

# Ethics Policy<sup>12</sup>

## 1. Context and Scope of Policy

In line with Trinity College Dublin's [Policy on Good Research Practice](#), it is imperative that research activity in the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy is conducted to the highest standards of integrity, professional conduct and probity. As College's *Policy on Good Research Practice* states: 'In all research, in addition to the Law of the Land, the over-arching ethical principles for Trinity College can be summarized as: **respect** for the individual subject or population, **beneficence & the absence of maleficence** (research should have the maximum benefit with minimal harm) and **justice** (all research subjects and populations should be treated fairly and equally).'

This document sets out the principles and procedures of the Ethics Policy of the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy.

1.1 For the purposes of this document, the term 'researcher' encompasses:

- Any member of the School who conducts research (which includes staff, postgraduate students and unpaid research associates);
- Any individual who is not a member of the School but is undertaking research using the School's premises and facilities and/or under the name of the School (including visiting academics and students). Such a researcher should follow the guidelines for Staff or Students, as appropriate.

1.2 Research involving human participants is defined as any of the following:

- research that directly involves people through their physical participation (active or passive) in research activities. Such activities may include, but are not limited to, interviews, questionnaires, discussions, physical experiments and observational research;
- research that indirectly involves people (living or recently deceased, particularly where there are likely to be living relatives) through the provision of access to personal data;
- research that involves people speaking on behalf of others, such as parents/guardians of children or vulnerable adults, and supervisors of people in

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<sup>1</sup> This document and the policy therein is based on and takes from the Ethics Policy developed by University College Plymouth St Mark & St John in November 2008. We are indebted to the author of said policy, Dr. Stoakes, for his kind permission to use their policy as a template for this document .

<sup>2</sup> This policy, along with membership of the School's Ethics Committee, was approved by the School's Executive Committee on 30 September 2010, with immediate effect.

controlled environments.

## 2. Principles

**2.1** The following key principles inform the School's stance on ethical issues in research involving human participants.

**2.1.1 Diversity of approach:** Given the diversity of academic activity within the School, which is home to the disciplines of Political Science, Philosophy, Economics and Sociology, the nature and significance of ethical issues arising in research will vary across the disciplines and between projects.

**2.1.2 Independent scrutiny:** The ethical conduct of research is a matter of judgment. Scrutiny of research proposals, independent of the researcher, is intended to create the conditions for an explicit discussion of the judgments guiding the conduct of research projects. Dialogue is thus seen as a central part of ethical practice in research.

**2.1.3 Informed consent:** Research involving human participants should, wherever possible, be conducted only with the fully informed, and freely given, consent of participants. In line with College's policy, potential participants should be informed of the nature and purpose of the research, and any potential benefits, risks, obligations or inconvenience associated with the research that may influence their decision to participate. The researcher (or lead researcher, in the case of collaborative work) is responsible for ensuring that all participants have given their consent prior to participating in the research. Such consent should be given voluntarily and without coercion. Wherever possible, and proportional to the nature of the research, evidence of consent (either written consent, or oral consent witnessed by another) should be obtained. Participants should be informed that they are free to withdraw their consent at any time without adverse consequences, and that any data provided by them will be destroyed should they request it.

It is particularly noteworthy to mention those cases where vulnerable populations are involved in research: extra care is needed to ensure that the rights of participants are upheld and that their consent to participate in the research is freely given. For research involving children, where appropriate and feasible, the informed consent of the child<sup>3</sup> and of their parent/legal guardian should be obtained. In the case of research in educational settings, the researcher should follow any special policies or procedures of the school. However, when access to participants is controlled by a 'gatekeeper' of any form, researchers should adhere to the principle of gaining informed consent from the participants themselves, whilst respecting the legitimate interests of the gatekeeper. In exceptional circumstances, where the nature of research design requires that research is undertaken without informed consent, the need for this should be considered carefully and justified fully.

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<sup>3</sup>Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. The British Educational Research Association thus recommends that children should be facilitated to give fully informed consent.

**2.1.4 Protection from harm:** Researchers should endeavour to minimize the risk of physical or psychological harm arising to any person or organization as a result of their research, and to minimize the risk of harm to the environment. At a minimum, participants should be fully informed, free to volunteer without inducement, free to opt out at any time without redress, and be fully protected with regards to safety, to the limits of best practice for the nature of the research being undertaken. It is advisable that researchers inform participants of the contact details of a person whom they may contact in the event of any issues arising from the research that cannot be resolved with the researcher.

**2.1.5 Confidentiality:** Except where explicit written consent is obtained, researchers should protect the confidentiality of all participants and their data at all times<sup>4</sup>. Researchers should be aware of the risks to anonymity, confidentiality, privacy and security posed by the data they collect and store, and take measures to prevent accidental breaches of confidentiality. The collection, storage, use and disclosure of data must comply with the Data Protection Acts of [1988](#) and [2003](#).

**2.1.6 Openness, honesty and integrity:** Researchers should be open and honest about the purpose and content of their research at all times, and conduct the research in such a way as to ensure the professional integrity of its design, the generation and analysis of data, and the publication of results. Deception or covert data collection should be used only where essential to the research design. Any personal, academic or commercial conflicts of interest in the research should be declared. Direct and indirect contributions of colleagues, collaborators and others should be acknowledged. Participants should be given the opportunity to access the outcomes of research, and be debriefed if appropriate.

**2.1.7 Professional codes of practice and guidance:** Researchers should ensure that their research accords with any professional codes of practice and/or ethical guidelines relevant to the subject domain of their research. For research projects that fall within the domain of Funding Agencies, such as IRCHSS, researchers must ensure that they conform with their requirements and protocols as necessary.

### **3. Procedures**

The following outlines the procedures to be followed by Staff (§3.1) and Postgraduate students (§3.2).

#### **3.1. STAFF**

**For all members of staff and unpaid research associates:** Independent scrutiny of research proposals is provided by the Department within which the researcher is located and by the School's Ethics Committee, if necessary, using the procedures outlined below:

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<sup>4</sup> The duty of confidentiality is not absolute in law and may, in exceptional circumstances, be over-riden by more compelling duties, such as the duty to protect individuals from harm. If such issues arise, researchers are advised to discuss these with their Departmental Ethics Officer in the first instance.

3.1.1. In the first instance, researchers should self-certify the ethical propriety of their research by completing a Research Ethics Checklist (Appendix 1). This should be undertaken in the early stages of the project, prior to any data collection or, where appropriate, during each phase of the research.

3.1.2. Where the Research Ethics Checklist of Appendix 1 indicates 'ethics release', the researcher should submit the completed form to the Departmental Ethics Officer, who is the person nominated by the Head of Discipline to sit on the School's Ethics Committee. If the Departmental Ethics Officer is satisfied that the research poses minimal potential risk of harm to participants and others, he/she should sign the Research Ethics Checklist and forward a copy of the signed document to the Secretary of the School's Ethics Committee (for the time being the School Administrator).

3.1.3 Where the Research Ethics Checklist indicates that an actual Certificate of Ethical Approval *is* required, the researcher should complete the proforma at Appendix 2 and submit this to the Secretary of the School's Ethics Committee for consideration at a meeting of the School's Ethics Committee.

The School's Ethics Committee, or part thereof, may meet with the researcher to discuss any ethical issues associated with the research plan<sup>5</sup>. On decision by the panel to grant ethical approval, the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee will issue the signed Certificate of Ethical Approval.

## 3.2 POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

**For students:** Independent scrutiny of research proposals is provided by the first-named supervisor in the first instance, using the procedures outlined below. In all cases, the first-named supervisor has a responsibility to encourage among students an awareness of ethical issues in research.

3.2.1 For taught programmes, the Director of the Programme should determine if a given project raises ethical issues. If it does not raise ethical issues, Appendix 1 should be completed and the form should be signed by the Departmental Ethics Officer. If it does raise ethical issues, Appendix 2 should be completed and the application should be sent to the Secretary of the Ethics Committee for consideration at the next Ethics-Committee meeting. No work should be undertaken before approval has been granted.

3.2.2 For routine research undertaken within taught modules, where all students undertake largely the same research each year and the ethical issues arising can be anticipated, the Module Leader must ensure that a Research Ethics Checklist is completed for the activity and that a record of this is signed by both the Module Leader and the Departmental Ethics Officer before being sent to the Secretary of the School's

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<sup>5</sup> In some circumstances, where the potential risk of harm to research participants or others is judged to be minimal, the Chair of the Ethics Committee may decide to undertake 'expedited review' via electronic means. A full meeting of the Ethics Committee with the researcher would then only occur at the request of any Committee member or of the researcher themselves.

Ethics Committee. Where the Research Ethics Checklist indicates that a Certificate of Ethical Approval is required, the Module Leader must ensure that the proforma at Appendix 2 is completed for consideration by the School's Ethics Committee. For individual research projects the procedures in §3.2.3—3.2.5 should be followed.

3.2.3 For individual research projects at postgraduate level, students should normally self-certify the ethical propriety of their research with assistance from their first-named supervisor by completing a Research Ethics Checklist (Appendix 1). This should be undertaken in the early stages of the project and prior to any data collection or, where appropriate, during each phase of the research.

3.2.4 Where the Research Ethics Checklist indicates 'ethics release', the first-named supervisor should sign a copy of Appendix 1, have it signed by the Departmental Ethics Officer and forward same to the Secretary of the School's Ethics Committee.

3.2.5 Where the Research Ethics Checklist indicates that a Certificate of Ethical Approval is required, the student (assisted by the first-named supervisor) should complete the proforma at Appendix 2 for consideration by the School's Ethics Committee, following consultation with the Departmental Ethics Officer.

**3.3 All Researchers, particularly those seeking ethics approval as per §3.1.3 and §3.2.5 above, should note that:**

3.3.1 A Certificate of Ethical Approval is granted for the research activity described by the researcher on the proforma at the time of application. If the research departs significantly from that indicated on the original proforma (e.g. in terms of its aims and/or methods), the researcher should ensure that ethical issues are reconsidered using the procedures specified in §3.1 or §3.2, as appropriate.

3.3.2 Where uncertainty over any aspect of a proposed research project exists, the researcher and/or the Departmental Ethics Officer may request that the proposal be discussed by the School's Ethics Committee, even where this is not a formal requirement under the procedures stated in §3.1 or §3.2.

3.3.3 Research that requires the scrutiny of another recognized School's Ethics Committee in College, and that attains ethical approval from such a body, should not normally require additional scrutiny by the School's Ethics Committee. Further, research that has received ethical approval from another third-level institute that is internationally recognized should not normally require additional scrutiny. Consistent with College's Ethics policy, in such cases the Chair and the Secretary of the School's Ethics Committee should be notified of such research and a copy of the ethical approval documentation for the project should be sent to the Secretary of the School's Ethics Committee. Applicants seeking ethical reciprocity consideration will be expected to furnish a letter not only detailing the ethical approval granted in the collaborating institution, but also explaining how that approval is in keeping with the School's Ethics policy. Once this has been received, and providing that this is deemed satisfactory by the Chair, the Secretary will issue a letter to the researcher stating that ethics approval

has been reciprocally recognized and that the researcher can thus start their research project. If not deemed satisfactory by the Chair, the researcher will be informed that he or she must seek ethical approval following the above procedures.

### **3.4 Membership of the School's Ethics Committee:**

Membership of the School's Ethics Committee will be as follows:

- The Director of Research (Chair, designated by the Head of School)
- One Ethics Officer from each department, nominated by the Head of Discipline
- One independent member of TCD nominated by the Chair
- The School Administrator, who shall act as Secretary

All decisions of the School's Ethics Committee must be agreed by consensus.

### **4 Further guidance**

For further guidance on research ethics, the following sources may be of use:

Anthropological Association of Ireland -

<http://www.anthropologyireland.org/research1.htm>

Association of Research Ethics Committees - <http://www.arec.org.uk/>

British Association of Social Workers - <http://www.basw.co.uk/>

British Educational Research Association - <http://www.bera.ac.uk/>

British Psychological Society - <http://www.bps.org.uk/>

British Sociological Association - <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/>

Committee on Publication Ethics - <http://www.publicationethics.org.uk/>

Ethics Research Information Catalogue - <http://www.eric-on-line.co.uk/index.php>

NHS National Research Ethics Service - <http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/>

Oral History Society - <http://www.ohs.org.uk/>

Sociological Association of Ireland -

[http://www.sociology.ie/docstore/dls/pages\\_list/3\\_sai\\_ethical\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.sociology.ie/docstore/dls/pages_list/3_sai_ethical_guidelines.pdf)

Social Research Association - <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/>

Trinity College Dublin's Policy on Good Research Practice -

<https://www.tcd.ie/research/dean/TCDGoodResearchPractice.pdf>

World Commission on Ethics of Science & Technology -

<http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/ev.php->

[URL\\_ID=6193&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/shs/en/ev.php-URL_ID=6193&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

There are also excellent relevant resources, such as:

- Eckstein, S (ed) (2003) *Manual for Research Ethics Committees*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Israel, M (2006) *Research Ethics for Social Scientists: Between Ethical Conduct and Regulatory Compliance*. London: Sage.
- MacFarlane, B (2008) *Researching With Integrity: The Ethics of Academic Research*. Oxford: Routledge.
- McNamee, M; Olivier, S & Wainwright, P (2007) *Research Ethics in Exercise, Health & Sport Sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Pitts, M & Smith, A (2007) *Researching the Margins: Strategies for Ethical and Rigorous Research with Marginalised Communities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Simons, H & Usher, R (2000) *Situated Ethics in Educational Research*. London: Routledge.