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ResearchBite – Introduction to Research Ethics

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Introduction to Research Ethics



Introduction to research ethics, its rationale and implementation in the context of research integrity, and will provide researchers with an overview of the research ethics approval processes within the University.

Contents



- Research integrity
- Development of research ethics
- Key principles of ethical research
- Research ethics approval process at the University of Aberdeen
- Additional support and resources

Research Integrity - Definition



*“Research integrity refers to the **active adherence**, by researchers and research organisations, of the ethical principles and professional and legislative standards essential for the responsible practice of research. “*

University of Aberdeen, [Research Governance Handbook](#), p4

Research Integrity – In Practice



- Research integrity applies throughout the research life cycle, from the initial idea or concept to the publication of research outcomes.
- It describes the standards of good research conduct which are required by the University and which are intended to satisfy the requirements of all funding bodies.
- These standards apply to all individuals involved in research, including visiting researchers, research support staff, students and research managers and professional support staff.

Research Integrity – Core Elements



- ✓ **Honesty** in reporting research goals, methods and outcomes
- ✓ **Rigour** in line with prevailing disciplinary norms and standards
- ✓ **Transparency and open communication** in declaring potential competing interests, sharing negative or null results, accessibility of research outcomes and data
- ✓ **Care and respect for all participants in, and subjects, users and beneficiaries of research**, including humans, animals, the environment and cultural objects

Research Ethics



Research ethics refers to the moral principles guiding research, from its start through to completion and publication of results and beyond.

Historical Development of Research Ethics



- **Nazi doctors during WWII:** significant harm, lack of participant consent
- **Tuskegee Syphilis Study, Alabama 1932 – 72:** significant harm, withholding of information, withholding of medical care
- **Stanford University Prison experiment, 1971:** significant harm caused by escalating brutality amongst participants; experiment abandoned after seven days

Development of Codes of Conduct

- As a result of these and other cases, influential codes were developed to specify ethical expectations of research
- Research ethics as a field has largely developed by way of codification of principles in response to abuses or malpractice



Nuremberg Code of Ethics (1947)

Declaration of Helsinki (1964)

Belmont Report (1978)

Research Ethics - Today



- Most Universities have a policy and/or code of ethics
- Most professional bodies have a code of ethics
- Most research funders have a code of ethics
- Our Research Ethics statement is contained in section three of the **University of Aberdeen Research Governance Handbook**

<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/research-ethics-and-governance-2778.php>

What types of research require ethical approval?



You have a responsibility to apply for ethical approval if:

- Your research involves **human participants** (or their remains)
- Your research involves **genetic resources** (plants, animals, microorganisms)
- There are any **issues which you feel might raise any ethical concerns** during proposed research activity (for example, the use of artefacts; environmental impact; potential conflicts of interest; potential harm to the researcher/participants/the University; financial inducements for participants)
- Your research activity might involve the **sharing of data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given** (including where research relies solely on secondary data)

Note that the above research activity **must not commence** until ethical approval has been granted.

Key Principles of Ethical Research



1. Maximise benefit and minimise harm (non-maleficence)

Research should be conducted in such a way that it **minimises risk of harm** to individuals or social groups.

- **probability**: how likely is harm to occur?
- **severity**: how serious might the harm be?

- Harm can occur **physically, psychologically, or socially**
- **Participants, researchers, the public, or institutions** can be harmed

Key Principles of Ethical Research



Risk of harm: 1.) minimal or 2.) more than minimal.

More than minimal risk may include:

1. Research involving vulnerable groups
2. Research involving sensitive topics
3. Research involving groups where permission of a gatekeeper is normally required for initial access to members
4. Research involving deception or which is conducted without participants' full and informed consent
5. Research involving access to records of personal or confidential information
6. Research which would induce psychological stress, anxiety or humiliation or cause more than minimal pain
7. Research involving intrusive interventions

Key Principles of Ethical Research



2. Obtain Consent

- Risk is managed by obtaining **consent** from participants
- Consent means a voluntary, un-coerced decision, made by a sufficiently competent or autonomous person on the basis of adequate information and deliberation, to accept rather than reject a proposed course of action
- Competency to consent is also defined legally by **age** – Children (in Scotland, under the age of 16)
- Forms of **proxy consent** are used when working with research participants not competent to consent

Key Principles of Ethical Research



Consent - Covert Research

Another way of thinking about consent is by considering those cases when it is NOT obtained.

For instance, all **COVERT** or some **OBSERVATIONAL** studies

- Are there justified instances where covert methods might be acceptable?
 - high value of the research?
 - methodological difficulties in behavioural research?
 - researching participants where gaining access and/or consent highly unlikely?

Key Principles of Ethical Research

3. Provide Information

Adequate information must be provided regarding the research project

- Aims of research
- How research participants will be involved
- Potential benefits and potential risks

Quality of information

- Truthfulness and accuracy

The research participant must understand what is involved

- Any risks
- There should be time for deliberation, and to allow participants to withdraw from the research
- Barriers to understanding are:
 - Failing to appreciate nature of the research
 - Having **too much information**
 - Information is **too technical** or filled with **jargon**

Key Principles of Ethical Research



4. Ensure Confidentiality

- Confidentiality must be preserved. Researchers must take steps to ensure that research data and its sources remain confidential unless participants have consented to their disclosure.
- Research data must be protected and (wherever possible) anonymised.
- Handling of data must be in line with the law and ethical guidelines.
- Any secondary data analysis must be subject to specific consent, or the data anonymised.
- There are both ethical (i.e. respecting the relationship between researcher and research participant) and legal dimensions (e.g. data protection) to confidentiality

Key Principles of Ethical Research



5. Good Research Data Management

- University guidance

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/research-data-management-428.php>

- **Data Protection Act 2018 & General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**

The above legislation determines how personal data should be handled. The University's [Data Protection Policy](#) ensures compliance with this legislation, whilst enabling the use of personal data for teaching, research, administrative and other legitimate activities.

Personal data = any information relating to an identified or identifiable living person. If it is possible to identify an individual directly from the information you are processing, then that information may be personal data. Anonymised data is not covered by the GDPR.

Key Principles of Ethical Research



Good Research Data Management

- Further guidance on data protection issues (and GDPR compliance) can be obtained from the University's **Information Governance Team** (dpa@abdn.ac.uk) and also on our website:

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/governance/data-protection-6958.php>

- Specific guidance is available on **'Academic Research and Data Protection'** (<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/governance/data-protection-6958.php#panel8627>)

University of Aberdeen Research Ethics Approval Processes



- [Arts, Social Sciences & Business](#)
- [Physical Sciences & Engineering](#)
- [Psychology](#)
- [Life Sciences & Medicine](#)
- [Clinical Research Governance](#)
- Animal Research (Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Board and Home Office Approval is required)

University of Aberdeen Research Ethics Approval processes



Common elements in each process:

- Review the *ethics checklist* to determine if your research will require ethical approval
- Complete the *application form* for ethical approval
- Attach a copy of your *project proposal* (brief project description), including your methodology and your strategy for handling ethical issues
- If your research will involve human participants, provide a
 - *consent form* and
 - *participant information sheet*

Ethical Review - Benefits to the Researcher



- Improves the research project by helping researchers to clarify the aims, research methodology and outputs from their research
- Encourages good conduct in research
- Protects the researcher and the research participants

Additional Support and Resources



- **Online training course on research ethics** – available on [MyAberdeen](#) (staff and student versions) – three modules to be completed:
 - Principles of Research Ethics
 - Harm, Risk and Consent
 - Research Integrity
- **Compulsory for all postgraduate research students** – is monitored as part of the annual progress review. Postgraduate taught students will undertake this training at the discretion of their Programme Coordinator. It is expected that all research-active staff will complete this training.

Additional Support and Resources



- Research governance webpages (including link to Research Governance Handbook, Ethics Committee webpages, and Online Ethics training course):

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/research-governance-304.php>

- Discipline guidance from professional associations

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/ethical-approval-2780.php#panel9179>

Thank you for listening!

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