



SBE Research Ethics Review Board | Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam | rerb.sbe@vu.nl

RESEARCH ETHICS REGULATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

School of Business & Economics,
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Contents

1. BACKGROUND OF THIS DOCUMENT	3
2. THE RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW BOARD (RERB)	3
2.1 Aims.....	3
2.2 Competence	3
2.3 Constitution	4
3. GENERAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS	4
4. APPLICATION OF GENERAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES.....	5
4.1 Recruitment of subjects and informed consent	5
4.2 Research procedures and reporting	6
4.3 Research in public space and organizations	8
5. THE ETHICS REVIEW PROCEDURE	8

1. BACKGROUND OF THIS DOCUMENT

The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam fosters scientific integrity and endorses the [Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) (2018)¹, calling for honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence, and responsibility. One aspect of scientific integrity is dealing with human subjects in an ethically acceptable way. Rooted in the broad principles of the Code of Conduct, the current document provides ethical guidelines for research with human subjects at the School of Business & Economics (SBE) and states the procedures of its Research Ethics Review Board (RERB). The guidelines and regulations outlined in this document apply to all SBE researchers and students, and all persons that are otherwise involved in conducting research related to SBE.

This document has the following goals:

- To advise researchers how to make their research ethically acceptable.
- To make the procedure followed by the RERB clear and transparent for the RERB itself, for researchers and for third parties.

Besides the ethical guidelines for research with human subjects, researchers should also adhere the other principles for scientific integrity as laid out in the Code of Conduct. Another important aspect of scientific integrity concerns research data management, including the processing of personal data. We refer to SBE's separate research data management policy for detailed guidance on this topic.

2. THE RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW BOARD (RERB)

2.1 Aims

1. The RERB promotes that research involving human subjects is carried out in compliance with relevant institutional, national and international ethics regulations and legal requirements.
2. The RERB conducts ethics reviews of research proposals.
3. The RERB promotes ethical research practices.
4. The RERB advises the School Board, department heads and individual researchers about the ethical acceptability of research proposals.
5. RERB proposes changes to these ethics guidelines where and when deemed appropriate, to be approved by the SBE Faculty Board.

2.2 Competence

1. The RERB issues a statement indicating that a research project is carried out in concordance with the principles for research involving human subjects.
2. The statement is valid for the duration of the research project.

¹ KNAW; NFU; NWO; TO2-federatie; Vereniging Hogescholen; VSNU (2018): *Nederlandse gedragscode wetenschappelijke integriteit*. DANS. <https://doi.org/10.17026/dans-2cj-nvwu>

2.3 Constitution

The RERB consists of a chairperson, at least four committee members and a secretary. External (legal) expertise is called in when needed. Members of the RERB are appointed by SBE's Faculty Board.

3. GENERAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

The following basic principles should be applied in all research involving human subjects, or data of human subjects:

1. Research projects are designed and implemented in compliance with the Dutch law and the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Scientific Integrity.
2. During the preparatory phase of the research project, its acceptability is assessed in the light of the current ethical guidelines, as outlined in this document.
3. Researchers are responsible for an ethical approach to the research conducted by themselves and others under their supervision or responsibility.
4. Researchers take into consideration the interests of people involved and take measures to ensure that the rights and wellbeing of all individuals involved in the research project will not be violated.
5. Researchers refrain from using methods that negatively affect the dignity of the subjects.
6. Researchers refrain from using methods that interfere with the private lives of the subjects more than is necessary for the intended purpose of the research project.
7. Researchers treat subjects and communities with respect:
 - a. Subjects are treated as autonomous agents.
 - b. Subjects with diminished autonomy are entitled to adequate protection.
8. Researchers only perform those tasks for which they are appropriately trained and prepared.
9. In case research is conducted with subjects with specific problems (e.g. work stress, depression, physical complaints), researchers acquaint themselves with these problems prior to the start of the research by consulting an expert in the field of the relevant problem.
10. The research has plausibly scientific, social and/or educational relevance.

4. APPLICATION OF GENERAL ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

4.1 Recruitment of subjects and informed consent

1. Research subjects (“subjects”) are individuals, who voluntarily participate in a research project. All subjects participate on the basis of active informed consent:
 1. Prior to the execution of the research project, the researchers inform the subjects and/or their legal representatives about what they can expect during the investigation. Subjects are informed about the purpose and methods of the research project, to the extent this does not interfere with the aim of the research project. Subjects are informed in language that is comprehensible for them.
 2. Researchers inform prospective subjects about the fact that their participation is voluntary and that they may refuse to participate in research or to cease participation without a statement of reasons.
 3. Researchers inform subjects about important factors which may affect their willingness to participate (such as risks, discomfort, adverse effects, or limitations on confidentiality). Researchers inform the subject about the method of reporting back the research results and the nature of the research to be reported back to the subject.
 4. The purposes of data collection and use are clearly described. Identifiable personal information will not be passed to a third party without consent.
 5. The subject is given ample opportunity to ask the researcher questions about his or her participation in the research project. Name and contact details of the researcher(s) are provided.
 6. The agreement of the subject to participate in the research project is based on *active informed consent*. Active informed consent means that the subject performs an action to confirm his participation. Some evidence of consent must be available, preferably a signature on a form, but evidence can also concern a digital action (e.g. clicking a “tick-box” of a link), or approval recorded on audio or video, as long as it happens on the basis of information provided by the researcher.
 7. In case of *passive informed consent*, the subject must perform an action to show that he or she does *not* want to participate in the research project. In general, passive informed consent is regarded as undesirable by SBE. Researchers who wish to make use of passive informed consent should consult the RERB.
 8. In some cases concerning studies in public space or organizations, researchers may deviate from asking individual informed consent, see section 4.3 "Research in public space and organizations".
2. Children (<18 years), persons incapable of judgment, or otherwise vulnerable persons (e.g. refugees, persons with drug or alcohol problems, persons with special needs) may only be involved in the research project if they are uniquely suited for the study purpose, and the burden on the subjects is minimized.

1. In case of studies with children (<18 years) or persons incapable of judgment, it is necessary to gain written informed consent from the legal representatives of the subjects. In the case of studies with children aged 12 years and older, the letter of consent should be signed by both the child and the legal representative. In general, a consent letter signed by a single parent is sufficient, unless the nature of the research project reasonably requires the consent of both parents. In the case of incapacitated subjects, permission must be obtained from the legal representative of the person, regardless of the age of the subject. Investigators may also obtain the consent of the subject itself. In the case of research with children or young people in a group, see section 4.3 “Research in public space and organizations”.
 2. Note: 17-year-old students are considered adult as well.
 3. Researchers who wish to study persons incapable of judgment or otherwise vulnerable persons should consult the RERB.
3. Researchers do not offer excessive or inappropriate financial or other incentives to recruit subjects. Incentives (e.g. payments or EC’s) should not override the voluntary participation in a research project.
 1. When rewards or services are offered as consideration for participation in the research project in order to recruit subjects, the researchers communicate the nature of the rewards and/or services and clearly communicate the potential risks, obligations and limitations associated with these services.
 2. In case researchers conduct research with human subjects who somehow depend on them, such as SBE students, they take precautions to protect them against the adverse consequences of premature termination or denial of participation. In case participation in the relevant research project is a mandatory part of the education or training of the subject, or a possibility to obtain study credits, the subject is offered the choice of alternatives. If students refuse to take part in a research project that is a mandatory part of the education or training of the subject, or provides a possibility to obtain study credits on moral or religious grounds, the subject is offered the choice of alternatives.
 3. This does not apply in case the behavioral impact of (financial) incentives is object of research.

4.2 Research procedures and reporting

1. Researchers minimize potential risk, harm, or other negative consequences to research subjects during or after the research. In case of any possible risk, harm, or other negative consequences, the RERB should be consulted.
2. In case subjects will be exposed to stimuli (e.g. pictures, text) that can be distressing, offensive or age-inappropriate, the RERB needs to be consulted.

3. Researchers refrain from conducting any forms of research that entails deception, unless the use of deception is justified by the scientific, educational, or applied value to be expected from the research project. Deception will only take place if equally effective procedures in which no deception occurs are not possible. Subjects are not misled about possible risks and inconveniences that participation in the research project might entail. Any form of deception that forms an essential feature of the design and implementation of the research project, must be explained to subjects as soon as possible. This is preferably done at the end of their participation, but no later than by the end of the research project.
4. In case the research project involves collection of personal data², appropriate action must be taken to secure the privacy of the subjects. Personal data should be treated in accordance with the research data management policy of the [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#) and the [School of Business & Economics](#).
 1. Anonymization or pseudonymisation of the data should be accomplished as early as possible during the research project. Personal data should be stored at a secure location (e.g. VU server, SurfDrive, not on an USB-stick or unprotected hard drive). Particular attention should be given to this point in a data management plan³.
 2. Moreover, in case the research project involves collection of sensitive personal data (e.g. financial data of an individual, student grades) or so called special personal data⁴ (*'bijzondere persoonsgegevens'*) the research project design has to be reviewed by the RERB.
 3. The research project does not involve collection of social security numbers (BSN). It is by law forbidden to collect social security numbers for research purposes.
 4. Researchers inform subjects prior to the research project about what personal research details the subjects will receive at the end of the research project. Researchers grant subjects access to all information gathered about them, to the extent that it has not yet been fully anonymized, or where no personally identifiable information about others is released by referring to other subjects in the research project than themselves.
 5. Publicly available text, audio and video recordings may be used for scientific purposes.
 6. Researchers shall ensure that the reporting and presentation of research data (including audio and video-recordings) is done anonymously, unless consent has been provided.
5. Researchers give subjects the opportunity to obtain information about the nature, results and conclusions of the research.

² Personal data is any piece of information that relates to an identifiable individual.

³ See <https://dmponline.dcc.ac.uk/>

⁴ Special personal data is: race or ethnicity, political opinion, religion or ideology, union membership (*'lidmaatschap van een vakbond'*), health, sexual behavior, genetic data and biometric data.

4.3 Research in public space and organizations

Research in the various disciplines of Business and Economics can relate to persons in public space or organizational processes, or the effect of a change in a situation in a large group of people. Examples include research about general interactions between professionals at work, the effects of management techniques on productivity in the workplace, or the effect of the working environment on employee behavior. In the study of public space and organizations, it is not always possible or desirable to obtain consent of each studied individual (e.g. the awareness of participation may influence the behavior of the individual), or this would require disproportionate effort. In such cases, the researcher may study group behavior without obtaining individual consent, under certain conditions:

1. Informed consent is obtained from the relevant body or authority, for example, the management of the organization that is studied.
2. Research entails the observation of the daily setting of the sample group, in which the individual privacy and autonomy is not limited or compromised. If the effect of a management method is studied, this should be a method which is developed or approved by the organization itself, and carried out with its permission and under its supervision.
3. Research methods and observations are announced to relevant groups (including parents and/or other legal representatives) unless it might endanger the purpose of the research project.
4. Interventions by the researcher take place at the group level and are not directed at specific individuals. The effect of an intervention can, of course, be different for each person. A measure may apply to the whole group, but the behavior of some individuals may change more than others.
5. The reporting about the research data takes place solely at the group or organizational level. This also applies to reporting back to the organization where the research took place. Groups can also be subgroups in this case, as long as the data cannot be traced back to individuals.
6. In case of mere observation of behavior in public spaces (e.g. street, campus) it is not required to obtain individual informed consent, as long as no personal data is collected and the research cannot not be traced back to specific individuals. Note that the usage of audio or video recordings could lead to the identification of an individual.
7. When an intended study of a group or organization does not comply with all these conditions, the RERB has to be consulted.

5. THE ETHICS REVIEW PROCEDURE

The School of Business and Economics requires researchers to review studies that involve (data of) human subjects on ethical issues.

The procedure of ethical evaluation is as follows:

1. Before the research starts, a researcher fills out the [self-check](#) on the SBE website. When the result of the self-check is that the research project design is in line with the ethical guidelines as stated in this document, the researcher receives a message that ethical guidelines are met and no further ethical review is required. When the self-check reveals that ethical guidelines are not (yet) met, the researcher is required to fill out a full ethical application and send it to the RERB for evaluation.
2. Upon receiving the full ethical application, the secretary of the RERB performs a first check and makes recommendations to the researcher for improving ethical aspects, if applicable.
3. The secretary sends the (updated) application to at least two relevant RERB members.
4. The consulted RERB members independently give their advice to the secretary. In case a member does not advise positively on the application, he/she gives an explanation and recommendations for improvement.
5. In case the research project meets all ethical guidelines, the secretary communicates the RERB's advice and any minor recommendations to the applicant.
6. In case the RERB judges the application is not in line with ethical guidelines, the secretary communicates the RERB's recommendations for improvements and another round of review starts. As long as ethical guidelines are not met, the research project may not start.

N.B:

- Every researcher (in training) can do the online self-check and hand in a full ethics application. PhD and master students should include the name and contact details of their supervisor in any communication.
- In case research is conducted at multiple institutions, the responsibility for ethical review lies primarily at the institution of the principal researcher.
- In case ethical assessment has been obtained from an external institution, while the researcher conducting the research project is affiliated to SBE, the researcher is responsible for comparing the external institution's guidelines to the SBE guidelines as outlined in this document for gross deviations. In case of doubt, the researcher should consult the RERB for advice.
- After sending in a full ethics application, the RERB will strive to communicate an advice as soon as possible, but no longer than 12 weeks. The advice has no expiry date. However, when ethical guidelines or research project design change, the researcher is responsible to resubmit his/her application to the RERB.
- In case of significant changes in the research project design after a positive advice of the RERB, the research project has to be resubmitted to the RERB.
- In case of disagreement between the advice of the RERB and the involved researcher, the RERB and/or the researcher may report to the SBE board and ask for a final judgement.