



**University Research Ethics Committee  
Annual Report 2020-2021**

**August 2021**

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## Foreword



Sheffield Hallam University is committed to the promotion of excellent research and to maintaining the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of our research practice. The University Research Ethics Policies and Procedures are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure currency with legal and other external body requirements and that all research undertaken at the University is subject to appropriate ethical scrutiny. The University continues to invest in developing staff and student researchers with the provision of appropriate high quality resources. Completion of research ethics training is mandatory for all new research students. This is delivered initially via a Virtual Learning Environment. All research students complete the online Epigeum training package to develop their understanding of research ethics even if they are not planning currently to undertake research with human participants. Students undertaking research with humans or human bioproducts are required to undertake additional online training. In addition, subject-specific workshops and drop-in sessions are run for students. Specific training is provided for supervisors of research students with annual updates occurring. A suite of training packages is provided including online training programmes on Research Ethics, Research Integrity, Professional Skills for Research Leaders, Statistical Methods for Research and Developing Research Impact, which are available for staff and research students. Further training is delivered in workshops so all our researchers can maintain the currency of their skills to produce high-quality research that meets the highest ethical standards. Workshops have continued but moved to online delivery as a response to the Covid-19 safety requirements. All academic staff undertaking or supervising research are required to undertake research ethics or integrity training, and to update this training annually, and this is monitored at their annual appraisal. Directors of Research Institutes and Centres are supported to ensure research occurs with a culture which values honesty, rigour and transparency with open communication to ensure that research participants and the environment are treated with due care and respect. The University complies with the Concordat for Research Integrity and our commitment can be found [here](#). Researchers, Directors of Research Institutes and Centres, and Heads of Department are notified of their responsibilities under the Concordat each year. The University's commitment to the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers has been acknowledged by receiving the HR Excellence in Research Award from the European Commission.

Professor Ann Macaskill  
Head of Research Ethics  
Chair of University Research Ethics Committee  
31<sup>st</sup> August 2020

## Introduction

This Research Ethics Report provides some background and a summary of Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethics Committee business for the 2020- 2121 academic year. The aim is to provide a snapshot of the research ethics data presently available and present this in an accessible format using both numerical and descriptive information.

### What is Research Ethics?

Research that involves human participants or human artefacts raises unique and complex ethical, legal, social and political issues. Research ethics in the University mainly focuses on the analysis of ethical issues that are raised when people are involved as participants in research studies. The *first* and broadest objective is to protect human participants. The *second* objective is to assure the integrity of university research by ensuring that the methods used are verifiable, that research is conducted and reported honestly to the highest standards with due regard to legal, professional and university regulations and codes of practice. The *third* objective is to ensure that university research serves the interests of individuals, groups and/or wider society. This is achieved by ensuring specific research activities and all research projects are reviewed for their ethical soundness, looking at issues such as the management of risk, protection of confidentiality, the process of obtaining informed consent and the management of the research data collected.

Most research involving human participants is directed towards advancing human welfare, knowledge and understanding, and/or towards the study of social or cultural dynamics. Such work is undertaken for many reasons, for example: to alleviate human suffering, to validate social or scientific theories, to dispel ignorance, to analyse or evaluate policy, and to understand human behaviour and the evolving human condition. Such research is primarily driven by the desire for new knowledge and understanding and may have a number of benefits. It may, for example, benefit research participants (e.g., improved treatments for disease/illness); research may also benefit both particular groups and society as a whole. That said, care must be taken to ensure that the benefits outweigh the risk of harm to research participants and it is for this reason, amongst others, that ethical frameworks have been developed to underpin research practice. Ethical frameworks are, however, developed within a continuously evolving social context which includes the need for research, moral imperatives and ethical principles, and the law meaning that they are, subject to change.

### Framework for Research Ethics

Under the revised Framework for Research Ethics (FRE), UKRI only funds research where consideration has been given to ethical implications and in those institutions where appropriate arrangements to undertake this systematically are in place. The Framework therefore has implications for applicants to UKRI research ethics committees within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and for those assessing research proposals. The University's Research Ethics Policies and Procedures are aligned to satisfy the framework in full.

### Concordat to Support Research Integrity

The Concordat to Support Research Integrity launched in July 2012 by Universities UK sought to provide a comprehensive national framework for good research conduct and governance. The Concordat was developed in collaboration with the Funding and Research Councils, Wellcome Trust

and various government departments. A revised Concordat to Support Research integrity, was published in October 2019. This version addresses the recommendations in the Science and Technology Committee's report on research integrity that was published in July 2018.

The Concordat sets out five commitments to provide assurances that research in the UK continues to be underpinned by the highest standards of rigour and integrity.

- Maintaining the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research.
- Ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards.
- Supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice and support for the development of researchers.
- Using transparent, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise.
- Working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to reviewing progress regularly and openly.

The University is committed to supporting the Concordat to Support Research Integrity and we publish [our response](#) on the University website annually.

### **Sheffield Hallam University**

The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) was established in the academic year 2001/02 as a sub-committee of the Research and Business Development Committee (subsequently re-constituted as the Creating Knowledge Board and will, with revised terms of reference and reporting arrangements, become the Research and Innovation Committee from September 2021) in response to increasing internal and external pressures regarding the ethical conduct of research. The UREC is responsible for developing and implementing policy and for providing guidance on research governance. The University has an effective research ethics policy to ensure that the highest standards of research are met. It aims to promote good practice through the assessment of ethical issues and compliance with legal requirements. The policy applies to all research at the University including student projects.

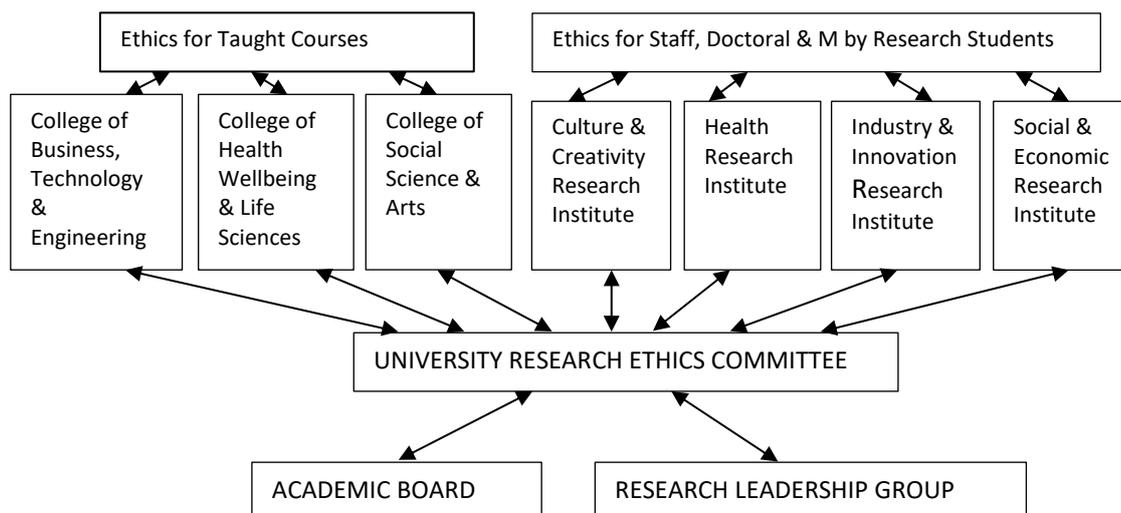
Research ethics issues have received increasing attention in recent years, particularly from research sponsors and as a result of developments within the National Health Service and Social Care bodies. Our ethics policy complies with guidance and recommendations given by national bodies and ensures that research at the University upholds the highest standards of integrity, impartiality and respect for data. Furthermore, it ensures that the interests, confidentiality and anonymity of volunteers in research activities are maintained and that processes are in place to assure the integrity of research undertaken at the university. Our approach to promoting research integrity is recognised as an exemplar of good practice by the European Science Foundation (Fostering Research Integrity in Europe, ESF, December 2012).

### **University Research Ethics Governance**

The Academic Board has overall responsibility for academic matters and regulation of taught and research provision. The Research and Innovation Committee, as a sub-committee of the Academic Board, has responsibility for issues of research policy, regulation and compliance, including oversight and assurance of the Ethics Committee.

Strategic leadership is provided by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic), who Chairs the Research and Innovation Committee. The Head of Research Ethics exercises delegated responsibility on behalf of and accountability to the Research & Innovation Committee (RIC). During the pandemic the Research Leadership Group which met weekly, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research and Innovation, took over many of the functions of the Creating Knowledge Board as issues related to research in very changed circumstances had to be dealt with swiftly. The Head of Research Ethics is a member of this group.

The University was restructured in January 2020. Taught courses are now located in three Colleges while staff and doctoral student research is managed via four research institutes as shown in the diagram below.



### Ethics for Taught Courses

Research ethics related to all taught provision is managed through the College Teaching Programme Research Ethics Committees (TPRECS). The reorganisation provided the opportunity to enhance the provision, by ensuring standardisation of processes across the three colleges and thereby improve efficiency. The existing ethics proforma were revised and new versions produced to simplify the process. This has resulted in four ethics proforma for taught students:

- UREC1 No Human participants
  - UREC2 Low risk human participants
  - UREC 3 Higher risk social science projects
  - UREC 4 Higher risk Bio-medical, food, sport and health projects.
- All the proforma include a health and safety risk assessment for the student.

New procedures were implemented in each College to ensure consistency of delivery across the University. Each College has a Teaching Programme REC Chair who oversees the review processes in the College, works with departments to disseminate policy and ensure that the correct procedures are being utilised and manages the review of Category Approvals on taught courses. TPREC chairs are members of UREC and are involved in identifying training needs and delivering training for College teaching staff. Each Department has an undergraduate and a postgraduate Departmental Research Ethics Working Group (DERWG) chaired by the departmental ethics lead. The chair oversees the ethics review process for student work, liaises with modules leaders and represents the department on the CTPREC. The minutes from each TPREC meeting are presented at UREC

and each College also will produce an annual report for UREC. The additional work caused by the pandemic resulted in verbal reports to UREC this year.

### **Ethics for Staff, Doctoral & Masters by Research Students**

Each Research Institute has appointed Research Ethics leads who disseminate policy and procedures across the institutes. Research Centres also have ethics leads, who can support staff and doctoral student ethics applications. The Research Ethics Leaders and the Head of Research Ethics (HRE) also provide expedited ethics reviews for contract research or bids being undertaken within tight deadlines.

Staff, doctoral & masters by research students' research projects are reviewed using an online system. Low risk studies are reviewed by one researcher with possible escalation to the chair, while all other research with human participants is reviewed by three people, one of whom is a subject expert, one a methodology expert with the third acting as a lay reviewer. Lay reviewers are either members of the general public who sit on UREC or researchers from a different discipline to the study being reviewed. Ethics reviews aim to be completed within two to three weeks but is dependent on the responsiveness of researchers.

### **University Research Ethics Committee**

UREC held four meetings in the Academic Year 2020-21 with an average attendance by members of eighty-four percent. UREC membership includes the three College Teaching Programme Research Ethics Committees' chairs, the Research Ethics Leaders from the four Research Institutes, the Human Tissue leads, plus representatives from Research and Innovation Services, Library, Health and Safety Services, the Multi-Faith Chaplaincy, early career researchers, a statistician, external lay members and a secretary. The Health, Safety and Welfare Committee is represented on the University Research Ethics Committee to ensure close links between the two committees. UREC is represented on the Research Degrees Committee to ensure that ethical considerations are prioritised in research training.

The numbers of Staff and Doctoral student research projects reviewed between 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020 and August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021, are shown in the following table along with the figures for the previous year to allow comparisons.

<b>Application type</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>PGR</b>	<b>University Total 2020-2021</b>	<b>University Total 2019-20</b>
All other research with human participants (higher risk)	133	54	<b>187</b>	167
Very low risk human participants studies	194	41	<b>235</b>	215
No human participants, human tissue or personal data	38	26	<b>64</b>	50
Approval given elsewhere - another UK HEI	6	0	<b>6</b>	6
IRAS - projects requiring NHS or HMPPS ethics	6	1	<b>7</b>	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>499</b>	<b>447</b>

The number of staff and doctoral student reviews carried out via the online review system has increased. The increases in low risk and no human participant studies possibly reflects a move to more online research in response to the pandemic. There have been over 90 amendments to research studies submitted to the system largely in response to Covid-19 restrictions on research and these still continue. The system does not record these separately hence the lack of precise figures.

There are robust procedures in place for ethics review on taught courses and these were carried out by the academic teaching teams assisted by departmental ethics advisors and overseen by the College Teaching Programme Research Ethics Committees.

## **Research Misconduct**

Sheffield Hallam has been implementing a research misconduct policy since 2005. The levels of verified research misconduct are low. In line with the Concordat to Support Research Integrity training on research ethics and integrity is promoted and the research misconduct policy is publicised widely emphasising that failure to report misconduct constitutes a breach of university policy. For research misconduct policies to work, researchers within an institution are required to take collective responsibility and police each other, thereby protecting the reputation of the University and ensuring that we have the highest standards of research integrity. The reporting of allegations, since training has become widespread for staff and mandatory for doctoral students, has evidenced that this is happening. We also have a research misconduct policy for doctoral students.

Three research misconduct allegations were made this academic year and investigated. One allegation was not substantiated and was followed up by mandatory further training and mentoring. The two additional allegations were upheld and addressed in accordance with the University's Principles of Integrity in Research & Procedures for Dealing with Allegations of Misconduct.

This compares with three research misconduct investigations in 2019-20, two in 2018-19, zero in 2017-18. Research staff regularly seek advice suggesting that the system is seen to be accessible, and that research integrity has a high priority with our researchers.

## **Public Engagement with Research**

The Committee continues to monitor the role of lay members to ensure that the role is fulfilling and provides significant contributions to the mutual benefit of both parties. The University is fortunate in having close relationships with the local University of the Third Age (U3A) for the recruitment of lay members for the ethics committees across the University including the review of applications. Training is provided for lay members and expenses are covered. The lay members are happy to be consulted about research funding applications where it is advantageous to have public perceptions represented. Individual members are also willing to serve on steering groups for research projects where public or user representation is desirable.

## **Training**

A number of online training sessions and seminars dedicated to, or including Research Ethics

elements have been held throughout the University. These events have had various targeted audiences and over the year, staff (researchers, supervisors and administrators), students and lay members have been catered for, along with open events. These are in addition to a range of e-learning courses to support the development of researchers and research students. Since the Covid-19 restrictions, the e-learning resources have been used heavily, especially by doctoral students and what would have been face-to-face training has also moved online. This appears to have been beneficial with the Epigeum courses being the most used online resource by doctoral students. Taught courses were reminded that their students can access the Epigeum online courses and this has led to an increase in uptake. Attendance at the online internal courses have also been high. The University supports lay members to attend seminars organised by external bodies. Lay members are also given access to ethics training via the Virtual Learning Environment.

## **Key Outcomes**

### **General Data Protection Regulation**

Work has continued to deliver training and support in relation to compliance with GDPR regulations and this is now included in all ethics and integrity training events. Changes to the Information provided to research participants were also required under the Act and this continues to be disseminated across the University research community. This year a small working group has been working on creating a range of examples of GDPR compliant information sheet suitable for different groups of research participants. The aim is to ensure the information provided for research participants is appropriate for the age, literacy level and understanding of research participants.

### **Teaching Provision**

A College Research Ethics Newsletter was produced and disseminated to the teaching community specifying the requirements for student projects in relation to undertaking research and the ethics review process. This has resulted in a standardised procedure now being implemented across the University and ensures equity of treatment for students. A blackboard site of teaching and training resources for staff teaching research ethics and supervising student research projects has been created. This includes all the new simplified ethics proforma for students developed this year. Two online training events on ethics on taught courses were delivered online by the HRE, with over 200 staff attending and other accessing the recordings of the events.

### **Online Ethics Application and Review System**

The online ethics application and review system continues to operate via our research management system (Converis). The technical support for the system was transferred from Research and Innovation Services (RIS) to the University Digital Technology Services (DTS). This has led to some delays in desired developments of the system but the review process has not been interrupted. Support for training has remained with the business and a detailed guidance document has been produced that can be accessed via the online system. The HRE has provided training for the new doctoral students (and at some staff events) but a longer-term solution will be implemented through access to on-line sessions. Administrative support for Converis has been reorganised through the Research Institutes and very effective support is currently being provided, with the administrators each covering two Institutes.

On the online Coveris ethics review system, an audit of the 'no human participant route' and the 'low risk human participant' routes, indicated that a small number of researchers were claiming their projects were low risk when this was not the case. Previously this route received a check by

administrative staff. The administrative check is still in place for projects with no human participants, but the low-risk human participant route is now reviewed and can be escalated to the chair and the committee. This sets a higher standard for the University in that all research with human participants is reviewed by researchers.

A Research Ethics Newsletter was circulated to all the Institute researchers informing them of the new procedures and introducing the staff with responsibilities for research ethics.

The UREC now regularly audits a random sample of reviews from the system to ensure the quality of reviews being undertaken and that there is consistency across different areas. While this system is still in its early stages, the feedback to date is positive. Two online training sessions for reviewers were held and were well attended. Recording was made for researchers unable to attend the events.

### **Internal Governance**

Changes to UREC membership were made as a result of the University reorganisation. The administrative support for staff and doctoral research is excellent, and a review of administrative support for research ethics in the Colleges is in progress. Work planning for research ethics review on taught courses has been agreed and is in place in all departments for the session 2021-22.

### **NHS and Social Care Governance**

To reduce the burden on students in some health-related areas, students can now undertake audit or service evaluation on research modules as these require University Ethics review not NHS research ethics review and the former can be delivered much more quickly for students. The Social Governance IRAS route no longer accepts ethics reviews of taught student or doctoral research in social care, so these are now being undertaken with the University. The speedier University review process again advantages these students.

### **Human Tissue Act**

On the retirement of the Human Tissue lead, Professor Woodroffe, two new leads were appointed, Professor Clench and Dr Lynn to represent the areas of the University where this type of research occurs. Audits were undertaken on compliance with the Human Tissue Act, specifically regarding the documentation and correct storage of tissue and contacts were made with the Biorepository to ensure efficient collaboration. A list of researchers who have recently or are likely to use the biorepository have been established and training is provided.

### **External Website**

The ethics administrative team have been trained and can now update University's ethics webpages. A major updating was undertaken in the summer of 2021.

### **Guidance Produced and Covid-19 Responding**

The UREC made judgements on several matters that were escalated to it, including on the topics of research with illegal aspects and research involving researchers' own children. Relevant guidance was then produced for the website. The large increase in enquires related to changes in research projects in response to the Covid situation have continued. The expedited ethics review system for research ethics amendments that was set up to allow researchers to transfer their studies to online

methods in response to the Covid -19 situation has also continued. In consultation with DTS revised guidelines on the safe use of Zoom by students for online data collection were produced and disseminated to staff and students.

## **Policies, Procedures and Guidance Updates**

Major revisions to the University Research Ethics and Integrity Policy and the Research Misconduct Procedure for Staff and the Research Misconduct Procedures for Doctoral and Masters by Research Students were completed and taken through the approval processes including consultation with the trade unions. These revisions ensure compliance with current national and international guidelines.

The following policies/procedures were added to, or updated on, the external ethics web pages:

### **Ethics, Integrity and Practice**

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity/policies>

All policies updated.

### **Research Ethics Approval Procedures**

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice/research-ethics-approval-procedures>

- All documents reviewed and revised as necessary.
- Separate page for Taught provision created to facilitate use by students
- Converis User Guide (Revised)

### **Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service Research**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service/about/research>

### **Guidance and Legislation**

- Updated Health Research Authority guidance
- Revised IRAS guidance (NHS studies)

### **Concordat to Support Research Integrity**

<https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity/integrity-concordat>

- Sheffield Hallam University's Commitment to the Concordat to Support Research Integrity v.8 (2020)
- Updated Responsibilities of Heads of Departments and Directors of Research Centres
- Updated Responsibilities of Researchers