Introduction to Research Ethics

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When is Ethics Approval Required?

- All research involving human participants requires ethics approval – for example:
  - Surveys and questionnaires
  - Interviews and focus groups
  - Observation and field work
  - Co-production methods
  - Laboratory experiments

- All research involving human tissue samples requires approval
Ethics Governance

- Governed by the university’s Research Ethics Policy
- Implemented through the centrally-designed Approval Procedure
- Overseen by the University Research Ethics Committee
- Department-level oversight:
  - Departmental Ethics Administrator (me!)
  - Departmental Ethics Committee
  - Departmental Ethics Reviewers (all academic staff)
Key Concepts for Ethics

- Managing risk
- Informed consent
- Data protection
- Vulnerable participants and safeguarding

Overall: respecting participants
Key Concepts: Managing Risk

- Your safety and wellbeing
- Participants’ safety and wellbeing
- Psychological as well as physical risks
  - Are you meeting in a public place?
  - Are you meeting outside working hours?
  - Will you be accompanied?
  - Will the participant(s) be accompanied?
  - Could any of the equipment used cause harm?
  - Could the activity itself cause harm?
  - Will you be discussing sensitive topics?
Key Concepts: Informed Consent

- Participants must know what’s involved before they agree to take part
  - The nature of the activity
  - What you will do with the results (e.g. publication)
- You must document both the information delivery, and the consent
- Usually signed information sheet + consent form
- You must explicitly give participants the right to withdraw their consent at any time
Key Concepts: Data Protection

- Will you be recording personal data?
- Will you be taking audio or video recordings?
- Who will have access to it?
- How will it be securely stored?
- Will you anonymise the research data?
- Will any of this data be visible in research outputs?
- All of this must be made explicit to participants

- Legal responsibilities: Data Protection Act 1998
Key Concepts: Vulnerable Participants

- Children under 18 yrs; people who lack mental capacity; people suffering from mental illnesses
- How will you gain and document consent?
  - Are the participants able to give consent?
  - Do you need to seek additional consent from those responsible for their care? (e.g. parents, teachers, carers)
- Safeguarding
  - Will you be accompanied by a responsible adult known to the participant?
  - Do you need a DBS check?
  - Have you checked the safeguarding policy of the school, care home, etc.?
Making an Ethics Application

- **Online application form:** [ethics.ris.shef.ac.uk](http://ethics.ris.shef.ac.uk)
- **The process:**
  - You complete and submit the online form
  - Your project supervisor checks your application; revisions
  - Your supervisor classifies the application as high/low risk
  - Low risk applications reviewed by supervisor alone
  - High risk applications reviewed by two members of staff
- **Possible outcomes:**
  - Approved
  - Approved with suggested amendments
  - Approved with compulsory amendments
  - Rejected
Ethics Advisory (the grumpy stuff)

- Leave *at least* two weeks for the process
- It might take longer than two weeks
- Your application may not be approved first time
- If your research requires ethics approval, you may not start work on it until approval is granted
- Conducting research requiring ethics approval before approval is granted is a disciplinary matter referred to the Student Conduct and Appeals Office
- Any data gathered without ethics approval will have to be discarded; it cannot be used as part of work submitted to the university for assessment
Useful Resources

- Application system
- Application system helpsheets
- Definition of ‘human participants’
- Sample Information Sheet
- Sample Consent Form
- UREC’s ‘Top Ten Tips’ for applicants
- Guidance on research with vulnerable people
- Main research ethics webpages – labyrinthine but stuffed full of useful guidance
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