Vision and objectives of the Research Ethics Committee[[1]](#footnote-1)

*“Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of*

*university life, and governments and universities* [*…*] *must ensure respect*

*for this fundamental requirement.”*

Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988

**Objectives and principles**

The objective of the ISS Research Ethics Committee (REC) is to establish an enabling environment for ethical research practice and ensure that the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of participants are considered carefully. The committee is cognizant of the many unresolved dilemmas and tensions between academic freedom and justice in an unequal world. The primary focus of the committee is to provide the instruments and the opportunities for researchers to discuss and reflect on the ethical dimensions of their work, as well as overseeing and ensuring compliance with an ethical review process. These instruments, opportunities and the review process, taken together, aim at improving the ethics of research practice at ISS. The Committee’s objective is to ensure that ISS researchers ‘do no harm’ while carrying out research activities, and to encourage reflection on benefit-sharing with the research participants.

Overarching objectives include seeking and obtaining consent (recognising the many forms and practices this may include), respecting confidentiality and anonymity, sharing research results and, where there is risk, undertaking steps to minimize it. ISS researchers are also encouraged to reflect on inherent power relations between the researcher and research participants and the specific cultural and ethical norms of a given group of research participants. Ethical research practice is viewed as a reflective and ongoing process which is integral to research at all stages of design and implementation and extending beyond it, to sharing of results and potential consequences.

Funding sources are also screened to evaluate potential conflict of interest and other ethical concerns. If there are ethical regulations, in the Netherlands or the country where the research is carried out, the researcher should adhere to these. However, it is also recognised that in some contexts (e.g. oppressive regimes) adhering to regulations may be detrimental to participants and come into conflict with the Committee’s principle of ‘do no harm’. In these cases, it is the researcher’s responsibility to be well-informed of the local context and regulations and to justify any deviance during the approval process.

**Enabling environment**

The ISS enabling environment, includes:

--Web based resources for researchers to reflect on ethics in research. These include standard templates/data management plans that facilitate the submission of research proposals and the incorporation of high ethical standards.

--Training opportunities on research ethics.

--The opportunity for every researcher to engage confidentially with the Research Ethics Committee. This opportunity is available from the design phase and extends beyond the ethics review and extends to the implementation (including data management) and dissemination of the research.

-- Detailed guidance and advice to help researchers comply with compulsory checks for all eligible research– see the ‘Research Ethics Review – for whom?’ section below. To this effect, the committee uses a checklist, but adopts the one of the research funders if there is one.

-- An ethics review for researchers who are requested by publishers to provide proof of ethical approval before publication

-- the REC is open to all staff and PhD researchers for advice and guidance or ethical screening.

**Institutional set-up**

Responsibility for the Research Ethics Policy is in the purview of the IB which approves the policy and nominates the members of the Research Ethics Committee. The Chair of the REC has the authority to approve the ethics reviews of individual pieces of research based on the opinion of at least two members of the REC. The Rector and Deputy Rector Research will act as an appeals body.

The ISS Research Ethics Committee is a part of the EUR system of ethical review for individual pieces of research. In addition EUR has a Scientific Integrity policy which incorporates a general [Code of Conduct[[2]](#footnote-2)](https://www.eur.nl/sites/corporate/files/Erasmus_University_Rotterdam_Code.pdf) and endorses the recently updated [Netherlands Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice[[3]](#footnote-3)](http://www.vsnu.nl/files/documents/Netherlands%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20for%20Research%20Integrity%202018.pdf). Issues which come into conflict with the 5 key principles of this Code are currently dealt with through Scientific Integrity coordinators[[4]](#footnote-4). These include, amongst others, issues relating to plagiarism, fabrication, falsification and verifiability of data and conflict of interest (e.g. of a commercial or political nature)[[5]](#footnote-5). Similarly, personal conduct of researchers is dealt with outside of the Research Ethics Committee.

**Research Ethics Review – for whom?**

All research projects of academic staff and PhD researchers need ethical screening apart from in the following cases:.

* Seed-funded projects to develop grant proposals are excluded since the full proposals themselves will undergo ethical screening.
* Research projects which involve only the processing of secondary, non-personal data[[6]](#footnote-6) are also excluded. Please note that it is important to check that the secondary data is not sensitive, is anonymised and has minimum risk of disclosing the identity of individuals[[7]](#footnote-7).  If there is some ambiguity regarding possible ethical concerns in relation to secondary data, researchers are invited to consult the Research Ethics Committee.

That notwithstanding, when researchers in the latter two cases do anticipate ethical concerns, they are invited to consult the Research Ethics Committee.

In terms of approval of research proposals, the official letter of approval will be based on the principle of ‘no harm’, but the accompanying correspondence will also aim at higher standards and include suggestions and comments aiming at enhancing how the researcher deals with any ethical concerns.

The Research Ethics Review procedure includes all ISS research staff and PhDs. PhDs should submit their research proposal and a completed Research Ethics Review Form to the Committee before the Dissertation Design Seminar (DDS) takes place, with the expectation that data collection is not carried out beforehand. In case there is a need to carry out data collection prior to the DDS this should be minimal and it is left to the discretion of the Supervisor as to whether the Committee should be consulted. The Committee encourages Supervisors to support PhDs in reflecting on ethical concerns and completing the form however the PhD researcher should drive the process.

The requirement for ethics review of MA research is outside the remit of the Committee and at the discretion of the individual supervisor and second reader. If any serious ethics concerns do arise, the REC is available to the supervisor.

**Monitoring**

In the future it is hoped that the Committee will have the capacity to monitor research projects by requesting researchers to provide updates annually. However this process still needs to be developed. In the meantime, researchers will be advised in the approval letter from the Committee that they should consult with the Committee if there are major changes raising ethical concerns during research.

1. This document benefitted and partly borrowed from Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Research Ethics Policy and Preliminary Translation Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (draft version). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.eur.nl/sites/corporate/files/Erasmus\_University\_Rotterdam\_Code.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.vsnu.nl/files/documents/Netherlands%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20for%20Research%20Integrity%202018.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Scientific Integrity Coordinator at ISS is Nynke Jo Smit ([smit@iss.nl](mailto:smit@iss.nl)). Further information about EUR’s scientific integrity policy and additional contact points for advice can be found [here](https://my.eur.nl/en/eur-employee/research/research-services/research-quality-integrity/research-integrity) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. EUR is currently developing a plan to ensure implementation of the new Code and in particular to meet the new recommendations for duties of care. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Although Development Studies is multi-disciplinary, the different disciplines which contribute to Development Studies have different definitions of ‘secondary’ data. For example, to a historian a diary would be a primary data source. The REC recognises this tensions and requests that if you are in doubt to use the definitions common to your discipline and consult with the REC. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a useful categorization of secondary data or data re-use please see Section I.II of [ESRC Framework for Research Ethics (2015)](https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/esrc-framework-for-research-ethics-2015/). More information is also provided in the ISS Research Ethics Guidelines. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)