

University Research Ethics Committee

Code of Practice for Researchers Working with Vulnerable Populations

This document needs to be read in relation to the University Policy on Safeguarding Children and Other Vulnerable Individuals that can found here: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/governance-and-strategy/governance/safeguarding>

The code applies to all University staff and students undertaking research with vulnerable populations

Vulnerable populations in research terms are defined as:

- Infants and children under the age of eighteen who are still in education or aged sixteen if they are not in education.
- People with learning or communication difficulties or serious mental health problems
- Patients in hospital
- Individuals under the care of social services
- People in custody or on probation
- Individuals engaged in illegal activities such as drug abuse
- Persons with a condition or illness which is directly being investigated in the study
- Refugees
- It is also recognised that vulnerabilities also arise in relation to undertaking research in some social contexts or around particular issues that have affected communities or organisations and the guidelines should also apply in these situations.

Guidelines

- Researchers working with vulnerable groups should discuss the possibility of DBS screening with the University Secretariat.
- Keep physical contact to minimum and avoid all unnecessary contact
- When working one-to one with a member of a vulnerable group try to ensure a venue is chosen where you can be clearly observed by others or have another person present throughout.
- Researchers should avoid developing close personal relationships with members of vulnerable groups they are researching, and refrain from entering into any obligation (formal or otherwise) to provide practical or emotional support for their respondents.
- If a research participant tells a researcher about abuse of himself/herself or abuse occurring within an organisation, the researcher is required to consider what action to take. For children under 16 years, the researcher should report his/her concerns to the designated individual identified within the organisation in which they are working or to the designated individual identified in the University's Policy on Safeguarding.

For adults in vulnerable situations this may mean supporting the adult to report abuse or neglect and enabling them to make decisions about whether and how to participate in the safeguarding process to the extent that they choose.

- If in the course of working with a vulnerable individual or group aged under 16 years, if the researcher has reason to suspect abuse, he/she should report his/her concerns to the designated safeguarding individual identified in the organisation they are working with or a designated individual within the University. If vulnerable adults are involved, the researcher should take advice from the designated individual identified in the University's Policy on Safeguarding. Researchers must not undertake any investigations themselves.

These guidelines are designed to protect researchers and research participants.

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