

# Ethical Principles and Practice Policy Statement

## 1. Purpose of the Policy Statement

- 1.1 The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to individual staff on the ethical framework within which the University seeks to conduct its academic activities; and on the processes that the University uses to ensure compliance with the highest ethical standards.
- 1.2 All activities and practices carried out by the University and its employees should comply with the University's ethical standards as set out in this statement.

## 2. Ethical Standards

- 2.1 The University is an exempt Charity within the definition of the Charities Act 1993. The primary purpose of the University is the advancement of education. The preservation of our charitable status relies on ensuring that our activities fall within the definition of our charitable aims; and on the integrity with which we undertake those activities.
- 2.2 The ethical standards which apply to academic activities (including research, teaching, consultancy and outreach work) arise from the basic principle that such activities should neither include practices which directly impose a risk of serious harm nor be indirectly dependent upon such practices. Serious harm includes, for example, failure to respect the interests of human beings and damage to items of cultural value or the natural environment. Ethical practice also requires that the use of individuals' personal data, medical research and the use of animals in academic work are fully justified and that statutory controls and codes of practice are observed at all times.
- 2.3 All activities undertaken by staff and students as members of the University must comply with the University's ethical standards. In applying this framework to individual decisions, it is the responsibility of the individual academic to seek guidance on and, if necessary, approval for activities which might be ethically sensitive.

## 3. Definition of Academic Activities

- 3.1 Decisions concerning ethical or unethical practice in relation to academic activity could arise in the following contexts:
  - The acceptance of external funding for research or teaching projects
  - The subjects for teaching or research projects
  - Decisions concerning methodology
  - Dissemination and publication of findings from research or teaching.
  - Business engagement and professional practice, such as, consulting, contract research and training

Decisions concerning ethical investment, ethical trading or the acceptance of gifts or benefactions to the University are the responsibility of the University's Board of Governors and the sub-committees, including the Trustee Committee. Any concerns relating to these aspects of University business should be referred to the University Secretary.

- 3.2 When faced with a decision which raises potential ethical concerns, the following types of questions should be considered:

- Might the outputs of this activity be used to progress or support unethical practices?
- Does this activity have the potential to do harm to any individuals or groups?
  - Does this activity have the potential to do harm to vulnerable adults or children?
  - Might this activity have potentially detrimental impacts, for example on the environment?
  - Might the undertaking of this activity infringe the human rights of any individual, or be contrary to the University's Equality duty?
- Does this funding or activity have the potential to bring my Faculty/School/Department, and/or the University as a whole, into disrepute?
- Might this funding/ activity detrimentally affect other existing relationships or partnerships within the University?

3.3 Ethics must also be considered when the outputs from research or teaching are published, or disseminated in any other way, for example through an exhibition, presentation or talk. Publication of findings must respect the privacy of participating individuals and must give due credit to all researchers involved, both staff and students.

#### **4. Ethical Management**

4.1 The University has developed management and decision making systems designed to ensure compliance with its ethical standards. Compliance is achieved by establishing a system of faculty accountability, under the oversight of the University Academic Ethics Committee.

4.2 Each Faculty is required to develop, implement and publish its Ethical review process. These processes must be approved by the University Academic Ethics Committee, acting with the delegated authority of Senate. In the case of medical research and teaching, these ethical review processes may also be subject to the approval of the NHS.

4.3 Each Faculty is responsible for implementing an ethical review process that is appropriate for its own circumstances and disciplines. However it must comprise the following elements:

- A clear process for identifying and assessing the risks, actual or potential, of undertaking activity
- A systematic means of identifying and recording, through the use of checklists, questionnaires or survey forms, all relevant information
- A robust system of record keeping

4.4 Faculties may make arrangements for the oversight of Academic Ethics in ways that meet the specific needs of their disciplines. This could be through the establishment of a separate Faculty Academic Ethics Committee, or by incorporating these responsibilities into the remit of another or other committees. Generic Terms of reference for a Faculty Academic Ethics Committee have been drawn up to support Faculties in making this decision.

- 4.5 Where ethical issues cannot be resolved through the Faculty's own ethical review process, they should be referred to the University Academic Ethics Committee for decision.
- 4.6 Each Faculty submits an Annual Report of their ethical review activities. The University Academic Ethics Committee reports to Senate following each meeting.
- 4.7 The University Secretary chairs the University Academic Ethics Committee.

## **5. Ethics and Research**

- 5.1 Specific ethical issues apply when considering research which involves the following:
- Human participants (adults or children)
  - Human material (e.g. tissue or fluid samples)
  - Human data (e.g. surveys and questionnaires on issues such as lifestyle, housing, working environment, attitudes and preferences).<sup>1</sup>
- 5.2 Research involving any of the above requires additional checks in the approval process. Where a student is unfamiliar with the issues involved, he or she should consult his/her Director of Studies/Supervisor for further advice. A member of staff should consult the relevant Director of Research or the Associate Dean with responsibility for research.

## **7. Further sources of advice and guidance**

Academic colleagues are encouraged to familiarise themselves with their Faculty's Ethical Review process, and to raise any queries or concerns with their Head of School, or Executive Dean.

Other colleagues who are able to provide advice include:

Pro-Vice-Chancellor – Academic (academic freedom issues)  
Director of Human Resources (terms and conditions)  
Director of Research (ethical issues in relation to research)  
University Secretary (issues of corporate ethics, implications of the Charities Act, University Ethics Committee)

The University's Research Ethical Framework  
[www.bcu.ac.uk/research/office](http://www.bcu.ac.uk/research/office).

Academic Ethics Committee, September 2010

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<sup>1</sup> While less relevant to research undertaken at Birmingham City University, colleagues should also be aware that specific ethical issues apply when considering research involving vertebrates, especially mammals and birds.