Additional Guidance Note

THE APPROPRIATENESS OF OPT IN AND OPT OUT RECRUITMENT METHODOLOGIES

There are two procedures used by researchers to obtain consent to carry out research involving children in school settings or in school-related activities: Opt-In and Opt-Out.

1. **Opt-out.**
   The researcher and Head Teacher agree that explicit parental consent is not required. Researchers, having obtained the written consent of the Head for their project, provide parents with information explaining the proposed research project (e.g. an information sheet) and give them the opportunity to opt their children out by filling in and returning a form to the school.

2. **Opt-in.**
   The researcher and Head Teacher agree that the proposed research project requires explicit parental consent. Researchers provide parents with information explaining the proposed research project and ask them to complete an opt-in form giving permission for their child to take part in the research.

The consensus would appear to be more in favour of the use of opt-in as a methodology. The opt-in methodology helps to better safeguard the rights of the participant given that explicit consent, not implicit or assumed consent, is required prior to the participant’s involvement. Furthermore, given that this is the case opt-in methodologies are preferable to opt-out methodologies when the participants are particularly vulnerable (e.g. children and other particularly vulnerable groups as defined by section 2.3.1 of the University’s Ethics Policy). It may be worth considering how a person might react should s/he discover that her/his child had been participating in a research project without her/his knowledge, albeit following the permission of the Head Teacher (e.g. because the child may have forgotten to inform the parent by passing on information that the researcher/teacher provided).

**Advantages cited for using the opt-in methodology:**

- Ensures that people are only participating after fully informed consent has been given (this is especially important when consent has been given on someone else’s behalf (e.g. by a parent or legal guardian);
- Participants are informed about the research;
- Participants have the opportunity to ask questions or queries about the potential research and can take time to decide whether or not to participate;
- Participants, but also the researcher(s) and the University, are better protected.

The guidance note has been endorsed by the University Research Ethics Committee
**Advantages cited for using the opt-out methodology:**

- Recruitment of participants is facilitated (e.g. when undertaking research involving children it is easier to obtain the permission of a Head Teacher than it is to obtain the informed consent of parents (e.g. a child may forget to pass on information to a parent or a parent may not complete and return a form);
- Sometimes, depending on the nature of the research, it may be impractical or impossible to opt-in participants, having first obtained their fully informed consent. This is often the case, for example, in much observational research.

It is worth reflecting that the interests of science should not take precedent over the interest of participants in research. For this reason, choosing the opt-out methodology on the rationale that it potentially provides an easier means of recruiting prospective participants (i.e. because they have to opt-out if they do not wish to be participate) is NOT a sufficiently acceptable rationale. Furthermore, the opt-in methodology should NOT be used when particularly vulnerable groups or particularly vulnerable individuals are involved. BUT, bearing these points in mind, the opt-out methodology may be the appropriate, acceptable methodology in certain types of research (e.g. certain observational studies).

Where the opt-out methodology is used (i.e. because the research ethics reviewers have approved its use) then it is good practice for the researcher to delay the start of the proposed research for a period of at least two weeks. This time provides parents or legal guardians and/or prospective participants the opportunity to read about the proposed research (e.g. information sheet), ask questions or queries and the opportunity to opt-out (e.g. by signing and returning an opt-out form).