

**The University of Hong Kong  
School of Professional and Continuing Education**

**Operational Guidelines and Procedures for Application for Ethical Approval  
for HKU SPACE Staff, Taught Postgraduate and Undergraduate Students**

1. This is an abridged version of the “Operational Guidelines and Procedures” of the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University, with amendments made by the HKU SPACE Research Ethics Committee (REC). The full document (38/916 amended) is available on the HKU Research Services website at <http://www.rss.hku.hk/HREC/guidelines.pdf> All members of the University including HKU SPACE are under an obligation to comply with the highest standards of professional conduct. All research conducted by staff and students involving human participants subjects must be referred to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) for consideration.

The following guidance notes on how to obtain ethical approval from the REC are intended to provide the necessary information for Principal Investigators (PIs) to complete the application form for ethical approval. The Application Form for Ethical Approval can be downloaded from the HKUSPACE Staff Intranet, Learner Portal and Learners’ Information on the School’s website

### **1. Research requiring Ethical Review**

Research requiring Ethical Review include all research projects/dissertations/theses involving human participants by HKU SPACE staff, taught postgraduate and undergraduate students who are Principle Investigators (PIs) of the project. Such research will have a potential for invading human privacy, such as written questionnaires, telephone surveys, interviews, observations, video- and audio-taping, case study of focus groups, secondary use of data (not for a directly related purpose when the data were collected), deception, testing (non-invasive, not involving drugs), and non-medical treatment or intervention.

For ethics research approval granted to staff by other academic institutions, the REC will normally just receive and note the approval that they already obtained from the institutions unless the Committee has concern on the related ethics research proposed by the staff.

### **2. Types of Review**

The REC conducts three types of review i.e. expedited review, double review and full review. In general, for a research protocol which involves only minimal risks to human beings, an expedited review may be conducted to shorten the review process, subject to the Chairman’s discretion. If not, the application will go through double review or full review by the Committee.

- I) Expedited Review (submitted to the REC for vetting, then normally approved within two to three weeks)

Projects involving no greater than minimal risk may be considered by the Committee under “expedited review”. That is to say, the nature of the research meets one of the following definitions:

- a) Research, involving the collection or study of existing documents or records containing personal data, if these sources are publicly available or if the information is recorded by the researcher in such a manner that participants cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the participants. The source of data, documents, records, must be indicated in the application form for the Committee’s consideration.
- b) Research involving anonymous data<sup>1</sup> collected using educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behaviour. Expedited review cannot be granted to:
  - i) information obtained that is recorded in such a manner that human participants can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the participants; and
  - ii) any disclosure of the human participants’ responses outside the research could reasonably place the participants at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

- II) Double Review (submitted to the REC for vetting, then normally approved within three weeks)

Research that does not fulfill the description of minimal risks will normally require double review by at least two members of the Committee.

- III) Full Review (submitted to the REC for vetting, approved within one month)

Research involving any of the following items will require full review:

---

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous data: Data without personal identifier. Data is anonymous when there is no possible way to identify the participants from the data collected. Data are not anonymous if procedures, such as accessing a computer database, will identify the participant. For most specific cases, the omission of names and other personal identifiers as HKID/Passport numbers, is sufficient to qualify data as anonymous.

- a) Sensitive topics which could induce stress to research participants, such as illegal conduct, drug or alcohol use and sexual conduct;
- b) Deception, (participants are given misleading information during the research process). The PI must justify in detail why the method of deception is necessary and why there will not be any adverse psychological and/or emotional harm. Participants will need to be debriefed at the end of the study. (A Sample of English and Chinese post-debriefing consent forms to participants are in <http://www.rss.hku.hk/integrity/ethics-compliance/hrec-forms>)
- c) Action/participatory research which involves greater than minimal risk;
- d) Treatment research;
- e) Inclusion of participants who may be unable to give informed consent, e.g. under the age of 18, mentally handicapped individuals (unless the criteria for expedited review are met);
- f) Study can induce psychological stress/pain/discomfort; and
- g) Videotaping and audio-taping, that pose privacy risk.

### **3. Ethical Guidelines for Research involving Human Participants**

Researchers should note the principles concerning the areas in the following list when conducting non-invasive research as outlined in “Operational Guidelines and Procedures” of the Human Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Faculties (HREC), Clause V.

*Informed Consent*

*Recorded Consent Other than Written Consent*

*Pre-existing data*

*Pilot Studies*

*Parental Consent*

*For School-based research*

*Privacy and Confidentiality of Data*

*Security*

***Benefits***

Prospective participants should not be adversely induced by financial reward or be pressured to participate in research. All reimbursement of expenses, such as traveling expenses, should be commensurate with standard practice and be reasonable.

#### **4. Procedures to be Followed when Applying for Ethical Approval**

The supervisor/tutor and the Programme Leader (for part-time programme) / Divisional Head/Programme Co-ordinator (for full-time programme) in-charge are responsible for determining if each student's project needs ethical clearance and for overseeing the completion of the necessary application for ethical approval. Students as well as Staff who initiate ethics research should submit their applications to the REC for vetting via the Secretary of the Committee. Cases that require a full review or have some issues of concern would be referred to the HREC.

#### **5. The Outcome of the Review**

##### Approved:

A letter/email of approval will be issued to the Applicant (student/staff member) and copy to the Supervisor.

##### Conditionally Approved:

The approval letter/email is issued with conditions that apply to the approval that need to be satisfactorily addressed. Normally such conditions should be addressed with the applicant in advance.

##### Approval not given and resubmission:

The Committee will specify its comments/recommendations that need to be addressed in a resubmission on the notification to the PIs/Supervisors/Students of protocols which are not approved.

#### **6. Appeals**

##### Right to Appeal

- a) The REC can refer special cases requiring advice to the HREC for informal advice
- b) All research participants have the right to appeal and to refer any concerns or questions directly to the HREC.

#### **7. Annual Reporting**

An annual statistical report on the number of approved applications/re-submissions and any acute incidents which have occurred, to the HREC and the HKU SPACE School Academic and Management (SAM) Board by the end of each academic year.