

Arden University Ethical Approval Policy and Process

1. Introduction

This document seeks to classify research projects carried out with Arden University according to their potential to cause harm to any individual or organisation concerned with the research process.

Risk is related to three distinct categories, high, low, and minimal. The level of risk will determine the degree and level of scrutiny any project will be subjected to which also may affect the time it takes to gain ethical approval. Approval of research that carries minimal or low risk can normally be given by the Dissertation Module Leader (ML). Where a piece of work is felt to be potentially high risk then it will be referred to the Research and Ethics Committee (REC). Research undertaken by Arden University staff will be automatically referred to the REC.

For students engaging in any research project in Arden University it is a requirement that ethical approval is gained before any research commences.

This process will apply mainly to research undertaken as part of a dissertation or independent study module. In such cases appropriate documentation will be prepared such as an application form. Appendix 1 shows the Dissertation Proposal and Ethics approval process as an exemplar.

2. A Risk Based Approach

An ethical assessment is required before any research is undertaken, and approval gained. The extent of the process to be followed is dependent on the level of risk associated with it. The nature of research activities undertaken by Arden University students will in the main be relatively low risk. The purpose of this ethical approval system is to take a risk-based approach to the approval process. In doing so it seeks to classify the risk of any research project in terms of the individuals involved and the subject area of research. It is impossible to draft a policy that covers all eventualities and the examples given below should be regarded as indicative only. Where there is any doubt as to the category to be applied the policy requires that we err on the side of caution and apply the higher weighting.

2.1 High Risk Research

This is research activity that may pose significant risk either to the researcher or to the participants. It is not expected that this will arise frequently although where research is done among subordinates care must be taken because the power relationship¹ arising from a dual role of, for example, lecturer and researcher can have an impact on students and colleagues, and it is therefore placed in this category as risk research which will require approval from the REC (see process below).

2.2 Risks to the Researcher

Examples of areas which may be considered as high risk include any research:

- a. undertaken in a medical setting even where this does not include reference to patients. In such cases the student should forward the approval of the institution and confirmation that it has either been ethically approved or does not require such approval
- b. undertaken in a setting where the researcher is in a position of authority¹ or influence over participants
- c. involving vulnerable groups
- d. involving individuals who might be deemed incapable of making an informed decision to participate within the terms of the Mental Capacity Act 2005. In such cases advice and, where necessary, approval will be sought from an NHS Research Ethics Committee or the Social Care Research Ethics Committee
- e. involving prisoners
- f. involving children under 18 years of age
- g. where participants may be under duress or coercion to participate e.g. where a gatekeeper only allows certain people to be approached
- h. where gatekeepers insist on being present in interviews.

2.3 Sensitive topics of research.

These include but are not limited to:

- a. sexual behaviour or orientation
- b. illegal or political behaviour
- c. research that involves subjecting the participants to higher risks than they would experience in everyday life (such as higher levels of psychological stress, anxiety, humiliation or more than minimal pain)
- d. research involving deliberate deception or that conducted without the participants full and informed consent
- e. research involving intrusive interventions – e.g. administration of drugs, substances
- f. vigorous physical exercise, hypnotherapy etc; research that has the potential to invoke legal action against the researcher or Arden University
- g. research that involves offering participants incentives to take part that exceed reimbursement of basic costs of participation i.e. travel costs and any out of pocket expenses

2.4 Low Risk Research

Low risk research involves all activity that includes working with groups or individuals that does not fall into the high-risk category.

2.5 Minimal risk

This will normally include the use of material that is within the public domain and would cover all desk-based research activity. Research that requires observation, for example counting footfall in a shop, where individuals cannot be identified, and data is aggregated also falls into this category. Research that involves changing a process within a work setting but does not meet any criteria in 2.3 or 2.4, for example the researcher is a member of staff and not a manager or working with a vulnerable group.

2.6 Generic Ethical Approval

For modules that involve large numbers of students conducting very similar and closely defined projects, for example group reports or short-term work-related projects, general ethical approval can be sought to cover all students involved. This would be the responsibility of the module leader who would be required to prescribe the methodology and any constraints. This should include reference to inter alia: informed consent; use of inducements; anonymity; and the keeping of data. Approval will be by the Programme Team Leader (PTL). If the PTL believes that the work is potentially high-risk it must be referred to the REC.

2.7 Organisation Based Research

Any work undertaken within an organisation must be approved by that organisation. This is the case irrespective of whether the organisation is named within the research or not. Written approval to carry out the research must be obtained prior to commencement. Where other stakeholders are involved then approval from them should also be sought. For example, a piece of HR based in-company research that involved a survey of trade union members would require approval from both the organisation and an appropriate person in the trade union.

3. Informed consent

One of the principal issues involved in conducting ethical research is gaining the full informed consent of all research participants. The following section discusses what is meant by informed consent.

Even though it is expected that most Arden University student research will be minimal or low risk there is still a need to gain informed consent in the latter case. This would normally be achieved by production of a document for participants that states:

- what the research is for
- why it is being conducted
- who will benefit
- how data will be stored and used
- how anonymity will be assured
- how and up to what point a participant can withdraw consent
- a contact email address or telephone number at Arden University

Consent should be obtained by a signature on the participant information sheet or, in the case of a recorded interview, a verbal acceptance.

4. Arden University Ethical Approval Process

Ethical research issues will form a key element of all modules where research is undertaken. It will be the responsibility of the Dissertation ML to ensure that relevant issues are presented to students and that they understand the risk-based nature of approval processes.

Prior to commencing any research, approval must be obtained. All students will be required to complete the Arden University Ethical Approval Form in addition to any internal process undertaken within their institution.

The Dissertation ML or named person(s) will be responsible for determining the risk category that a proposal falls into. In the case of the dissertation then this will be in conjunction with the supervisor.

Low and minimal risk projects may be approved by the Dissertation ML. This consent must be recorded on a form that sets out the parameters of the research. In the case of a Dissertation ML seeking general ethical approval, consent must be sought from the PTL.

Arden University will ensure that an appropriate form through which the student can apply for approval will be granted. This will allow for the identification of any ethical issues and the way they have been addressed.

High-risk projects will be referred to the REC.

When approval is granted it will be the responsibility of the Dissertation Supervisor or Dissertation ML (as appropriate) to ensure that the student acts within the terms of the consent. Where there are significant deviations the student should reapply for approval.

5. Research and Ethics Committee

The REC will comprise senior members of the Arden University academic community with experience of conducting research. Appointments to the REC will be made by the Academic Board. Where projects are referred, details will be sent to three members of the REC, nominated by the Chair of the REC who will collectively decide. One panel member will be nominated as the Chair and it will be his/her responsibility to ensure that a decision is made and communicated.

The student must send the REC full details of the research activity being undertaken with a detailed statement of how this will meet ethical standards. Supporting documentation from the subject organisation should also be provided to include details of any ethical approval process within that organisation or the student's own organisation. Where such processes exist then the REC will require confirmation that the host organisation has given approval and will normally accept this as confirmation that ethical standards have been met.

Approval may be unconditional or with conditions. Where an application is rejected reasons must be provided.

In the event of an appeal against a decision the matter will be referred to the Academic Board who may take external advice before deciding.

¹ <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online>

Appendix 1 Dissertation Ethical Approval Process

