

Faculty of Arts Business and Social Sciences

Guide to Ethics

**For Independent Study Modules at Level Six and Taught Masters (Level 7)
Dissertations.**

This guide applies to all Level Six Independent Studies/ Project modules and taught Masters/ Dissertations/ Projects in the Faculty of Arts, Business and Social Sciences.

If your work on taught modules brings you into contact with people, the relevant module leader must know what contacts you are making and authorise them.

What is Ethics and Ethical Research?

Ethics is primarily about how we conduct ourselves in relation to others and what counts as right and wrong. There is a considerable literature and debate about ethics. Consequently, while there are sets of ethical guidelines in various contexts there are few absolutes, if any, when considering ethics generally. While ethics overlaps with the law it is not necessarily the same.

Research ethics is primarily concerned with how we conduct our research. It is taken very seriously right across the Higher Education Sector, not only for undergraduate students, but at all levels including postdoctoral research. The basis of ethical research is that a researcher should not bring harm to those who are helping with the research – commonly referred to as research participants. Research ethics applies to any research that involves human participants. It also includes any research topic that might be deemed controversial or particularly sensitive.

Ethics is different from methodology, although there can be an overlap. The first ethical principle listed on the University's [Ethical Guidance](#) is 'excellence' which indicates that 'researchers should strive for excellence when conducting research and aim to produce and disseminate work of the highest quality and rigor'.

There is a Faculty Ethics Committee (FEC) which is concerned with all research ethics at the Faculty level and which reports to the University Ethics Committee.

**All Level Six Independent Studies and Masters – Level Seven projects and dissertations which involve any form of interaction with human participants and/or deal with particularly controversial or sensitive issues must obtain prior authorisation.
Failure to obtain ethical approval where required will be considered as academic misconduct and may well lead to disciplinary action**

The information below is intended:

1. To enable students to understand the importance of ethics in research.
2. To indicate what types of Independent Study require ethical permission.
3. To provide details about obtaining ethical permission for your Independent Study/ Dissertation.

Disclaimer

The material in this booklet is for guidance. While it seeks to cover the most likely ethical issues that students may encounter, it does not claim to be comprehensive. The Ethics Committee reserves the right to reject ethics applications in situations where potential ethics violations are apparent, but are not explicitly addressed in this document.

It should be noted that ethics **approval is not a** guarantee that the project's methodology, or any other aspect of an Independent Study/ Dissertation, is sound. It is vital that students discuss their methodology with their relevant supervisors.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) indicates six key ethics principles.

- Research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm
- The rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected
- Wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed
- Research should be conducted with integrity and transparency
- Lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined
- Independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided they should be made explicit.

See [ESRC Research Ethics](#)

Other areas of concern

Research ethics is primarily about considering the welfare of research participants – i.e. interviewees etc. who are the source for primary data.

The Faculty Ethics Committee (FEC), **your supervisor and dissertation tutor** are also concerned with:

- A. A student's personal safety.** If **it is considered** that the research proposal places the student in a situation of unacceptable risk, they will not give permission for the research.

Students who are undertaking field work or interview work should carefully consider, for example, the time and location at which they intend to conduct their research. Care must be taken to avoid physical danger, potentially compromising situations, vulnerable situations where one might be subject to sexual or other forms of harassment, meetings at which one might be placed under undue psychological coercion or at which one might be persuaded to part with any money.

- B. Representing the University.** Students who engage with other people as part of their degree must remember that they are representatives of the university, and the **FEC, supervisors and dissertation tutors are** concerned with any behaviour that might be deemed to bring the University into disrepute.

This can inadvertently occur in several ways, for example by poorly written letters to outsiders, questionnaires that are badly designed, or inappropriate approaches to people by telephone or e-mail.

Which Independent Studies projects require ethical permission?

Ethical approval is required for all Level Six Independent Studies, taught Masters projects, dissertations and work placements which include:

- Any research that involves human participants.
- Any video or audio recording of people.
- Any work that is intended to be placed in the public domain including social media.
- Any work that involves highly controversial subjects, such as pornography, but does not necessarily involve human participants.
- Any online research that involves accessing social networks such as Facebook or accessing Massive Multiple Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG)

Involvement of human participants.

Involvement of human participants includes: interviews, focus groups, *vox pop*, observation, participant observation, circulation of questionnaires, making a video, as well as any form of contact with any individual or organisation (letter, E-mail, telephone).

Involvement of human subjects in research can also involve experiments. However, any

research involving experimental work with human subjects will be scrutinised especially rigorously.

Human subjects includes: family, friends, other students, members of staff as well as people who you do not personally know.

Even if your intended contact with other people is unproblematic and uncontentious, the Faculty Ethics Committee, **your supervisor and dissertation tutor** still need to know what you intend and **authorise it**.

Recruiting participants

One of the core ethical principles of research is informed consent. Consequently, potential must be supplied with the information necessary to make an informed decision. The information must include at the minimum:

1. Your name and contact details.
 - a. Where possible this should be your University Email address
2. Your affiliation with the University – e.g. final year undergraduate student at the University of Wolverhampton.
3. The University Logo must be utilised in all correspondence.
4. You must also include the contact details of your supervisor
5. A brief and clearly worded description of your project, which should have the following details:
 - a. Title of the project
 - b. Level of research – e.g. this is my final year undergraduate dissertation
 - c. A few words on what the project is about.
 - d. What participant’s involvement will be.
 - e. A statement indicating that participation is voluntary and can be freely withdrawn at any time
 - f. An invitation to ask any further questions if clarification on any issue relating to the research is required.

Note that “All Staff” or “All Student” mailing lists kept by the University cannot be used to contact potential participants to your research.

More details about recruiting participants can be found on the [Ethics Guidance Pages](#)

Data Security

Data security is of increasing concern in the HE Sector, particularly since the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation in 2018. The University Ethical Guidelines state: ‘All data collected in relation to the research project must be secured at all times to ensure confidentiality’. Further details can be found on the [Ethics Guidance Pages](#)

Category B Research

Undergraduate and taught master students must not undertake Category B research unless there are very exceptional circumstances. In the rare occasions where a UG or Masters student project is category B, the supervisor becomes the primary researcher. The student completes the ethics form with the supervisor and the supervisor submits the ethics form on behalf of the student. The project then drops from a B to an A for the student as the supervisor is taking responsibility, but the student still gains experience of going through the ethics process. In addition, the proposal must be submitted to the full Faculty Ethics Committee for consideration.

Minors and Other Vulnerable Groups

Undergraduate and taught Masters students should not work with vulnerable groups unless there are exceptional circumstances, as any research with vulnerable groups or minors automatically classifies the project as Category B. However, if students do obtain the permission to work with vulnerable groups, then they may also require a Disclosure and Barring Service check.

Applications for DBS clearance can take a considerable time to process, consequently unless you already have a current DBS disclosure, it is unlikely that you will have it in time for work in the same semester.

Information about [DBS](#) applications

You will normally acquire DBS clearance through the University.

If your research takes place on a school's premises, you will also require the formal permission from the school as well as parental approval.

What sort of information does **ethical approval require?**

This is by no means a comprehensive list, but will give you an idea of the sort of information required.

Overall the FEC, **your supervisor and the dissertation tutor are** concerned that your research is well thought out and that you are aware that your research is contingent on the good will of human participants, and that the research does not waste the time of these research participants.

Have you clearly indicated that you have taken the five key principles of ethics listed above in your research design?

What sort of data do you hope to obtain from the research that is not in the published literature?

i. Questionnaires

- a. Provide a clear rationale for circulating a questionnaire.
- b. Who do you intend to circulate the questionnaire to and why? This should include information about your sampling method.
- c. Questionnaire design. Are the questions clearly expressed, is the questionnaire laid out properly?
- d. How will you store the primary data to ensure confidentiality?

ii. Interviews and focus groups

- a. Provide a clear rationale for undertaking interviews. What sort of data do you hope to obtain from the interviews?
- b. Who will you interview and why?
- c. How will you identify and contact the interviewees?
- d. If the interviewee is a representative of an organisation or institution how will you obtain formal permission from the organisation or institution?
- e. Where will the interviews take place? Have you obtained formal permission to use any premises for interviews? (e.g. supermarket forecourts, cafes, places of worship, hospitals, doctor's surgeries etc.)
- f. What sort of questions do you intend to ask?
- g. Interviewees must sign the Faculty's Informed Consent Form.
- h. If recording (audio or video) ensure that interviewees agree. Indicate what you will do with the recordings and transcriptions after you have completed the project.
- i. How will you store the primary data to ensure confidentiality?

iii. Ethnographic field work (observation and participant observation).

- a. Authorisation is required for any observational research, this includes if you plan to undertake your observation in a public place or even a virtual place like MMORPG.
- b. Provide a clear rationale for undertaking fieldwork.
- c. Where will the field work take place?
- d. Have you obtained all necessary formal permissions? Any form of covert research will not be approved.
- e. How will you store the primary data to ensure confidentiality?

iv. Vox Pop

- a. Provide a clear rationale
- b. Where and at what time do you intend to carry out your *vox pop*
- c. What questions do you plan to ask?

Video work

- i. Particular care must be taken when videoing in public places. Remember that you may inadvertently film a passer-by, and not everyone likes to be captured on film.
- ii. Consider very carefully where, when and who you will be filming.
- iii. Where possible subjects being filmed must provide their informed consent and sign a release form.
- iv. You must have a signed media release form from everyone appearing in your video
- v. You need to consider how your recording will be stored securely to ensure no unauthorised dissemination of your video. In particular, you have to consider what you will ultimately do with the recording after it has been graded.

Ethics Procedure

Getting **ethical** approval is relatively easy and straightforward.

You must obtain **ethical approval before you begin your research. Ethical approval cannot be sought retrospectively.**

In the first instance, your ethical approval request will be assessed by your dissertation supervisor, who will consider it with one other member of staff (generally the dissertation tutor/module leader) and it will be a relatively quick process. However, if your research involves particularly sensitive and/or controversial issues and/or includes contact with particularly vulnerable groups your request for approval will be **forwarded to and** scrutinised by the **Faculty Ethics Committee**, and therefore it might take slightly longer to make a decision.

- **Please** fill in the 'Ethics Application Form. It is **important that you** consult **with your dissertation supervisor before you do so. You can find all the forms and ethics guidance here:**

<https://www.wlv.ac.uk/research/research-policies-procedures--guidelines/ethics-guidance/fabss-ethics-resources/>

- Please submit the ethics application form to your dissertation supervisor.
- If there are no problems they (your dissertation supervisor in consultation with another tutor, generally the dissertation tutor / module leader) will approve and sign the ethics form.
- Retain the signed copy of the Ethics application Form, which you will have to bind into your project for submission, as proof of ethical approval. Your supervisor will retain another copy.
- If your dissertation supervisor and the dissertation tutor / module leader perceives a minor problem with your submission they might suggest that you amend and re-submit your proposal.
- If they have any major concerns, your proposal will be submitted to the FEC for discussion.
- Remember that you are only given authority to undertake the research that you specify on the Ethics Application Form. If in the course of your research you realise that you wish to modify your project, for example interview someone not originally indicated in your proposal, you must apply for further ethics approval.

Any Questions?

If you have any questions or concerns about research ethics and/or the process of obtaining ethical approval for your Independent Study/Dissertation you should contact your dissertation supervisor in the first instance, who may, if necessary seek further guidance from the FEC.

Further Information

- [ESRC Research Ethics Guidebook](#)
- [Statement of Ethical Practice for the BSA](#)
- [University of Wolverhampton Ethics Guidance](#)
- [University of Wolverhampton introduction to GDPR](#) (see especially the slides on 'Consent').

There are also numerous publications on research ethics, for example:

Hammersley, Martyn & Traianou, Anna (2012) *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, London: Sage
 Oliver, Paul (2010) *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Most research methods books have a section on ethics.

Thank you for reading through this guidance, we wish you the best of luck in your research.

Appendix I. Ethical Categories

CATEGORY 0

Category 0 projects are non-hazardous, do not employ participants and use only existing material publicly and legally available in the UK. They do not meet the criteria for Category A or B.

CATEGORY A

Category A projects usually involve the participation of people, rather than secondary data sources such as published memoirs etc., but are not deemed hazardous to the physical or psychological welfare of the participant or the investigator. They do not employ vulnerable individuals, in the context of the specific research, or investigate issues likely to give grounds for offence. If a project appears to be a borderline case of category B it should be deemed to be category B in the first instance. A school ethics committee may subsequently determine it to be category A if it is required in pursuit of a professional qualification and carried out under suitable close supervision. Category A projects may be carried out by undergraduates and students, with appropriate training, on other courses below degree level but a first degree in an appropriate subject, or other relevant professional recognition, is a minimum requirement for carrying out category B projects.

CATEGORY B projects involve any of the following:

- Any research involving covert procedures.
- The use of any procedure that may be considered likely to be physically or psychologically harmful **unless** the procedure is widely used in practice and potential hazards have been minimized. For example, blood sampling and collection of other bodily fluids may be category A procedures provided there is strict adherence to established safety protocols and appropriate supervision.
- Research that may be offensive. Also, research that is contentious in the sense that it may bring the university into disrepute.
- Research that requires access to, or creates, data about individuals of a highly confidential nature.
- Research involving participants who, within the context of the study to be undertaken, are considered to be vulnerable. Projects with vulnerable individuals may be designated category A if it is clear that the vulnerability of the individual is likely to be unaffected by participation in the study.
- Research that requires the administration of certain substances.
- Research that requires the approval of another ethics committee, for example an LREC, will usually be designated category B. Similarly, research requiring data collection abroad, especially if the supervisor remains in the UK, will usually require scrutiny by the Ethics Committee.