

Handling Human Ethics (non-medical) ethics applications for Honours/ 4th year and Masters by Coursework and Research Report projects: Information for Schools (or Departments/Divisions)

This document should be used in conjunction with the flow diagram of the *School ethics committee workflow*. Herein, the term *School ethics committee* is used to refer to a School (or Department/Division) non-medical ethics committee.

1. Which Ethics Committee to use for different types of application

All research that involves gathering data from human participants must receive ethics clearance from the appropriate Human Research Ethics Committee. This applies to all research, whether done by staff, or students at any level (PhD, Masters by dissertation, Masters by Coursework and Research Report, and Honours/4th year). No data collection may start until ethics clearance has been granted.

- **Research involving medical procedures, medical records, or in a clinic/therapeutic setting** must be dealt with by the *University Human Research Ethics Committee (Medical)*. Information on these applications may be found at <https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/>
- **Non-medical research involving humans as participants or using pre-existing data or databases** (e.g. investigating social, educational and/or psychological behaviour or perceptions) should go to the *University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)*, herein termed the main University committee, or one of its School-based sub-committees.
- **Staff, PhD students or Masters by dissertation students** must submit their applications to the main University committee. Information on this committee and how to apply for ethics clearance is available at <https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/> For more information or for help please contact the committee secretary Shaun Schoeman, Shaun.Schoeman@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-1408) or committee chair Jasper Knight, Jasper.Knight@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-6508).
- **Honours/4th year or Masters by Coursework and Research Report applications** are dealt with internally within each School, unless special circumstances apply (see point 6 below). To this end, each School (or Department/Division, depending on the disciplinary setup of the School) should have a documented ethics review process, and these School committees should be considered as a Sub-Committee of the full University ethics committee and therefore subject to the same Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) as the main University committee. The SOP of the main committee is available on the website at <https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/>
- **National framework for Ethics Committees.** All Ethics Committees, including the main University non-medical committee operates under the national guidelines provided by the Department of Health (*Ethics in Health Research, Principles, Processes and Structures*, 2024). This document describes the minimum national benchmark of norms and standards, the process of ethics review and focused guidance about specific topics and research methodologies, the expectations and standards for Research Ethics Committees and standard operating procedures, and the research ethics infrastructure and regulatory framework in South Africa. The SOP for the main University committee, and therefore all of its School committees, operates under these guidelines.

2. How to set up a School (or Department/Division) ethics committee or review process

- **Membership of the committee/ethics review process:** Each School should set up a formal Ethics Committee rather than an informal ethics review process, although the latter is not excluded. Each School committee should comprise at least three academic staff members, and the ethics review process should undertake oversight and consider ethics applications from their School's Honours/4th year and Masters by Coursework and Research Report students. Different disciplines or Departments can merge to form a single committee if they so wish, with the agreement of their Head of School, or operate as separate ethics committees. Likewise, academic staff members from outside of the School

(or Department/Division) can also be invited to undertake this review process or sit within the School committee. Each School committee has a Critical Friend, who is a chair/co-chair of the main University committee. The Critical Friend is there to assist in the set-up and operation of School committees and can also offer advice and training to School committee members and student applicants. The School is strongly encouraged to actively engage with their Critical Friend.

- **Training:** If the School already sends a representative to the main University committee, then that person might be suitable to set up and run the School ethics committee/ethics review process if one does not exist. Members of School committees are very welcome to ask for advice from the main committee, or to observe the workings of the main committee. Please ask!
- **Scheduling of School ethics committee meetings:** The School ethics committee can either be convened as a standing committee which meets regularly, or an *ad hoc* committee to consider applications as the need arises. The committee may conduct its business through face-to-face meetings or by email or other means, as long as all its business is documented/archived. In scheduling meetings and setting internal deadlines for student applicants, please bear in mind the monthly submission deadlines for School reports to the main University ethics committee. The dates of these deadlines through the year are given on the Ethics committee website. Please look at these deadlines and then work backwards, so that there is enough lead-in time for School applications to be dealt with. The main University ethics committee can only ratify School applications in one of the main meetings, therefore it is very important that School committees keep to the schedule.
- **Documenting procedures:** There needs to be formal documentation of the ethics application and review processes within the School committees. The details needed are given on the Excel spreadsheet supplied to all Schools that must be completed in full during the School review process (see Section 4).
- **Keeping records and reporting:** If committee review and decision business is conducted by email, please ensure that emails are collated or stored so that a hard or soft copy paper trail is preserved. This is for audit purposes. In addition, the main University committee may also call up applications and therefore will need access to any archived documents. It is good practice to ensure that the workings and decisions of School committees are formally noted by the School learning and teaching or research committees (as appropriate) where Honours/4th year and coursework Masters students are discussed (see Section 5).

3. How students should make applications for ethics clearance to School committees

- **The importance of this procedure:** Getting students to reflect upon ethical issues in their research and to complete an ethics application form is an important formative process and should be considered as part of their research training. To aid the functioning of the review process and to help students, it is important that ethical issues are considered while the research proposals of Honours/4th year and Masters by Coursework and Research Report are being written, rather than just when they are finished. This is because many potential ethical issues can be circumvented by the use of slightly different research designs, methodologies, recruitment strategies or participant groups. **Retrospective ethics applications are strongly discouraged** (please refer to our policy on the ethics website).
- **Documents to be submitted to School ethics committees for evaluation:** All Honours/4th year and Masters by Coursework and Research Report students should normally submit the following documents as part of their application for ethics clearance to their School committee:
 - Completed ethics application form* or ethics waiver application form*
 - Participant information sheet(s)**
 - Consent form(s)** (if required)
 - Questionnaires/interview questions (drafts if final not available)
 - Details of any other research instruments used
 - Any permission letters that may be required (if applicable)
 - Submitted or accepted research proposal.

*These forms are provided to School chairs in Word format. Please cascade these forms to all staff and students. Schools must also ensure that the correct form is used.

Templates are provided to School chairs in Word format as examples for guidance purposes. Please note that these documents **MUST be tailored to the needs and requirements of each individual study.

When an application has been successfully submitted with all the completed documentation, a unique School ethics number is given to each application, recorded on the School spreadsheet (see below).

Schools may wish to make use of the Ulwazi system for student submissions of ethics applications to the School committee.

4. How School ethics committees should evaluate student applications

- **Each application should be evaluated independently by at least two academic staff:** This may include the supervisor. Comments should be made on the application using the reviewer evaluation form^{***}. Please note that this process and this form is different to review by an Ethics Reader (which is used in some Schools). Comments on the two reviewer evaluation forms should then be collated and passed on as feedback to the applicant, listing precisely what changes need to be made to the application and/or its supporting documents. The main University committee has a stated timeframe in its SOP of 15-20 days for feedback to applicants. School ethics committees should also work to this timeframe, or speedier if possible.

^{***}The reviewer evaluation form is provided to School chairs.

- **Revisions may be required:** Following receipt of feedback, the applicant should make the necessary changes to the documents and resubmit the corrected application to the School committee. There is no particular timeframe for this – for taught programmes, this should be in a timeous manner (within a week or so). In resubmission, the applicant must state in a covering letter precisely how the application has been changed. The revised application and any revised documents must then be re-reviewed within the committee, using the revised application reviewer form provided[^]. If these changes are acceptable to the satisfaction of the School committee, the ethics application can be provisionally approved by the School. If the application needs further work, it is referred back to the applicant until such a time as the application is acceptable. All applications that have been provisionally approved by the School committee should be recorded in detail on the Excel spreadsheet provided for this purpose⁺⁺. All cells in this spreadsheet must be completed in full and accurately. If this is not done correctly, there may be holdups in ratifying School decisions because we then have to ask you for clarification and to make changes to the spreadsheet. The completed spreadsheet must be sent electronically to administrator Mmatshupo Taunyane Mmatshupo.taunyane@wits.ac.za) monthly, on or before the School submission deadline. All deadlines for the year are given in the document on the main University ethics committee website. If your spreadsheet is late, we cannot consider it in the meeting.

[^]The revised application reviewer evaluation form is provided to School chairs.

⁺⁺The Excel spreadsheet is provided to School chairs.

- The main University committee will consider in its monthly meeting each applicant listed on the School spreadsheet. The main University committee will either ratify the School's provisional approval decision or may in some instances not ratify a decision if the spreadsheet is incomplete, there is missing information, or if the risk level or project need further clarity from the School committee chair. School committees will be informed by email of the outcomes of consideration of the applicants listed on their own spreadsheet. This will take place in the days immediately after the main University committee meeting^{^^}. School committee chairs can then inform its students if their applications have been successful^{^^}. At this point, students can start data collection. Note that no data collection can take place until School decisions have been ratified by the main University committee. Successful applicants must be informed of their own unique ethics clearance number, created at initial application, so that this number can be cited within the student's research report and/or any resulting publications, where necessary. The School committee may also at this point issue successful applicants with an ethics clearance certificate[†] with the unique protocol number. This may be issued

in hard or electronic copy. In most cases, however, this step is not needed because applicants of Faculties do not need the physical certificate. The final decision email sent from School chairs to individual students should state that all researchers must comply with ethics guidelines as outlined in the completed application form, and that any changes to the project (different instruments, data collection methods, participant groups) must be communicated to the School committee chair[§].

^{^^}University ethics meetings are held on a Friday. Schools will be informed of the success or otherwise of their applicants in the week following this meeting.

^{^^}Please refer to the email template provided to School chairs. This email gives the terms and conditions of ethics clearance that successful applicants must abide by.

[†]A template for the clearance certificate is provided to School chairs.

[§]Amended applications must be re-reviewed, to ensure that the amendments do not lead to additional risks in the project. The reviewer template for this is provided to School chairs. Note that this is the same form used for revisions to applications. HOWEVER, please note that there is a separate spreadsheet for reporting amendments – do not put amendments on the same spreadsheet with the new applications.

- **Applications for clearance should be submitted as early as possible:** Please make sure that School ethics committees follow the procedures outlined above, and in a timely fashion, so that students can get to work on their projects as soon as possible. Remember that no data collection may start until ethics clearance has been granted. It is therefore recommended that School committees work backwards from their own hand-in deadlines to ensure that their students obtain ethics clearance in a timely manner.

5. Actions following approval of student applications by the main University committee

- **If the student is collecting data from Wits staff or students, or at Wits University campuses,** the School committee must ensure that the student completes the correct application form^{††} to receive University Registrar permission. This form can only be sent to the Registrar's office after ethics clearance has been obtained. The completed form must be emailed to the Deputy Registrar's office (contact: thato.chauke@wits.ac.za). Please note that no data collection on campus involving Wits staff or students can take place until the Registrar's permission has been obtained. If the student is not collecting data on campus or involving Wits staff/students, no further action is needed.

^{††}There are three forms (A, B, C). Please ensure that the correct form is completed. These forms are provided to School chairs who should pass the correct form to applicants if they are collecting data from Wits staff or students. Schools have these forms for distribution to students.

6. When student applications should NOT be dealt with by the School committee

- **Ethically problematic research:** If a School committee considers that a particular Honours/4th year or Masters by Coursework and Research Report project proposal is problematic with respect to ethics (such as if the research involves highly sensitive topics, involves minors, or is classified as medium or high risk), then the application should be referred to the main University committee. Applications involving vulnerable groups cannot be considered at School level. All minors (participants aged under 18) are considered to be a vulnerable group and any applications in which minors are participants cannot be considered at School level. Alternatively, the School committee may suggest that the student modifies their proposal to ameliorate the ethical risk.

7. Ethics clearance procedure for large projects involving several student researchers

- **Applications by the principal researcher who is a staff member, MA by dissertation or PhD student:** Where the principal researcher of such projects is an academic staff member, Masters by dissertation, or PhD student, these applications must be submitted to the main University committee for ethics clearance. These umbrella projects cannot be dealt with at School level.
- **All students working on such projects and using the data for their own degree research MUST apply independently for ethics clearance.** If the student additional researchers are involved as paid research assistants, they are covered by the umbrella protocol where they are listed as named

additional researchers. However, if these students are collecting data to be used in their own research projects (for degree purposes) they are not covered by the clearance for the umbrella project and must apply in their own name for their own ethics clearance. The committee to which they apply depends on the degree for which they are registered. When data are going to be collected for potential reuse by other students/researchers in the future, this must be explained in the *Participant Information Sheet*[#], and specific permission to use the data in other future research must be included in the *Consent Form*[#].

- **In the case of an Honours-level project involving multiple students:** If all students are working as a group on exactly the same project under the same supervisor, then one application can be submitted listing all the students' names and details. Please issue one certificate per group, and ensure that the spreadsheet reflects one application with all students listed. (There is a specific question on the School ethics application form that covers this scenario.)

[#]Guidelines for *Participant Information Sheets* and *Consent Forms* in Word format are available on the main University ethics committee website and from School chairs.

8. Be aware of deadlines

It is recommended that all members of academic staff are aware of the deadlines and ethics application requirements for School (or Department/Division) and University ethics applications. Deadlines for the University committee are given at (<https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/>). Please be aware that no research data collection should take place until the ethics application has been approved and a protocol number issued, from School (or Department/Division) or any University ethics committee, as appropriate.

9. Common errors in submitted spreadsheets from School committees

- Name of school or month/year are missing from the top of the spreadsheet,
- Some elements missing in the table, e.g. a title or date is incomplete, or some columns are omitted altogether,
- Please be explicit about the 'degree registered for'. Do not just say 'Masters' because we WILL ask for clarity. State Masters in xxxx by CWRR (or similar), so we know that this is a taught programme,
- Summaries are missing,
- Summaries provide insufficient detail regarding the methods for the study. We specifically need to know if there are human participants in the study, if the researcher is using previously collected or publically available data (or if they are collecting primary data), and what instruments they are using, questionnaires? Interviews?
- Spreadsheet includes multiple tabs – all spreadsheets should ONLY include one tab that corresponds to that single month. Please do NOT include protocols from the previous month or protocols that have been previously dealt with (your spreadsheet WILL be sent back to you in this instance),
- Risk category incorrectly assigned – projects with no human participants or where the researcher is looking at publically available data (e.g. economic data) should be categorized as 'no risk', These studies are eligible for a waiver (therefore please tell students to use the correct waiver application form, and please say YES in the waiver column on the spreadsheet),
- Full Masters/Masters by dissertation applications are included – these should be referred to the main committee, they cannot be considered by School committees,
- Medium risk studies are included – these should be referred to the main committee. We strongly suggest that you ask for guidance BEFORE it gets to this stage, because we can give you some quick advice to change the topic or ameliorate the risk level and so not slow up the student,
- Duplication of protocols listed on spreadsheets and also submitted to main committee – please encourage students not to submit to main committee if they should be submitting to school committee, and vice versa.

10. For more information

The webpage for the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) is available here: (<https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/>) – all guidelines and other documents/examples are available for download at the bottom of the page. Please refer your

students to this information

Secretariat:

Main University HREC and for all initial queries, including using the online form:
Shaun Schoeman, Shaun.Schoeman@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-1408)

Reporting and management of School committees:

Mmatshupo Taunyane, mmatshupo.taunyane@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-1788)

Main University HREC Non-Medical Chair and Co-Chairs:

Prof Jennifer Watermeyer (Chair), Jennifer.watermeyer@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-4578)

Prof Jasper Knight (Co-Chair), jasper.knight@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-6508)

Prof Karin Joubert (Co-Chair), karin.joubert@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-4561)

Updated Feb 2025