



University of Wales
Prifysgol Cymru

**Ethical Principles and Guidelines for Undergraduate and
Taught Postgraduate Level Study
2015**

Contents

How to use this Resource.....	2
What do we mean by Ethics?.....	2
Overview, Principles, and Precepts.....	3
When to Seek Ethical Approval.....	4
Mechanisms for the Consideration of Ethical Issues	5
Ethical Conduct of Academic Activity	7
<i>Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Safeguarding Animals.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Safeguarding Participants.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Unacceptable Behaviour.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Glossary of General Ethical Principles	9
Further Resources.....	9
Appendix 1: Suggested Pro-Forma for Approval	10

How to use this Resource

This resource has been devised to assist collaborative centres to reflect and develop their own practices of ethical approval for undergraduate and taught postgraduate learning. This document outlines a number of broad considerations which need to be taken into account when confronting ethical matters within taught degree programmes. The resource uses the terminology of 'academic activity' to cover work undertaken as part of a module, assessment, and the development of final projects and dissertations.

The resource is not intended to replace robust systems already established within collaborative centres, but is meant for those institutions, particularly from outside the UK, who do not have an established approach to considering ethical matters within student learning activities. Furthermore, it is expected that those collaborative centres already delivering programmes that include learning activities which engage with the general public and/or animals, will already have an established and effective means of addressing ethical issues.

What do we mean by Ethics?

In 1966, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which sought to give both moral and legal status to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was established in 1948. Under Article 7 of the Covenant, the assertion was made that 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In particular, no one shall be subjected without his free consent to medical or scientific experimentation.' Since then, the Declaration has been amended several times, but has become a main reference point for all academic study which includes human participants.

Similar principles have also been adopted both within the UK and the wider European economic area in order to protect animals used for scientific purposes, most recently the European Directive 2010/63/EU, which enhances the UK Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act of 1986.

In the context of university study, ethics concerns the rules and standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession. Ethics seeks to ensure that actions undertaken within scholarly enquiry produce positive consequences and outcomes for those involved with minimal impact to them. The University believes that ethically based scholarly practices are important for the following reasons:

- i) to enhance the quality, integrity, and probity of research and teaching;
- ii) to protect the rights and welfare of participants and minimise the risk of physical and mental discomfort, harm, and danger from research procedures;
- iii) to protect the welfare of scholars and their right to carry out legitimate investigations;
- iv) to minimise the potential for claims of negligence made against the University, its staff, and any collaborative individual or organisation; and,
- v) to protect the reputation of the University for the research it conducts and sponsors.

Overview, Principles, and Precepts

As a reflection of its core values, the University of Wales (the University) seeks to ensure that academic activity carried out under its jurisdiction maintains the integrity and probity expected of a degree awarding authority from the United Kingdom (UK). To this extent, the University believes that academic activity should be conducted according to the ethical guidelines referenced within the wider UK higher education sector. The University considers that ethical issues broadly include, *inter alia*, academic activity that: involves human participants; includes animal participants; may result in social or environmental damage.

Under the Common Academic Framework for research degree provision, the responsibility for the oversight of research ethics rests with the Research Degree Committee of each collaborative centre. However, the oversight of ethics affecting taught awards (at both undergraduate and postgraduate level) has previously lacked specific guidelines. The following guidance is prepared to support those centres delivering undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes leading to University awards ensure that consideration is given by students and staff to ethical dimensions of modules and final projects or dissertations.

The University recognises that as an internationally facing institution, with awards being offered in countries not subject to the laws of the UK, that interpretation of ethical principles may differ between territories. As the University validated award is offered as a degree of the UK, any ethical considerations should also be founded within the general ethical principles found within the UK higher education sector, rather than those within the country which the validated award is delivered. While this may create tension within the nature of validation, it is believed that the granting of an academic award to an individual from a country different to the location of where it is delivered, continues to imply that the values of the society within which the awarding body is based must underpin the learning received while studying for the award.

The University also recognises that, with programmes operating within an international arena, programmes may also be subject to oversight and scrutiny from local professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, who may also stipulate expectations over the ethical approaches required for candidates. In times of conflicting advice, the collaborative centre is encouraged to contact the Senior Academic Officers or programme Moderators of the University in order to discuss the matters more fully on an individual case-by-case basis.

The guidance uses the following principles for adoption by undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes on the matter of ethics oversight:

1. Any project, dissertation, or element of coursework involving the gathering or holding of data from human or animal participants requires ethical approval before the activity begins.
2. Any module which seeks to involve evidence from individuals which is not in the public domain (e.g. newspaper and/or published statistics) requires ethical approval before the activity begins.
3. That ethical oversight will be applied and operated in a proportional manner, commensurate to the type and form of academic activity.

In operation, the following precepts should be adopted in ensuring that important ethical values are observed:

- i) Ethical considerations should be included in formal teaching in advance of any academic activity taking place. This should explain the approach of the University as well as take into consideration any applicable local laws and regulations.

- ii) When planning academic activity, students and their supervisors should meet to identify, evaluate and address any ethical implications. Academic activities should be structured to ensure that any ethical issues arising from the activity is minimal and are contained within an agreed ethical framework.
- iii) Any agreement reached between student and supervisor on how ethical issues will be addressed should be recorded in writing. No academic activity should commence without this agreement and sufficient time should be allowed for this in planning.
- iv) Where it is considered appropriate by the place of work, school or other setting, a letter should be sent to the parents, guardians, or carers of children or vulnerable adults involved providing information about the academic activity. If informed consent is not sought, this allows parents, guardians, or carers opportunity to make further enquiries or withdraw individuals as they see fit.

When to Seek Ethical Approval

Ethical approval is expected to be sought by students or staff prior to the commencement of any activity leading to a University award which includes:

- i) Academic activity that involves human or animal participants. This includes direct contact with participants or subjects, but also includes others affected by it, for examples those at risk of physical or mental harm.
- ii) Academic activity that does not directly involve human or animal participants but does raise other ethical issues due to potential social or environmental implications of the study.
- iii) Academic activity that reuses previously collected personal data which is of a sensitive nature, or enables the identification of individuals.

Ethical approval should not normally be required when:

- i) Academic activity only uses information freely available in the public domain. This includes: published biographies, newspaper articles, and published minutes of meetings.
- ii) Academic activity only draw upon anonymised records and data sets that already exist within the public domain such as statistical information published by national institutions.

It is up to the students and their academic supervisors, module leaders or programme leaders to decide if there are any ethical issues within the academic activity. It is acknowledged that there may sometimes be difficulties in establishing a clear differentiation between activity that requires ethical approval and that which does not. Where such instances arise, students and supervisors, or module leaders are recommended to adopt a precautionary approach and seek ethical approval before the commencement of any activity.

Mechanisms for the Consideration of Ethical Issues

In entering into an academic activity with an ethical dimension, the University would expect that the following steps are taken to ensure that the activity is underpinned by ethical considerations:

- i) To seek approval of the proposed topic independently from those involved from the home collaborative centre before beginning the activity (i.e. gaining approval from those not connected to carrying out, supervising, or teaching activity).
- ii) To ensure informed consent from participants of the aims and procedures of the activity and obtain their agreement to take part on the basis of this information.
- iii) To avoid deception by informing participants about the activity, or to justify the need for deception if necessary.
- iv) To inform and allow participants to withdraw from the activity at any stage of the activity, including during the end of the activity, and subsequently face no issue in doing so.
- v) To ensure confidentiality, and assure participants that the information that they provide will not be disclosed without prior consent to others, or at a minimum will be made anonymous.
- vi) To provide a debriefing for participants with additional information to support them after taking part in the activity, and/or provide true information if deception was necessary at the start of the activity.
- vii) To ensure that research gathered from scholarly activity is held in a secure manner consistent with the requirements of local jurisdictions for data security.

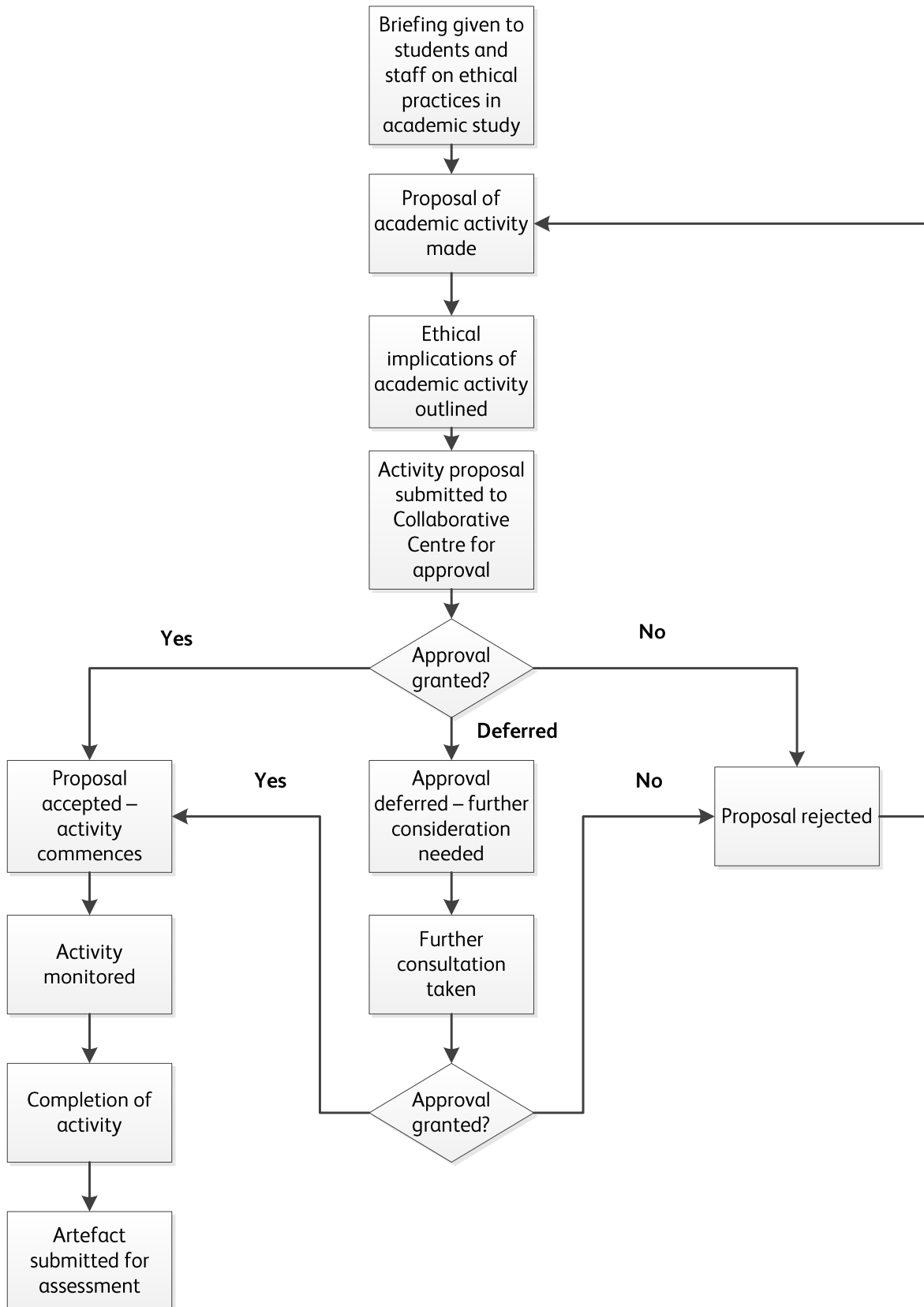
Collaborative centres delivering programmes that may include academic activities which may have ethical implications should ensure to have systems in place in order to ensure oversight of such activities. For undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, a proportional approach would normally be adopted. A proportional approach would seek to ensure that an overview of the activity is submitted which includes reference to any ethical implications of the activity. Following the submission of a proposal, the project supervisor (if a student has submitted the proposal), or a programme manager (if a module leader has submitted the proposal) would review and approve the proposal. Should there be any concern arising from the proposal, further consultation should be undertaken with the wider programme team, collaborative centre management, and the University.

All approved activity should be monitored on a regular basis, and further approval sought should there be any developments within the activity that move beyond the original proposal.

To ensure transparency, a record of approval should be included within any documentation submitted as a record of the activity, in order to provide evidence to external examiners of systems in place to oversee this aspect of the activity. A template for recording this information is outlined in Appendix 1.

No academic activity with ethical dimensions should be permitted to proceed without approval. The University reserves the right to consider data gathered in academic activities which cannot demonstrate how ethical considerations were addressed as unusable for assessment contributing to a University award.

In order to operate oversight of ethical approval effectively, collaborative centres may wish to follow a process similar to below in order to approve activities:



Ethical Conduct of Academic Activity

The following section outlines expected conduct for those undertaking academic activity that has an ethical dimension, as well as steps that should be in place to ensure the safeguarding of all those participating within the activity.

Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults

Within the UK, all individuals undertaking direct and unsupervised work with children and vulnerable adults would be required by law to obtain clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau, which undertakes to ensure to identify individuals who may be unsuitable to work with children or vulnerable members of society. The University acknowledges that outside of the UK, such regulations may not be in force, and it would therefore be the responsibility of the centre in order to assess the suitability of candidates to undertake academic activity with children and vulnerable adults, and to ensure that there are appropriate safeguards in place to protect individuals. Where such national organisations are in place to review the suitability of individuals to work with children and vulnerable adults, the collaborative centre is compelled to use such services.

In order to ensure safeguarding of all in the undertaking of academic activity with children or vulnerable adults, permission must be sought from a parent/guardian/carer, or an individual who may hold legal responsibility for persons.

Safeguarding Animals

Within the UK, a license must be obtained under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 in order to undertake any direct experimentation on animals. The University therefore will not accept academic activity that contributes to an award by the University that has included direct experimentation on animals. The University recognises that there may be occasions when animals are included in an academic activity that is classed as benign. In such circumstances where benign observation is undertaken in an academic activity, the University recommends participants ensure that animals are not disturbed, not interfered with, and are not harmed during the activity.

Safeguarding Participants

Students and supervisors are encouraged to think about the risks involved in conducting academic activity which includes projects or fieldwork. Students and supervisors may therefore wish to consider the following possible issues that may be confronted when conducting academic activity:

- Environmental risks
- Working alone
- Risk of ill health or injury
- Use of hazardous equipment
- Dealing with the public
- Manual handling
- Chemical / Biological risks
- Working on or near water
- Armed conflict
- Civil unrest
- Other hazards.

Students and module leaders should make a note of any of the possible risks that may be encountered during the projects or modules, and seek methods in ensuring that precautions are taken in order to minimise risk within the activity.

There are a variety of dangers that can be confronted while conducting scholarly activities. Students and module leaders should therefore be made aware of the potential dangers and encouraged to take steps to diminish these. The main risks to conducting academic activity are:

- danger of physical intimidation, or actual bodily harm; and also the psychological trauma which could result from these;
- emotional distress in response to participants' disclosures;
- being put in compromising situations, such that they risk being accused of misconduct;
- arousal of suspicion and antagonism from authorities.

It is anticipated that the arenas for conducting academic activity by undergraduate and taught postgraduate students will be safe, where such dangers would not normally arise. However, there are specific topics which may instigate danger or extreme emotional responses to individuals conducting academic activities from participants, whose topics include, *inter alia*:

- Criminal activity
- Working with the terminally ill, the infirm, emotionally disturbed individuals or victims of abuse
- Animal experimentation
- Culture
- Class
- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Belief
- Gender.

Explicit discussion between students and staff should be undertaken in order to minimise any risk should any of the above or similar topics be undertaken. It should be noted that situations can change rapidly within fieldwork, and it is therefore important to keep safety under constant review, and to exercise basic common sense in each situation. It should also be recognised that some academic activity may invoke physical dangers from people connected with those engaged in the study rather than the research participants themselves (e.g. partners of abused individuals).

Unacceptable Behaviour

The University understands unacceptable behaviour in the conduct of ethical academic activity includes, *inter alia*:

- i) Fabrication of data or other aspects of the activity, including documentation and participation consent.
- ii) Manipulation and/or selection of data, imagery, and/or consent.
- iii) Plagiarism, which includes the misappropriation or use of others' ideas, intellectual property or work (written or otherwise), without acknowledgment or permission.
- iv) Misrepresentation of qualifications and/or experience.
- v) Failure to declare material interests either in the activity.
- vi) Inappropriate claims to authorship where there has been no significant contribution, or denial of authorship where an author has made a significant contribution.

Glossary of General Ethical Principles

The following terms are outlined for information, as they form the basis of many ethical frameworks used within higher education in the United Kingdom.

Beneficence – Scholarly enquiry must be worthwhile and provide a reasonable opportunity for securing beneficial outcomes which outweigh any associated risks. The research methodology must be sound, ensuring the best results are obtained, but minimises the intrusion to an individual.

Non-maleficance – Any possible harm must be avoided by robust precautions.

Autonomy – Individuals participating in the research must be made aware of the purpose of the research and be free to take part without coercion or penalty for non-participation. Individuals should be able to withdraw at any time without being required to give a reason and without threat of any adverse consequences arising from their withdrawal.

Confidentiality – Personal data must remain unknown to all but the scholar undertaking the enquiry (unless participants agree otherwise, or in cases where there is an overriding public interest, or where participants wish their voices to be heard and identified).

Integrity – The scholar must acknowledge any actual or potential conflicts of interest, and undertake their research in a manner that recognises standards of scholarly integrity.

Further Resources

The following professional groups within the UK have ethical guidelines freely available online and may be consulted through the following links. In all cases, the onus is placed on the individual undertaking the academic activity to meet the highest ethical thresholds set by the relevant body:

RCUK Policy and Code of Conduct of the Governance of Good Research Conduct	http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/RCUK-prod/assets/documents/reviews/grc/RCUKPolicyandGuidelinesonGovernanceofGoodResearchPracticeFebruary2013.pdf
Economic and Social Research Council	http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/framework-for-research-ethics/index.aspx
British Educational Research Council	https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf
Association of Social Anthropologists	http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml
Social Research Association	http://the-sra.org.uk/research-ethics/ethics-guidelines/
British Sociological Association	http://www.britisoc.co.uk/about/equality/statement-of-ethical-practice.aspx
Royal Anthropological Institute	https://www.therai.org.uk/about-the-rai/governance/ethical-policy/
The British Psychological Society	http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards
Nuffield Council on Bioethics	http://nuffieldbioethics.org/

Appendix 1: Suggested Pro-Forma for Approval

Taught Provision Academic Activity Ethics Form

This form should be completed where any element of academic activity involves the gathering or holding of data from human participants in any form (e.g. interviews, surveys, observation or testing).

A record of agreement from all participants must be obtained before any element of activity is undertaken.

Name of Individual	
Programme of Study	
Course Code	
Module	
Name of Project Supervisor / Programme Director	
Title of Dissertation / Project / Coursework / Assessment	

Question 1	Yes	No
Will any of the participants be from the following groups?:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children under 18; • Vulnerable adults; • Young offenders or prisoners; • Participants involved in illegal activity; • Participants involved in unethical activity; • Individuals who are unable to give consent for themselves; • Animals. 		

Question 2	Yes	No
Will any of the below issues apply?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remuneration will be received by the participants for taking part in the activity? • Activity will discuss issues or topics that may be considered sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting? • Disclosures of activities that may be considered criminal by participants? • Involve participants without knowledge or consent? • Raise issues of safety to yourself or participants involved in the activity? 		

If you have answered 'Yes' to either question one or question two, please complete the outline and summary of academic activity on the following page.

Outline summary of academic activity to be undertaken, including consideration of methods to be used, ethical implications, and proposed methods for managing ethical issues.

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This form must be signed and approved by your dissertation/project supervisor or the programme director before progressing to undertake the academic activity.

Please confirm by a tick that you understand the ethical approval process, and have considered the activity that you are proposing.

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Student Signature

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Date

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I agree that the student is fully aware of the ethical approval process, and that I am satisfied that the proposed academic activity does not need any further approval.

Signed (Dissertation Supervisor/Programme Director)..... Date