Ethical review may be necessary for a variety of forms of research. It is a requirement of the University and of the majority of funding bodies that approval is sought and obtained for any research with certain defined characteristics (see University of Aberdeen Research Governance Handbook https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/research-governance-304.php#panel6326); this includes any research that involves human participants. The Physical Sciences & Engineering Board has developed a Policy for Ethical Review and Approval. This policy applies to research conducted as part of:

- Academic-led research projects.
- Postgraduate and undergraduate research projects, including dissertation and thesis projects.

It covers research in all areas of the physical sciences and engineering, and applies to staff and students from the Schools of Engineering, Geosciences and Natural and Computing Sciences. The Board also reviews and approves research projects from other areas of the University when appropriate, by arrangement with other University ethics committees.

It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator or the Programme Co-ordinator to ensure this policy is adhered to. Further information about the Board’s ethics process can be found at https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/ethical-approval-2780.php#panel6499.

Ethical approval should be sought as early in the research proposal process as possible. For externally funded projects, the applicant should complete the self-assessment Ethical Review Checklist (Annex A) as described below to determine whether further ethical review will be required. This should be done before the proposal is submitted to the Head of School and Research & Innovation (R&I) for first review (see also the Policy on Peer Review). Depending on the funding body’s rules, full approval may not be needed at the application stage. Any application for external funding should include a signed declaration that the applicant has understood his/her obligations under the institutional Research Ethics Framework, and, where appropriate, the RCUK requirements. This is included on the grant application cover sheet.

1. Separate review processes

The Board is mainly concerned with research that involves human participants. The following types of research are handled using different processes.

(i) Research involving NHS staff, patients, facilities and premises is subject to ethical review by the NHS North of Scotland Research Ethics Service (NOSRES) (see http://www.nhsgrampian.co.uk/nhsgrampian/gra_display_simple_index.jsp?pContentID=2991&p_applic=CCC&p_service=Content.show&). This includes research involving individuals when their status as NHS staff or patients is relevant to the research, even when a medical condition is not the subject of the research. Research involving adults who do not have the capacity to consent is subject to these same ethical review procedures.

(ii) Research involving animal and biological materials is subject to Home Office regulations. Forms and guidance can be obtained from Ms Liza Young (liza.young@abdn.ac.uk). The University’s statement on the use of animals in research is available at
(iii) If collection of genetic resources (organisms, microorganisms, DNA, RNA, proteins, small molecules) from signatories to the Convention on Biodiversity/Nagoya Protocol is involved, then a relevant agreement must be in place before this can begin. This agreement must provide prior informed consent with mutually agreed terms and it must be in keeping with the Convention on Biodiversity/Nagoya Protocol and be obtained via the national focal point of the provider country. A statement to this effect must be included in grant applications that intend to make such collection.

2. Academic-led research projects

The ethical review process has two stages. All academic research projects must be ethically assessed by the researcher to determine whether there is a need for formal ethical approval, using the self-assessment process detailed below (Stage i). If formal ethical approval is required, the researcher must submit an application to the Physical Sciences & Engineering Ethics Board (Stage ii).

i. Self-Assessment

The researcher must determine by self-assessment whether the research requires formal ethical approval, using the Ethical Review Checklist (Annex A). If the answer to all of the questions is NO, the project needs no further ethical review.

ii. Full Ethical Review and Approval

If the answer to any of the questions in the Ethical Review Checklist is YES, the project must undergo a full ethical review. The project cannot begin until approval has been granted. If the project is not subject to review by NOSRES or under Home Office regulations (see above), the researcher must complete the Ethics Review and Approval Form (Annex B) and submit it to the Ethics Board for review through the Clerk of the Board (copsethics@abdn.ac.uk).

The application will be forwarded to an appropriate member – usually the School representative – of the Ethics Board for consideration. Applications demonstrating potentially complex ethical issues may also be reviewed by one or more other members of the Board and/or the Board as a whole. Some applications may require additional advice from other University ethics committees, from the University Data Protection Officer, or on intellectual property issues from colleagues in Research & Innovation.

A response will normally be provided to the applicant within 7-14 days, although very complex proposals may take longer. The outcome of the review will be communicated to the applicant by the Clerk of the Ethics Board as soon as practicable. Often the applicant will be asked to submit a revised application to resolve issues identified by the reviewer.

3. Postgraduate and undergraduate research projects

The University is responsible for all research activities undertaken at the University. The University must therefore be satisfied that research undertaken by students is in compliance with this procedure.

The checklist (Annex A) must be completed by all PGR, PGT students and undergraduate students before beginning a research project or preparing dissertation or thesis proposals. Students should discuss the checklist with their supervisor. If the answer to all of the questions is NO, the project needs no further ethical review.

If the answer to any of the questions on the checklist is YES, the research proposal needs further ethical review. The project cannot begin until approval has been granted. The precise nature of the review process depends on the discipline; students should consult their supervisor and/or Programme Coordinator for details. All PGR project students and most PGT project students must complete the Ethics
Review and Approval Form (Annex B). Often, but not always, undergraduate project students go through a different process.

The Board is required to report on ethical review activity. Therefore it is important that all applications requiring full ethical review by the Board are directed to the Clerk of the Ethics Board (copsethics@abdn.ac.uk).

For further information please contact the Clerk of the Ethics Board in the first instance, copsethics@abdn.ac.uk.