

School of Theology and Religious Studies



Research Ethics Guidelines and Code of Conduct

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NB. These Guidelines are sub-ordinate to UWB's Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Integrity and Quality Assurance in Research and should be read in conjunction with them. They are on UWB's website.

Philosophy

The School of Theology and Religious Studies (STARS) accepts all human beings as equal. The STARS actively opposes discrimination of any form. The STARS is concerned with the study of religions, religiosity and religious phenomena. The work carried out within the STARS (either by students or staff) must adhere to the Code of Ethics outlined below, and must protect the rights and interests of the participant. Particular emphasis is placed on minimising the risks to participants, ensuring that participants give informed consent and respecting participants' privacy.

Rationale

Researchers have a professional and moral responsibility to adhere to ethical principles and procedures as well as the code of conduct appropriate to their respective discipline. What is more, funding agencies and academic journals will only support research that has received approval from an Ethics Committee.

Policy

- The STARS Ethics Committee (hereafter 'the Committee') will ensure that research performed within, or supported by STARS is conducted in an ethical and humane manner.
- The ethical implications of each proposal will be assessed and addressed by the Committee.
- No empirical research shall be carried out at STARS without going through the ethical approval process.
- All those involved in a study will be provided with an information sheet and will be asked to give informed consent.
- Any project involving NHS patients will be referred to the North West Wales NHS Trust Ethics Committee.
- Any project involving children (under 18) must conform to the Child Protection Act and especially the requirements for those who work with children to be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB).

Procedures

- All proposals whether at undergraduate, postgraduate or staff level, will go to the Committee.
- The Committee will assess each proposal and provide feedback for the researcher.
- The Committee welcomes dialogue with researchers to ensure that ethical approval is granted.
- When a decision cannot be reached about the proposal it will be referred to the Ethics Committee of the College of Arts and Humanities (CAH).

The Ethics Committee

The Ethics Committee will have at least four members. The chairperson is the Senior Postgraduate Tutor of STARS. The Committee will include two members of academic staff and a student representative of postgraduate status.

The Committee is responsible for:

1. Ensuring written procedures are in place to enable research activity to be carried out ethically.
2. Regularly reviewing these procedures.

3. Receiving and making recommendations concerning all research proposals which have been submitted by the student or staff member who is principally responsible for carrying out the research.
4. Receiving and make recommendations about other research proposals which might need to be referred to the CAH Ethics Committee.
5. Ensuring that all risks associated with any proposed research activity have been fully considered by the investigators involved, using the written risk assessment procedures as recommended by the STARS and the University.
6. When there are complex issues or when NHS patients are involved, assessment of the proposal will be passed on to the CAH Ethics Committee or The North West Wales Area Research Ethics Committee

The ethical implications of individual research proposals

When a research project is being planned, consideration of its ethical implications is one of the first steps which should be taken. These should be considered under the following headings:

- Humane treatment of participants
- Respect for participant's privacy during the study
- Informed consent
- Risk assessment
- Risk minimisation
- Confidentiality of findings of participant's replies
- Maintenance of participant's anonymity
- Participant feedback

The ethical implications of a proposal should be addressed in the *Research Proposal Form* (to be found at the back of this document) and when a project is being written up. If there are no ethical implications this should be stated, however investigators who indicate they believe there are no ethical consideration are not thereby absolved of responsibility if risks do arise during their research programme.

The headings are now considered in more detail.

Humane treatment of participants

It is obligatory for participants of any research project to be treated in a humane and ethical way at all times. This includes treating them with respect, dignity and value.

Respect for participants' privacy

Privacy refers to the physical, social, psychological, sexual and spiritual aspects of a participant's life. It is important for researchers to be aware that individuals may feel uncomfortable sharing information that others may share freely. Researchers, therefore, need to be sensitive to the varying needs of participants. Researchers should always be on the look out for behaviour and body language that suggest invasion of privacy. If in doubt they should ask the participants whether they have any concerns.

Informed consent

Potential participants for all research projects should be in possession of sufficient information to allow them to decide whether or not they want to take part. Therefore all researchers will ensure that the following process is followed:

- Potential participants will be provided with information describing the project and what they are being invited to do.
- Potential participants will be informed that they are free to withdraw from the project at any time without having to give an explanation.
- When the researcher is satisfied that the participants have been fully informed, the participant will be asked to complete the *Participant Consent Form*.

- Both participant's signature and researcher's signature must appear on this form for it to be valid.
- Two forms should be signed; one for the researcher and one for the participant.
- The participant will be given an *Information Sheet* to keep.
- In the case of a research questionnaire the recipients of the questionnaire must be informed of their rights. The questionnaire must be signed by the researcher. It is assumed that the recipient of the questionnaire accepts the ethical statement when the questionnaire is returned completed. It is also assumed that questionnaires returned uncompleted or incomplete reflect the wish of the recipient not to engage in the research project.

Minors and dependent populations

Where research involves children under the age of 16, consent from parents or those *in loco parentis* should be obtained. The Committee must be consulted to establish if the head teacher's permission is sufficient or if parental consent is also required. In most circumstances the head teacher can be counted as being *in loco parentis*. In the interest of child protection, in some circumstances the law requires researchers working with children to undergo a check by the Criminal Records Bureau.

These regulations apply to all children, including those with physical, emotional problems and those who are intellectually vulnerable.

At no time in the course of their involvement with children is a researcher to be alone with children under the age of 16 years.

Risk assessment and Risk minimisation

Withholding certain information and deception

- Some studies may not be possible unless certain information is withheld or participants are misled.
- Such studies are considered inappropriate if participants are likely to show unease once debriefed.
- All such studies require Ethics Committee approval.
- If information is withheld or deception is employed, debriefing **MUST** take place to protect the welfare and dignity of the participant(s).

Confidentiality

- It is of paramount importance for all STARS researchers to preserve the confidentiality of all information acquired in their research.
- No information can be divulged without the prior written consent of the participant.
- Participants have the right to a copy of all information relating to them except where the research findings are provided anonymously.

Videotaping, audio taping and photography

The participants must be made aware if they are to be videotaped, audio taped or photographed in any manner and must be advised as to who will have custody of these materials and how they are to be used. It must also be clear what will be done with the material when they study is over. Special written consent must be obtained from participants engaged in this procedure.

Anonymity

Information about participants should be held in an anonymous manner (unless the participants agreed to researchers using their names). Numbers or letters (rather than the name of the participant) should be used.

Participant feedback

All participants in research should have the opportunity to feed back on their experiences. As such, all participants should be given the facilities to provide feedback. This is optional for participants.

Gaining Ethical Approval for Research

- All research projects that involve living human beings will be subject to the STARS ethics approval process
- All projects will be presented to the Ethics Committee.
- Only research with living human beings which has been awarded ethical approval will be performed at STARS.
- This applies to undergraduate, postgraduate and staff research projects.
- Undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral proposals will be rated by a member of staff or their supervisor in preparation for scrutiny by the Committee.
- A public record of all approved projects will be kept in the STARS.

Procedures for all Undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral and Staff projects.

- The researcher discusses the research area with their supervisor
- The researcher collects *Research Ethics Guidelines and Code of Conduct* from the Administrator of the STARS and an application form (the material can also be downloaded from the school website).
- The researcher completes the application form for ethical approval.
- The researcher will complete an *Information Sheet*.
- A *Participant Consent Form* is available on the school website. Special attention should be taken if children, minors or dependent people are involved. Researcher who will have direct contact with children must initiate the UWB procedure for a CRB check.
- The researcher submits *Research Proposal Form, Information Sheet* and *Participant Consent Form* to the Administrator at the STARS.
- The researcher will be contacted when decision has been made. If the project has to be referred to the CAH ethics committee or the NWW NHS Trust Ethics Committee, the researcher must await approval before any work starts on the project.

The Chair will sign the approval form.

Procedure for projects involving NHS patients

- All projects involving NHS patients must be submitted to the NWW NHS Trust Ethics Committee.
- The procedures for doing this are available from the Secretary to the Ethics Committee at Ysbyty Gwynedd.
- When an outside ethics committee has approved a study it is the researcher's responsibility to inform the Administrator so that it can be included on the STARS research register.

The STARS Research Register

All research projects with the names of the investigators and the ethics approval will be recorded on the STARS research register.

Changes to research project

The committee's approval of a research project covers only the procedures outlined by the applicant in the original application. Any changes in the procedures affecting interactions with human participants should be reported to the Ethics Committee in writing. Significant changes will require submission of a revised application for ethics approval.