

Human Research Ethics

Coursework Guidelines

Introduction

An ethical approach to human research is one that respects and protects research participants. These guidelines are designed to support the ethical conduct of student projects that have a human research dimension, but do not require formal approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). In assessing whether a project requires HREC approval unit co-ordinators need to take into account the nature of the research and the level of risk involved.

The Research Test – research and research activity

The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (the Code) sees research as ‘original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight.’ The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (the National Statement) refers to ‘new or substantially improved insights’. These documents are not referring to the knowledge, understanding and insight of individuals (which is learning) but to advances in the public stock of knowledge. Clearly most student coursework research projects do not meet this test of research. However, many projects do require students to engage in research activity such as the use of experiments, observations, interviews, surveys, questionnaires, standardized tests, video and audio recordings, and performance and physical measures to gather and analyse data. Such coursework activity will not require HREC approval where:

1. the primary focus is on student learning, and
2. the results will not be disseminated beyond the University or interested parties, and
3. the risks are low or negligible

The Low Risk Test

If your project includes any of the following, then the research activity will not meet the low risk criteria and will require HREC approval.

1. Any physical/psychological/social/economic or legal risks greater than inconvenience or discomfort, in either the short or long term, resulting from participation or use of data in this project
2. Use of identifiable or coded health information without consent
3. A focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues and/or participants
4. A focus on children and young people under 18 years
5. A focus on homeless people, addicts and refugees
6. Interventions and therapies e.g. administration of drugs, clinical or psychological treatments
7. Participants who have a cognitive impairment, an intellectual disability, or a mental illness
8. Human genetic research
9. Pregnant women and the human foetus
10. Research intended to study/expose illegal activity
11. People highly dependent on medical care who may not be able to give consent
12. Sensitive, contentious or highly personal issues e.g. suicide, eating disorders, body image, trauma, violence, substance abuse
13. The activity potentially infringes the privacy or professional reputation of participants or organisations.

In considering risks, particular attention should be given to the sensitivities and vulnerabilities of groups not listed above such as older persons, unemployed and disabled people. Some consideration of the sensitivities of organisations, employers and workers is also important when collecting data in workplaces.

While student projects may not require HREC approval they still need to be conducted ethically, and unit convenors need to be aware of the ethical principles underpinning the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. The principles informing this

document are set out below, together with some strategies for addressing ethical considerations in student research projects.

The National Statement - Principles

The principles used in the design, review and conduct of human research are set out in the *National Statement* (see <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/e72> for the full document) and comprise research merit and integrity, justice, beneficence and respect. These principles provide a framework for identifying human research ethics issues.

Research merit and integrity

- Is the research justifiable by its potential benefit? (i.e. its contribution to knowledge, human wellbeing or improved social welfare)
- Is the research based on a thorough analysis of the current literature?
- Is the research designed using methods appropriate for achieving the aims of the proposal, that at the same time do not compromise respect for participants?
- Will the research be undertaken following recognised principles of research conduct, and is there a commitment to searching for knowledge and conducting the work honestly?

Justice

- Is the recruitment of participants, accurately described, fair and suitable for the objectives?
- Does participation in the research place an unfair burden on particular groups or constitute exploitation?
- Will the research outcomes be made accessible to research participants?

Beneficence

- Taking into account research merit considered above, does the likely benefit of the research justify any risks of harm/discomfort to participants or the researchers?
- Have the researchers taken into account the welfare of the participants, designed the project in such a way to minimise the risks of harm/discomfort to participants or themselves, clarified to participants the potential risks and benefits of the research?

Respect

- Are participants asked to give their consent? Are they given sufficient information and do they have an adequate understanding of the research and the implications of their participation?
- Have the researchers shown respect for the welfare, beliefs, perceptions, customs and cultural heritage of all participants involved in the research?
- Have the researchers shown respect for the privacy, confidentiality and any possible sensitivities of the participants?
- Have the researchers taken into consideration the capacity of human beings to make their own decisions, including ensuring those who are unable or have diminished capacity to do so, are appropriately empowered and protected as necessary.

Strategies for unit convenors, lecturers and/or students to address ethical issues in student projects

1. Assess the level of risk in the coursework research projects as per the National Statement.
2. Incorporate ethical considerations as part of the project design and/or assessment.
3. Debrief the group on ethical issues encountered during the conduct of the project.
4. Where appropriate use some of the common tools used in research ethics such as a Participant Information Sheet, a Consent Form or other method of obtaining consent, a letter of invitation/notice of recruitment, a statement of confidentiality/anonymity, a statement about the use and disposal of the data, a statement about the right to withdraw without any consequences or to not answer any particular questions.
5. Identify any ethical considerations/risks relating to particular categories of participants (such as those identified in the National Statement).
6. Identify any ethical considerations/risks relating to specific research methods such as interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, video or audio recordings.
7. Identify any sensitive information that may cause distress – consider in particular the way questions are worded.
8. Identify ethical considerations/risks relating to the site(s) of the project such as workplaces, the home environment, institutional settings.
9. Identify the potential impact of the research on third parties e.g. risks to an organisation or its employees, or to a program of work.

10. Address, where appropriate, each of the principles in the National Statement (see above).
11. Discuss the range of risks and how to minimise or manage risks.

Coursework Program Ethics Scheme

The Coursework Program Ethics Scheme covers projects that are considered low risk and where research results will be disseminated beyond the University and interested parties.

Applications for Coursework Approval must be submitted through the Human Ethics Online Application Form (<https://ethicsform.canberra.edu.au>) and reviewed in accordance with the National Statement and university policies/guidelines. Applications can be project specific or seek approval for a variety of student projects within a coursework unit. The Chief Investigator must be the Unit Convenor.

The following information is required:

- A detailed description of the coursework program and all proposed student projects
- Detailed information on methods to be used, recruitment, consent procedures and risks
- Copies of the Participant Information and Consent Form as well as other relevant materials such as flyers, approval letters etc.

Approval can be gained for a maximum of three years and annual reports must be submitted in a timely manner. New students must be added to existing protocols via a request for variation before the commencement of the project.

Please note: where a unit requires a substantial and original research project, or where a coursework project fails the low risk test, a separate application must be submitted to the Committee for ethical review.