University of Edinburgh Business School

Research Ethics Policy

The purpose of the ethical standards embodied in this policy is not to limit research activities, but to promote and facilitate the conduct of all research in ways that respect the dignity and preserve the well-being of human research participants and the researchers. Researchers are advised to refer to the comprehensive CAHSS Research Ethics Framework (2023) published by the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Science. Where research requires ethical approval by external bodies, it must comply with whatever is the most rigorous relevant ethical framework.

1. Guiding principles

1.1. In line with the University of Edinburgh (UOE) Research Ethics Policy (2022), the School Research Ethics Policy is guided by the following UOE research ethical principles:

- Beneficence and non-maleficence
- Integrity, openness and transparency
- Dignity and respect
- Responsibility and accountability
- Equality, diversity and inclusion

1.2. Researchers are obliged to:

1.2.1. Conduct research as capably as their knowledge permits.
1.2.2. Protect the dignity and preserve the wellbeing of human research participants.
1.2.3. Adhere to the 5 ethical principles outlined in Section 1.1.

1.3. The requirements for Section 1.2.2 are detailed below:

1.3.1. **Respect for Free and Informed Consent:** Respecting the exercise of individual free and informed consent by the research participant. Free and informed consent must be voluntarily given without manipulation, undue influence or coercion. Participants have given free and informed consent when they have freely agreed to serve in the study on the basis of well-understood information about the objectives of the research. They must be fully informed of all anticipated risks and possible benefits of their participation. Voluntary participation requires that participants are assured that at any time they may withdraw their consent to the research.

In the case of behavioural and questionnaire research where full disclosure about the nature and objectives of the research could bias and invalidate results (for example, in communications intended to change attitudes or in studies of incidental learning), the explanation should be given immediately after data collection or as soon as is consistent with the research design and methods. Participants should be fully informed as soon as possible of the purposes and aims of the research, and any uncertainties should be removed. The investigator should remove any misconceptions that may have been fostered and should re-establish any trust in the research community that may have been lost.

1.3.2. **Respect for Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality:** Access, control and dissemination of personal information must be protected to ensure privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are respected and comply with data protection law. If anonymity and confidentiality cannot be assured or granted, potential participants must be made aware of

the limitations and of the possible consequences before they are asked for their consent to participate.

1.3.3. **Respect for Vulnerable Persons:** Children, institutionalized persons or others who are vulnerable are entitled to protection and special procedures to protect their interests.

1.3.4. **Respect for the physical and psychological safety of researchers and participants:** Risks to the researcher and participants, and ways of addressing these, must be given careful consideration.

2. Participant Information and Informed Consent

2.1. Research participants should be provided with adequate information to be able to make an informed decision about whether or not to take part in the research. Predictable potential risks of participation should be communicated clearly to human participants.

2.2. Where informed consent is not possible or not appropriate, then researchers should seek and be guided by standards for best practice.

2.3. Researchers should ensure participants are free to participate without coercion or penalty for not taking part, and that their right to withdraw from the research is clearly communicated.

2.4. Participants should receive clear directions on how to raise a complaint or disclose concerns about a project. Ethical concerns should be directed to ethics@business-school.ed.ac.uk

2.5. Where possible, participants should be informed of the risks of the research and their rights in relation to the research in writing, and evidence of their consent to participate gathered in writing.

2.6. Template copies of Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms are available online via Sharepoint for staff and via LEARN for students and should be used whenever possible.

- Staff Link: https://uoe.sharepoint.com/sites/hss/uebs/researchpgr/SitePages/Ethics.aspx
- Student Link: https://xerte.cahss.ed.ac.uk/play.php?template_id=681

2.7. Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms must comply with Data Protection Legislation, and should also contain the charitable status strapline as instructed in the University's publishing guidance.

- Editorial Guidance: https://www.ed.ac.uk/editorial-style/download

2.8. Researchers conducting data collection using social media should consult the principles in Appendix 1 to address potential issues surrounding participant consent and expectations of anonymity.

3. Ethical Review

3.1. All researchers should explicitly self-evaluate the ethical implications of all of their research.

3.2. Research review should be sought whenever there is any risk of concerns or controversy about its adherence to the UOE research ethical principles. This is the case in particular when research involves human subject participation, animal subjects, and/or any form of research related to

terrorism. Research considerations should not be limited to data collection only, but should address the full project.

3.3. This applies to any person within the Business School community who conducts research, including academics, emeritus, staff, teaching staff, administrators, students (all UG and PG students conducting research for dissertations, theses and coursework), visiting or adjunct scholars, fellows and chairs, paid and unpaid research associates and assistants, whether acting as a principal investigator, a junior collaborator or in some other capacity. Ethical review can be sought by one member of the research team regarding the whole project, rather than each individual requiring separate ethical review. Researchers also include honorary staff, those who are visiting from other institutions and organisations, and those who are undertaking or supervising research at or for the University.

The Business School will ensure procedures to avoid duplication of work when research projects involve more than one research institution.

> 3.3.1. For visiting researchers, University of Edinburgh ethical review should be sought if they will be conducting research as part of their position as a visiting researcher. In situations where they have already undergone ethical review at their home institution, documentation evidencing the favourable opinion of the project should be provided to the Business School's Research Ethics Team to avoid duplication of ethical review.

4. Procedures for Ethical Review

4.1. The Business School consider three categories of research according to the levels of potential ethical risk.

4.2. **Level one**: This applies to research which does not involve human subject participation and where there is no doubt or controversy about its adherence to the UOE research ethical principles.

> 4.2.1. Examples of human subject participation include: observation, assessment, or recording of public meetings; observation of general behaviour in public spaces or similar activities, and research using many forms of information publicly available for research purposes.

> 4.2.2. Please note that the rise in digital and social media research raises particular issues, and studies relying on online or social media data require attention to complex questions around privacy, informed consent and potential harm and cannot be assumed to be Level 1. Please consult Appendix 1 for more detail.

4.3. **Level two**: This applies to straightforward non-intervention with human participants, such as observation or questionnaires and direct engagement with participants or participant groups, such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography.

4.3.1. Research that involves a minor or low emotional risk (temporal distress) for participants will be considered level two in presence of sufficient mitigation measures. For the aim of deciding on the level category, 'low emotional risk research' will be defined as:

- Research that only induces mild, temporary distress (comparable to everyday life disappointments or frustrations).

4.4. **Level three**: This level applies to research that may present a higher level of ethical risk, such as:

4.4.1. The research uses novel procedures (where there is no recognized protocol for guiding research). Researchers should consult Appendix 1 for any use of novel tools (such as generative AI) and online data sources.
4.4.2. The research is potentially problematic in that it might incorporate inherent physical or significant emotional risk (higher than low emotional risk as defined above) to researchers or research participants.
4.4.3. The research involves vulnerable people including children (under 18), institutionalised people, or other individuals who are vulnerable or unable to give consent.
4.4.4. The research involves staff members asking students on their own courses to participate in their research projects.

4.5 Instructions for the school processes to submit a request for ethical review for students can be accessed via LEARN.

4.6 Instructions for the school processes to submit a request for ethical review for staff can be accessed via the Business School's Sharepoint.

5. Business School Ethics Committee

5.1. The Business School Research Ethics Committee is a sub-committee of the Research Committee, and is chaired by the Deputy Director of Research (Ethics). Each subject group will be represented on the Committee by its Research Champion. Three members are necessary to be quorate, including the relevant subject group representative.

5.2. The Committee will review each Level 3 proposal via email with the Deputy Director of Research (Ethics) to decide whether the research project should be provided with a favourable opinion.

5.3. If the Committee reviews the application and are satisfied that all ethical implications have been considered and accounted for it will offer a favourable opinion of the application. It may also offer a favourable opinion subject to minor changes. Failure to make these changes prior to the launch of data collection may constitute research misconduct, and may result in referral to the University's Research Misconduct Procedure.

5.4. Following review, if the School Research Ethics Committee has major ethical concerns regarding a project that cannot be resolved through feedback to the applicant, they will offer an unfavourable opinion with thorough feedback as the result of their review.

5.5. If ethical concerns cannot be resolved, the matter will be referred to the College Research Ethics Committee, which has an audit (receiving annual reports), enhancement (conduit for recommendations), and maintenance (ensuring ethics procedure function in Schools) role.

5.6. If a Level 3 application is being made by a Committee member, or a student supervised by an Committee member, a suitably experienced colleague from that subject group should be co-opted onto the sub-committee to provide subject matter expertise for the review.

5.7. Where the Deputy Director of Research (Ethics) role is undertaken by a Subject Group Research Champion, an additional member of faculty will act as their subject group ethics representative.

Appendix 1: Social Media Research.

A1.1. Digital and social media research raises particular issues, and studies relying on online or social media data require attention to complex questions around privacy, informed consent and potential harm.

A1.2. Suppose the project is using public data on a social media platform. In that case, the researcher should examine the Terms & Conditions of the social media platform to confirm that there is a clause allowing the data to be used for research or for testing methodologies.

A1.3. The researcher should consider user expectations of privacy and anonymity. In some cases, social media data may be considered private or anonymous by its users (see examples below). In these cases, the researcher should follow the Level 2/3 processes for ethical review, and should make clear how they will provide options for the social media users to consent for their data to be used in the research, such as the following examples: contacting the group administrator if there is one; posting a message at the forum; explaining how users can opt-out. There are other cases where there is a solid argument for information being public. For example, posts by public figures, journalists, publicity accounts or accounts with a high number of followers can be considered as public information. In these cases, research can be considered Level 1. In case of doubt, researchers should follow Level 2/3 processes to seek the opinion of the Research Committee.

Some examples where user expectation of publicity may be assumed are:

- Posts that include a hashtag.
- Posts by a public figure, celebrity or profile with a large number of followers.
- Conversations in social media where a public figure is participating.

Some examples where user expectation of privacy or anonymity are usually assumed are:

- Posts by a member with a low number of followers.
- Posts in a close online group where all participants are anonymous.
- Posts on sensitive topics.

Note that this is neither an exhaustive nor a prescriptive list. There may be circumstances where this list is not applicable because contextual circumstances. In these cases, researchers need to submit the Level 2/3 processes and include in the forms the arguments in favour or against anonymity and privacy consideration.

A1.4. The researcher must take steps to ensure the anonymity of the users they are researching, unless there is a solid argument about the information being open to the general public (for example public figures/posts by an account with large number of followers). It may be possible for users to be identified by the use of their online data, for example if very specific quotations from a user are included in the final research it may be possible for readers to find that specific post online and identify the reader. If the research plans present a potential risk to anonymity, the researcher should follow the Level 2/3 processes for ethical review and should make clear how they will mitigate the risks to user anonymity.

A1.5. The researcher must consider whether or not the topic of their research presents a higher ethical risk, such as online discussions of experiences of medical issues or mental health. In these cases, the Level 2/3 processes for ethical review should be followed.

A1.6. The researcher should consider if there is a potential risk of harm to the users in the data sample. Examples of harm might include the risk of online abuse, or risk of significant emotional

distress by being included in the research. In these cases, the researcher should follow the Level 2/3 processes for ethical review and should explain how they plan to mitigate the risks of harm.
A1.7 When using generative AI tools, researcher needs to be aware of the current limitations of such tools regarding the preservation of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. When the research involves personal data being processed by a generative AI tool, the researcher should follow the Level 2/3 processes for ethical review.