

# GUIDANCE DOCUMENT FOR SREC APPLICATIONS

Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC)



There are several codes of research ethics produced by universities, professional bodies and others. SREC encourages applicants to refer to the ethics documents related to their own disciplines, but as a matter of course all applicants ought to be familiar with the UCC Code of Research Conduct

(<https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/documents/UCCCodeofResearchConduct.pdf>).

The general approach of the SREC committee is to be enabling and to offer advice to researchers to strengthen the ethical approach in their study. However, there are a number of common issues which impact on researchers securing approval. The purpose of this document is to proactively address these issues to help strengthen applications and the ethical review process.

We must also remember that our duty of care to research participants extends from the conception of the project to post-dissemination of findings and that ethical approval once granted does not and should not displace ethical engagement for the duration of a research project

## **Common problems arising in SREC application**

There are several difficulties which arise regularly in applications for SREC approval, and this list has been compiled by members of the committee to assist applicants through the process.

### *1. The right to withdraw*

The right to withdraw from the study is included in all research studies where consent is obtained. However, it cannot be open-ended; for example, once a paper has been published or a thesis submitted, withdrawal is impossible. Where data have been gathered in a manner allowing them to be linked to a specific participant (e.g. audio-recorded interviews) then one can offer the right to withdraw at any time during the interview and up to a specified time after; where the data have been gathered anonymously (e.g. through online survey) then the withdrawal of consent is only possible up to the point at which the data are submitted.

### *2. Storage*

As researchers, it is imperative that we can assure our participants that their data will be stored securely; this is of course particularly important where potentially sensitive personal details are involved. It is not adequate to simply say that the data will be stored safely. Exact detail is required as to the use of locked cabinets, password-protected audio files, encryption of laptops<sup>i</sup>, and so on. SREC does not recommend the use of cloud-based storage solutions and the use of USB memory keys to store

research data. UCC academic staff and researchers have the option of storing research data on the UCC Network File Storage (NAS<sup>ii</sup>)

### 3. *Storage duration*

As per the *UCC Code of Research Conduct*, data must be securely stored for ten years before disposal.

### 4. *Voluntary consent*

In most of the applications that come to SREC, this is relatively unproblematic. There are specific circumstances, however, where difficulties can arise:

Where the participants are children, it is necessary to obtain consent from the parent or guardian. This does not mean that consent must not be obtained from the child also. Parental/guardian consent is necessary but not sufficient for the research to proceed.

Where the participants are children, recruited through schools or other organizations, it is important to take steps to ensure that the consent offered is indeed voluntary. If a teacher, principal, group leader or other figure of authority appears to be endorsing and encouraging participation in research, this may present a problem. Therefore we suggest that, while such figures may facilitate contact with potential participants, they should play no more active role in the recruitment process;

Where participants are residents of institutions, whether prisons, care homes etc, the same difficulty may arise. If prison warders, for example, appear to be promoting the project, there must be a question over whether the consent gained is indeed voluntary.

## 5. *Research questions*

To make sense of your data collection and sample selection strategy, it is necessary to include the research questions for the study as part of your application.

## 6. *Confidentiality & anonymity*

We must always offer these promises from ourselves, but there are limits to these. Specifically, there are limits in law such as the need to protect individuals from harm. Where a risk assessment identifies potential for such an issue to arise, the applicant must outline proposed procedures. Where data are gathered in a group format, such as a focus group, there must also be concerns about confidentiality. Again, we can offer confidentiality from ourselves, but cannot guarantee it from the other group participants. Under these circumstances, it is advisable to include in the consent form an agreement to maintain confidentiality, and to explain this before the group commences.

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<sup>i</sup> See this link for details on how to enable encryption on your PC/laptop:

<http://www.ucc.ie/en/it/itservicecatalogue/encryptionlaptop/>

<sup>ii</sup> See this link for details on the UCC NAS service and how to apply for storage space:

<http://www.ucc.ie/en/is/itservicecatalogue/networkfilestorenas/>