



University of  
**Strathclyde**  
**Glasgow**

# University Ethics Committee

## Students as Research Participants

This guidance uses the themes adopted by the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (and commonly accepted more widely) to identify key issues to consider in research design and applications for ethical approval for research projects involving students as participants.

It should be read in conjunction with the [Code of Practice on Investigations Involving Human Beings](#)

### **When does a research project involving students need ethical approval?**

All projects involving students as research participants must have ethical approval. Sometimes it is unclear whether the student is a research participant or is contributing to the review and development of an educational activity. Any activity which is part of a standard review process at the University of Strathclyde does not require ethical approval. If a member of staff is, for example, gathering interim feedback to inform their practice, and this data or the results of the feedback will not be shared with anyone else, then the project does not require ethical approval. A project requires approval if any data is to be collected which will be visible to anyone beyond the member of teaching staff and the individual student, or if the research findings are to be shared, and this is not part of a standard University of Strathclyde review process.

### **Consent**

Consent can never be assumed or presumed and must be explicitly given by all participants. As with all research projects, this consent must be properly informed. Students must understand what information is being collected, how it will be stored, and how it will be used.

Consent also applies to data gathered for other purposes by the University, and to material such as essays or assessment marks produced as part of a learning or other exercise. The University Student Privacy notice

[https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/ps/strategyandpolicy/Privacy\\_Notice\\_Registered\\_Students.pdf](https://www.strath.ac.uk/media/ps/strategyandpolicy/Privacy_Notice_Registered_Students.pdf) provides information about what students have agreed to about the use of data collected by the University, and must be adhered to.

Template information sheets and consent forms are available at

<https://www.strath.ac.uk/research/researchknowledgeexchangeservices/universityethicscommittee/information-sheet-consent-form/>

## **Transparency**

Students must understand the purpose of the research and the range of potential implications for them as participants. This is particularly the case where their teacher is also the researcher and roles may be confused or unclear.

Transparency must also be considered when planning when to conduct the research. It is very unlikely that it will be appropriate to use teaching time for research activity (see comments regarding right to withdraw below).

The benefits of participation must be explicit. It will rarely be the case that participation, e.g., completing a survey, will be a benefit in its own right. 'Engaging with research' is not a benefit unless this provides some clear educational advantage to the student within the context of the module learning outcomes.

## **Right to Withdraw**

Students must be able to withdraw from participation. This means that research conducted during teaching time may be problematic as the student will lose contact time if they withdraw from participation in the study. Right to withdraw (and not to participate) must be considered in research design and must be justified in the application for ethical approval.

## **Incentives**

Incentives are commonly used in research but their interaction with teaching activity must be properly considered, and the transparency of the incentives must be clear. For example, students may assume that participation may improve academic performance. This would be unfair on non-participating students and may not be possible to evidence. Some students may have experienced contexts where credit is awarded for participation, and it must be made clear whether this is the case (it will rarely be so).

## **Perceived conflict of interest or harm arising from participation in research**

Although the researcher may not perceive any potential for harm, the participant may see such potential. This is especially the case where the teacher is also the researcher, and the participant may suspect that participation (or non-participation) may impact on the teaching relationship. The teacher is in a position of power in this respect, which renders the student vulnerable.

## **Privacy and Data Storage**

Usual rules regarding privacy and data storage must be respected

<https://www.strath.ac.uk/whystrathclyde/universitygovernance/accesstoinformation/dataprotection/principles/>

Importantly, the researcher must be clear about the source of all data used and ensure they are not using in their research data which is available to them as a teacher but for which research is not a permitted use. Small group settings there is the potential for students to be contextually identifiable (e.g., another group member reading the report of a research project may be able to identify individual participants).