**UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING**

**General University Ethics Panel (GUEP)**

**Ethics review process for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students**

**Introduction**

1. Undergraduate and postgraduate taught student ethics applications, falling under the remit of the General University Ethics Panel (GUEP), are assessed at Faculty level and approved on a risk based approach.
2. The University of Stirling uses the definition of risk as the potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress to human participants that a research project may generate as outlined by the British Psychological Society in their [Code of Human Research Ethics](https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Code%20of%20Human%20Research%20Ethics.pdf). The risk based approach considers potential harms to the primary research participants, the researcher, the environment and other stakeholders, and will assess applications against the [University’s hierarchy of ethical risk](https://stir.sharepoint.com/:b:/s/ResearchIntegrityandGovernance/ETlZ1OgTIHpAnB-F-M7W4KQBS2znz7qOeKqSUN-meKE-UQ?e=lyvJGX).
3. Low risk research requires the student to complete low risk ethics approval, this should be processed through the [ERM](https://stirling.forms.ethicalreviewmanager.com/) (Ethics Review Manager). This will require sign off by both dissertation supervisor and a second reviewer. Any application that exceeds minimum risk must further be approved by the GUEP representative within the Faculty.
4. Staff and postgraduate research students will continue to apply directly to GUEP where applicable.
5. Supervisors will be responsible for supporting their students with the GUEP ethical approval documents while also confirming that the level of risk associated with a student project has been assessed correctly. They must sign off their own approval of the ethical approval documents and ensure that ethical approval has been granted before data collection or fieldwork commences. Supervisors must escalate to the Delegated Authority within their Faculty any project where the associated level of risk is unclear. While it is the student’s responsibility to seek and gain ethical approval, dissertation supervisors also have a responsibility to ensure that all students have gained ethical approval before their research commences. The deliberate misleading of a student or failure to support the student through the ethics process will be treated as Research Misconduct and handled in accordance with the [University’s Research Misconduct Guidelines](https://www.stir.ac.uk/media/stirling/global-assets/documents/PROCEDUREFORHANDLINGALLEGATIONSOFRESEARCHMISCONDUCT.pdf).
6. Second Markers and Module Coordinators will review the ethics application within the University process and the best practice ethical guidelines of their discipline, providing a recommendation for approval, minor amendments required, major amendments required or rejection of application. Where a project exceeds the minimum risk level approval is required from the Delegated Authority.
7. The deliberate avoidance or refusal to engage with the ethical review process will be considered to be an act of academic misconduct by the student and handled in accordance with the [Academic Misconduct Policy](https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/professional-services/student-academic-and-corporate-services/academic-registry/academic-policy-and-practice/quality-handbook/assessment-and-academic-misconduct/).
8. Faculties should ensure that all undergraduates and postgraduate taught students registered on a dissertation module have completed the necessary level of ethics approval prior to the submission of their dissertation.
9. Delegated Authorities will provide advice to colleagues and students within their Faculty/Division on the ethical conduct of research and the ethical review process, and review and approve ethical applications that involve more than minimal risk. They will also support the central recording of the outcome of ethical reviews within their Faculty/Division and report on the findings to GUEP annually.
10. GUEP will continue to make recommendations to the University Research Ethics Committee relating to the management of undergraduate and postgraduate taught student research under the auspices of the General University Ethics Panel (GUEP). The Panel will also ensure that delegated authority members of GUEP conduct an annual audit of processes within their relevant Division or Faculty, reporting on their findings to UREC annually.

**Responsibilities**

1. GUEP’s responsibilities with regards to the ethical review process for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students are:
   1. To make recommendations to the University Research Ethics Committee relating to the management of undergraduate and postgraduate taught student research under the auspices of the General University Ethics Panel (GUEP).
   2. To ensure that the delegated authority members of GUEP conduct an annual audit of processes within their relevant Division or Faculty.
   3. To report annually on the findings of the audit to UREC.
2. Delegated Authority responsibilities with regards to the ethical review process for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students are:
   1. To provide advice to colleagues and students within their Faculty/Division on the ethical conduct of research and the ethical review process.
   2. To review and approve those ethical applications which exceed the low risk threshold.
   3. To support the central recording of the outcome of ethical reviews within their Faculty/Division.
   4. To conduct an annual audit of ethical review processes within their Faculty/Division.
   5. To report annually on the findings to GUEP.
3. Second Marker/Module Coordinator responsibilities with regards to the ethical review process for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students are:
   1. To review the ethical application within the University process and the best practice ethical guidelines of their discipline.
   2. To provide a recommendation for approval, minor amendment, major amendment or rejection. Or where the low risk threshold has been exceeded ensure that approval is sought from the Delegated Authority.
   3. To support the recording of the decision within a central system to allow for appropriate record keeping for all students conducting a dissertation.
4. Supervisor responsibilities with regards to the ethical review processes for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students are:
   1. To ensure and confirm that the level of risk associated with the project has been correctly assessed by the student.
   2. To escalate to the Delegated Authority any project where the associated level of risk is unclear.
   3. To support the student with the completion of the ethical approval documents and ensure all potential ethical issues involved in the project have been properly addressed.
   4. To sign off their own approval of the ethical approval documents within the University process and the best practice ethical guidelines of their discipline.
   5. To ensure that ethical approval has been granted for all of their students before data collection/fieldwork commences.
5. Student responsibilities with regards to seeking ethical review for their dissertation project are:
   1. To assess the level of risk associated with their proposed dissertation project against the University hierarchy of risk (Appendix One).
   2. To follow the correct ethical review process dependent on the identified level of risk.
   3. To work closely with their supervisor to ensure that any potential ethical issues have been fully examined within their ethical approval documents.
   4. To ensure that their supervisor signs their ethical approval documents before submitting to the second marker/module coordinator for review.
   5. To ensure that ethical approval has been granted before data collection/fieldwork commences.

**Rachel Beaton, Research Integrity and Governance Manager**

**Research and Innovation Services**

**Appendix One**

**Ethical hierarchy of risk**

Types of research that may be low-risk:

* Research that engages healthy adults aged 18 or over (University of Stirling students aged 16 or over that are able to provide informed consent should be considered as low risk participants unless they meet any other risk indicators).
* Research that obtains informed consent from all participants
* Research that does not involve vulnerable or dependent groups.
* Research involving anonymous or self-completion questionnaires
* Research where the topic is not of a sensitive personal nature or potentially distressing.
* Research that does not require participants to take part in activities that pose a significant risk to their personal well-being (e.g. physical or psychological health), social well-being (e.g. social standing, social connectedness) or economic well-being (e.g. employment, employability, professional standing).
* Research that replicates a previous study that has been granted ethical approval.
* Research that uses secondary data without risking the anonymity of the participants.
* Research that does not involve the collection of video/photographs of research participants.
* Research where data collection takes place in a public or semi-public space where the safety of the researchers can be protected and the privacy of the participants can be guaranteed.
* Research where ethical issues do not include the risk of breaking confidentiality due to safeguarding or disclosure requirements.
* Research where ethical issues do not include the risk of possible coercion of participants.

Research that would be considered to be above the threshold of low risk and therefore require further review from the delegated authority is that involving:

* The use of animals in any way, including observational studies.
* Research involving the NHS or conducted in healthcare settings.
* Potentially vulnerable[[1]](#footnote-1) individuals
  + Children and young people under the age of 18 (University of Stirling students over the age of 16 are not usually considered to be vulnerable)
  + Those with a learning disability or cognitive impairment
  + Individuals who are vulnerable due to a dependent or unequal relationship
  + Individuals who lack capacity to make decisions or those who during the course of the research may come to lack capacity.
* Potentially sensitive topics/areas of research
  + Sexuality
  + Illegal behaviour
  + Political opinion
  + Religious, spiritual or other beliefs
  + Experience of violence, abuse or exploitation
  + Physical or mental health conditions
  + Race or ethnicity
  + Conflict situations
  + Crossing the boundary between public and private spaces
  + Children considered to be at risk of harm
* Individuals that may not be or may not feel able to freely consent to participation in research
  + Those who depend on the protection of or may be influenced by research gatekeepers – school pupils, members of the armed forces, young offenders, prisoners, asylum seekers, organisational employees.
  + Family members of the researcher
  + Those in hierarchical institutional relationships – e.g. employees recruited through their workplace.
* Deceased persons, body parts or other human elements – carried out under the relevant legislation.
* Deception, concealment or covert observation
* Invasive research methods
* Risk to the safety of the researcher
* Research involving international partners or being undertaken outside of the UK where there may be issues of local practice or political sensitivities
* Internet-mediated research where the understanding of privacy is contentious or where sensitive issues are discussed, or where a participant or other individual may be identifiable in the material used.
* Visual or vocal methods where a participant or other individuals may be identifiable in the material used or generated.
* Linking of personal data which may potentially compromise the anonymity of participants.

1. Vulnerability should be considered on a case-by-case basis. While the participants may not appear vulnerable, participating in the research could make them vulnerable. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)