

Griffith University Research Ethics Manual

Human research and the ethical principle of justice

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1.0 Introduction

Justice is one of the core ethical principles articulated by the Australian ethical standards ([see 2.0](#)) and underpins Griffith University's approach to human research ethics.

There are a number of component elements of how the design, conduct and reporting of research can demonstrate adherence to the ethical principle of justice. These include:

- fairness in the recruitment of participants – including the reasons for the inclusion and exclusion of individuals;
- fairness in terms of the assessment of whether the benefits justify the risks – including consideration of who is bearing the burden of participation and where the benefits will flow;
- a reflection on distributive justice matters;
- avoiding any exploitation of participants – including a reflection upon whether potential participants are over-researched; and
- being mindful of the degree to which a project may result in discrimination, persecution or prejudice

This booklet provides practical advice to researchers with regards to planning and conducting research that adheres to the ethical principle of justice.

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2.0 National guidelines

The **[National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2007 updated 2018\)](#)** is the Australian reference for human research ethics matters.

The ethical principle of justice is introduced in [Chapter 1 of the National Statement](#). Throughout the [National Statement](#) justice is further discussed with regards to specific areas of research and specific participant groups.

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3.0 Fairness in the recruitment of participants

Chapter 1.0 of the *National Statement* discusses researchers having due regard for distributive and procedural justice in the design and conduct of our research.

The *National Statement* refers to fair treatment in the recruitment of participants for a research project. In practice this means:

- i) the criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of potential participants is fair and based upon sound methodological considerations (e.g. does not include or exclude potential participants on the basis of factors such as gender, age, socio-economic status, disability, language competence, culture, unless the criteria has a methodological basis – [see Commentary Inset 1](#));
- ii) the approach to the selection of participants (when there are more individuals who are interested in participating than there are ‘spaces’ for participants) is fair and reasonable ([see Commentary Inset 2](#)) – this can be especially important when there are potentially significant benefits associated with participating;
- iii) any exclusion of potential participants is appropriately discussed in the outputs from the project (e.g. under the heading ‘Limitations’ in the journal article); and
- iv) there should be consideration of the burdens on participants, especially when they should be considered an ‘over researched’ population, they are more likely to be susceptible to perceived pressure to participate and/or they should otherwise be considered a vulnerable population.

Commentary Inset 1 – Methodological reasons for screening a participant pool

The *National Statement* and University policy precludes screening a participant pool on the basis of factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, language competency, disability or cultural identity.

It can however be ethically justifiable to screen a potential participant pool (to exclude or include persons) for the above kind of reasons if the screening relates to variables of significance to the research or for other methodological reasons. An example of a justifiable screening criteria is below:

EXAMPLE – A research project is looking at the factors that influence the investment decisions of middle-aged consumers. In this case the potential participant will obviously need to be screened on the basis of age, but it might also be valid to screen the pool on the basis of socio-economic status and language competency – to focus upon the response to advertising as a theorised determiner and so remove other variables (e.g. those individuals who cannot afford to invest).

Such exclusion might of course have some sort of limiting impact on the research (e.g. perhaps a large cohort of people fit within the excluded group). For this reason, the screening mechanism must be explained in a ‘Limitations’ section of a research output.

Refer to [Booklet 21 of this Manual](#) for more about recruitment, [Booklet 26 \(7.0\)](#) about vulnerable persons, and [Booklet 27](#) about persons in an unequal relationship.

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4.0 Fairness and beneficence

Beneficence is itself a core ethical principle for human research, which involves a reflection on the degree to which the anticipated benefits of a project justify the risks or burdens. Beneficence also involves a due regard to the flow of the benefits compared to where the burden of risks applies.

When considering risks and benefits in the context of the ethical principle of justice, the *National Statement* indicates that:

- i) distributive justice calls for the fair distribution of the benefits and risks of a project;
- ii) there should be consideration of the degree to which there is unfair burden on a group – especially when that burden isn't justified by the benefits to that group; and
- iii) the benefits of a project are to be distributed fairly.

Despite the above, the [National Statement](#) does allow for situations where the risks/burdens are to be borne by one group while the benefits will flow to another group, but both the researchers and research ethics reviewers must carefully consider:

- iv) the degree to which this imbalance is just;
- v) whether the consent mechanism identifies the potential imbalance, so individuals who consent do so aware of the imbalance; and
- vi) the degree to which the vulnerability of potential participants demands a modified approach.

Commentary Inset 2 – Fair recruitment and 'excess' interested potential participants

In some cases researchers can find themselves in the fortunate situation where more individuals than he/she needs want to participate in her/his project. This can occur for a number of reasons, but generally is because participation is perceived as useful, fun or otherwise attractive.

There can however be resource, time or other constraints that may warrant a cap on the number of participants (whether the total number or the number of participants in a particular subset/category).

Researchers should have a plan of what will be done if there are excess potential participants (e.g. will selection be in the order in which expressions of interest are received or based upon some other approach).

Ideally the approach to excess potential participants will be discussed in the application for research ethics review for a project. It should also be considered for inclusion in the consent and/or the recruitment materials. These matters, and the potential for complaints, are more acute when participation might offer tangible/valuable benefits for the participants (because an individual may feel cheated if they perceive they have been unfairly denied an opportunity to participate and access the benefit).

Refer to [Booklet 9 of this Manual](#) for more about beneficence, [Booklet 22](#) about consent, and [Booklet 26](#) (7.0) about participant vulnerability.

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5.0 Distributive justice

As discussed in earlier sections of this booklet, [Section 1.0 of the National Statement](#) refers to a consideration of distributive justice as being element of the core ethical principle of justice.

There is considerable academic literature with regards to the use of a distributive justice paradigm to inform the conduct of social endeavours – including research. To varying degree one, or a combination of, egalitarian and market philosophies can be employed for the practical application of distributive justice approaches.

When reflecting upon the ethical dimensions of a project (during its design, research ethics review, conduct and reporting), practical distributive justice considerations include:

- i) are there fair opportunities for participation in the project ([see 3.0](#) of this Booklet); and
- ii) is there a justifiable balance between the flow of benefits and the burden of risks ([see 4.0](#))?

Researchers have an ongoing responsibility to remain reflective on the above questions throughout every stage of a project. If it becomes apparent that the situation with regards to the above is no longer what was expected it might be necessary to suspend, modify or even discontinue the project.

Refer to [Booklet 3 of this Manual](#) for more about responsibilities of researchers and [Booklet 6](#) about modifications to an approved project.

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6.0 No exploitation of participants

One component of the principle of justice, as discussed by the [National Statement](#), is the direction to not exploit participants. This echoes the expectations of the core ethical principle of respect for persons with its direction to give precedence for the welfare, rights, culture and beliefs of the participants, ahead of the objectives of the research.

This direction should inform the design and conduct of the recruitment strategies for a project ([see 3.0](#)) and the approach to the risks and benefits of a project ([see 4.0](#)). Refer to [Booklet 26 of the Griffith University-REM](#) for more about respect for persons in the design and conduct of our research.

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7.0 Discrimination, persecution and prejudice

Even though it is not explicitly stated by the [National Statement](#), one of the implications of the core ethical principle of justice (especially when read in conjunction with the other three core principles) is arguably for researchers to remain mindful of the potential negative societal impacts of our research.

Negative societal impacts can include perpetuating stereotypes, providing academic validation to discrimination, persecution and/or prejudice. Such matters are valid ethical concerns and should be considered to be potential harms for researchers to minimise, mitigate, otherwise address or justify. Any potential harms of this kind must be balanced by benefits and discussed in an application for research ethics review.

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8.0 Queensland Human Rights Act

Effective from 1st January 2020, the [Queensland Human Rights Act](#) applied to all Queensland public sector agencies (including Griffith University). This has implications with regard to legislated consent requirements and the use of deception.

Booklets [22](#), [26](#) and [33](#) of this Manual have been updated to ensure the University's researchers design and conduct work in accordance with the Act.

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Contacts

There are a number of resources available to assist researchers formulate an appropriate response to a question or challenge about the design and/or conduct of a project. This includes the Griffith University Research Ethics Manual and the Human Research Ethics Information Sheet Series. These documents are available from the URL below.

Research students – The first point of contact for research students for advice on any research ethics matter is always your supervisors.

REAs – All academic elements of the University have been asked to appoint at least one member of academic staff as a Research Ethics Advisor. REAs are a local contact for advice, information and suggestions. The contact details of all the current REAs can be found on the URL below.

Office for Research – Staff in the Office for Research (see below) are available to advise with the process of lodging an application or other administrative matters, procedural or policy questions. However, you will be asked what advice you have sought or received already (e.g. consultation with the REA for your area).

Manager, Research Ethics and Integrity

Tel: (07) 373 54375

research-ethics@griffith.edu.au

Policy Officer, Research Ethics and Integrity

Tel: (07) 373 58043

Research Ethics Systems and Support Officer

Tel: (07) 373 5 2069

On the ethics web site you will find:

<https://www.griffith.edu.au/research/research-services/research-ethics-integrity/human>

- The other booklets of the *Griffith University Research Ethics Manual*
- The *Griffith University Human Research Ethics Information Sheet Series*
- Either downloadable copies of, or links to, the various application forms
- Contact information for the Research Ethics Advisers (REA) and other contacts
- Educational and other resource material
- Useful external links



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