

RESEARCH ETHICS POLICY

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1. SCOPE AND PURPOSE

The aim of this university policy is to establish and promote good ethical practice in the conduct of academic research. The *Research Ethics Policy* is intended to:

- (i) provide standards to protect individuals and groups with whom researchers interact, including the university and its staff;
- (ii) engage staff, students and any interested parties, including the public, of issues that may arise from research activity;
- (iii) provide a clear understanding of the mechanisms the university employs to internally review its practices and activities in relation to research.

This policy complements the university's *Ethics Policy* and must be viewed in the context of the university's *Research Governance and Integrity Policy*, *Data Protection Policy*, *Freedom of Information Policy* and financial guidelines, all of which are available at www.rgu.ac.uk/about/planning-and-policy/policies/policies.

The university wishes to promote a quality research culture, where excellence is promoted and key elements such as effective leadership, openness, accountability and honesty, are maintained and enhanced.

This *Policy* is of direct relevance to all those who host, conduct, participate and disseminate the results of research.

This *Policy* requires that researchers need to consider issues of ethics in the design, process and outcomes of research.

This *Policy* requires that researchers have a clear understanding of research ethics review mechanisms within the Robert Gordon University.

2. NEED FOR A POLICY

2.1 To encourage researchers to adhere to best practices relating to the ethical development, implementation and dissemination of research

Researchers should be aware that all research carried out should be to the highest ethical standards possible, that it complies with all relevant laws including, where appropriate, laws of other countries; appropriate due diligence is undertaken to minimise risk; and finally, that it adheres to all relevant policies or codes of good practice.

2.2 To protect the integrity and reputation of the university

The university wishes all research to be in the best interests of the university and its reputation, as well as its partners and spin-off companies.

The university has many close links with the community and it wishes these links to remain untarnished.

The university has a clear responsibility to develop a culture among staff, researchers and students in which attention to both governance and ethics in research becomes accepted practice. To achieve and maintain a working culture, the university has to have an agreed, consistent and unambiguous framework and the means to implement it.

The university has a duty of care toward members of its community and also toward members of the general community where the university's activities impact upon them.

2.3 To protect the rights of those engaged in or affected by research

The responsibility for ensuring ethical conduct in research extends not only to the investigators but to everyone engaged in the process. This includes the university.

The rights of those engaged in, or affected by, research are of two kinds. General rights are those which apply to all, like human rights or animal rights. The university is bound to observe general ethical principles of this kind. Particular rights are those which are determined by context, circumstances and specific undertakings made in research – for example, undertakings made in respect of confidentiality, the use of data and reporting. Agreements of this kind are made in the name of the university and consequently the university has a responsibility to ensure that they are complied with.

2.4 To protect the rights of fellow researchers

To encourage the internal sharing of ideas, methods and research results and to encourage collaboration between researchers, research groups, research disciplines and institutions.

Researchers need to have mutual respect for one another and duly acknowledge the input of each individual.

Researchers must also consider the confidentiality of projects/results with commercial sensitivity.

3. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

3.1 Ethical conduct

Ethical conduct depends on:

- consideration of the impact of the research, including
 - § the potential implications of research for subjects and participants
 - § the potential implications of research for non-participants, and
 - § the uses to which research can be put.

- guidance covering the treatment of participants, including
 - § informed consent
 - § confidentiality and anonymity (see section 3.3 below), and
 - § special consideration of vulnerable respondents

- academic considerations. Researchers are enjoined to
 - § maintain research of high quality
 - § display competence
 - § act responsibly towards others in their field, and
 - § advance their discipline

- guidance concerning research relationships. These include
 - § the responsibilities of the researcher to the body commissioning the research,
 - § responsibilities to the university,
 - § commitments to fellow researchers, and
 - § integrity in dealing with subjects, participants and stakeholders.

3.2 The impact of research

Researchers should ensure engagement in research does not cause unnecessary harm to participants, stakeholders, the environment, the economy and other living beings.

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.

Researchers have a moral obligation to attempt to minimise the risk of physical and/or mental harm to themselves, human and animal participants, research subjects, stakeholders and the environment which may result from their research.

3.3 Ethical procedures

Ethical procedure depends in part on consideration of the impact of research, but more specifically on impacts for those who are directly affected by the process of research. Examples are procedures to obtain consent, to ensure anonymity, to protect confidentiality and to ensure the position of vulnerable subjects.

The application of these procedures depends on the nature of the research, and cannot be determined by simple rules without careful ethical consideration.

Research in the public sphere may not require the consent or approval of research subjects. The advice of the Canadian Tri-Boards is that "REBs (research ethics boards) should recognize that certain types of research - particularly biographies, artistic criticism or public policy research - may legitimately have a negative effect on organizations or on public figures in, for example, politics, the arts or business. Such research does not require the consent of the subject ... Consent is not required from organizations such as corporations or governments for research about their institutions"¹.

There is a general presumption that consent should be obtained from subjects whenever the information is private. The requirement to seek consent can, however, be waived in certain exceptional cases, for example where there is necessary deception, or where the consent of a subject may jeopardise the welfare of an informant. All such cases require explicit ethical review and an extended justification.

Private data should be presumed to be under the control of the person or organisation to whom it relates. Anonymity is not a sufficient condition for confidentiality. Removing names from a report, or using aggregate data, may not be enough to ensure that respondents cannot be recognised or identified; and even where material is not identifiable except by the person who gave it, using it in ways that go beyond the terms on which it has been given may be a breach of trust.

The protection of subjects who are vulnerable calls for particular consideration to be given by researchers. This may apply, for example, to human subjects who are regarded as vulnerable (e.g. children or vulnerable adults) and to animals. Consent and anonymity should not be taken as sufficient protection.

3.4 Academic quality

Researchers are enjoined to maintain research of high quality, display competence, act responsibly towards others in their field, and advance their discipline.

3.5 Research relationships

As an academic community, the Robert Gordon University has a responsibility to encourage the highest possible standards of care, consideration and integrity within all research. Research integrity extends to accountability for the ethical basis for all aspects of the research; for the safety of both the participants and the researchers; for the probity of the financial management of the project; for the reliability of results and for making every best effort to provide value for public or private funds invested in the project.

Consideration should be given to potential conflicts of interest that may arise given the source of research funding and the nature of the research project.

All funds shall be managed in accordance with the university's financial guidelines.

¹ Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. 1998 (with 2000, 2002 and 2005 amendments). Available at <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/archives/tcps-epct/Default/> [accessed 4 February 2016]

3.6 Dissemination of research findings

It is expected that the researcher disseminate and publish all research findings, unless major confidentiality issues arise and subject to contractual provisions.

When publishing research, all reasonable steps must be taken to ensure that published reports, statistics and public statements about research activities and performance are complete, accurate and unambiguous. The nature of financial or in kind support should normally be acknowledged in all reports of research outcomes, both to acknowledge the support and to enable readers to make their own judgement over any prejudicial influences this support may have had upon the direction of the research.

The university is committed to pushing the boundaries in all areas of research in order to advance human knowledge but, at the same time, to benefit humankind. Therefore researchers should be aware of the use, potential misuse and abuse of published research.

All researchers who have contributed to the development of results and dissemination will be appropriately acknowledged.

Where research findings have commercial potential, consideration should be given to appropriate forms of protection prior to dissemination.

4. UNIVERSITY RESPONSE TO NON-COMPLIANCE

Non-compliance and ethical misconduct are addressed in the *Research Governance Policy*.

5. RESEARCH ETHICS POLICY REVIEW

The *Research Ethics Policy* will be regularly reviewed and updated, and amendments will require the approval of the university's Board of Governors.

Version 1: Approved Board of Governors, 23 June 2003

Version 2: Approved Board of Governors, 25 March 2004

Version 3: Approved Board of Governors, 18 December 2008; updated 29 July 2011

Version 4: Updated 02 September 2014

Version 5: *draft*