

Research Guidance Note 2

Research Ethics

Governance Structures

Governance structures

Edinburgh Napier University is committed to promoting high standards of ethical awareness and behaviour by staff and students undertaking research, knowledge exchange and associated activities.

All staff and students involved in research at the University have a personal responsibility to behave in an ethical manner and in a way that does not bring the University's reputation into disrepute.

Each School has a Research and Innovation Committee with responsibility at School level for ethical approvals and procedures. This mechanism allows ethical approval processes to be adapted to local School needs. The University Research Integrity Committee reports to the University Research and Innovation Committee and helps develop university-wide practices and policies. Responsibility for compliance with the University Code of Practice on Research Integrity within each School lies with the Dean of School.

The ethics approval procedure has been devolved to School level to ensure that it is appropriate for the types of research commonly carried out in each School. These structures and policies have been endorsed by the University Research Integrity Committee and should be clearly published within each School with a web link to the University Code of Practice.

Cross-University Ethical Approval Procedure

The Cross – University ethical approval process is designed to consider applications with research located in more than one School, or an application from a researcher based out with the School structure (for example Professional services staff). The cross-university ethical approval process is a triage system based on risk assessment, ensuring special consideration is given to medical/invasive work, vulnerable groups, or research involving staff and students within Edinburgh Napier University.

A three tier form has been established starting with a self-assessment to establish level of risk and guidance on to establish level of risk and guidance on level of scrutiny required for the research project. If the assessment establishes the research to be low risk, it would be signed off at this stage. Medium risk research regarded to have a level of risk that requires consideration would be asked to complete standard ethical questions. Research deemed to be high risk would be directed to further questions for more rigorous scrutiny.

A panel of reviewers for cross – university applications draws from a pool of academics with expertise in ethics, subject areas and/or methodology, e.g. convenors of school research integrity committees, School Gatekeeper, members of staff with expertise/knowledge willing to contribute to our ethical approval procedures.

It is the responsibility of the Research and Innovation Office (RIO) to receive the Cross – University ethical approval forms and the administrator will send the application to three identified reviewers who are given a two – week turnaround to approve/reject the application.

School Ethics, Structures and Policies

Within each School there should be clearly designated structures and policies which ensure that:

- a) There is a designated person or persons to oversee general operation of research ethics and governance activities within the School. This function could also be handled by a School Research Integrity Committee. Current information on individuals fulfilling relevant roles in relation to research ethics such as convenors of research integrity committees or ‘gatekeepers’ is available on School and University websites including the Research and Innovation Office.

- b) Appropriate 'gatekeepers' are identified who are responsible for scrutinising any research proposals from staff or students within the School.
- c) The development needs of all staff involved in teaching, research and knowledge exchange are reviewed regularly, identified and met.
- d) The content of students' study programmes incorporates suitable training in the ethics and governance issues appropriate to their discipline and their level of study. This learning may fall largely, but not exclusively, within research methods modules. The University expects all academic staff to engage in developmental activities in order to ensure the currency and relevance of the knowledge they impart to students.
- e) Where a researcher is not fully competent or sufficiently informed to make a fair judgement about the conflicting needs and interests of direct and indirect participants (for example, in relation to an undergraduate project on a sensitive topic) it is essential that specialist advice is sought, normally from the 'gatekeeper' in the first instance or from the Convenor of the School Research Integrity Committee.

Appropriate records are kept by researchers, 'gatekeepers' and committees to show for each project proposal, when ethical or governance issues have been identified, if they have been referred elsewhere (for example to an external committee) and what guidance or requirements have been given to the researcher or their 'gatekeeper'. There must be compliance checks to ensure that such advice or requirements are observed. This can be as simple as an email acknowledgement from the project's originator.

- f) Reporting relationships are established, including regular reports from School level to the University Research Integrity Committee.

The role of ‘gatekeepers’ A gatekeeper is an experienced member of staff who is familiar with ethical good practice. For the purpose of this document, the gatekeeper will normally be a member of the School Research Integrity Committee who has been identified as having responsibility for an identified subject group, academic school or department, research cluster or other functional area within the School. This person will act as a point of contact and information for both academic staff and students undertaking research.

Specifically, the Gatekeeper will:

- Be an active member of the School Research Integrity Committee;
- Provide advice on ethical matters to: academic staff undertaking research; academic staff supervising students; and, students undertaking research as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate studies;
- Provide advice as to the process of obtaining formal ethical clearance for both staff and student research studies;
- Make initial assessments of individual applications for ethical approval on behalf of the School and University Research integrity committees using criteria detailed in the University Code of Practice on Research Integrity. As such, the Gatekeeper will act as an initial point of contact for supervisors, staff and students concerning ethical issues for specific research studies. The gatekeeper is required to be:
 - available to answer questions regarding research ethics;
 - provide timely feedback to staff and students regarding such issues;
 - make initial assessments of individual applications for ethical clearance; and,
 - determine if further action (e.g. consideration by the School Research Integrity Committee) is required.
- Provide advice regarding the process involved in applying for ethical clearance via the School Research Integrity Committee;
- Act as a liaison between the School Research Integrity Committee and module and programme leaders;

- Act as a source of advice and support for academic staff supervising students undertaking research as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate studies;
- Promote research integrity to their representative group;
- Provide a summary of activities (e.g. number and type of enquiries, decisions made, etc.) and produce a report for the School Research Integrity Committee.

**Ethical Approval
Appeals Process**

Exceptionally, if a matter raises ethical or governance issues on which the Convenor feels the School Research Integrity Committee cannot reach a decision, the Convenor may choose to refer the matter to the University Research Integrity Committee. The decision of the University Committee shall be final.

If a research proposal is rejected by the School Research Integrity Committee the researcher may appeal this decision.

Any appeals will be considered by the University Research Integrity Committee. The decision of the University Committee shall be final.