

ETHICS GUIDANCE NOTE: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) AND RESEARCH ETHICS

OVERVIEW

The University recognises that AI tools are increasingly being used by colleagues and students to support research and research-related activities. Due to the rapidly changing landscape in this area, the use of AI in developing research proposals and / or data collection, analysis and presentation is not prescribed in the University's [Research Ethics Policy](#) or [ethical review process](#). However, this may be subject to change. Currently, researchers should refer to the University's [Code of Good Practice in Research](#) and online guidance on the responsible use of [Artificial Intelligence in Research](#) (internal login required) and adhere to relevant funder and publisher policies and professional guidelines.

It should be noted that the University does not endorse or provide access to any specific AI tools. Researchers will therefore need to make their own decisions on which platforms to use and fund the cost themselves. Users must ensure that the products and procedures comply with data protection legislation and the existing data privacy policies to protect the data. CoPilot in Microsoft Edge currently meets these requirements – although this will be regularly reviewed by the University's Cyber Security Team.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Guidance for academic colleagues:

Researchers may be required to reflect on the potential ethical and Responsible Research Innovation (RRI) considerations of the project as part of their proposal for external grant funding. Researchers should use these sections of the grant application form to identify potential risks and outline how they will be managed. Further information on potential risks is available to applicants via the University's online [Ethics Toolkit](#) and [Responsible Research Innovation \(RRI\) Toolkit](#).

Researchers may also consider using AI tools to help identify the ethical, legal and regulatory requirements of the proposed research. However researchers should be aware that some funders will be able to identify where AI tools have been used to generate standard text in grant applications, therefore the use of stock paragraphs is not recommended. External funders may also require applicants to declare where AI has been used.

Ideally, AI tools should only be used as a starting point to generate ideas, although the output should always be manually checked for accuracy and tailored to the project prior to submission. Project teams may also be asked to expand upon the ethical considerations of the project at a funder panel interview or in response to peer reviewer comments.

Guidance for students:

The same advice also applies to University students developing research proposals. Students are reminded of the importance of learning about ethical principles as part of their formal education and development as researchers. In some subjects, students may also be required to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of these principles if their programme of study is accredited by a professional body. Students are advised to check with their Module Leader or Supervisor for further guidance. Doctoral and MPhil students should also refer to the information provided in the University's [Code of Practice for PGR students](#).

APPLYING FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

Guidance for applicants:

In accordance with the University's [Research Ethics Policy](#), ethical approval must be in place before any work can begin on the project. For externally funded projects, ethical approval should be sought at the award stage, or at the project sign-off stage for internally funded and student projects.

Although the use of AI tools to generate text to populate sections of the University's [online ethics form](#) is not prohibited, colleagues and students are reminded that the process of applying for ethical approval is intended to prompt reflection and can therefore be a useful learning exercise for both early career and experienced researchers. Applicants should also be prepared to respond to reviewer feedback on the proposed research design and methodology as well as the ethical implications.

Researchers using AI tools to collect data should also consider whether consent has been given for the secondary use of any personal and / or sensitive data. For expert guidance on data protection and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) please contact the Information Governance Team (email: rec-man@ncl.ac.uk). Consideration should also be given to the provenance of the data and any potential conflicts of interest declared to ensure transparency.

Guidance for Reviewers:

Ethics Committee members play a valuable role in reviewing ethics applications from colleagues and students, which helps to strengthen the quality of research at Newcastle University. As active members of the research community themselves, Reviewers draw upon their own knowledge and experience as well as their expertise in ethics in order to provide feedback on the research design and methodology. As part of their roles, Reviewers may be asked to comment on applications from other research disciplines. However, for data protection reasons and to ensure confidentiality, the use of AI tools to support the ethical review process is not appropriate, and in some cases may constitute a breach of statutory requirements. It is therefore important that Reviewers continue to complete the ethics review process manually in order to meet external funder and publisher requirements regarding the ethical review of projects.

Research Policy, Intelligence and Ethics Team
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