

ETHICS IN RESEARCH - POLICY STATEMENT NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this document is to clarify the obligations on staff and students who undertake research activity, and to provide a framework for their consideration at Northumbria University. Detailed guidance is available in the University's Research Ethics and Governance Handbook.
- 1.2 The University's mission is to serve our learning communities by delivering internationally recognised and professionally relevant learning, research and enterprise. Commensurate with this mission is a commitment to ethical standards in academic life. Broadly defined, this means a systematic regard for the rights and interests of others in the full range of professional relationships and endeavours that characterise academic life.
- 1.3 All research is subject to ethical considerations concerning purpose, source of funding, methods to be deployed and wider value and impact. It is important that risks in carrying out a piece of research are clearly articulated and weighed against the potential value of it so that all those involved proceed with informed consent. The mechanisms for approving research activity are detailed below and in the Research Ethics and Governance Handbook and all staff and students are required to be compliant with this policy to ensure that the wellbeing of all involved in research is protected.
- 1.4 The policy is intended for all those engaged in research activity as they are embodied in different disciplines. It is designed primarily for academic staff, including those on research contracts, but is also relevant to research degree students, taught postgraduate and undergraduate students engaged in projects.
- 1.5 The policy is built upon ethical and good practice guidelines issued by Research Councils, professional bodies, subject associations and external ethics committees.

2. Ethical Principles and Dilemmas

- 2.1 It is not possible to define absolutely the boundaries of ethical principles, practice and problems. What is advocated is a fundamental engagement with the ethical principles and dilemmas detailed below as an essential part of the research process in whatever discipline.
- 2.2 Regardless of the nature of their work, staff and students who undertake research activity at Northumbria are obliged to take into account the wider direct and indirect anticipated consequences of their work.
- 2.3 The principles of **beneficence** and **non-maleficence** are fundamental to all research activity. **Beneficence** is the requirement to promote the interests and wellbeing of others. It is the ethical principle of 'doing good' in the widest sense. **Non-maleficence** is the principle of 'not doing harm'. Both principles must be applied to all entities directly or indirectly affected by the research. In practice, these principles frequently conflict, for example as in animal *versus* human welfare.

- 2.4 Ethical conduct in research demands **respect for the rights of others** who are directly or indirectly affected by the work. In relation to human participants, both their physical and personal autonomy should be respected. Their participation in the research should be on the basis of fully informed consent, and their right to confidentiality, according to prevailing standards, should be guaranteed. The respect for rights to confidentiality is essential irrespective of any characteristic of the research environment or participants and at all stages of the research process. Further guidance is available in the University's Research Ethics and Governance Handbook. Respect for equality and diversity in the management, design and conduct of research activity is essential to maintaining good academic practice.
- 2.5 **Justice** is the ethical principle of **fair treatment of others**, which requires researchers to weigh up and make judgements about competing claims and interests of those directly or indirectly involved in the research, regardless of the vested interests of researchers. Researchers should address competing interests at every stage of the research, including the decision of whether it should be carried out in the first place. Researchers should consider the moral justification for differential treatment of research subjects, including non-human entities. For example, potential risks to the future should be weighed against technological progress in the present.
- 2.6 Ethical principles will inevitably conflict, resulting in the requirement on the researchers to **balance qualitatively different values**. In such cases, researchers are obliged to make difficult judgements that cannot be derived from first principles, and should be prepared to draw upon disinterested advice. Where such a conflict cannot be resolved at subject level or by advice to an external ethics committee or professional bodies' guidelines, the matter should be referred to the Research Ethics Committee. In all instances, the University strives to promote a high standard of professional conduct amongst staff and students.
- 2.7 Examples of ethical issues in research include:
- Academic subjects vary widely in the range and significance of the ethical problems that arise in their work. Many academic subjects do not involve the direct use of human participants or animals. Some can confine their consideration of ethics in research to broad-based questions concerning its purpose and value and its indirect effects. Even here, the ethical/legal issues will be considerable.
 - Where **human subjects** are involved in research, approval may be required from external bodies (such as NHS Research Ethics Committees). In other cases, routine use of human subjects in research (be they peers on taught courses, people in the community or in organisations) occurs without external vetting. This requires a careful and self-reflective approach to the ethical problems that might arise. For example, in surveys, interviews and experiments, researchers must consider the potential of placing human subjects/organisations at risk from criminal or civil liability, damage to their social standing and to their emotional wellbeing.
 - It is essential that the conduct of research takes into consideration issues such as the health and safety of staff and research participants (undertaking risk assessments as appropriate); that research data is stored in a way that is compliant with the Data Protection Act (1989) and General Data Protection Regulations (2018); that there are systems for the identification and management of academic misconduct; that the Human Tissue Act (2004) is fulfilled; and that intellectual property is appropriately protected.

3. University Framework for Considering Ethics in Research

3.1 Each member of staff, (and when appropriate students involved in research) is responsible for abiding by the University's Policy on Ethics in Research. Advice should be sought, in the first instance, from the Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor.

3.2 Northumbria's framework for the consideration of ethical issues in research comprises:

- (a) formal consideration of ethical issues in research at the discipline level;
- (b) monitoring at the level of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee; and
- (c) institutional oversight.

It is the responsibility of every Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor to ensure that appropriate consideration is given to ethical issues arising in and from research activity for staff and students in all disciplines within the Faculty. The Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor will exercise this responsibility through the Faculty Research Ethics Committee with the following brief:

- to ensure good practice and a climate of ongoing reflection with regard to ethical issues in research and consultancy;
- to support academic staff and students in the consideration of ethical issues;
- to ensure good practice by the scrutiny of all research and consultancy activity at critical points (which will be defined locally in accordance with the nature of the research activity and the discipline and as outlined by professional bodies).

3.3 Each Faculty Research Ethics Committee will:

- be chaired by the Faculty Director of Research Ethics
- include academic staff with a significant track record in research and teaching;
- meet as frequently as required, but at least twice per year, and maintain appropriate records of the business conducted;
- will be aware of the legislation and the requirements it places on the University;
- undertake an annual audit to ensure that appropriate ethical standards are maintained.

3.4 The Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor (working with the Faculty Director of Research Ethics) is responsible for assuring the University's Research Ethics Committee that the Faculty Research Ethics Committee is operating effectively. The Faculty Research Ethics Director will submit an annual report to the Research Ethics Committee at the beginning of each academic year in a prescribed format to provide:

- (a) a brief statement of the local arrangements for consideration of ethical issues in research;
- (b) a list of those activities where ethical consideration has been required; and
- (c) an indication of the problems which have been referred directly to another internal or external committee for their resolution.

- (d) maintain records of all research projects (including dissertations) which involve ethical issues.
- 3.5 The Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor can refer to the University's Research Ethics Committee any matters which cannot be satisfactorily resolved at Faculty level.
- 3.6 The Research Ethics Committee will submit the reports to the Research and Innovation Committee at the beginning of each academic year.
- 3.7 The Research Ethics Committee is established as a sub-committee of the Research and Innovation Committee with the following terms of reference:
- to provide written Guidelines on ethical issues in research, for use by staff and students of the University;
 - to take a University overview of the Ethics Policy implementation;
 - to recommend policy changes;
 - to advise on any issues of an ethical nature referred to it by the Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Faculties;
 - to receive relevant papers/information from external bodies for consideration.
- 3.8 Membership of the Research Ethics Committee will comprise Faculty Directors of Research Ethics and other senior academic staff with a proven track record in research appointed by Faculty Research Ethics Committees. The Committee will also have powers of co-option, to allow appropriate consultation with relevant experts.
- 3.9 The Research Ethics Committee will have two statutory meetings each year, but will also be convened as other business requires.

Research Ethics Committee

Terms of Reference and Membership

Research Ethics Committee is a Committee of the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee, responsible for overseeing the research ethics regulatory and governance framework of the University. The specific responsibilities of the Committee are as follows:

1. Performance Monitoring and Review

1.1 To monitor and review the University's Research Ethics Policy and Research Ethics and Governance Framework in the light of the University's developing ethical experience and the external research ethics environment and to propose changes as required.

1.2 To ensure a framework is in place for the development of staff and systems that support the ethical review and governance of research.

1.3 To consider annual reports and annual audits from Faculties on the management of ethical issues in research and the operation of Faculty level procedures.

2. Policy and Regulation

2.1 To approve, and periodically review, the University's Research Ethics and Governance Framework.

2.2 To provide written Guidelines on ethical issues in research for use by staff and students of the University.

2.3 To advise on any issues of an ethical nature directly referred to it by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and Service Departments.

2.4 To submit an annual report on the Committee's activities and the operation of procedures for ethical review of research to the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.

2.5 To review the arrangements in place to ensure compliance with the Concordat on Research Integrity.

3. Reporting Relationships/Interactions with other bodies

The Committee has the following sub-committees:

- Faculty Research Ethics Committees

The Committee will actively consider:

- I. reports from each of the faculties relevant to the remit of the Committee.
- II. minutes of the meetings of the faculty equivalent committee, which should be scheduled to ensure a
- III. written report is provided to each meeting of this committee.
- IV. minutes and reports from the meetings of the other committees of the Committee.

- V. relevant notes and actions linked to task and finish and steering groups established by the Committee.

4. Constitution

The parent body of the Committee is the Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee.

The Committee should normally meet a minimum of two times per year in order to transact its business and should only meet where it is necessary to do so to consider, recommend and/or decide upon significant business. The transaction of urgent decisions by means of a written resolution of the Committee members is favoured where timescales and urgent require this. Chair's Action is acceptable for routine or specifically urgent items, or where a clear regulation or requirement exists in other University regulations to do so.

The quorum for the meeting is more than 50% of the members of the Committee. Attendees do not count as Committee members.

The Committee will provide reports to, advise, and receive advice and input from Academic Board, University Executive and their respective committees and groups.

The Chair of the Committee, and the professional support attendees who support the activity area of the Committee, should ensure that members of the Committee have clear obligations and responsibilities on behalf of the Committee to:

- consult with the relevant colleagues in their faculties of services as appropriate on proposals and
- recommendations arising from the work of the Committee
- report concerns and areas for action both to and from the Committee
- deliver actions arising from the Committee in their own area of responsibility and to report back to the Committee on progress