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DEPARTMENTAL ETHICS SCREENING COMMITTEE (DESC) GUIDELINE Sept 2012

PURPOSE OF THE DEPARTMENTAL ETHICS SCREENING PROCESS

The primary purpose of the DESC checklist and process is to ensure that all researchers adequately consider the ethical implications of their own research. The checklist serves as a heuristic tool (i.e. a guideline) to assist the researcher in evaluating the potential ethical risks associated with the research. The emphasis should be on an honest and critical reflection on, and deliberation about, the risk of unjustifiably impacting negatively on the research participants and other stakeholders involved in the research and not on the completion of the checklist as a mere bureaucratic necessity.

However, because **only medium and high risk research requires completion of the full REC approval process before the research commences**, the DESC process should facilitate the initiation of the majority of research projects without undue delay.

SUMMARY OF DESC PROCESS AS APPROVED BY THE SENATE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE MAY 2012

1. All projects for degree purposes, in which humans, institutions, organisations or communities/groups are involved, and which are assessed by the researcher as minimal- or low-risk, must be submitted to the DESC for review.
2. The REC will only accept medium- or high-risk projects without an initial DESC review process if the research is not for degree purposes (e.g. submitted by a SU staff member or other SU affiliated researcher), has been judged by the applicant as medium- to high-risk, and is following a process that has been approved by the respective Department (i.e. individual Departments may decide that **all** research must be reviewed by the DESC irrespective of status of the applicant).
3. The DESC reviews and approves minimal- and low-risk research. The DESC may request the applicant to make certain changes to the project or informed consent form etc., and should provide an appropriate process for ensuring that these changes have been made prior to the implementation of the project.
4. **THE RESEARCHER MAY START THE DESC-APPROVED MINIMAL- OR LOW-RISK PROJECT.**
5. Medium- and high-risk research is referred to the REC either directly or after requiring the applicant to make certain changes (this at the discretion of the DESC) for full REC review as per standard REC processes.
6. Once the DESC has approved the project (minimal- and low-risk projects) the completed and signed-off DESC form is submitted to the REC, together with a copy of the research protocol and other relevant documents.
7. The documents are reviewed by a rotating sub-committee of the REC, e.g. Chairperson and one other REC member.
8. **THE DESC APPROVAL IS RATIFIED AT A REC MEETING (A LIST OF PROJECTS APPEARS IN THE AGENDA) AND THE REC ISSUES A FINAL LETTER OF APPROVAL.**
9. The REC reserves the right to suspend the DESC approval and request changes or clarifications. If there is a minor problem, the reviewer may request additional information or changes without suspending the DESC approval. However, if the problem is deemed more substantial, the DESC approval will be suspended and the applicant will be notified that the project will need to serve at the next REC meeting. The REC office will request an application form (if not submitted previously) and any outstanding documents

IMPORTANT ADDITIONAL POINTS

1. All research in which humans, institutions, organisations or communities/groups are involved requires ethics clearance.
2. The departmental processes for the ethics screening of research proposals should, where possible, be integrated with the process of approving research proposals in terms of their scientific integrity and rigour.
3. Researchers, under the guidance of their supervisors where applicable, have the primary responsibility to ensure that research conducted in their respective disciplines is characterised by methodological rigour and complies with the guidelines of relevant professional bodies and scientific organisations, as well as relevant legislation, institutional, national and international ethics guidelines.
4. Departments should have a short turn-around time in the processing of Departmental Ethics Checklists, following a time schedule that is well-coordinated with the submission of applications to the Research Ethics Committee.
5. Departments are encouraged to involve researchers and supervisors in the deliberations and/or feedback of the DESC, with a view to promote awareness, insight, and opportunities for the discussion of ethical issues related to research. Thus, once the initial DESC process has been completed, the DESC may require the researcher to make certain changes to the project, for example, to amend the Informed Consent Form. It is the responsibility of the DESC to ensure that all changes, clarifications or corrections are completed before the project starts, OR before the project is referred to the REC (if referral is required).

RISK CATEGORISATION

NB: The concept of 'risk' applies primarily to potential risk to the human research participant. However, certain research projects can involve potential risk to the researcher or research team, the academic department and/or the institution. Such risks must also be taken into consideration when determining the overall risk level of a project.

RISK CATEGORY	DEFINITION	EXPLANATION AND/OR EXAMPLES
MINIMAL RISK	The probability or magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research is not greater in itself than that ordinarily encountered in daily life. (The concept of 'daily life' used as a benchmark should be that of daily life as experienced by the average person living in a safe, 'first-world' country)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research involving the analysis of existing statistics, as well as literature, documents and information in the public domain, for example in public libraries, public archives, on websites, newspapers, or newsletters. (The above research is generally not considered 'human subject research'.) • Market research surveys <p>NB: Not all research involving material in the public domain is 'minimal risk'. For example, some research studies involving social media, e.g. 'tweets' or 'Facebook' profiles, could be medium risk, depending on the research question under investigation.</p>
LOW RISK	Research in which the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort or inconvenience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research in which the investigation of largely uncontroversial topics is undertaken through interviews, surveys and observation • The participants are adults and not considered to be a vulnerable research population. (Children are generally considered to be a vulnerable research population; however, this rule is not absolute and certain projects involving children may also be considered 'low risk'—DESC to evaluate) • The research will collect information that would generally be regarded as non-sensitive, such as

		<p>opinion rather than personal information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The information can generally be collected anonymously¹.
MEDIUM RISK	Research in which there is a potential risk of harm or discomfort, but where appropriate steps can be taken to mitigate or reduce overall risk.	<p>One or more of the following apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The research topic is 'sensitive' • Information gathered is personal rather than opinion or attitudes, or a combination of both • The information needs to be collected with personal identifiers (name, student number, etc.) • The research participants may come from a vulnerable or marginalised group such as those with disabilities, people living with HIV or other chronic disease, the economically or educationally disadvantaged, etc.
HIGH RISK	Research in which there is a real and foreseeable risk of harm and discomfort, which may lead to a serious adverse event, if not managed in a responsible manner.	<p>One or more of the following apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research involving highly sensitive topics and/ or very vulnerable and marginalised individuals or communities • Research involving deception of research participants • Research investigating illegal activities; research involving participants who are illegal immigrants or engaged in illegal activities • Agreeing to participate in the research may well place participants at real risk of harm • Information revealed during the course of the research may place the researcher at risk of breaking the law, e.g. research investigating gang activities and possession of illegal firearms • The research may reveal information that requires action on the part of the researcher that could place the participant or others at risk e.g. research involving child victims of physical or sexual abuse, victims of domestic violence, etc.

¹Please note the following: "A respondent may be considered anonymous when the researcher cannot identify a given response with a given respondent. This means an interview-survey respondent can never be considered anonymous, since an interviewer collects the information from an identifiable respondent. An example of anonymity would be the mail survey in which no identification numbers are put on the questionnaires before their return to the research office" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001).