Research Ethics Policy & Code of Practice

Groups Responsible for Policy Review:	Academic Board
Executive Team Member Responsible:	Academic Dean
Person Responsible	Chair of the Research Ethics Committee
Date Last Approved:	May 2024
To be Reviewed:	Every 36 months
Review consultation:	Research Ethics Committee, Academic Board
Date of Next Review period:	May 2027

1. Introduction

1.1. The integrity of any research depends on academic rigour and ethical adequacy.

1.2. Ethical issues may be complex where primary research involving human participants is undertaken.

1.3. All research of this nature carried out by students and staff at the London School of Theology should be guided by the three fundamental ethical principles that ensure the protection of human participants: **causing no harm** (non-maleficence), **doing good** (beneficence), and respect for participants' choice by ensuring **informed consent and confidentiality** (autonomy).

1.3.1. Please note that members of professional organisations such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy or Association of Christian Counsellors are usually required also to adhere to the relevant Ethical Framework.

1.4. A consideration of potential harms and benefits needs to be weighed up by researchers. The research process can be intrusive and provoke anxiety in participants, or worse, involve psychological or spiritual harm.

1.5. It is important to think through carefully the likely impact on participants of any data collection methods. Certain groups are particularly vulnerable and may succumb to pressure, for example young people, children or people with learning disabilities. Some participants are unable to give informed consent and are therefore less able to protect themselves, for example, people with dementia. However, research activities may be so unobtrusive that individual consent is not warranted, such as in the case of some community-based studies.

1.6. The School's Research Ethics Committee (REC) has the responsibility to ensure that all student and staff research complies with this Code of Practice, and their explicit written approval must be obtained before any participants are approached and research is commenced.

1.7. Whilst some guidance may be offered as to how to carry out *good* research (e.g., research that is methodologically rigorous), the purpose of the Research Ethics Committee is to ensure that research is carried out in an *ethical* manner.

2. Ethical Concerns

2.1 No research should cause harm, and preferably it should benefit participants

A judgement needs to be made as to whether a particular intervention is likely to affect the well-being of participants and any potential harm to participants which might arise in the course of the research should be identified.

a. The potential benefits of the research to participants and/or society must be clearly stated.

b. Any cultural, religious, gender or other differences in a research population should be sensitively and appropriately handled by researchers at all stages.

2.2 Potential participants normally should receive clearly communicated information from the researcher in advance.

a. Under normal circumstances, participants should receive a Participant Information Sheet (PIS).

b. The information sheet should set out information such as: who is doing the research (with your contact details), the purpose of the research, why the participant has been invited to take part, what will happen during the research (who, what, when), any potential discomfort, risk, or benefit participants might experience from taking part , what data you're collecting and where will it be stored, how you will use the

results of the research, and who you'll share them with, how you will protect participants' identity, how long their data will be kept, must also let participants know, if the research is being observed (and who's watching), if and how the session is being recorded .

c. The information sheet should also provide contact details so that participants may report any procedures that seem to violate their welfare to the relevant person.

d. Participants should be given plenty of time to study the information sheet and consult relevant parties.

e. The information sheet (and consent form if relevant) should form part of the application for to the Ethics Committee for approval.

2.3 Participants should be free from coercion of any kind and should not be pressured to participate in a study.

a. Inducements, such as special services or financial payments (other than reimbursement for travel expenses or in some cases time), and the creation of inappropriate motivation should be avoided.

b. Risks involved in participation should be acceptable to participants, even in the absence of inducement.

c. Reimbursement of participants' expenses, for example for journeys, is not payment in the sense of reward and can be provided.

d. Participants must be free to withdraw from the study at any time.

2.4 Participants in a research study have the right to give their informed consent before participating

a. Voluntary informed consent should usually be obtained from any participant who is able to give such consent.

b. Consent may be implied by the completion and return of social survey questionnaires, removing the need for written consent. However, under normal circumstances, written consent from participants should be sought.

c. Individual consent may be unnecessary for some unobtrusive research activities, such as community research, which may involve observation of public behaviour.

2.5 Where third parties are affected by the research, informal consent should be obtained

a. When third parties, for example parents, teachers, youth workers, church leaders are directly involved in the care, or education of the potential participants, consent should also be obtained from them.

b. Informed consent should involve sharing of information about the project. If the proposed research is likely to interfere with the care being provided by a third party, it is necessary that they be fully informed and give written consent to participate.

c. In certain situations, the affiliation of participants to particular organisations or special groups such as educational institutions, business organisations, or hospitals, may necessitate the granting of permission by such groups to conduct the research project and any relevant policies or guidelines should be followed.

2.6 The consent of vulnerable participants or their representatives' assent should be actively sought by researchers.

a. If the involvement of children, which in legal terms is any individual under the age of 18 years old, in a research study is justified, then informed consent should also be sought from parents or other legal guardians for inclusion of the child in the study.

b. To the extent that it is feasible, which will vary with age, the willing consent of participants who are children should also be sought. Children over age 16 may be assessed as being capable of giving informed consent, but this will vary depending on the nature of research and special guidance may need to be sought.

c. In cases where people are unable to comprehend the implications of research, for example people with dementia, informed consent to participate will have to come from a representative, such as a legal guardian or immediate relative.

d. Witnessed consent is required for vulnerable participants who have intellectual or cultural difficulties in speech or understanding, but who are deemed capable of giving consent.

e. The quality of the consent of participants who are in a potentially dependent relationship with the researcher (e.g. Church leader, youth group, cell group etc.) requires careful consideration, as willingness to volunteer may be unduly influenced by the expectation of advantageous benefits.

2.7 Honesty should be central to the relationship between researcher, participant, and institutional representatives.

a. The deception of participants must be avoided.

b. The use of one-way mirrors for observation in any investigation must be clearly justified.

2.8 Participants' privacy and confidentiality should be maintained where possible.

a. Researchers should take precautions to protect confidentiality of participants and data.

b. The identity of the participant, or any information which may identify the participant, may not be revealed without the participant's specific prior consent.

c. Researchers and other collaborators should deal with all data obtained through their project in such a manner as not to compromise the personal dignity of the participant or to infringe upon the participant's right to privacy.

d. All information obtained during a research project should be considered privileged information and should under no circumstances be publicly disclosed in a fashion that would identify any individual or organisation.

e. When personal identifiers are used in a study, researchers should explain why this is necessary and how confidentiality would be protected.

f. Procedures for protecting the confidentiality of participants should be followed and include:

i. securing individual confidentiality statements from all research personnel;

ii. coding data with numbers instead of names to protect the identity of participants;

iii. using codes for identification of participants when transcribing audiotapes, and destroying the tapes once the dissertation or research has been examined satisfactorily by the Assessment Board;

iv. storing data with any identifying information in an encrypted or password protected file.

v. using pseudonyms for participants, agencies and geographical settings in the publishing of reports;

vi. disposing of information that can reveal the identity of participants or places carefully (e.g. burning or shredding rather than disposal in wastebasket;

2.9 The collection and storage of research data by researchers must comply with the Data Protection Act 2018.[1]

a. Researchers should be aware of the risks to anonymity, privacy and confidentiality posed by all kinds of personal information storage and processing, including computer and paper files, e-mail records, audio and videotapes, or any other information that directly identifies an individual.

b. Participants must be informed of the kinds of personal informationthat will be collected, what will be done with it, and to whom it will be disclosed. 'Consent to process' may need to be obtained where information collected from individuals is to be used later for research purposes.

c. Measures to prevent accidental breaches of confidentiality should be taken and in cases where confidentiality is threatened, relevant records should be destroyed.

d. Provisions for data security at the end of a project must be made.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/data-protection