participation from the volunteer’s perspective* can help identify potential risks.

Provide a description of the potential sources of inconvenience your participants may be subjected to, an indication of the degree of inconvenience and its nature, and what steps you have taken to minimise or eliminate them from the procedure. You must give due consideration to the potential side-effects of experimental procedures from the outset (screening for likelihood of epileptic seizure during visual stimulation, for example) and for alterations in mood caused by discomfort (e.g. environment, stress) or length periods of testing that could influence experimental observations. Financial inducements should not be employed if potential participants are subsequently exposed to risk-taking or deviations from everyday patterns of behaviour (e.g. unnecessary time off work).

Risk-levels must not exceed those experienced by the volunteer in the course of normal every-day life or, in the case of extreme sports activities for example, that which the volunteer would routinely expose themselves to in the pursuit of recreational or professional activity. It is important to explain to participants (or potential volunteers in the case of a recruitment poster) the risks involved. In some cases, potential recruits may be dissuaded from participation by a lack of explanation and clarity about the procedures involved (e.g. ‘*electrodes will be attached to your head…*’).

If the proposed investigation has the potential to interact with pre-existing medical conditions (behavioural or physiological), indicate which pre-emptive measures you will take in order to ascertain the level of risk involved.

As outlined in section 1.1 on Monitoring, researchers are obliged to monitor ongoing research for adverse effects on participants and to stop the research if there is cause for concern about their health and well-being. Your experiment may also necessitate post-experiment monitoring.

Please also read [BPS guidelines](http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards) on observational research methods.

**3.3.4 Sensitive information**

Indicate how you will protect the dignity of participants when experiments involve acquisition of sensitive personal information (e.g. health and sexual information, emotional and experiential responses from questionnaires). As mentioned in the Debriefing section, you must avoid providing unnecessary feedback during or after an experiment; this applies to verbal, telephone, written, e-mail contact, text messaging, etc. equally. Volunteers must be provided with sufficiently detailed information to inform them that detailed feedback is not customary practice, either on task performance or the grounds for selection in follow-up experiments. In certain cases experiments are designed to screen potential participants on the basis of vulnerability to depression or panic disorder, for example, and such procedures must be fully justified and supervised by a senior researcher. Confidentiality and anonymity issues may also be raised.

Please also read BPS [guidelines](http://www.bps.org.uk/documents/Code.pdf) on problems detected during the normal course of psychological research.

**3.4 Participants and Funding**

**3.4.1 Special groups**

Close inspection of applications seeking access to specialist groups is warranted. Certain groups involve additional associated risks for the researcher. Your application should identify those risks and how they will be dealt with.

When working with special groups, particular consideration needs to be given to the type of environment in which assessment will take place and impact on outcomes.

Work with children, juveniles, individuals with learning or communication difficulties, and the vulnerable (e.g. anxiety disorder, elderly) requires careful planning. Work with young persons (≤16yo) requires Disclosure Scotland (CRB equivalent) screening (also see notes on Internet Mediated Research). Young people 16 years or older will be required to provide consent using procedures for adults. You should be aware of demographic [age] differences in University student populations in Scotland and other countries and how this might affect consent and data collection procedures.

Obtaining consent from individuals with learning or communication difficulties, and those serving custodial sentences may be problematic. You must ensure that you have secured the necessary permissions and provided adequate provision to manage distress.

Studies conducted in external organisations (e.g. companies, public services) require written permission from the relevant manager to confirm that access to collect data from employees of that organisation has been granted.

PEC may not be able to review applications for studies involving individuals engaged in certain illegal activities. Advice should be sought from the Committee Chair; you may be referred to the University research committee. However, PEC accepts the routine use of peer-reviewed published questionnaires containing potentially sensitive topics.

Applications seeking access to any volunteer cohort out with normal adult populations normally require to be seen by the full committee. See also General Notes on consent and participants.

**3.3.2 Review for funding and collaboration**

If ethical review is part of an external application, please specify the funding body. PEC may be required to provide written confirmation of ethical review in support of applications or prior to funding being awarded.

1. **General Notes**

**4.1 Pilot experiments**

If it is necessary to conduct pilot work prior to commencement of your main experiment(s), consideration must be given to the ethical issues. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ascertain whether the conduct of a pilot study raises any ethical issues and, if so, a member of PEC should be approached for clarification and/or an application for ethical approval. For example, a study of emotional responses in adults may require the use of emotion arousing materials. In order to ascertain whether stimuli are effective, a pilot experiment is required in order to assess video materials containing potentially shocking scenes that would be used in the main experiment. In such a case, ethical approval for the pilot stage is necessary since the well-being of participants must be considered during and after the experiment. Another example requiring ethical review might concern the acquisition of pilot data for the purposes of a grant application, in which the investigator must conduct a substantial number of trials in order to demonstrate the validity of the proposed technique as a research tool.

**4.2 Equipment allocation and room booking**

Members of staff (i.e. supervisors) can request equipment and room allocation from [Mr](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/people/technical/pbates.shtml) Jim Urquhart (Room S16) in advance of data collection in order to set up facilities required for the conduct of experiments and to test the feasibility of test paradigms. Students must be in receipt of the returned signed ethics application indicating ethical agreement if they are to request equipment or room allocation. Transfer the PEC number to the equipment form before submitting your request.

**4.3 Investigators and liability**

A permanent member of staff must be associated with the project. The named individual assumes responsibility for the proper ethical conduct of the experiment after project review.

Supervisors are obliged to protect their supervisees [i.e. UG, PG, RA, RF] from possible harm, being mindful of any health, safety and insurance issues that may apply to a given programme of research.

**4.4 Project description for ethical review**

Typical details used to describe experimental protocols include:

*Rationale:* A succinct description of the background and aims of the research. The description should be understandable to non-specialist readers and should clearly state why the work is being conducted. Include a copy of an appropriate key reference if necessary.

*Description:* A brief indication of the methods and procedures of the study.

*Design:* describes the paradigm used to acquire data (e.g. reaction time study, structured interview, filmed observation, questionnaire).

*Conditions:* refers to the type of procedure to be used (e.g. randomised block design using 3 conditions).

*Duration:*  estimates the time taken for a participant to complete the task. You should make it clear if volunteers may be expected to sit in a waiting room and for how long before being brought to the testing facility. If participants are required to attend multiple times, make this clear. You should have some idea of task duration from previous pilot or experimental work.

*Participants:*  should indicate the number and type of volunteers you will recruit (e.g. balanced study of 50 early-diagnosed non-dementia Alzheimer patients, and 50 age- and ability-matched controls). Consideration must be given as to what constitutes an adequate sample size and, if necessary, what statistical measures will be appropriate to ascertain this (e.g. statistical power calculations).

*Unit allocation:*  should indicate the number of credits a Level 1 student will be given for participation in the experiment. Level 1 students are required to participate in 2 group practical classes in First Half Session and 1 practical in Second Half Session, and accrue 6 credits in each Session by participating in the Individual Research Participation scheme. Thirty minutes’ testing equals one credit.

*Assessment method:* Indicate the mode of assessment you will employ to acquire your data. Experiments commonly use reaction time and accuracy measures, questionnaires, observation and video filming, discourse analysis and subjective rating assessment. Copies of novel questionnaires (in full, or in outline with supporting reference material if questionnaire design is part of the project) and interview schedules must be supplied. It is not necessary to append copies of standard, established questionnaires used in psychological research (e.g., Beck’s depression scale), as long as the reference for the questionnaire is provided. However, for less established (not previously published) questionnaires, a copy should be provided.

**4.5 Recruitment**

Participation in psychological experiments is voluntary. Provide an indication of how you will advertise for volunteers to participate in your experiment(s). If you are accessing participants from a panel, please state which panel (e.g., School participant panel, SONA, EEG lab panel, etc.). You are not allowed to use payment as an incentive to participate. Reimbursement or honoraria can be made for travel to the experiment and loss of time at work. Certain experiments that can involve some degree of discomfort or inconvenience (e.g. use of a bite bar in psychophysics, long scanning times in brain imaging) may be cause for additional compensation. If a poster advertisement is to be used, it is essential to include a copy with the application. Also bear in mind that NHS LRECs forbid recruitment of patients by direct telephone contact; this method could be interpreted as coercion and put individuals under pressure to comply.

A poster may be used either for direct recruitment (with an accompanying sign-up sheet or other method of time allocation) or as a means to initiate screening procedures in order to select a sample of appropriate volunteers (e.g. telephone or e-mail contact with the investigator in the first instance). If this is to be used in an external organisation, you may require specific permission to display it. Guidelines for poster preparation are on the School’s research ethics webpages.

If recruitment is via Sona’s PRPS, then a copy of the relevant form should be attached to the application. Permission to register the experiment on PRPS will not be given without a PEC number, signifying ethical approval, also please make sure that ethics application and PRPS titles are the same.

Particular attention should be given to the presentation of your research project in the poster. Be as professional and courteous as possible. Do not trivialise the work but at the same time you will need to make it appealing; graphical images can work for and against recruitment. Indicate the purpose of the research, where the experiment will be conducted, and how long the session(s) will last. Indicate special requirements. Make it clear if particular types of participants are required, and who is ineligible to participate. Outline what the volunteer will be required to do in the experiment. You may have to consider health issues. Provide the name and contact details of the senior investigator/supervisor from whom further information can be obtained. Please also note that the poster should include the following statement: ‘This study has been approved by the Psychology Ethics Committee, University of Aberdeen’. This is in order to inform potential participants that the study was ethically reviewed and approved by PEC.

Sign-up sheets can be used as a way to fill available time slots, and can be a useful way of gauging the response to recruitment. You must consider whether recruits are penalised in the event that they fail to turn up for the experiment (particularly for undergraduate course requirements). It is not always appropriate to contact a missing volunteer directly; therefore you need to be flexible in your scheduling of experiment slots.

Serious ethical issues arise as a consequence of the type of study being conducted and the method of recruitment. A project designed to look at sexual, emotional, medical, or substance abuse issues, for example, must not put volunteers at risk by use of a sign-up sheet posted in a publicly accessible location. Access to names, e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers could be abused by other individuals.

**4.6 Location**

Normally, PEC considers applications for routine experimental work conducted within the University of Aberdeen or affiliated institutions (such as local hospitals and clinical practices). You should indicate where you intend to conduct your study, i.e. where you propose to perform the experiment that will result in data created by your participants.

If data are to be acquired out with the remit of the University of Aberdeen, you are obliged to satisfy the Committee that all possible steps have been taken to try to ensure that participants involved in your experiment(s) will be treated according to the guidelines against which PEC itself is obliged to evaluate the implications of your project. If your research requires recruitment and study of participants abroad, for example, your application cannot be approved unless you can provide documentation indicating the agreed compliance of either an appropriate local authority body or individual responsible for hosting your programme of work. Compliance with these guidelines is an essential requirement for an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

PEC understands that in certain circumstances you may be awaiting permission to test participants at an external location. Such permission may be contingent on receiving ethical agreement in the first instance. PEC requires evidence that external permission is being sought, and any relevant documents should be attached to the application.

**4.6.1 Research in Schools**

Research with children or with participants who have impairments requires appropriate safeguards. For research with **school children** under 18 years, consent must be obtained from parents or guardians. Similarly, if access depends on the consent of a third party (parent/guardian, head teacher, physician, etc.), then you must attach a copy of the information letter sent to this authority with the application. A ‘captive audience’ may not be able to indicate free consent. Exclusion criteria may be important to ensure the safety or comfort of participants (e.g. use of contact lenses or spectacles, anomalous colour vision, asthma, migraine; or descriptions of aversive or noxious stimuli). A letter of permission from the Head Teacher of the school should be provided to PEC *before* *testing commences*; the letter may not be available at the time the original ethics application is submitted but should be provided thereafter as soon as possible. A [form is available](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/documents/ethics/PECDOC_research_in_schools.doc) which must be completed and signed by the Head Teacher of the school where the study will be conducted. Whenever possible, a copy of the document should be attached with the ethics submission. As of spring 2013, Aberdeen City Council has its own School Research Committee and following departmental ethics approval, you must also get approval from this committee in case you plan to perform research in an Aberdeen City school. Details on the procedure for obtaining approval for research in schools are available in a separate document on the School’s ethics website, as are copies of standard letters for Head Teachers and parents.

Research involving young children can raise numerous ethical problems, including obtaining consensual evidence before the work can commence. You should be aware of the implications of your work. Local Education Authorities may require you to consult with them prior to applying for access to children and to PEC (e.g., Aberdeen City has its own ethics review process). Police checks on students wishing to conduct research in schools or nurseries are also necessary, and it is important that these are conducted well in advance of the proposed experiment start date (see School of Psychology handbooks for further detail on Disclosure Scotland). Access to special needs schools during either during normal term times or out with normal hours (e.g. weekends) often requires special negotiation and preparation (e.g. access to children with autism). Your project will probably involve some level of disruption to teaching, schoolwork or family provisions. Thus, recruitment, advertising and assent must be considered from the outset.

If you are a Level 4 student and plan to conduct research in a school, please read the guidance notes for research in schools, found in all student handbooks. Whenever relevant it should be made clear to potential participants that the study is a supervised student project.

Participants under the age of 16 can only be recruited after consent is obtained in writing from parents or those *in loco parentis*. Therefore children’s parents or guardians must be consulted and their written permission obtained. It is expected that you will provide evidence of letters sent to parents, head teachers, etc. as part of your application for ethical approval.

Remember to factor into your proposal that supervision of children may require you to compensate for the presence of other adults during the experiment. Some children may be uncooperative and affect your data and/or participant numbers (and therefore variance in statistical analysis). Children may wish to withdraw from further participation, or be prevented from further participation by their supervising adult.

**4.6.1.1 Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG)**

Work with vulnerable groups (including children) may require *Disclosure Scotland* (Criminal Records Bureau equivalent) clearance. Details of the service offered by Disclosure Scotland are given on their [website](http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/). PEC’s policy is that **ALL** **researchers working in local schools** must undergo *Enhanced Disclosure Scotland* clearance. This document must be countersigned by University of Aberdeen Human Resources. Dr Emily Nordmann in the School of Psychology is your point-of-contact.

Continuing consent may require consideration of pilot schemes, familiarisation with the experimenter, or the development of alternate experimental strategies.

**4.6.2 NHS staff and patient research and drug trials**

This section refers to work involving pharmacological, psychological, psychiatric, or physiological regimes for NHS patients, patients for whom specialist referral or assessment is required, or NHS staff. For this type of study, you are required to obtain National Research Ethics Service (NRES) approval before you apply to PEC. You are required to provide the NRES with very detailed information about your study. The application has to be booked in for a monthly committee meeting. Plan your work in advance. Be aware of the deadlines for submission and receipt of notification from NRES (North of Scotland Research Ethics Service (NoSRES) in our case). Some NHS staff research may be classified as audit, but written evidence of this decision must be provided to the PEC. NRES can request evidence of PEC review of research proposals in advance if the study also involves the need to recruit large samples of the public or to measure ‘baseline’ responses in control group populations. The BPS document ‘Guidelines for minimum standards of ethical approval in psychological research’ (July 2004) states ‘*approval by an External Ethics Committee does not remove the need for local ethical approval by either a Departmental Ethics Committee or Institutional Ethics Committee*.’ If adequate information is not provided, or the work is not properly justified, your application is likely to be delayed or rejected. NHS review committees have the right to request further information in order to clarify the proposed research if they see fit. Such action is taken in order to protect participants’ interests, to adhere to accredited ethical guidelines (similarly for the BPS), to protect the interests of individuals conducting psychological research, and to adhere to legal requirements of our institution.

You are prohibited from acquiring and reporting data obtained from any volunteer without obtaining their free informed consent. Individuals (whether designated as a ‘patient’ or not) who are not in a position to demonstrate coherent understanding of the experiment and their role in it must not be approached directly. If the research involves NHS patients, applications should be directed to the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) using their electronic forms available from their website (<https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/Signin.aspx> ). If you wish to seek clarification, please contact their representatives. Please note that this local policy overrules BPS Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles & Guidelines section 3.4, page 9.

Most NHS research now requires the researchers to have a certificate showing that they have completed the Good Clinical Practice course.

If one of your collaborators is an NHS-paid researcher (even though they may be employed by the University), you must register them with the NHS R&D Office using the Site-Specific Information form (SSI).

All projects which involve NHS staff, patients, patient samples, patient records or facilities should be registered with the NHS R&D Office when

* Externally funded by Research Councils, Charities, UK Government, Europe or any other international body
* Part of a multi-centre trial in which Aberdeen is a collaborator regardless of funding
* Supported by NHS Grampian endowment grants, departmental funds, named endowment accounts or discretionary funds
* Identified as Grant in Aid - where a contribution is made towards research by a commercial company
* Unfunded

**4.6.3 Internet mediated research (IMR)**

Suggestions for how to implement consent policies in research involving the internet are given in [Hewson C (2003) Conducting research on the internet. *The Psychologist*, 16(6), 290-293](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/psychology/documents/ethics/0603hews.pdf). Young people 16 years or older will be required to provide consent using procedures for adults. Responses should not be solicited from persons under the age of 16 years of age without adequate justification. The latest guidance on IMR from the BPS can be found on our ethics web pages [here](http://abdn.ac.uk/psychology/research/ethics/info/).

**4.8 Right to withdraw**

Data from participants who indicate withdrawal after the study should be treated in the same way as any other volunteer. It is important to reassure participants, particularly if they feel vulnerable in an unfamiliar experimental environment or suffer from a diagnosed medical condition. Acquiring data from particular groups of individuals can be problematic; for example, people with schizophrenia, autism, depression, paranoia, amnesia, Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s. You are advised to incorporate provisions in your experimental protocol to cater for loss of participant numbers, and identify a replacement strategy if possible (this can affect comparison with normative control data which, ideally, should be acquired after patient data).

**4.9. Data storage**

A secure designated area for data storage is necessary in order to protect experimental data. It is also essential when the identity of participants can be recovered from materials. You should indicate where data are to be stored (either on hard disk, CDROM, DVD, tape, printed media, or in another raw form) and who will have access to it. Student investigators should indicate how they will safeguard data kept at home (e.g. during data entry). In certain cases it may be necessary to indicate to participants that their data will be destroyed after a period of months or years or at such times as when the principal investigator is no longer in the employ of the University of Aberdeen.

You are expected to use encrypted memory sticks if your work involves NHS-related protocols, transfer of data between machines, etc.

The storage of raw data on cloud-based systems such as Dropbox is against University policy and could be research malpractice. If the consent or debriefing information indicates data will be stored on a secure, password-protected computer then the university could severely punish the individual (and PI) if they go outside agreed terms and use an unauthorised cloud system, and this would also fall within the remit of the Data Protection Act.

**4.10 Participant exclusion**

Certain participants may not be appropriate for your research. Examples include very young children who have not yet developed complex skills, members of the public or patients either suspected or known to be under the influence of pharmacological agents or alcohol, or individuals with prior knowledge of (or professional experience at a level inappropriate for) the research that could adversely affect experimental outcomes. The scientific rationale for exclusion and inclusion should be made clear.

**4.11 Special requirements**

You may require some of your participants abstain from exercise or alter dietary practices prior to assessment, for example. You may wish to conduct experimental work in particular environments (e.g. heat and noise, trial jury mock-ups, observation using one-way mirrors, observation by strangers). The Participant Information Sheet must make this clear in every detail. Special requirements may impact on health issues due to participants’ age, for example, which must be addressed.

**4.12 Supplementary measures**

Describe any additional procedure(s) you have introduced to ensure your research complies with the BPS code of conduct and ethical guidelines (confidentiality, moral issues, physical safety, and psychological consequences of participation). Attach copies of relevant documents (e.g. Department of Health information leaflets).