

## Procedure for Ethical Review

School of Informatics, University of Edinburgh

### Part A: Ethics oversight route

Consideration of the ethical aspects of our research is both a moral and a legal obligation, as well as part of the academic culture in which we should be training researchers. The following procedures should help us fulfil those requirements. The goal of the system is full legal accountability with minimal effort. The first goal is served by keeping the full record. The second goal is served by keeping form filling to a minimum, by holding information locally, and by assuring that decision-making is as close to the pertinent research expertise as possible.

The procedures proposed here aim to ensure that ethical consideration are taken into account in any research done in the School. The proposed framework borrows heavily from current practice in PPLS Psychology and Linguistics.

The system outlined here applies to:

Proposed research	When is ethical approval sought	Researchers responsible	Records kept by
UG final year projects	Submission of project proposal	Student and supervisor	ITO/IGS
MSc projects	Submission of project proposal		
PhD projects	First year report		
Post-doc fellowships	Submission of funding proposal	Post-doc and mentor	Institute portfolio manager
Any form of funded research for which there is a proposal	Submission of funding proposal	PI	Institute portfolio manager
Research performed by a visitor	When the visit is approved	Visitor and host	Host
Personal research for which there is no proposal	Before research starts	Individual conducting the research	Individual researcher

The system uses existing mechanisms for recording ethical approval. For UG final year and MSc projects, the project proposal form contains a question about ethics (see Level 0 below). For PhD projects, this question is included in the first year report form; for post-doc fellowships and other funding proposals, this question is included in the cost request form. For visitors, the ethics Level 0 question is included in the visitor approval process.

The system operates 5 levels (0-4). Some work in the School will

complete its ethical approval at Level 0. Most of the rest will complete at Level 1. We expect that a few cases a year will reach Level 2 and 3 and none in an average year will reach Level 4.

### Level 0. Registration

Any form for registering a piece of research (final year project, MSc project, PhD or post-doc project, grant proposal, etc.) with the School should ask not only for the title and proposers but also:

Does this research involve human participants or animals, confidential or personal data, developing countries or military applications?

*Refer to the Level 1 form for guidance if you have any doubt on issues mentioned in the question.*

If the answer to the questions is 'no', the form, lodged with the relevant School office constitutes the whole paper trail for ethical approval of that research.

If the answer is 'yes', we will provide level 1 consideration of the ethics of the research.

### Level 1. Self-Assessment

The researcher(s) should fill out a **Level 1** form (see **Project Details** and **Self Assessment** Part B), which allows them to consider a number of ethical issues that may be pertinent to their work. The Detailed Assessment document is for reference only at this stage.

For any supervised work (undergraduate, MSc, PhD, post-doc, visitor), supervisors work with students or post-docs to complete the form.

*If nothing about it is problematic, the Project Details and Self Assessment forms are submitted.* They may be updated, particularly in the case of PhD research, as the work develops from year to year.

Where new participants (informants, interviewees, subjects) are involved, the final phase is devising an appropriate **consent form**. Examples are available from the School ethics web site, but the form should be modified to suit each study, obtaining informed consent for suitable use of participants' material. The researcher is responsible for retaining consent forms. If materials from the study are retained by the School, the consent forms should be left on record here.

*Timing:* Level 1 should be complete before a proposal is submitted (this applies to both UG final year and MSc projects and to funding proposals).

### Level 2. Consultation

ONLY IF problematic issues arise will the **Level 1** and **Level 2** forms (**Detailed Assessment**) be used together. Only the problematic issues need to be set out in **Detailed Assessment**. Anything noted as satisfactory at Level 1 need not be described at this stage.

A colleague in the same general field should consult on the difficulties. For PhD students' work, the PhD committee members are the appropriate Level 2 consultants. The members of the School Ethics Panel are also available for consultation, and if appropriate, the ethics committees of other relevant schools (PPLS, Biology, Medicine) should be consulted.

*Timing:* The time constraints for UG final year and MSc projects suggest

that Level 2 should be completed before project work starts, and that we should reject outright as a matter of course any topic that cannot be accepted by Level 2. This constraint assures that students do not risk investing time in projects they cannot complete.

*The expected output will be Level 1 and 2 forms (+ consent form where appropriate) with the name(s) of the consulting colleague(s). You do not have to make a submission prior to consultation.*

### **Level 3. The School Ethics Committee**

ONLY IF the difficulties cannot be resolved by consultation will the annotated Level 1 + Level 2 forms go to Level 3 review. The review will be conducted by the Informatics Planning and Resources Committee (PRC), which also functions as the School Ethics Committee.

If a proposal reaches Level 3, the proposer will be asked to attend the PRC meeting and present the background of the work, the problematic issue, and the relevant professional body's ethical standard which is thought to bear on the issue. *The output will be a recommendation for resolving the issue.*

*Timing:* PRC meets at most once a semester. Because of pressures on proposals, it may be necessary to operate Level 3 by email.

ONLY IF the researchers cannot accept the guidance of the PRC OR IF the PRC cannot come to a decision will it refer the matter onward.

### **Level 4. The College Ethics Committee**

ONLY serious problems reach this level, for example, projects in which a student is to observe an illegal activity or use materials which are the subject of legal action against the University.

### **Summary of Roles and Responsibilities**

*School Ethics Panel:* informal group of colleagues with experience in ethical matters, to be consulted at Level 2 (or Level 1 if required). Currently: Austin Tate, Frank Keller.

*School Ethics Committee:* committee with formal responsibility for ethical review in the School; to be consulted at Level 3. The Planning and Resources committee (PRC) has this role in the School of Informatics. Current chair: Mike O'Boyle.

*School Ethics Representative:* member of the PRC that reports to the College Ethics Committee. Currently: Austin Tate.

*College Ethics Committee:* committee with formal responsibility for ethical review in the College; to be consulted at Level 4.

## Part B: Summary

Filled boxes in the rightmost column of the table indicate where the process ends for different categories of project.

level	issue	form	who	outcome	action	END	
0	Human participants or animals, confidential or personal data, developing countries or military applications?	UG/MSc project proposal, annual PhD report, cost request form, visitor registration form	Researcher/supervisor	NO	Tick 'no' box		
				YES	Tick 'yes' & go to level 1		
1	Possible ethical problem?	Level 1 form	Researcher/supervisor	ALL OK	Submit level 1 form		
				Possible problem	Go to level 2		
2	Problems in ethics details?	Level 2 form	Researcher/supervisor + colleague and School Ethics Panel	Resolved	Submit level 2 form as agreed		
				Unresolved	UG/MSc	Abandon/redesign project: go to 0, 1	
					others	Go to level 3	
3	Can't work out problems with help of colleague	Level 2 form + additional documentation if necessary	Researcher/supervisor, School Ethics Committee (PRC)	Resolved	Submit level 2 form and additional documentation as agreed		
				Unresolved	Go to level 4		
4	Can't resolve problem within Informatics	All documents for case	School Ethics Representative; College Ethics Committee	Resolved	Submit level 2 form and additional documentation as agreed		
				Unresolved	Abandon/redesign project: go to 0, 1		