

Research Ethics Policy

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Purpose

This policy describes the principles of ethical conduct for research by staff and students and defines the process for the rigorous ethical review of research and approval of research ethics.

1. Ethical responsibilities of researchers at the University

- a. The ethical values and principles described here apply to all University activities, to all its staff and student researchers including those visiting for short periods, and to any research agreements or partnerships that the University establishes.
- b. The University's [human and animal ethics](#) will be compliant with the laws of individual University member states, particularly concerning privacy, confidentiality, ownership, intellectual property requirements, research permit requirements and human rights.
- c. Staff researchers should be aware of the ethical principles they are required to bring to all their research activities, including those of the students whose research they oversee. Staff researchers should also communicate to research collaborators from outside the at The University of the South Pacific (USP) the nature and scope of its ethical principles, and the importance that the University attaches to their adherence.
- d. In particular, every researcher at the USP should acknowledge and understand the Pacific context within which they are working. They should be sensitive to the needs and aspirations of Pacific communities and states, they should evince respect for Pacific knowledge systems and methodologies, and they should be bound as far as possible by all traditional protocols when dealing with Pacific peoples.
- e. Every staff and student researcher at the USP who is proposing research involving people must receive approval (in writing) from the Academic Unit Research Committee or University Research Ethics Committee before commencing that research.
- f. No researcher from the USP should begin a research project involving humans unless an appropriate agreement with the persons/communities to be studied has been reached.

2. Ethical Principals

- a. Ethics are the moral principles or values held by an organization, group, or individual that govern their behaviour. For research at USP, these principles are overt, written down, and underpin relevant policies, processes, and practices of the organisation and the researchers who work within it.
- b. Ethical policies are needed not only to guide research processes and practices but also to protect researchers and the institutions where they work.

2.1. Respect for human dignity, human rights and Fundamental freedoms

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with the USP will give due respect to human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

2.2. Maximising benefit and avoiding harm to humans

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with the USP will make every effort to maximise its benefits to individuals and communities and avoid any harm to them as a result of the research, either during the research process or after it has been completed.

2.3. Sensitivity to Pacific context

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will be sensitive to the contexts of Pacific Islands research, particularly in respect of the following four values:

(a) Respect

- Respect is fundamental to all ethical relationships in the Pacific. Respect acknowledges the primacy of the group but at the same time, it recognises the individual as a valued member of the group. Respect in its practice is always context-specific and varies in its interpretation and usage even within the same cultural context. Respect is demonstrated through humility and is reciprocal.

(b) Cultural competency

- Researchers must understand the rudiments of the cultures in which they are working. Cultural competency involves this understanding but also acknowledges that researchers and research participants often bring to the research exercise their own cultural beliefs, values and practices. Researchers must be aware of how these influence their engagements with the people they are studying.

(c) Meaningful engagement

- Meaningful engagement between the researchers and research participants requires developing, maintaining, and sustaining relationships that involve mutual trust. This is not something that can be hurried. All protocols that normally apply to visitors from within the same culture must be followed when engaging individuals and communities for a research project, even though the researcher(s) may not be part of that culture.

(d) Utility

- An important aim of research at USP is to assist Pacific communities and states meet their needs and achieve their aspirations while, at the same time, achieving international recognition in areas that reflect the University's geographical and cultural contexts. Research involving human informants or subjects will be expected to lead to practical outcomes of benefit to Pacific communities. Every attempt must therefore be made to engage these communities in ways that

ensure the utility of the research. One desired way of achieving this is reporting research outcomes in the languages of the participating communities to ensure their understanding and dissemination

2.4. Consent

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will be carried out only with the prior, free, and informed consent of all persons concerned, whether individuals or communities, based on adequate information. The consent may be withdrawn by a particular individual or community at any time for any reason without disadvantage or prejudice.
- The request for consent will be appropriate to the circumstances although it is recognised that cultural and educational barriers may inhibit some projects from being fully comprehended by human subjects. In such cases, the AURC or University's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) will advise on the necessary minimum level of informed consent.

2.5. Respect for human vulnerability and personal integrity

- In the process of applying and advancing scientific knowledge, all research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will identify and acknowledge those individuals and groups that are especially vulnerable and ensure that they are protected and their integrity is respected.

2.6. Privacy and confidentiality

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will respect, as agreed in advance, the privacy of participants in research activities and the confidentiality of any information that they supply. Information obtained during the research should not normally be used in ways or disclosed for purposes other than those for which it was collected.

2.7. Equality, justice and equity

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will acknowledge the dignity and the rights of all participants in the research activity and ensure that they are treated justly and equitably.

2.8. Non-discrimination and non- stigmatisation

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with the USP will ensure that no individual or group is discriminated against or stigmatised on any grounds in violation of human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

2.9. Respect for cultural diversity and pluralism

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will respect cultural diversity and pluralism, especially in recognition of the cultural diversity of the Pacific. Such

considerations will not be invoked to infringe upon human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms, nor upon any of the other ethical principles expressed here.

2.10. Social responsibility and sustainable futures

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will endeavour to promote the well-being and sustainability of Pacific cultures and environments.

2.11. Sharing of benefits

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will ensure that any resulting benefits and applications will be shared with Pacific peoples and states for their benefits, as well as the international community according to the [USP's Intellectual Property Policy](#)

2.12. Protection of the environment, biosphere and biodiversity

- All research conducted by persons affiliated with USP will pay due regard to the connections and relationships among human beings, the environment and other forms of life. In the Pacific context, these relationships include traditional knowledge and skills, and appropriate access to and utilisation of resources.
- The University will engage with appropriate bodies among its member states and externally to ensure that ethical issues relating to research in medical science, science and technology that impact Pacific peoples, communities, their environments and resources, are adequately and effectively addressed.

2.13. Ethical decision-making and transparency

- In all its teaching and research activities, the University will promote professionalism, honesty, integrity, respect and transparency. Conflicts of interest will be declared. Knowledge will be appropriately shared.

3. The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)

3.1 The UREC at USP is chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research & Innovation) or nominee and comprises one representative from each School with experience in the ethical conduct of research in the Pacific. The UREC will generally consider applications forwarded by AURC having high risk and low-risk ethical clearance will be dealt with by the respective AURC

3.2 The Terms of Reference for the UREC at USP are as follows:

- a) To raise awareness of research integrity and ethics across the University.
- a) To impartially support and promote, ethical standards in research;
- b) To receive research applications including from the School Research Committee, University, which involve people or animals as subjects of research and make the judgement that the proposed research follows ethical principles.

c) To assess research developments within the University member countries, make recommendations, and contribute to the preparation of guidelines on ethical issues concerning research.

d) To develop guidelines for addressing conflicts on ethical issues that may arise within the University.

e) To take specialist advice where required on the insurance, liability and other legal implications of research activities.

f) To recommend sanctions and penalties consistent with other University discipline procedures to be imposed in cases of ethical infringements.

h) To advise on appropriate appeals processes related to ethical issues that are consistent with those existing within the University.

In association with the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research & Innovation), the UREC will also spearhead training in ethical practices for researchers at the University.

4. Procedures for applying for ethical clearance of proposed research

4.1 Any research project dealing with human and animal subjects that are proposed to be undertaken under the auspices of USP, whether by full-time or affiliate staff or students, is required to have ethical approval before commencing. Procedures are essentially the same for academic staff and students. The application along with the full project will be submitted to AURC. The AURC will evaluate the low-risk applications and issue the ethics clearance. The AURC will forward the application that it decides of high risk and need to be considered by UREC which will be evaluated by UREC for ethics clearance.

4.2 Projects may be initiated only after the appropriate committee has given its approval. Retrospective approval of projects that have already begun will not be granted.

4.3 Failure to gain approval may affect funding and publication decisions.

5. Application Procedures

5.1 **Projects requiring review may be initiated only after the appropriate committee has given its approval.** Retrospective approval of projects that have already begun will not be granted.

5.2 Projects which require ethical approval include:

a) Any research or teaching activity in which persons are subjected to experimental procedures or observation or questioning or otherwise used as a source of information or data.

b) Research which draws on personal information which is not currently in the public domain accessed from artifacts such as documents or computer records that has been collected for other purposes than the research.

c) Projects not involving human participants, but that involve human tissue, genetic modification, or animals may also require review by an appropriate body. Researchers are expected to be aware of their responsibilities.

5.3 Research may be considered low risk when it arises from:

- Master's or Ph.D. theses, or supervised projects are undertaken as part of specific course requirements, where the theses or projects do not raise any issue of deception, threat, invasion of privacy, mental, physical or cultural risk or stress, and do not involve gathering personal information of a sensitive nature about or from individuals.
- Undergraduate and postgraduate class research projects which do not raise any issue of deception threat, invasion of privacy, mental, physical or cultural risk or stress, and do not involve gathering personal information of a sensitive nature about or from individuals, but do not have blanket approval as outlined below.

5.4 Projects that may not be considered low risk involve any of the following:

- Invasive physical procedures or potential for physical harm;
- Procedures that might cause mental/emotional stress or distress, moral or cultural offence;
- Personal or sensitive issues;
- Potentially vulnerable, excluded, or marginalised groups;
- Cross cultural research;
- Investigation of illegal behaviour/s;
- Invasion of privacy;
- Collection of information that might be disadvantageous to the participant;
- Use of information already collected that is not in the public arena might be disadvantageous to the participant;
- Use of information already collected which was collected under the agreement of confidentiality;
- Participants who are unable to give informed consent;
- Where a conflict of interest exists e.g., the researcher is also the lecturer, teacher, treatment-provider, colleague or employer of the research participants, or there is any other power relationship between the researcher and the research participants;
- Deception;
- Audio or visual recording without consent;
- Withholding benefits from "control" groups;
- Inducements; and/or
- Risks to the researcher

5.5 AURC Approval for Low-Risk Applications

(a) AURC will undertake the first stage of approval of projects that meet low risk criteria.

(b) Staff involved must sign a declaration that students undertaking the research projects:

- Are being made fully aware of the need for and the requirement of seeking Ethics approval for all research involving human participants;

- Are conversant with the procedures involved in making such an application;
- Have individually filled in the required applications submitted to the staff responsible for the student project.

(c) An application form should be filled out and submitted in line with the instructions on the form. Attachments should include the information and consent forms that will be used.

(d) UREC will review the applications forwarded by AURC as the second stage of a review first by the Chair UREC (or its designate) or by full UREC before final approval can be given.

5.6 Blanket Approval

(a) Blanket approval will be granted only for research projects that are low risk.

(b) Blanket approval may be sought for undergraduate and postgraduate class research or projects related to specific courses and/or field trips, which pose no threat to the well-being of the participants and where the methodology and its ethical implications is similar for all the projects.

(c) The staff member responsible for the project may seek approval for the whole class based on a single application to the appropriate committee in the first year.

(d) This approval should be valid for three years if there is no substantial change in the project during this period. For the fourth year, a new application can be made seeking approval for a further three years and so on.

(e) The staff member when applying, should set out how they are to ensure that the students:

- Who undertake those research projects are made fully aware of the need for and the requirement of seeking ethical approval for all research involving human participants; and
- Are conversant with the procedures involved in making such an application;
- Have completed a component of the course that involves a discussion of the research ethics involved in the class project.

6. Procedures

6.1 Any research project dealing with human and animal subjects that is proposed to be undertaken under the auspices of USP whether by full-time or affiliate staff or students, is required to have ethical approval before commencing. Procedures are essentially the same for academic staff and students.

6.2 Researchers at USP, whether staff or students, whether full-time, temporary or affiliate, are required to complete the Screening Questionnaire for every new research project that they propose to undertake. Where several staff and students of the University are involved in a single project, only the lead researcher needs to complete the Screening Questionnaire.

- 6.3 The Screening Questionnaire is intended to ascertain whether or not a researcher needs to have their proposed project given ethics approval. Researchers should answer all questions honestly and should seek advice if they are in doubt about what to answer. Once the Screening Questionnaire is complete, it should be submitted to the appropriate AURC along with the full proposal.
- 6.4 Submission of the Screening Questionnaire must be supported by:
- (a) A copy of the full research proposal
 - (b) A declaration by the principal researcher that full consideration has been given to ethical issues that might arise in the research and
 - (i) (If appropriate) how those issues will be addressed; or,
 - (ii) that no ethical issues have been identified as arising
- 6.5 If all answers to the screening questions are NO, and the declaration by the principal researcher identifies no ethical issues, then generally there is no further need for ethics approval, and the project can proceed but final approval, in this case, will be by the Chair of the AURC. If any answers on the Screening Questionnaire are YES, then the researcher must complete a full submission to the AURC on the Application for Human/animal Ethics Approval.
- 6.6 The Chair of the AURC may, however, at their discretion, refer a proposal to the UREC where they independently identify concerns that in their judgment require further consideration by that Committee.
- 6.7 Potential participants who agree to be involved in the study must all complete a Consent Form available in the [Human Ethics Form](#) where a community is the subject of research, it is acceptable in a Pacific Islands context for a recognised leader or spokesperson for that group to sign a consent form on behalf of the group. All completed consent forms must be obtained before the research commences .
- 6.8 Persons other than the Lead Researcher (Principal Investigator) who are associated with a research project involving humans that require ethical approval must sign a Confidentiality Agreement available in the [Human Ethics form](#), whereby they agree to keep confidential all information concerning the project. This agreement must be signed by each co-researcher who will have access to personal data before they begin work on the project.
- 6.9 Researchers should destroy personal data (including biological samples) collected for research projects involving humans/animals after a maximum of ten years from the start of the project unless specific permission is given by the UREC to be stored permanently on the data Repository (when created).
- 6.10 The AURC or UREC will provide guidance and support to satisfactorily address any conflicts that may arise between the student, the supervisor, research participants and communities in the course of research. Deliberate or avoidable breaches of the ethical principles for human/animal research of USP will be reported by the UREC for appropriate action.

7. Amendments to already approved research

Researchers often wish to make a change to their research project. Where researchers realise such a change will raise further ethical questions (e.g., a change in treatment of participants, or the way the data is handled), they should apply for an amendment. An email to the Secretary requesting the amendment should include:

- All details of the changes
- Any ethical issues that arise
- A discussion of those ethical issues
- Any public documents associated with the project (e.g., information sheets) that require revision as a result of the amendments.

8. Bibliography

The University of the South Pacific, *Human Research Ethics: A Handbook for USP Researchers*, https://research.usp.ac.fj/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/human_ethics_handbook.pdf

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