

Notes on Working with the Human Research Ethics Committee at Alphacrucis University College

The Human Research Ethics Committee at Alphacrucis University College was set up because the Australian government requires that all human-related research have ethics approval. The basic framework for ethics approval is set out in a *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. (Available from the National Health and Medical Research Council website: <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2023>).

The Human Research Ethics Committee exists to help students and staff do their research ethically, which means respecting the rights and wellbeing of all who participate in it or may be affected by it, minimising any risks of potential harm, and ensuring, where possible, participants receive some benefit from the research. The Human Research Ethics Committee is not there to hinder research or make it difficult, beyond ensuring the appropriate steps are taken to ensure researchers act ethically. The Committee should not be commenting on the methods or content of the research where that has no bearing on the ethics of the research.

If your research is of 'negligible risk' such as research involving the use of existing collections of data or records that contain only non-identifiable data about human beings, you do not need to apply for ethics approval and do not need to complete a form.

Principles of Ethical Research

The basic ethical principles set out in the *National Statement* have some implications for the questions on the Ethics Approval Form and for the sorts of things to which the Human Research Ethics Committee pays attention. In brief, these are:

1. Right of participants to decide if they will participate. This means that participants:
 - a. have the relevant information about the project and what is required of them;
 - b. do not feel under any obligation to participate (for example, because the researcher is their teacher, pastor or employer);
 - c. are able to make the decision themselves. (Special arrangements need to be made in relation to research with children and those who have diminished ability to make their own decisions due to disability or sickness, for example.)
 - d. Participants can decide to leave the project or withdraw their participation (within practical limitations).

Note that the Australian legislation regarding the right to privacy means that you cannot ask a church or anyone else for a list of possible participants, as was done in the classical form of 'snow-balling'. Rather, you need to produce information sheets/advertising fliers which can be distributed in a church or club, or one of your participants can give to their friends who then contact you. (References to 'snow-balling' raises red flags for ethics committees.)

2. Rights of participants for their contributions to remain confidential. This means that researchers must have in place steps to ensure that:
 - a. what participants say and do in relation to the research can remain confidential to the researcher(s) and (where appropriate) supervisors; OR
 - b. the participants are fully informed that confidentiality cannot be maintained (where maintaining confidentiality is not possible).

This means that the researchers protect carefully records of interviews or surveys, and delete, where possible, any information which might identify individuals from those records. Some types of records, such as video recording, make it impossible to keep the records in a de-identified way. Religious faith is seen by many people as something which is highly personal and which they wish to keep confidential.

3. Potential risks of harm or discomfort to the participants are minimised. This means:
 - a. methods of research are used which minimise harm and discomfort, including choosing 'safe' places for interviews, and not seeking to 'trick' people in any way within the research;
 - b. the content of questions and ways participants are asked do not cause unnecessary discomfort, embarrassment, distress, guilt, or anger, or which could cause damage to social networks or relationships.

For this reason, researchers need to spell out their methods and indicate the content of the interview or survey questions. If there are sensitive issues in their research, researchers need to spell out the steps they will take to refer people to counselling, if that should be required.

4. Justice of the project. This means that the researcher
 - a. recruits participants in a fair way and does not place unfair burdens on a particular group, or excludes a particular group for a reason unrelated to the research objectives;
 - b. ensures, where possible, that the participants receive some benefits from the research, or that the research benefits the interests of the participants, for example, by offering participants a report of the research.

So what particular aspects of a study will the Human Research Ethics Committee look at?

1. The way you recruit your participants – and whether they can make informed voluntary decisions about involvement.
2. The information and consent forms provided to participants.
3. How you deal with the interviews or interview records or surveys to ensure confidentiality of what your participants say or do in relation to the research.
4. Whether there is anything in your methods or content which could cause discomfort or some form of distress for those involved, and whether you are adequately prepared for such an eventuality.
5. Whether you are offering anything of benefit to the participants.

Note that there are particular kinds of the research which need particular attention.

1. Research with children or young people below the age of consent demands a higher level of care. In general, guardians need to be informed and to give consent.
2. Research with Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islanders. Approval from Aboriginal elders is needed.
3. Research conducted overseas requires that you need to meet the regulations and ethics guidelines of the country or countries in which your research takes place as well as those in Australia, and you will need to assure the Ethics Committee that you are meeting the laws and regulations and have the relevant permissions in those countries.

Processes

If your research involves human participants, please complete an **Application Form for Research with Human Participants**. You may like to send a draft to Johannes Luetz, chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee, (Johannes.Luetz@ac.edu.au) to check all is in order. When ready, please lodge your ethics application and all supporting documents at the link location provided. A sample ethics application with supporting documents is available upon request.

In situations where the Chair of the Ethics Committee considers your research to be of 'low risk', the chair may give approval without taking it to the Committee. Otherwise, your research may be considered by a meeting of the Human Research Ethics Committee, and the Committee may ask for you to meet with them (along with your supervisors), so that any questions can be resolved. Or your research will be circulated to the Committee by email, following which a decision of the Committee will be communicated to you. When you have completed your project, please send a message to the secretary of the Human Research Ethics Committee indicating that the project was completed according to the agreed protocol, and that there were no complaints on an ethical nature.