

## **University Research Ethics Committee Guidance on Research Conducted Overseas**

Research is fundamentally an international pursuit, often involving overseas collaborators, participants and audiences. From an ethical perspective this adds complexity in the sense that multiple sets of laws, regulations, practices and customs need to be understood and adhered to. With more than 200 countries in the world, it is impossible to compile and maintain definitive records of the varying requirements. Therefore there are duties on individual researchers to investigate expectations, and often to seek local partners to assist in complying with these.

One general rule is that researchers should understand both UK and the other country's ethical frameworks and, if inconsistent, adhere to whichever is more rigorous. For example, if the UK requires a minimum of one reviewer for a low-risk human participant study and the country the researcher is intended to recruit participants from requires two, the latter should be adhered to.

Research overseas is actively encouraged as a positive experience. However for insurance reasons travel will not be permitted to regions in contradiction to Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice. Ethical approval may also not be given if there are safety, security or reputational risks presented by the research activities or topic that cannot satisfactorily be mitigated against.

This guidance contains signposts and prompts, which researchers should consider when completing their ethics applications and risk assessments. The ultimate decision on whether the research can proceed will rest with the reviewers' judgement of the individual application.

### **Ethical review and approval**

All research which falls within the scope of the Sheffield Hallam Research Ethics Policy and Procedures must undergo review within the University, regardless of whether any additional external ethics approvals are required.

Researchers planning to carry out research overseas should then also determine whether ethical approval is required in the country in which the research is to be conducted. Local ethical approval must be in place, where required, before the research activity can commence.

Approval solely by overseas review should generally be avoided, and may also be in breach of funder conditions.

The University's insurance team will automatically review the insurance cover of all studies involving research being conducted in an overseas country, as part of standard ethics reviews. Please note that research activities in USA and Canada are not routinely covered by Sheffield Hallam insurance. Collaborating with North American partners and recruitment of participants there (including via snowballing or online surveys) should therefore be avoided where possible.

### **Awareness of international regulations**

Researchers are expected to refer to international guidelines and conform to relevant local regulations for the country/countries where research is taking place, while also adhering to the ethical standards set out by Sheffield Hallam's [Research Ethics Policy and Procedures](#).

The [International Compilation of Human Research Standards listing](#) compiles laws, regulations and guidelines (collectively referred to as 'standards') that govern human participant protections in 131 countries, and is a good first-port-of-call for scoping research requirements and contacts in a particular territory.

The [Montreal Statement on Research Integrity in Cross-Boundary Research Collaborations](#) attempts to present a universal guide for the responsible conduct of research. It sets-out responsibilities of the individual and institutional partners in cross-boundary research collaborations.

Additionally, [ClintRegs](#) is an online database of country-specific clinical research regulatory information designed to assist in planning and implementing international clinical research.

Researchers must also identify the different certificates and checks that may be required (e.g. DBS alternatives, such as Malaysian Good Character Checks) and obtain them where necessary.

## **Awareness of local practices and customs**

When proposing to conduct research overseas, researchers have a responsibility to understand and implement practices and customs of individual countries, as well as the laws and regulations. They should be aware of social and cultural norms and ensure differing views do not result in treating participants disrespectfully or unfairly. Seeking local advice on potential sensitivities is particularly encouraged.

## **Specific Considerations**

The following practical considerations particularly have relevance for operating in low-to-middle income countries, where power differentials may be more pronounced or there may be greater levels of socio-political or cultural instability.

## **Safety and security**

It can often be more dangerous and pose security risks/concerns to conduct research overseas.

It is recommended that researchers regularly check the [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office \(FCDO\) website](#) for details and travel advice for the country they will be travelling to, as advice is maintained live. There may be added complexities in countries where the FCDO does not recommend travel to just particular regions of countries.

Ethics applications will not be approved for research involving researchers travelling to a location where the FCDO has issued red 'advise against all travel' status. Applications involving orange 'advise against all but essential travel' will also need to be appropriately risk-assessed.

## **Accountability, feedback and safeguarding**

It is essential to recognise the potential impact of research on participants, in particular concerns around safeguarding and protection of vulnerable groups. Providing accountability mechanisms such as complaints procedures and feedback systems are also best practice.

The University has dedicated policies in these areas:

- [Code of Practice for Researchers Working with Vulnerable Populations](#)
- [University Safeguarding Policy](#)
- [Additional Guidance for Safeguarding in Research Contexts](#)

Two other useful external guides with particular overseas relevance are:

- [UNICEF - Ethical Research Involving Children](#)
- [Tearfund - Doing Research Ethically](#) - pages 38-41

### **Conflict sensitivity**

Overseas research may impact on local or regional conflict dynamics, in particular along religious or cultural divides. Conflict analysis – ensuring that the proposed research does not aggravate existing conflict dynamics in a society – may therefore need to be a consideration within research ethics.

A useful case study on p.42 of the [Tearfund - Doing Research Ethically](#) guide outlines some of the potential issues in this area.

### **Illiteracy, language and informed consent**

Obtaining informed consent can be more complex when dealing with marginalised groups. Obtaining oral consent in countries with high illiteracy rates can be a particular factor in overseas research.

While the general principles of the University's [Code of Practice for Researchers Working with Vulnerable Populations](#) will still underpin this, other considerations may be needed with regard to illiteracy and language.

Translations of participant information sheets and consent forms may be needed, and this could include regional dialects, not just official state languages. Information sheets may need to be read aloud and verbal consent sought. When seeking verbal consent, the documents should be translated for the interpreter in advance, to assure the meaning conveyed by the narrator is as intended.

Further advice on gaining informed consent and issues surrounding it can be found on pages 24-27 of [Tearfund - Doing Research Ethically](#)

### **Data protection**

Data protection when conducting research overseas can also involve different consideration. In particular cyber security risks can be higher.

UK and EU data protection laws are likely to be stricter than those overseas. When data is collected and/or transferred outside of the UK, if the country concerned does not have any data

protection legislation, or this is known to have weaker than UK requirements, researchers should at a minimum comply with established GDPR principles.

Overseas countries will have their own legal frameworks for data protection rights and freedoms. Ethics applications should provide details of these for the country where the research will be being conducted, along with assurances of how these will be managed. It is researchers' responsibility to find out what local data protection requirements are. [Data Protection Laws of the World](#) is a useful online source.

If the data is processed in the UK, participants overseas acquire similar rights to those enshrined in UK/EU law, and research remains subject to information commissioner oversight as if it were based in the UK.

Data transfer - where a data is transferred between the field collector and researcher/collaborators/university systems - may also need to be considered, particularly with reference to the country in which the web application being utilised for this purpose is based.

Researchers should check with the relevant embassy whether there are any restrictions on the use of encrypted devices in the country being visited. If there are restrictions or encrypted devices are not permitted, DTS can provide support and assistance.

### **Privacy and confidentiality**

Privacy and security concerns can be particularly sensitive when it comes to research in traditionally conservative countries. Sex, race, sexuality and other characteristics can be culturally sensitive, especially when it comes to topics such as health and wellbeing.

Some advice on issues of privacy and confidentiality are found on pages 28-29 of [Tearfund - Doing Research Ethically](#)

### **Non maleficence, or do no harm**

Ethically it is important to assess the impact of research, including the cost of participating (e.g. time and money) for those from deprived backgrounds. Culturally it may be appropriate to pay participants for participating in research for example. An impact assessment of the cost to participants in time/money might be appropriate. The University has guidance on [Research Incentives](#).

A general discussion and the harms and benefits of research are found on pages 29-52 of [UNICEF - Ethical Research Involving Children](#).

## References and further reading

NGOs in particular provide invaluable advice on navigating some of the situations that may arise in overseas research.

Tearfund – Doing Research Ethically:

<https://res.cloudinary.com/tearfund/image/fetch/https://learn.tearfund.org/-/media/learn/resources/tools-and-guides/2021-tearfund-consortium-doing-research-ethically-en.pdf>

UNICEF - Ethical Research Involving Children:

<https://childethics.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ERIC-compendium-approved-digital-web.pdf>

Save the Children - So You Want to Involve Children in Research:

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/2437.pdf/>

Save the Children - Ethics in Research and Programming with Adolescents:

[https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/ethic\\_research\\_adolescents\\_2022.pdf/](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/ethic_research_adolescents_2022.pdf/)

Save the Children - Chapter 8 'Ethics and Logistics of Data Collection' in, Introduction to Qualitative Research Methodology:

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/Introduction-to-Qualitative-Research-Methodology.pdf/>

OXFAM - Integrating Gender in Research Planning:

<https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620621/gd-integrating-gender-research-planning-210219-en.pdf>

International Alert - Doing Research in Conflict Settings:

<https://www.international-alert.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Gender-Research-Conflict-Settings-EN-2019.pdf>

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