

The Role of the Supervisor

Research Ethics, Dalhousie University

A University Senate Policy describes the responsibilities of supervisors and of academic units with respect to research ethics for research involving humans.

Responsibilities of Supervisors

Supervisors are responsible for:

- The **ethical conduct** of their students.
- Ensuring that a student is aware of their **responsibilities as a researcher** and that prior to conducting the research they submit it for ethics review.
- Providing **adequate training** both in the methodology of the student's research and in the ethical principles and policies that must be observed in carrying it out. Familiarity with University policies and guidelines is considered a minimum in this respect.
- Reviewing the student's ethics application to ensure it is of appropriate **quality and completeness** prior to permitting the student to apply for REB review. Supervisors indicate this by completing the attestation on the student's application.
- Supervisors of undergraduate students engaged in undergraduate thesis, or independent research projects must ensure that their students conduct the research in an ethical manner and also have sufficient **training and competency** to do so. The Supervisor must also ensure that the research is reviewed at the appropriate level, initially consulting with the standing Unit-level Ethics Committee in this regard, prior to its being initiated.

(From the University *Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans* (section 4.2).

Unit-level Research Ethics Committees

It is expected that Departments or Schools whose students undertake human participant research as part of their **education** will

- establish a **standing ethics review committee** that will function throughout the academic year
- require that members of this committee are familiar with, and **apply, the TCPS** and this policy
- ensure that students undertaking human participant research activities receive the **appropriate instruction in research ethics**
- ensure that all human participant research activity being undertaken by students receives the **appropriate review**
- ensure that no faculty member reviews their own students' work
- submit a **timely report** to Research Ethics (per TCPS article 6.12) for distribution to the University REB on all student research projects reviewed by the Unit-level Ethics Committee
- **report any complaints** or difficulties raised by research participants involved in student research projects to Research Ethics immediately.

(From the University *Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans* (sections 4.3 c and 4.4 d)

Recommendations for Supervisors

Before submitting to the REB, ensure students are appropriately **prepared** and:

- Are knowledgeable about the proposed methodology, from a research methods class, for example
- Learned about research ethics, in a research methods class, for example
- Completed the online Course on Research Ethics (<http://tcps2core.ca/welcome>)
- Read the core chapters (1-5) of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (Supervisors too!) and any other chapters relevant to the proposed research
- Have had their research proposals vetted carefully by the supervisor and supervisory committee for **scholarly merit** and **feasibility**
- Consider having a member of the supervisory committee who is experienced with research involving humans, who can provide guidance in this area
- Consider having a member of the supervisory committee who is experienced with the specific research population who can provide guidance in this area
- Have discussed the student **researcher's safety** during the course of the conduct of the research and have a safety plan in place, where appropriate.

As students are **writing** the research ethics submission, ensure they:

- Are familiar with, and follow, the **application and submission instructions**.
- Address each issue in a sub-section **directly** and in **sufficient detail** that the reviewer can assess the ethical issues.
- Append study instruments, recruitment material and consent forms (do not embed them in the application form).
- Use language in the submission that is targeted to an educated non-expert (avoid acronyms, technical or discipline-specific terms; when it is necessary to use this language, ensure it is adequately explained). Reviewers can't assess information they can't understand. Language in the recruitment material, consent form and study instruments should be written for the target participant population (grade 8 language level is recommended).
- Explain the **scholarly merit** of the proposed research.
- Describe the **sample size**. How many participants are needed? Do they have a **feasible plan** to secure this same size? It is not ethical to begin research that will not yield usable results.
- Describe and justify **inclusion/exclusion criteria** and use these consistently (between the application form, the recruitment and consent material).
- Describe in detail each step in the research from the **participant's perspective**. What will participants be asked to do, and why?
- Describe why each part of the study is necessary to answer the research question.
- Do not collect any information that is not necessary to answer the research question.
- Ensure that documents prepared for research participants are **clear and correct**. Students are encouraged to work with the Writing Centre, especially if English is a challenge.

- Make sure the **research plan is substantially complete** before submitting to the REB. Although changes can emerge in the course of the research which can be addressed through an amendment request, this process should not be used as a substitute for a well-designed project initially. Each time a submission is made to the Board, expect it to take approximately **4 weeks** for a response – including amendment reviews.

During the review process:

- Discuss the REB review with the student researcher. Be available for **consultation** and guidance.
- Facilitate consultation with a colleague with **additional expertise** for the student (if this could be beneficial).
- **Vet** the re-submission.

After the student has received REB approval:

- Continue to be aware of the status of the student’s research project. **Invite discussion** of any concerns the student may have with respect to the ethical conduct of the research and any concerns about the safety of the researcher.
- Ensure the student is aware of his or her **continuing responsibilities**, including:
 - Reporting adverse events
Any significant adverse events experienced by research participants or significant protocol deviations (for example, a privacy breach) must be reported **in writing** to Research Ethics **within 24 hours** of their occurrence. The written report must include details of the adverse event and actions (or proposed actions) taken by the researcher in response to the adverse event. In all cases, the incident must be discussed with the supervisor and the supervisor must be engaged in overseeing the response.
 - Seeking approval for protocol / consent form changes
Prior to implementing any changes to the research plan, whether from the protocol or consent form, the student must submit them to the Research Ethics Board for review and approval after consultation with the supervisor. The amendment request process is described on the Research Ethics website. Supervisors must vet any proposed changes and the ethics submission before it is sent to the REB for review (similar to the initial submission).
 - Submitting annual reports
Ethics approvals are valid for up to 12 months at a time. Prior to the end of the project’s approval deadline, the student must complete an Annual Report (available on the website) and return it to Research Ethics for review and approval before the approval end date in order to prevent a lapse of ethics approval for the research. Supervisors should use this as an opportunity to review the status of the student’s project with respect to the involvement of participants and should be aware of the

project's status. Researchers should note that no research involving humans may be conducted in the absence of a valid ethical approval and that allowing REB approval to lapse is a violation of University policy.

- **Submitting final reports**
When the student and supervisor are confident that no further data collection or contact with participants will be required, a Final Report (available on the website) must be submitted to Research Ethics to close the ethics file in good standing. If the student is not available to submit a final report, it must be submitted by the supervisor. After review and approval of the Final Report, the Research Ethics file will be closed.
- **Retaining records in a secure manner**
Supervisors must support their students to ensure that both during and after the research project, data are secured in such a manner as to comply with confidentiality provisions specified in the protocol and consent forms. Supervisors should have regular discussions with their students about research records management.
- **Current contact information and status**
Supervisors must advise Research Ethics if their student has a change in status or email contact information for the duration of the REB approval.