

Griffith University Research Ethics Manual

Research with post-compulsory education students

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Contents

1.0 Introduction
2.0 National guidelines
3.0 Initial ethical considerations
4.0 Institutional approval
5.0 Recruitment
6.0 Incentives and credits
7.0 Beneficence
8.0 Research-like activities conducted for purposes other than research

1.0 Introduction

Some research will involve the participation of students engaged in post-compulsory education (e.g. TAFE and university). In the case of Griffith students this can often be a matter of convenience/cost.

Even though such research is often very useful and ethically appropriate, special ethical considerations can apply to the design and conduct of protocols in this context. This booklet is intended to provide an introduction to these issues and suggest some appropriate strategies to address them.

Because some students may be age under 18 years of age, [Booklet 24 of the Griffith University-REM](#) should also be consulted. This Booklet does not repeat content from [Booklet 24](#), except to expand upon a point as it relates to research in post-compulsory educational settings.

[Back to contents](#)

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.

In the case of students aged under 18, [Chapter 4.2 of the National Statement](#) discusses the ethical issues associated with the participation of young people in research

[Back to contents](#)

3.0 Initial ethical considerations

On the face of it, research involving the participation of university, TAFE, or other post-secondary school students should not raise any substantially different ethical issues from any other research involving the participation of the general population.

Some example considerations in common are:

1. **Integrity**

- a. Does the research represent a genuine and honest search for knowledge;
- b. Does the research appropriately draw upon the literature and is it informed by previous work;
- c. Does the research team have the necessary expertise and do they have access to the necessary resources to appropriately, safely and hopefully successfully conduct the research; and
- d. Does the research team have a conflict of interest (whether perceived or actual)?

2. Justice

- a. Are participants being included or excluded for valid methodological reasons or are there sound ethical reasons for their exclusion (e.g. because of vulnerability to risks);
- b. Is there distributive justice in the project (e.g. a fair access to benefits and a justifiable flow of benefits and risk); and
- c. Do participants belong to an “over-researched” population?

3. Beneficence

- a. Does the design of the research minimise the risks and burdens of the project (e.g. to participants, the researchers and identifiable third parties);
- b. Are there appropriate strategies in place to address or otherwise mitigate the risks); and
- c. Do the anticipated benefits justify the remaining risks/burdens?

4. Respect for others

- a. Does the research design provide for the welfare, rights, perceptions, customs and cultural heritage of participants;
- b. Is this respect given precedence ahead of the objectives of the work;
- c. Does the research respect the right of individuals for self-determination (e.g. will the informed and voluntary consent of potential participants be sought); and
- d. Will the researchers respect the right of participants to privacy (e.g. adhere to the assurances provided to participants about privacy and confidentiality)?

Even though there are a great number of ethical considerations in common there are some issues that require special attention for research in the context of post-compulsory education. These matters are discussed in the remainder of this booklet.

[Back to contents](#)

4.0 Institutional approval

Research that involves the participation of university, TAFE or other post-compulsory education students may require the approval of the relevant educational institution. This is most obviously the case where:

- the institution will have a direct role in the recruitment of the students – for example by distributing the details of the research on behalf of the researchers (e.g. in a broadcast email or on a web announce board).
- the direct recruitment will occur on the institution’s land/facilities (e.g. a researcher recruiting students on campus);
- the data collection will occur on campus;

- any of the above occur where the institution has some degree of duty of care for the students or other governance responsibility pertinent to the conduct of the research;
- the researchers will be accessing information from the institution that is not already available to the public.

When research involves one or more of the above, the formal approval or at least express agreement of the educational institution may be required – sometimes if only as a courtesy to the institution. Some institutions may require their own research ethics review of the work (that will hopefully recognise whether a Griffith clearance is in place).

Even if an institution accepts the Griffith ethics clearance for a project, they may still either: not approve the work; ask that the activity be delayed; or request other changes to the project. Often this will be because of operational or other governance considerations. Examples of why the institution may not approve the project include:

1. During the week the researchers have nominated there will be building work on campus;
2. Around the same time students will be asked to complete an internal service satisfaction survey and the institution is worried their students may confuse the two activities; and
3. The students have already asked to participate in a large volume of research and the institution is concerned that the students are being overburdened ‘over-researched’.

It is the responsibility of the researchers to ascertain what institutional approvals are required. This approval or agreement will be required before the research can be **commenced** but is not required prior to seeking Griffith ethics clearance for the project. It is sufficient to merely indicate in an application for ethics clearance that such prior approval/agreement will be sought, that the research will not be conducted at the site until the approval/agreement has been obtained, and that a copy of the approval/agreement will be provided once it is available. This is the case for both proposed new projects and variations that propose adding a new site to an existing clearance.

Refer to [Booklet 8 of this Manual](#) for more about research that requires the approval or agreement of other agencies.

4.1 Situations where institutional approval may not be required

In circumstances where none of the situations described by the dot points at 4.0 exist, the research will probably not require the approval of the students’ institutions.

For example: A research team will advertise online hoping to hear from students studying at a Queensland TAFE. The team could quite reasonably assume that they do not need to consult with each individual TAFE.

It should be noted that some institutions expect to be consulted, even in the kind of situations described above (e.g. the Australian Defence Human Research Ethics Committee would expect to be consulted about research involving cadets of the defence force academy, even if the students were being recruited via social media, community advertising or some other ‘external to the defence force’ mechanism). Such an expectation may reflect the institution wishing to monitor the degree to which their students are being over-researched, the institution’s awareness of other burdens upon the students, and the institution’s insight into particular risks and vulnerabilities for the students.

4.2 Consciously not seeking institutional approval

A very rare, but not unprecedented, situation is where a research team decides not to seek approval from an institution. This is likely to be the case when a researcher anticipates her/his research will be critical of an institution and so doesn't intend to treat the institution as a gatekeeper for the research.

In such circumstances, in the application for ethics approval a researcher's intention not to seek approval, the reasons for that and why you feel the research is still justified.

4.3 Griffith students as participants

Like other institutions, Griffith University has duty of care and other responsibilities to our students. Consequently, questions such as whether the students are over-researched, vulnerable, what other demands they have on their time are valid considerations for the University. When intending to recruit participants, seek consent, collect data or otherwise conduct research activity within a lecture/tutorial/workshop a researcher should seek the permission of the lecturer/tutor/facilitator who may defer to the convenor to decide. When the researcher is themselves the lecturer/tutor/facilitator they should always first check with the convenor.

Please refer to Griffith University's Student Communication Policy which applies to all attempts to recruit current, past and future students as research participants. The policy provides guidance on communication channels and relevant approving authorities e.g. surveying of current students requires approval from the Academic Registrar (for staff researchers) or the Dean, Griffith Graduate Research School (for HDR students). You may also need to submit an Application to Conduct a Survey through the Surveys Unit. The University's researchers must seek approval for the inclusion of the

Commentary Inset 1 – Strategies to reinforce the voluntary nature of participation/address perceived risk

Having concluded that a project involves more than negligible risk and the students might perceive some pressure to participate the researcher(s) should consider what strategies could be used to reinforce the fact participation is voluntary. A related advantage of such strategies is that they can address what participants might perceive to be risks (e.g. negative impact on their grades).

The following is an outline of a range of common strategies; this list should not be regarded as prescriptive or exhaustive.

Stressing that participation is voluntary – The consent and perhaps the recruitment material including a clear statement that participation is voluntary. This should be reinforced verbally and in any other correspondence with the potential participants. In some cases this is the only strategy that can be usefully employed and will be sufficient for many projects (especially where the work is low risk, does not involve highly sensitive matters and there are no other significant ethical concerns).

Concealing participatory status from the researcher(s) – An obvious way to address student concerns is to conceal their participatory status from the researcher(s), but it may not always be obvious how to achieve this. Possible approaches include:

i. (If the students are to complete a survey) Have them complete and return the survey at a later time, via post or into a sealed box, or online.

ii. (If the students are to complete a survey and the researcher concludes it needs to occur immediately) The researcher leaves the room while the students complete the survey. The surveys are collected by a nominated student, research assistant or other appropriate person.

iii. (further to ii above) It is recommended that, to mask the participatory status of the students (from the person collecting the surveys and other students), individuals be instructed to return the questionnaire booklet regardless of whether they have completed it (e.g. non-participant students would return a blank booklet).

iv. (if the students are to participate in a focus group or some sort of testing)...

Timing of participation – Timing participation so it occurs after the grades for the semester have been issued. Variants of this strategy include:

i. Conducting the recruitment phase before the grades are issued but concealing the participatory status of individual status (see above) until after the grades are issued.

ii. Collecting the data before the grades are issued (perhaps with the data being collected by someone not involved in the teaching team, and the data being sealed

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details of the project in a monthly digest email publication. There is an online request form for items in the *Volunteers for Important Research Projects* newsheet.

[Back to contents](#)

5.0 Recruitment

General advice about the ethical issues associated with recruitment can be found in [Booklet 21 of the Griffith University-REM](#). Even though the issues in research involving post-compulsory education students are very similar to those found in some other human research, it is worth noting some particular factors.

Commentary Inset 1 – Strategies to reinforce the voluntary nature of participation/address perceived risk CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS

until after the grades are issued (so there can be no concern that comments in the research could have an impact on an individual's grades).

There can be situations where none of the strategies discussed above are appropriate, practicable or otherwise desirable. If no alternative strategies can be devised, the research involves more than negligible risk and/or significant ethical issues, and there is a concern students may perceive pressure to participate, the researchers should carefully consider whether the research can proceed as planned.

5.1 University students who are under 18 years old

The Griffith University HREC has previously adopted a position under which first year university students, who are older adolescents aged under 18, can be considered the primary consenting agent (i.e. not requiring consent from their parent/guardian) for research that did not involve significant ethical concerns or risks.

This position, and the circumstances under which parental/guardian consent must be obtained, is further clarified in [Booklet 24 of this Manual](#). The question of whether parental/guardian consent will be required for such participants will depend upon the context in which the research will be conducted, the complexity of the research, and the presence of significant ethical issues and risks.

If a potential participant pool includes persons aged under 18, and involves the participation of another institution (e.g. the research is to be conducted at another university) the research team will need to confirm what policies that institution applies to the participation of such persons and parental/guardian consent.

5.2 Voluntary participation

There are a number of reasons why a student potential participant may perceive some pressure to participate in a research project. This is particularly the case where their lecturer/tutor/trainer/teacher/coach is a member of the research team or could be perceived to have some form of direct stake in the research. Some examples of why a student might feel that way are listed below. The significance of any perceived pressure is directly correlated to the risks of the research; the higher the risk the more ethically significant any perceived pressure would be. In a negligible risk project, it may be sufficient for the researchers to reiterate verbally that participation is voluntary. For research where there is greater than a low risk of harm additional strategies might be required. See [Commentary Inset 1](#) for some example strategies and [Booklet 9 of the manual](#) for more about risks.

Examples of reasons why students might perceive some pressure to participate include:

- (if the student is the recipient of some sort of support or service) they might worry that non-participation could impact on their continued access to the support or perhaps feel obligated to participate;
- the student may perceive that participating could help their grade or not participating might hurt it;
- the student wants to maintain a positive relationship with the researchers and they might worry that not participating might diminish that relationship;
- participating in the research affords access to some form of coaching/mentoring that the student might worry that otherwise they will miss out on (this might be unavoidable when the point of the research is to trial the usefulness of a coaching/mentoring program that hasn't previously been offered); or
- the grade for the course has a participation component the student may believe that participating in the research is a part of that participation grade.

Commentary Inset 2 – Valid arguments in favour of offering course credit for participating in research

It should be acknowledged upfront that the ethical acceptability of offering course credit for participating in research is not uncontested. The most common reasons cited for opposing the arrangement are:

- The reason for having the arrangement is more about maximising participation in research than a valid learning experience for students; and*
- Any incentive to encourage participation has the potential to be coercive and, given the financial and other pressures to complete a degree as quickly as possible, the 'value' of course credit is significant.*

Despite the above, the Griffith HREC has accepted the argument that offering such credit does have a valid and valuable role.

Before a University School proposes the establishment of a new arrangement the following matters must be carefully considered and discussed in the proposal:

- can a strong argument be made that the students hope to belong to a professional group that often conducts research with clients;*
- the types of research the students will be asked to participate in are very similar to the research clients might participate in;*
- a justifiable argument can be made that participating in research offers a valuable learning experiences for the students;*
- there will be a mechanism in place independent of the researchers to record a student's participation and award a specified amount of credit;*
- students must be able to choose between a number of projects; and*
- there must be an alternate way for the student to receive a comparable credit without participating in any project.*

The proposed arrangement must be reviewed and accepted by the Griffith HREC.

Once the arrangement has been accepted researchers from that School can use it as a component of the recruitment mechanism for a future proposed human research project. The project itself will still require ethical clearance.

5.3 Regulatory privacy considerations

As was noted in [Booklet 23 \(see 7.1 of that Booklet\)](#) unless the research qualifies for a research exemption ([see 5.2 – 5.4 of that Booklet](#)) it may not be possible to identify potential participants by accessing the student records of their host institution.

5.4 Peer pressure

“Open” recruitment or data collection that occurs in front of an entire cohort of potential participants (e.g. in a lecture) can result in peer pressure that may have a coercive impact upon potential participants. In this kind of situation, it is recommended that, to mask the participatory status of the students (from the lecturer and their peers), individuals be instructed to return the questionnaire booklet or consent form regardless of whether they have completed it (e.g. non-participant students would return a blank booklet).

[Back to contents](#)

6.0 Incentives and credits

The issue of offering incentives to potential participants is discussed in [Booklet 21 of the Griffith University-REM \(see 11.3 of that booklet\)](#). One form of incentive for students can be academic credits.

Over the years it has become standard practice in some disciplines (e.g. Psychology) to require students to participate in a research project as part of their professional development. The University accepts the view that such participation is important to the development of professional practitioners in some areas and their understanding of how participants experience research in their field (see [Commentary Inset 2](#)). Nevertheless, such incentives can constitute a coercive pressure, especially in situations where participation is formally credited and there are significant costs associated with the course.

Consequently, the Griffith HREC considers that it is only ethical to offer such academic credit where:

1. students have a choice of participation in any one of a number of projects over a period of time; and
2. there is a reasonable alternative to participation in a research project, which should be credited and/or treated in exactly the same manner as participation in a research project (e.g. so if a student decided that he/she should not participate in any project there is a way of obtaining the same credit for effort over a commensurate amount of time).

[Back to contents](#)

7.0 Beneficence

[Booklet 9 of this manual](#) discusses the core ethical principle of beneficence, which requires that the anticipated benefits of a project must justify the risks and burdens of that project.

With regards to risks [Booklet 9](#) discusses:

- the identification of risks (for consideration in the design, conduct and reporting of project);
- classifying the risks in terms of severity and likelihood of occurrence;
- determining what groups bear the burden of the risks;
- the need for strategies to negate, minimise, manage or otherwise mitigate the risks;
- considering the degree to which the benefits justify these risks;
- discussing these matters in an application for research ethics review; and

¹ This is to avoid a situation where students have no choice but to agree to participate in a project they might otherwise avoid. The range of projects should also ensure that, because of screening criteria, no sections of the student cohort have either a very limited or no choice of projects (e.g. because of their first language, disability status or other demographic factor).

- sharing these matters with potential participants.

The potential for harm arising from a human research project applies equally to research involving university and other post-secondary students as they do to human research more generally.

In this context, potential specific harms might include (but are by no means limited to): negative impact upon grades and/or academic progression; negative impact upon relationships with tutor/lecturer and/or the institution; humiliation; and negative impact upon the peer relationships of the participants (see [Commentary 3 side bar](#)).

[Back to contents](#)

8.0 Research-like activities conducted for purposes other than research

Students can sometimes participate in activities that otherwise have many of the qualities of research, but are not conducted for research purposes (e.g. will not result in a research output). A few of the most common examples of this are discussed below. You can find more about the scope of the University's research ethics review arrangements and the human research that is exempt from research ethics review in [Booklet 17 of this Manual](#).

Commentary Inset 3 – Perceived risk in research involving the participation of post-compulsory education students

In all likelihood for research involving post-compulsory education students most of the possible risks will be perceived rather than actual.

When the risks are actual (e.g. devaluation of the sense of personal worth, or psychological stress) these must be carefully addressed, discussed and justified.

Other risks (such as a negative impact on grades) will probably be just perceived by potential participants. Even though the risks are just perceived the researcher(s) must still carefully address those risks as though they were actual.

Experience suggests that if this is not done some students may worry that the risks have not been discussed and resolved. Consequently, this may have a negative impact upon participation rates.

Perhaps more seriously some students will conclude that by not discussing the risks the researcher(s) are indifferent or cavalier about the potential negative impact of their work.

Refer to Booklet 9 of the Griffith University-REM for more about risks in research and Booklet 7 about the arrangements for the review of concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of research.

8.1 Activity for demonstrative, instructional or other educational purposes

Students may sometimes participate (e.g. in class) in activities that may have features in common with research, but are undertaken purely for educational purposes. [Booklet 17](#) discusses the eligibility criteria to determine whether such activities require research ethics review. One key criterion is whether the collected data will be used for a research output (e.g. journal article).

Example: Students in a tutorial will complete a standard survey instrument to explore the structure of the survey and then the analysis of the collected data. The activity is negligible risk and the collected data is not sensitive. Although the data will be analysed for instructional purposes it will not be used for external publication. Consequently, the work does not require research ethics review.

8.2 Activity to inform the quality of Griffith services

Students may sometimes be asked to share their views with regards to improvements to Griffith services. These activities may have features in common with research, but are undertaken purely for quality

improvement purposes. [Booklet 17](#) discusses the eligibility criteria to determine whether the activity requires research ethics review. One key criterion is whether individuals could be identifiable in the reporting of the results of the activity.

8.3 Teaching/Course evaluations

In the same way that activities to improve Griffith University services may not require research ethics reviews ([see 8.2](#)), subject to qualifying criteria ([see Booklet 17](#)) teaching evaluations (UTEIs) are unlikely to require research ethics review.

8.4 Ethical conduct

As per [Booklet 17](#), even if an activity does not require research ethics review it must still be conducted ethically.

8.5 Research use of data collected for a non-research purpose

[Booklet 17](#) outlines under what circumstances data from an activity that did not require research ethics review can subsequently be used for research purposes (e.g. anonymous data from a SEC review of a new course being referred to in a conference presentation).

[Back to contents](#)

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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