

School of Biology Ethics Committee, Human: Overview of Application Procedures

Approval for any research on human subjects or materials is required under the auspices of the University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC); the Biology's School Ethics Committee (SEC) handles applications for UTREC from the School of Biology and in most cases approval is available through the SEC.

Research and Teaching Activities

Ethical approval is required for all research involving:

- human subjects, including observational and survey-based studies.
- human tissues or cell lines of human origin.

Teaching activities involving the above also require ethical approval (e.g., students recording data on themselves/their classmates, laboratory practicals using human tissue—whether provided or collected from students themselves).

Use of publically available or previously published datasets (e.g., data in NCBI, Ensemble, Array Express) does not require ethical approval.

Anyone concerned about whether or not their research or teaching requires ethical approval is invited to discuss their situation with the Convener (Human) of the SEC.

Research involving children or vulnerable adults requires further steps; please visit the main UTREC website for guidance on these procedures.

UTREC have given specific guidance that permission for research with human subjects CAN NOT be granted retrospectively so LEAVE SUFFICIENT TIME to obtain ethical approval and do NOT start your research without it.

Application Process

Application forms should be downloaded from the main UTREC website; links are available from the School of Biology SEC webpage.

Completed application forms should be emailed, along with any supporting materials (e.g., participant information forms, recruitment advertisements, questionnaires), to 'bioethics@st-andrews.ac.uk'. Tick boxes may be annotated with an 'x' next to the box if the box-ticking feature of Word does not work. Scanned signatures may be included in the electronic form, or hardcopies of the signed signature page may be posted to Lianne Barker (Biology SEC Administrator), Harold Mitchell Building.

The SEC aims to provide an initial response to applications within four weeks. Please be aware that the SEC may respond with questions or requests for modification; additional responses after revisions are also on the four-week timescale. Thus, the SEC recommends people apply at least **two-three months prior to the stated start date**.

In most cases the SEC will be able to approve or reject applications. Some applications, including all those involving children or vulnerable adults, may be referred to UTREC; UTREC provide responses within 2-6 weeks depending on meeting dates.

Ethical Research Tips

There is a large amount of material regarding ethical research practices on the UTREC website (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/guidelines/>); please refer to this. Additionally, we provide some suggestions for considerations in your research design.

- When collecting potentially sensitive demographic information (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation), collect only what is necessary for your research. The collection of such sensitive information should be justified in the Ethical Statement. Participants should always be free to decline providing such sensitive information.
- “Gender” is the preferred term to refer to an individual’s male or female presentation; only use “sex” if your research intends to contrast biological sex with presented gender, e.g., exploring transgender issues. It is best practice to provide an “Other” option on gender questions for transgender sensitivity.
- Any potentially sensitive physical contact between experimenter and participant (e.g., measurement of body fat with callipers) should be performed in the presence of both a male and female observer (one of whom may be the experimenter). The experimenter should never engage in such physical contact when alone with the participant.
- If the experimenter or assistants are travelling to meet participants, such as in “on-the-street” surveys, in most cases this is considered fieldwork and so requires a fieldwork risk assessment to be carried out.
- Avoid deception where possible. Any deception must be revealed to participants in a post-experimental debriefing and justified in the Ethical Statement.
- Store data in an anonymised format whenever possible. Many funders now require data to be stored for at least five years
- Except where specifically noted on the application form (e.g., inducement), be aware that answers other than ‘YES’ or ‘N/A’ represent deviations from standard ethical practice and thus must be have a strong justification presented in the Ethical Statement.

Application Tips

- Make sure you include all relevant supporting materials, such as surveys and debriefing sheets. Pointers to additional online-based resources (e.g., a game participants will play, a project website) are acceptable, but as much as possible must be provided off-line. For example, web-based surveys should be printed out or the questions provided in a document.
- Answer all questions on the form and fill in all boxes.
- Provide enough detail in the Ethical Statement for the SEC to understand your project and its associated ethical concerns.
- Make sure to explain procedures fully, for example, it is insufficient to simply say that individuals will be interviewed or surveyed – the procedure of recruiting/approaching, nature of questioning (e.g., written response or interview), who will be doing the surveys/interviews, where, and whether appropriate risk assessments have been carried out (e.g., working in pairs, regular phone contact).
- Always address any ethical issues in your Ethical Statement.
- If you addressing an ethical issue directly related to a question in the Ethical Checklist, highlight the question it relates to, for example by a heading or a bolded parenthetical remark e.g., **(Q20)**
- If your research has no ethical issues, state why.

- If a component of research requires justification, but has no ethical issues, state that there are no ethical issues (e.g., for small monetary inducements).
- If the SEC responds to your application with questions or requests for further justification, etc., make sure to include a revised application incorporating the requested material in your response. Please also either highlight the areas including the revised material in the application, or provide a summary of your changes.

Current Membership of Biology SEC

Anne Smith – Convener (Human)

Vincent Janik – Convener (Animal)

Luke Rendell

Helder Ferreira

Christopher Templeton

Lianne Baker - Administrator