The Role of the Supervisor in Research Ethics

Research Ethics, Dalhousie University

The **responsibilities** of supervisors with respect to research ethics is described in the Dalhousie University *Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans* and included here, along with **recommendations** for supervisors on how to help their students throughout the research ethics review process.

Responsibilities of Supervisors

Supervisors of students conducting research involving humans 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 research ethics review and approval.
- 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.
- The **content** of research ethics submissions and ensuring adequate **scholarly merit, feasibility, quality, and completeness** of submissions prior to submission for research ethics board 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 E., 4.2).

Recommendations for Supervisors

Before submitting to the research ethics board, ensure students are appropriately **prepared** and that they:

- 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: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (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.
- Explain the **scholarly merit** of the proposed research.
- Describe the **sample size**. How many participants are needed? Does the research have a **feasible plan** to secure this sample 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 who will be doing the **recruitment** (if applicable) and what actions they will take.
- Ensure any **cooperation or permissions** needed for recruitment and research activities are secured and documented in the appendices.
- 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 if they could benefit from help with their written communication.
- Make sure the **research plan is complete** before submitting to the REB. Although changes can emerge in the course of the research which can be addressed through an amendment (change) 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 their **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 REB 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 active research ethics board approval and that allowing REB approval to lapse is a violation of the University's *Scholarly Misconduct 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.

- University policies
  Supervisors must ensure that student researchers comply with other University policies and procedures as applicable to the project.

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