

School of Engineering and Computing

Ethical Approval Processes

Malcolm Crowe, revised 6 December 2017

Mechanisms and principles of ethical approval for research and other academic activities are found in all UK Universities and are broadly comparable across the sector. Throughout the community we see research, and project work generally, as something to be developed, learnt from, and celebrated; all research is required to meet standards of peer review for publication or funding, and we take a pride in developing these skills in our staff and students whether as researchers or reviewers. The application and review of ethical principles and practice in a research project is very similar in many ways to the application and review of a wide range of other considerations, from health and safety or financial policies to the methodologies and laboratory practice that are considered appropriate to a particular academic discipline. Academic Schools encourage and require staff and students to initiate and engage in relevant and appropriate projects as investigators or reviewers, and to develop the skills required in themselves and others. As with research excellence, teaching practice, financial policies, equality and diversity, health and safety etc, universities today are expected to develop their mechanisms and guidelines to demonstrate both internally and externally the excellence of their work, and to ensure a good balance between the effort of carrying out research projects, evaluating what has been done, and developing ideas and skills for future projects. In most areas, if not all, there is a need for independent scrutiny, for example by auditors, journal reviewers, or external examiners, and a need to develop expectations specific to each academic discipline.

The University requires that ethical approval processes apply to all research and to all student projects, and as a minimum every project must be independently and proportionately reviewed. It should be obvious that there will be some “high risk” research projects (e.g. involving sensitive or dangerous subjects, or vulnerable people) where we need to be sure that appropriate safeguards are in place.

In the School we want to ensure that ethical approval is part of project approval for students or in the PDR/Activity Plan/peer review processes for staff, and/or approval by collaborating bodies. All such approval processes already include independent review, and the ethical dimension should be explicit. While it is not a requirement that the School Ethics Committee needs to know all details of everything, the simplest way of ensuring compliance with the guidelines is with a list of research projects on the School’s SharePoint site, indicating titles and dates of approval, and where any other documentation can be found.

Who needs to be involved

All academic staff in the School will be involved in the process, either as a researcher or as supervisor, reviewer, assessor, or line manager of staff or student projects. The starting questions for self-assessment of ethical approval are on the School’s SharePoint site for Ethics:

- Does the research follow the best standards of research integrity so that participants are aware of the purpose of the research and possible benefits?
- Does the research carry any risk of causing harm, discomfort or distress to participants or to society?
- Are any of the intended participants from vulnerable groups or groups carrying a risk of bias in reported results?

Obviously the best answers here are Yes, No and No respectively. Any explanations or clarifications need to be recorded somewhere. If risks are identified, there should be safeguards put in place, letters from funding or collaborating organisations should be on file, questionnaires or interviews should be checked by supervisors, etc. The School Ethics Committee will provide training (e.g. online courses, workshops) to ease these processes. IT mechanisms will be developed to help.

Approval of projects in taught programmes (including Honours and Masters projects)

In every case there is a module coordinator responsible for the approval of student projects. For the simplest projects, where the risks to the researcher, participants if any, and to the University are low, the project specification outlines the research process and this is signed by the student, the supervisor, and the project coordinator, who take responsibility that the project is low risk (as defined below) and that any ethical concerns have been addressed and will be monitored during the project.

If the project involves human participants, the proposal must be submitted using the online system at <https://uws.forms.ethicalreviewmanager.com>. In order to use the mechanism, as a researcher, supervisor, or reviewer, you need to register on the online system. Then once you have the project specification ready to upload, the process is very simple.

The process is overseen by the School Ethics Committee which is responsible to the University Ethics Committee (and ultimately, the University Senate) for proper operation of the ethical approval system. Module coordinators will ensure that the approval process is transparent by a process of sharing approved project documentation.

Approval of PhD and staff research projects

For low risk PhD research and staff projects a similar record is independently signed off through the processes of registration, PDR, and/or peer review, with the possibility of more detailed consideration by the School Ethics Committee as required. Again, if the project has human participants, it must be submitted using the online system at <https://uws.forms.ethicalreviewmanager.com>. In order to use the mechanism, as a researcher, supervisor, or reviewer, you need to register on the online system. Then once you have the project specification ready to upload, the process is very simple.

The process is overseen by the School Ethics Committee which is responsible to the University Ethics Committee (and ultimately, the University Senate) for proper operation of the ethical approval system. Supervisors and managers will ensure that the approval process is transparent by a process of sharing approved project documentation.

What the School Ethics Committee does

Research involving any of the following is not *prima facie* low risk, and must be reviewed by the School Ethics Committee:

- (a) Potentially vulnerable participants are those who may not be in a position to give competent or unfettered informed consent. Examples include:
 - Children under 16
 - Adults with learning disabilities
 - Adults with severe or terminal illness
 - Adults with mental illness
 - Adults in care homes
 - Those with a dependent relationship with the investigator e.g. students, relatives and friends
 - Those who may have perceived and/or real benefit from participation to which they otherwise would not have access
- (b) Potentially highly sensitive topics. Examples include:
 - "race" or ethnicity
 - spiritual beliefs
 - sexuality
 - abuse and personal violence
 - criminal activities
 - Where there is a significant element of deception

(c) Procedures, treatments, therapeutic techniques, psychosocial or other interventions.

Examples include:

- collection of body tissues or fluids e.g. venepuncture
- administration of any substance or agent
- counselling sessions
- Where there is significant risk to the researcher

For such projects, the online mechanism at <https://uws.forms.ethicalreviewmanager.com> allows consideration of what the work will involve, the prior work on which the research builds, the methodology and the research protocol that gives details of how risks will be mitigated. It is expected that consideration will be given to such matters in any case, and the principle of proportionate review applies so that in many cases this will not need to be a detailed document.

The School Ethics Committee includes experts (see Appendix A) so that it can give ethical approval in most cases so that only high risk or complex applications need to be referred on to the University Ethics Committee. In addition, the Court and Senate Office will review academic activities that involve collaboration with overseas partners, particularly in countries with poor human rights records or identified as dangerous by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, or where there is conflict with the principles and values set out within the Code of Ethics.

The School Ethics Committee deals with all applications in a matter of days, with the aim of the research being enabled to progress through some adjustments or safeguards, or speedy referral to the University Ethics Committee. Any conditions imposed may be discussed if necessary with the Assistant Dean (Research and Enterprise) who may refer it for further review with guidance. If a proposal is not approved, the first formal appeal against a decision of the School Ethics Committee is to the University Ethics Committee.

Your responsibilities as a researcher

You need to ensure that your current experimental/fieldwork activities are approved – this will usually be as a single line in your PDR or activity plan; and then the whole PDR document on this extract needs to be available for audit. Other forms of approval are fine, e.g. KTP, allocation of a studentship, approval from the School or University Ethics Committee etc.

The minimal information for audit will be one or more lines in the staff list indicating approved activities for the current session, and the approval process used (who/when/how). Internal audit are likely to check this information with the approver (see next section). A research output this session may be the result of investigations undertaken last session, so audit will likely check such history. And of course it will save time if approvals of future activity are recorded as they are given.

Your responsibilities as supervisor, reviewer, manager, assessor etc

You need to retain or upload documents indicating your activities in these roles. It should be obvious that nobody can approve their own research.

If you feel proposed or current research raises ethical issues, it is your responsibility to explore these and ensure adequate safeguards are in place.

In cases of doubt, please inform the School Ethics Committee in the first instance – the Secretary to the Committee is Irene Edmiston. Internal audit may contact you to verify your approval for any project.

Appendix A

The School Ethics Committee

The composition and remit is set for us by the University (see [here](#)). Current membership is shown:

Chair	Prof Malcolm Crowe
Vice Chair	Dr John Hughes
Ex-Officio Members	Prof Moira Lewitt
	Assistant Dean Research
	...
Appointed Members	Prof Thomas Connolly
External or Lay Members	Rev Dr Ian Birch Dr Claire Chalmers Alan Terry
Co-opted Members	Dr Mark Stansfield* Dr James Thompson Dr Wenzhong Zhu Dr Daune West Dr Charlie Cullen
Administrative Support	Irene Edmiston

*The list of co-opted members will include all module coordinators for student projects and the School PhD coordinators