

Guide to Applying for Ethical Approval for your Research Project

This Guide should provide you with the information you need about how to gain ethical approval for your research project. Please note that you cannot conduct empirical research without the approval of the School Research Ethics Committee (SREC). If you collect data without this approval it may be treated as academic misconduct and could lead to a mark of zero being awarded for your project.

Who is on the School Research Ethics Committee (SREC)?

The School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) consists of members of staff from each one of the Departments in the School of Social Sciences and one lay (external) member (currently a Detective Chief Inspector from Nottinghamshire Police). The Departments in the School of Social Sciences are: Psychology, Sociology, Social Work and Health, and Politics and International Relations. There are also three dedicated ethics administrators from the School Office. Please see SRECmembers file for SREC membership.

If you have a query about the ethics process that is not answered by the documentation available in the Ethics learning room on NOW, and you have already approached your project supervisor, then you can contact one of your Departmental representatives on SREC for advice.

Your **supervisors** have an important role to play in making ethical decisions, as their judgements form the first stage of the ethics review process (see **Section 9** of the ethics application form) and you should always consult your supervisor in the first instance about methodological and ethical issues.

What does SREC do?

All empirical research projects conducted by final year undergraduates and students on taught postgraduate programmes, as well as empirical related teaching activities, need to be approved by SREC. One **electronic** copy of the completed and signed ethics submission form, together with attachments, are submitted to the School Office (to SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk), which are then sent for review to an **independent reviewer**. Please note that all attachments should be sent by **email** and not, for example, using OneDrive.

The independent reviewer is able to give an informed perspective on your application and usually comes from a different research or subject background, therefore offering a more objective perspective on your submission. The independent reviewers are asked to specifically flag any issues that could be of ethical concern, no matter how minor.

Once a form has been reviewed, and if there are any concerns identified, the application is considered at the next SREC meeting where decisions are reached. At the meeting the Committee draws upon the reviewer's comments but is also free to diverge from them if deemed appropriate. The decision is reached by member consensus and does not represent the view of any one individual. The Committee meets regularly during the academic terms and makes a decision for each of the applications received prior to the meeting.

The possible **decisions that SREC can take** are:

- The application is **approved** without change
 - Your ethics application will usually be approved without further recommendations or conditions if you have done the following: read this guide and all other relevant documents available in the Ethics learning room on NOW, thought about the ethical implications of your research, discussed the research with your supervisor, provided all the required information including any research instruments and participant information and consent sheets and taken

care in filling in your application form. If you receive this decision then your data collection can commence.

- The application is **approved with recommendations**
 - This may happen when the Committee is happy that the ethical issues have been considered and addressed appropriately but wish to suggest a change that could improve these in some way. These changes are not required however; instead you should discuss the suggestions with your supervisor and decide whether or not to incorporate these. If you receive this decision then your data collection can commence whether or not you take up the suggestions.
- The application is **approved with conditions**
 - This differs from the former decision in that these changes **must** be incorporated. You and your supervisor will be given clear information about the nature of the required change(s) by email. It is your responsibility to ensure that any conditions are complied with (with guidance from your supervisor). Once the required change(s) has been made data collection can commence.
 - Please note that if you do not enact the required change(s) your project is **not** approved and this could have serious consequences for your studies with the potential to be considered as an academic irregularity. It is the student's and supervisor's responsibility to check that required changes have been made prior to data collection.
- The application is **not approved**
 - This happens when there is an issue that SREC considers needs your further consideration, or information is missing or needs clarifying. Failure to sign your ethics form, or to obtain your supervisor's signature will automatically cause the application to be rejected! Whatever the reason for not approving your application, SREC will indicate the reasons on the returned decision letter.
 - Alongside the listed problems you will be given suggestions to help you address the issue. You will need to discuss this with your supervisor and correct the problem. The application then needs to be **re-submitted** to SREC for further consideration.
 - On resubmission, the form does not usually go through the full review process again but instead is submitted for Chair's action i.e. the Chair will review the changes and approve (or reject again) the application. However, if substantial changes are required it may be that resubmitted forms *will* need to go through the entire review process again, or if contentious, be considered by the Committee.

What if my project changes after gaining ethical approval?

During the process of research, you may find that you want to incorporate some changes from your original, SREC approved, research project. Some changes would affect the approved ethics status of your research (e.g., changing the sample from an adult to a child population), whilst other changes would not affect this. If you make any changes at all you **must** discuss this with your supervisor to determine whether you should submit a modified ethics application for approval. Additionally, you can email SREC on SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk.

If there is any doubt at all about proposed changes that have ethical implications then you **must** submit a modified version of the application form for review. When doing this please ensure that the submission is CLEARLY labelled as a '**Research Project Amendment**' of a previously approved proposal. This may enable SREC to approve changes through Chair's action rather than going through the independent review process again (although this will depend on the nature of the changes).

If you change your project idea entirely then a new ethics application must be submitted.

What is the role of my supervisor?

You cannot gain ethical approval without discussing your research with your project supervisor. At the most basic level supervisors have to **complete and sign Section 9** of your ethics application form (**any forms not signed by you and your supervisor will be automatically rejected**). You (in Section 10 of the form) and your supervisor (in Section 9) should type your names and add the date in the relevant sections of the form. The review of your form by your supervisor, and any comments that they have written in Section 9 of the form, is the first stage of the ethical review process.

Additionally, your supervisor is also a resource; they will be able to provide advice on any ethical issues with your research. They will, however, expect you to do the appropriate background work and to think through the ethical implications of your proposed research. They will not sign the form unless they are convinced that you have adequately addressed any such issues. If your supervisor is not happy with your application they will suggest in Section 9 of the form that you do some further work on it before you can both sign the form. **When presenting ideas to supervisors you will need to be very clear about the details of your planned research as this inevitably impacts on ethical issues.**

Supervisors will not hold up their review of your form unnecessarily; if, for example, there is a methodological detail to be finalised that has no ethical implications they can still sign the form. However, if there is a methodological detail to be finalised that *does* impact on ethical issues then they will not sign the form. Unsigned forms will **not** be accepted for consideration by SREC and will lead to an automatic rejection of the application. As the form is submitted to SOC.Ethics by email, the student's and supervisor's signatures will be in electronic form. It is therefore **very important that you copy your supervisor into the email that you send to SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk with your submitted form.** The way to copy your supervisor into the email is through clicking on the 'CC' line at the top of the email and inserting their email address.

Throughout the process of your research, your supervisor will check that your work is carried out in line with what has been stated on your approved ethics form. Your supervisor will also check that any changes *required* by SREC are carried out in relation to your work. When the final project submission is assessed, it is the supervisor who will check your work against the submitted ethics form to ensure that the two match appropriately.

When you **submit your final project report for assessment** you should attach a copy of the **Certificate of Ethical Compliance** available in blank form on the Ethics learning room on NOW (XXSOC10002) with your submitted work.

Frequently Asked Questions:

What is the process of gaining ethical approval for my research?

You should read carefully the information provided in **Sections 1 and 2** of the ethics application form. In particular, you should note the following points:

- **Electronic submission:** Students **must** submit both the form and the accompanying information electronically to SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk. Please write in the **Subject box of the email 'SREC Submission, SREC Amendment or SREC Resubmission'** (whichever is applicable). Please also **copy ('CC') your supervisor into the email.** The electronic copy, saved as a Word document, of the application form and attachments must be signed by you and your supervisor (electronic, typed signatures are permitted) and emailed to SOC.Ethics (we cannot accept files or applications using OneDrive). The form will be entered by the ethics administrators into the independent review system.
- Once your application for ethical approval has been approved by the independent reviewers or considered at the SREC meeting, you will receive an email formally notifying you of the SREC's decision. This email (from SOC.Ethics) will contain any

other information you need to know (for example, where SREC has made a Recommendation or Condition for approval). Your supervisor will also be sent a copy of this information.

- Once you receive the decision you should discuss it with your supervisor who will, if necessary, discuss with you any further work/amendments that need to be carried out.
- SREC meets weekly throughout the academic terms and aims to make decisions in around four weeks from receipt of the form – however this is dependent on the speed with which the independent reviewer returns their review to SOC.Ethics. **If the process is taking longer than 4 or 5 weeks** (excluding periods when the University is closed, for example over the Christmas and Easter breaks) then you can email SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk to explore the reasons for this; however, please **don't email before 4 weeks** as, otherwise, answering all the emails will simply slow things further.
- If you have to **re-submit your form** you must ensure that you **clearly indicate on the form that it is a resubmission**, for Chair's action, and **attach a note detailing what changes have been made**, together with including any relevant attachments (e.g., research instruments or participant information sheet) Please note that all attachments should be sent as **email attachments** and not, for example, via OneDrive.
- Re-submitted forms *may* be dealt with by Chair's action if the required changes were relatively minor; this process may only take a few days. However, substantial changes may require the forms to go through the independent process again i.e. this can take up to another four weeks to process. So, if you are anxious to get on with your project, your best strategy is:
 - To think carefully about the ethical issues associated with your research
 - Read this guide in full, paying particular attention to the section called "Common reasons for Ethics Committee decisions ... – with solutions..."
 - Discuss it with your supervisor
 - And fill in the form carefully, ensuring you include **all** necessary documentation.

Where do I get the relevant ethics forms and documents?

Information about how to obtain the forms and documents will be provided by the Module Leader/Project Coordinator for your course. All the forms, this Guide to Ethical Approval and various 'protocols' and guides are available on the NOW Ethics Learning Room under 'Content'. You and your supervisor will have access to the following forms and guides:

- Ethics (SREC) Process Flowchart
- Guide to Gaining Ethical Approval
- Examples of Participant Information and Informed Consent forms
- Guide to Online Based Research
- Guide to Conducting Research on the Internet (BPS)
- Risk Assessment and Safety Guidance Protocol (to help you carry out research safely)
- Guide to Disclosure of Criminal Activity and issues of Confidentiality
- Student ethics application form for Animal Research
- External Ethics Guides (NHS, Social Care and ESRC)
- Ethics Compliance form (to be submitted with your final project).
- SREC Student Application Form for Ethical Approval

In addition, you should familiarise yourself with the relevant **Research Ethics Code** for the **professional association** representing your subject area, (e.g., the British Psychological Society, the British Society of Criminology, the British Sociological Association, the Social Policy Association, the British Educational Research Association).

Common reasons for Ethics Committee decisions of 'not approved' and 'conditions for approval' – with solutions...

Student and/or supervisor has not signed the ethics application form

Make sure that both you and your supervisor have electronically signed and dated **Sections 9 and 10** of the ethics application form before submitting the form to SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk. Failure to sign the form results in automatic rejection of your application. Don't forget to copy your supervisor into the email submission of the form to SOC.Ethics. You can copy your supervisor into the emailed application by clicking on 'CC' at the top of the email.

Student has not attached all relevant appendices to the application form (see Section 11 of the application form)

You must include **ALL** the relevant information electronically with your submitted application form (e.g., a copy of the research instrument(s) such as questionnaires and/or interview schedules together with the participant information sheet, informed consent form, debriefing sheet - where relevant to the research). Failure to do so will result in **automatic rejection** of your application.

Spamming with email to recruit participants and NTU Computer Use Regulations

You might consider that your polite request for people to complete your survey is not 'spam' in the same way as sending out advertising promotions or asking all NTU students if they would like to buy your used books. However for recipients, who may get many such requests, it may be an unwelcome irritation and invasion of their inbox so you need to be respectful of this. NTU also has some technical limits on how many emails you can send at any one time to staff and students. Students are not allowed to email all other fellow students in the School of Social Sciences, either directly or indirectly via their project supervisor or an administrator.

You must not breach **NTU Computer Use Regulations**. These can be found at http://www.ntu.ac.uk/information_systems/document_uploads/85636.pdf. If you intend to send emails to a distribution group in some other institution, such as a workplace, to which you or someone you know has access, you must check their regulations.

Informed Consent: Confidentiality and Anonymity in qualitative research (see Section 7 of the ethics application form)

Students undertaking qualitative research often state that they will be keeping data confidential; however, the nature of qualitative reporting necessarily involves data extracts being used as evidence in the report. This data has therefore **not** been kept confidential.

If you are planning to conduct qualitative research, and you plan to use verbatim extracts in the report, you should not indicate that you will be keeping data confidential. Instead you need to explain this '**limit to confidentiality**' on participant information and consent forms and explain that you will be **fully anonymising** data in your project report. It should be made clear that this does not just mean changing the participants' names but means that **all identifying information** in the data will be anonymised and de-identified (e.g., place names, employing organisations, specific job title if only one person does that role and so on).

Please note that if you are **transcribing** participant data, and intend to attach a copy of the transcript to your project report, you must ensure that participants are not named or identified in the transcript.

A complicating issue is that, in some rare circumstances, some participants may prefer to use their own names rather than a pseudonym (for examples of justifications and the difficulties this raises see Grinyer, 2002, <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU36.html>). If this occurs in your research (which is unlikely) please speak to your supervisor or your departmental ethics representative about how to deal appropriately with this.

Confidentiality in qualitative research with people who are involved with one another

Qualitative research on people in relationships (i.e., both members of an intimate partnership, a set of best friends and so on) can raise particular difficulties in terms of confidentiality and anonymity. For example, if two cohabitees were interviewed separately and then both read the final report they might be able to recognise each other's data extracts. This might be the case even though you have disguised all identifiers such as names and places. This is because accounts of shared experiences or particular events could act as identifiers in and of themselves. For this reason, we would recommend that people in relationships (or people who know each other) be interviewed *together*. This way they can give their informed consent to the joint interview knowing that they will be speaking in front of the other party; and they can then control what they wish to make public to that other person during the interview.

Alternatively if there is a genuine need to hear separate accounts, because of a need for untainted alternative perspectives, then SREC recommends that you interview separate individuals from *different* relationships. For example, if you are interested in male and female attitudes to interpersonal relationships you could interview partners who are not in a relationship with one another.

If you have an ethically justifiable reason for needing to separately interview all members involved in a particular relationship, then you will need to give a clear and explicit justification for this within your ethics submission. Additionally, you will have to explain how you will ensure the anonymising of **all** aspects of your data to protect all participants' privacy, thereby also ensuring that there is no negative impact on the relationship because of participation.

Confidentiality and mechanisms for withdrawal of data

Students frequently state that they will (i) collect anonymous data to ensure confidentiality, and (ii) allow participants the right to withdraw their data at a specified date. What they fail to include is **how** they will identify participants' data for withdrawal at a later date. A simple solution here is to ask each participant to **choose a unique identifier** to attach to their data (e.g., six random letters and two digits) and ask them to cite this identifier if they wish to withdraw their data at a later date.

This solution should also be applied to **Internet based** research, i.e. it is not appropriate to have statements suggesting that once someone has pressed a button to submit their data they can no longer withdraw. Instead they should be asked for a unique identifier and given an NTU contact email address to use if they wish to withdraw at a later date.

Right of participants to withdraw their data – setting a deadline date

Participants should always have the **right to withdraw their data at any time up until the date specified on the participant information sheet/consent form**. It is very important that you provide participants with a realistic and specific deadline date for the withdrawal of their data and include this information on all participant information sheets, consent forms and any debriefing sheets. It is recommended that the deadline date should be **at least four weeks** before you need to start writing up your research report.

As an example of this, imagine a situation where a student has carried out a case study of a single participant involving a diary method and the participant withdraws their data the day before the project is due in – the student would be in a very difficult situation! Because of this possibility, we advise students conducting small sample research to give a cut-off date after which withdrawal could not normally take place but before which withdrawal is possible – a cooling off period. This cooling off period allows participants the opportunity to withdraw, but also gives students the time to collect more data to replace this. If participants then wish to withdraw their data *after* the cooling off period then their data **must** be withdrawn from public dissemination of the work (for example, if the project is going into the library, or placed online, or if a paper was written from the project). However the data can still be included in the student's submission for assessment. This **must** be made clear to participants on all participant information and this clarity of communication should be evident in the ethics application form (see **Section 5.8 of the application form**).

Data Storage and Retention of Research Records

The Good Practice Guidelines for the Conduct of Psychological Research within the NHS outlines within its Data Storage Section that if the research is to be published, most scientific journals require original data (including videos and transcripts) to be kept for 5 years. If it is not to be published then the data should be kept for 1 year, but this can lead to difficulties if publication is subsequently required as original data cannot be checked or examined if necessary (p. 11 on Data Storage).

The BPS Generic Professional Practice Guidelines state that: 'Psychologists should make, keep and disclose information in records only in accordance with national policy and legislation, the policies and procedures of organisations they are employed by/working in collaboration with, and the Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct' (p.12 Access to records and records keeping).

All students should ensure that their research data is stored securely, that access is strictly controlled, and that anonymisation and encryption are used as appropriate to protect personal data. You should also make sure that the requirements of the [Data Protection Act 1998](#) are complied with.

INTERNET BASED RESEARCH

i) Use of scales and copyright permissions in Internet based research (see Section 8 of the application form and the guides on the Ethics Learning Room)

Students cannot automatically use licensed scales for online or email data collection; digital copyright law on the license for paper scales does not give permission to convert scales into other formats (e.g., electronic versions) **unless** you have the author's or publisher's permission to do so, thus you need to obtain explicit permission to use a scale online. Some publishers will be willing to give this but others will not, and you could waste a lot of valuable time trying to obtain this. A simpler solution is not to use copyrighted scales if you plan to collect data electronically. Instead, there are *always* copyright free alternatives (you just have to work a bit harder to find them).

The restrictions regarding digital copyright law still apply to <https://www.qualtrics.com/>, <https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>, <https://www.surveymonkey.com/> and any similar data collection systems where access is limited, because the scales are being used in an electronic format.

If you are not sure whether you have permission, in most cases this means you don't, and that you need to find another research instrument.

The following databases provide scales that may be used online (check permissions) or useful tips on how to find such scales:

International Personality Item Pool: <http://ipip.ori.org/>

PsycTests: <https://search.proquest.com/psyc-tests/advanced>

ii) Allowing participants to skip questions in online surveys

Most of the academic professional associations that make the rules about research ethics insist that participants should be allowed to skip any question they do not want to answer. When you construct a survey online it is easy to ask a closed question such as "Do you agree?" and provide only "yes" and "no" options.

The way web pages work, once an option has been selected it is normally impossible to deselect in such a way that "nothing" is selected. For this reason you must always provide an

additional option which is worded something like “prefer not to answer” for every closed question.

It should be possible for someone to submit your survey without having told you anything at all, i.e. they’ve skipped every question. You cannot insist on any variable, such as sex or age, being given, no matter how important it is to your research, even if it then means you have to discard that respondent’s answer. Be careful when choosing an online survey design tool because some of them don’t automatically include “prefer not to answer” options and you will have to manually add them to each question.

iii) Informed consent in Internet based research

In some forms of Internet based research (e.g., online surveys), because of the lack of face-to-face contact between researcher and participants, obtaining a measure of written informed consent can be difficult. A suggested solution is that participants should be provided with an **introductory statement** that identifies not only the aims of your study but also makes participants aware of the ethical issues pertinent to your research (i.e., how to withdraw, how things like confidentiality and anonymity work and so on). They should have to read through this prior to beginning the research (for example by scrolling down), and then tick a checkbox to indicate that they understand the nature, and various aspects, of the research and that they wish to take part of their own free will.

iv) Debriefing in Internet based research and inclusion of support organisations

Because of the lack of face-to-face contact between researcher and participants, being sure that you have removed all negative or detrimental aspects of the research can be difficult. A suggested solution is that participants should be provided with a clear final statement (a debrief) that reiterates, and clarifies where necessary, the nature of the research in which they have been involved.

The debrief should give the contact details (NTU email address, not mobile phone number) of the student researcher, and those of their supervisor, explaining that they can be contacted with any questions that arise about the research. A full NTU postal address and telephone number should also be provided for the project supervisor.

Contact details may also be needed for an **appropriate support organisation** (see point below). The debriefing statement should also reiterate the procedures for withdrawal of data at a later date, and any limits to withdrawal (for example, because of project submission deadlines).

v) Anonymous retrospective withdrawal by a participant of their data

You must always allow participants to withdraw their data from your research during some reasonable time interval after they participate. With anonymised Internet surveys this is very difficult. If you cannot allocate pseudonyms in advance to your participants (which must be administered in such a way that you are not able to match pseudonyms to real names) then you could ask respondents to provide a pseudonym as one of your questions. Encourage them to come up with something unique (a ‘unique identifier’).

You must also think about how online participants can contact you to let you know that they want to withdraw, because if they email you that will, in many cases, reveal their name to you. So an anonymous letter to the project supervisor, quoting the project title and the participant’s unique identifier might be an option worth exploring for participant withdrawal. However, you should consult your supervisor about the most appropriate mechanism for withdrawal of online survey data.

vi) Breaking the terms and conditions of Internet and Social Networking services

Online services such as **FaceBook** and **Twitter** have rules that are routinely ignored by casual users. It is your responsibility to check them (and, yes, you really must read them). You will find, for example, that FaceBook does not allow you to create a bogus account, or a second account using a false name, so you should not create fictional user accounts to test reactions from different kinds of people.

You will also find that most social network services and online discussion forums/blogs have rules forbidding you doing things like recruiting research participants. You might be able to get such permission from list moderators, but remember they may get many such requests, and some online communities do not welcome such intrusions.

Any recruitment of participants that takes place online should be done in a manner that does not breach the terms and conditions of the websites where the adverts or posts are placed.

For further advice on conducting Internet based research please see the **Internet Based Research Guide on the Content pages of the Ethics Learning Room**. In addition, the following guidance on ethical issues in relation to **Internet-Mediated Research (BPS, 2013)** is an excellent resource that all students and supervisors will find useful:

<http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/inf206-guidelines-for-internet-mediated-research.pdf>

vii) Spamming with email to recruit participants

See page 5 of this Guide.

Counselling and professional advice

Students are in most cases **not** qualified to give professional counsel or advice. If your research touches on sensitive issues that could cause distress then you should refer **all** participants to an **appropriate** support organisation (N.B. do **not use the Samaritans as a default counselling service** unless this is appropriate for your research).

The reasons that this information should be given to all participants are: (i) students are not qualified to determine who is in enough distress to need this information, (ii) participants' distress may only occur *after* they have left the research situation, (iii) participants are entitled to privacy regarding whether or not they feel the need to approach support organisations and should not need to declare this to you in order to access support.

You must **not attempt to offer counselling yourself**. Some students do have counselling experience or qualifications. However, you are researching participants in your role as a student researcher from NTU and this should always be **made explicit** on participant information, consent and debriefing forms.

It **may** be appropriate, if your research participants are NTU students, to refer them to the NTU Student Counselling Service and you should seek advice from your supervisor on the most appropriate referral service.

Risk to students and participants (See Section 4 of the application form and Risk Assessment Safety Guide on the Ethics Learning Room on NOW)

If students are carrying out interviews anywhere other than in University buildings, they should include details on the precautions they are planning to take before and during data collection (e.g., having a mobile phone with them, telling people where they will be and so on). This can be done by alluding to the 'risk assessment and safety guidance' protocol available on the Ethics Learning Room on NOW. It may be the case, in particularly risky situations, that

your supervisor will need to complete an NTU Risk Assessment form on your behalf before the research can commence.

You should also be aware that researching certain topics might expose you to some **psychological risk**. For example, interviewing people about sensitive topics and/or those with post-traumatic stress can result in some distressing data emerging. Rapport in the interview situation (which can facilitate good quality data) can then spill over into empathy and identification with the interviewee, and repeated exposure to the data can bring about distress for the researcher.

Researchers need to self-monitor for such effects so that they can take breaks and allow themselves some distance from the data. If your topic has the potential to cause distress to **you** (rather than, or as well as, the participant) it would be appropriate to address this in your ethics submission form and discuss this carefully with your supervisor.

Sensitive topics/questions (See Section 4 of the application form)

If there is any doubt or discussion **at all** about the sensitivity of the topic to be addressed, it would be advisable to err on the side of caution regarding this issue. You can then add in an extra paragraph on the ethics application form detailing the discussions between student and supervisor, regarding the sensitivity or otherwise of the questions/topic, so that SREC is fully aware of the extent of your ethical consideration.

Personal/sensational issues

Inevitably students can be drawn to research areas that they have personal connections with, for example, parents might be interested in researching childhood, being a musician might stimulate interest in sight reading, a background in the arts might stimulate a desire to use visual methods and so on.

This is not only inevitable but also appropriate; you are likely to have a much better experience researching something you have a genuine interest in understanding. However, sometimes it might be inappropriate for a student to research something that they are very emotionally involved in. Projects should not be used as a therapeutic exercise for the student as (perhaps counter-intuitively) this could potentially expose them to greater psychological risk.

Sometimes, SREC may wish to explore a student's motivations for interest in a particular topic before approving the application. This is only ever done in the interests of the student and participants to ensure that neither is at risk of coming to harm. There is no topic that is inappropriate for research *per se* but in some cases there may need to be explicit reassurances that the student is advanced enough in their methods training to handle certain topics/situations.

A slightly different but related point is that for some 'sensationalist' topics SREC might seek reassurances that there is a sound justification for researching that specific topic.

Illegal activities, including issues of Confidentiality and Duty of Disclosure (see Section 4 of the application form and the Guide on the NOW ethics learning room)

Sometimes certain research questions may require samples of participants who engage in illegal activities (e.g., risk takers who speed whilst driving, cannabis users and so on). If you propose to use such a sample you need to discuss this carefully with your supervisor.

It is possible to use such samples but you obviously need to prepare a very thoughtful and carefully considered ethics submission. You also need to be aware that, whilst this does not apply to *past* criminal activity, if participants declare their **current involvement in criminal activity and/or intention to commit a crime** at some point in the *future* you may need to

report this to the relevant authority. Participants should be advised about this prior to taking part in the research, for example on the participant information sheet.

You should also offer a considered and detailed rationale for your proposed research in order to establish that your research interest is appropriately academic. **You are also advised to consult the 'Guide to confidentiality and disclosure of criminal activity' for guidance on situations where you MUST legally disclose such activity and where you might need to seek guidance on disclosure** (see Ethics Learning Room on NOW).

Vulnerable populations and DBS Checks for UK Students (see Section 3 of the ethics application form)

If you plan to carry out research using vulnerable populations (such as young people, defined as those under the age of 18) then an NTU approved Data and Barring Service (DBS) check may be required. Please consult relevant guidance here:

https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/about_ntu/policies/safeguarding_children/index.html. You will definitely need a DBS check if you plan to collect data from children in schools, and may need a DBS check if you are working with other vulnerable populations, or if the site where you are collecting data means that you will have access to vulnerable populations.

The DBS check process is as follows (please note that this process does not involve the Ethics Committee and is for information only):

1. Student identifies the school or other organisation where they will be working. This is an essential first step.
2. Student completes the Mid-Course DBS Form, available here: https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/about_ntu/policies/safeguarding_children/mid-course-dbs/index.html. You need to give sufficient details of your research plans for NTU to make a decision about whether or not DBS is required. This information should include the name and details of the institution where you will be working.
3. Student saves the form and then emails to the address on the form. Forms are currently received and processed by Grainne Carroll grainne.carroll@ntu.ac.uk. She will contact the student, copying in the supervisor, if it is unclear whether DBS checking is required.
4. The student is then sent instructions about how to proceed.

DBS and the ethics process: If a DBS check is required for your research then you should indicate on the ethics application form that DBS will be obtained before data collection starts. The Ethics Committee's role is to require that a DBS is in place, but not to check that it is (this is the role of the research supervisor). You should always discuss the DBS check application process with your supervisor in the first instance.

There can be very good reasons why students may not wish to engage in this process; however, we have tried to develop a protocol that addresses these concerns. It may be that there are concerns because the check may not come back as clear and students are worried that this will prevent the research. However, this does not necessarily mean that proposed research cannot go ahead; the key issue is protection of participants and some offences will not impact upon this.

Vulnerable Populations and Overseas Police Checks for Overseas Students (see Section 3 of the application form)

Many students from overseas choose to collect research data in the UK or in their home country as part of their projects. We will need a criminal record check from your home country (and possibly a DBS check too, see above) if you plan to work with vulnerable populations. Checks from overseas can sometimes be referred to by a variety of names such as a Police Check or a Good Behaviour Record. To find out what it is called in your home country and how to apply for one, please visit the following government website:

You will need to demonstrate in your ethics form that you have met all the requirements of your home country to work with vulnerable populations.

If you are unable to obtain a home Police Check and still wish to work with vulnerable populations in your home country, discuss this with your supervisor in the first instance. It will need to be made clear in your written correspondence with any participants/organisations that the University has been unable to engage with any criminal record checks prior to you undertaking your research.

Once you have obtained your police check, a copy of the documentation (in English) should be passed to the relevant course administrator in the School of Social Sciences Office.

Working in Schools (or similar organisations) – Opt-in and Opt-out Consent

Carrying out a research project in a school or similar organization (e.g., nursery, youth club and so on) is a popular and rewarding choice for undergraduate and postgraduate students. However, as all participants under the age of 18 are classed as part of a 'vulnerable population', particular care needs to be taken when seeking informed consent. SREC recommends that students adhere to the following guidelines, unless there is strong justification provided in your ethics application for an alternative approach:

- As a first step, written and fully informed consent needs to be obtained from the Head Teacher (or equivalent person in other organisations).
- In most circumstances, written '**opt-in**' consent should then be obtained from the parents or guardians of any children invited to take part in your research. In practice, this usually means children take home a letter about your research, and bring back a signed consent form if their parents/guardians are happy for them to participate. This is certainly the case if you are planning on working with children who have special educational needs, very young children, or if the topic you are researching is in any way sensitive.
- **Opt-out parental or guardian consent** may be appropriate in some circumstances. This is where children take home a letter about your research, and only return a signed form if their parents/guardians prefer them not to take part. You are therefore assuming that any child who does not return a signed form has parental/guardian consent to participate. This type of consent may be appropriate if you are carrying out research on a non-sensitive topic, if the types of tasks the children will be undertaking are similar to normal classroom activities, or if you are working with older teenagers. Finally, opt-out consent should only be used with the express permission of the Head Teacher or group leader.

If you are unsure whether to use opt-in or opt-out consent, discuss your concerns with your supervisor.

Publicly available data

Some projects may involve the use of data that has not been specifically generated for the proposed research (naturally occurring or naturalistic data), for example, documents such as minutes of meetings, blogs, transcripts taken from website message boards and so on. This raises the issue of whether permission is needed to use this data.

The key issue here is whether the data is already in the public domain, i.e. it is freely and publicly available to all. In this case permission is not *necessarily* specifically required. However, even if permission is not required it may be that it is still appropriate to notify relevant individuals that data is going to be used in this way. There are also forms of naturally occurring data that it would *not* be appropriate to use without permission (e.g., postings on closed Internet message boards). If you are planning research that involves this kind of data you are advised to consult your supervisor.

Contact details – yours and your supervisor's

Because of issues related to student and staff safety students should **not give their personal contact details**, or those of their supervisors, to participants (e.g., home address, mobile or home phone numbers, personal email address). It is however appropriate to give your full name, in order to differentiate you from any other NTU student. **You should provide participants on all participant sheets, informed consent forms and debrief sheets with contact details in the form of your full name, NTU email address, and your supervisor's name, NTU email address, NTU postal address and NTU phone number.**

External ethical review boards

For some research, ethical approval should be sought not through SREC but through an external ethical review board. For example, the **NHS** has its own ethical review boards that **must** be used if any research involving NHS patients, service users *or*, in some cases, staff is to be carried out. Please see details in <http://www.hra.nhs.uk/>. Similarly **Social Care** have also introduced their own required procedures. In such cases, you would need to obtain ethical approval for your research project from the external ethics board and then log that approval with the School Office. Specifically, you will need to send an email to SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk stating your name, your project title, your supervisor's name and provide documental evidence that the project has been approved by the relevant external ethical review board (e.g., Health Research Authority). The project supervisor will need to be cc'ed into that email and the School Office will log all this information under your (i.e., the student's) name.

You also need to be aware that research involving population samples that require external ethical review needs a **long lead-in time** as external boards meet infrequently. Because of this, some research may not be approved in time for you to commence the research for your project, not because it is unethical *per se* but because the timescale required for ethical approval is impossible to meet.

Animal research

Although the School of Social Sciences does not have an animal laboratory this does not rule out all animal research. In the past, for example, Psychology students have carried out observational research on primates at Twycross Zoo, studies on duck feeding and so on. This kind of research does not fall under the Home Office regulations for animal research but will still require careful thought about the ethical issues.

If you are planning any form of animal research you are advised to consult with your supervisor. **You will also need to complete an additional ethics form for approval of animal research, which is available in the Ethics Learning Room on NOW.** This form should be completed *in addition to your ethics application form* and appended to the application form together with any additional information such as a copy of research instruments and participant information sheet, informed consent form and debriefing sheet (for the human participants!).

Further information

If you have got any queries about the ethics of your proposed research that are not answered in this Guide, please ask your supervisor in the first instance who should be able to advise you appropriately. If you are still unsure, please contact your Ethics Committee departmental representative (see SRECmembers file for SREC membership). For advice on completing the ethics application form you should read the information on the form carefully, consult this Guide and any relevant guides and protocols on the pages of the Ethics Learning Room on NOW. You can also email SOC.Ethics@ntu.ac.uk for further information or advice on the ethics approval process.

School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (2017)

(The School Research Ethics Committee's forms and Ethics Guide have been audited for the NTU Equality Impact Assessment).