

Ethical Guidelines for Student Research

In force with start of academic year 2020/21

The purpose of this document is to provide students and their supervisors with support for ethical reflection upon students' research plans, for the master's theses or other research projects. It is based on the [AISSR Integrity Protocol and Ethical Procedure and Questions documents](#) (2017) and the hitherto used [CSS and GSSS Guidelines for the Ethical Review of Research Conducted by Students](#) (2012).

In the first part of this document, academic integrity is defined. Its principles should guide all GSSS students' conduct during the whole process of their studies, and ideally beyond. The second part of the document offers a list of questions to help students to think through their research plan and complete the ethical reflection section or chapter of their thesis or paper. The third part describes the procedure for obtaining ethical clearance for a student research project, in cases where this is required by the degree programme. The fourth and final part describes the procedure for acquiring permission for fieldwork or research work placements outside of the Netherlands, in cases where this is required by the degree programme.

I. Academic Integrity

The [Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) (2018), which the UvA endorses, breaks academic integrity down into five core principles: honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence (impartiality), and responsibility. Although these principles ought to be integral to the conduct of every researcher, this is not always the case; they are sometimes violated in [various ways](#): by introducing fabricated or falsified data, secretly omitting certain findings, plagiarising and wrongly presenting oneself as an author, intentionally misusing methods or misinterpreting results, being culpably careless in the conduct of research or permitting and concealing the misconduct of other researchers. None of these practices are acceptable for our students or staff in any way, shape, or form.

For student research projects in particular, five issues related to academic integrity are most relevant:¹

1. Scientific Fraud

Scientific fraud is understood as conscious deception in the form of cheating and misrepresentation of research procedures or results of research. This may involve not only serious manipulation of data or results but also "subtler" forms such as reporting empirical results consistent with one's findings and arguments, while being aware of but not reporting less favourable results.

¹ For elaboration on these topics, please refer to the [AISSR Integrity Protocol](#) on which this section is based.

2. Plagiarism²

Plagiarism is a form of scientific fraud that concerns use or reproduction of another person's text, data (including audio, visual and other forms of material), code or ideas without properly acknowledging the source. Plagiarism may not only take a form of conscious deception (e.g. presenting someone else's work as one's own) but also negligence (e.g. failure to clearly indicate quoted or paraphrased text, material, ideas etc.). This means that you should take great care to indicate direct quotations properly and to provide full information on your sources wherever in your work you rely on the work of others. The requirement to acknowledge intellectual indebtedness to others applies to non-academic sources, too. "Submitting papers obtained from a commercial agency or written (whether or not for payment) by another person"³ is also considered to be plagiarism.

3. Self-citation Standards

Students may build their research upon their own previously published work. In such instances, though, they must properly indicate that this is the case, so as to avoid "self-plagiarism." If you want to build on some of your own earlier non-published work, such as older term papers, this must be discussed with your supervisor and should in any case be minimized.

4. Conflicts of Interest

Conflict of interest occurs when a student has relationships or allegiances external to the given project that may make them steer the research towards a particular outcome. These relationships may be of several kinds: economic, political or even personal. Their sole existence, nonetheless, does not imply that the project cannot be conducted at all. Rather, it is important to recognize that such affiliations and normative priors might affect one's results and to take steps to ensure that empirical work can yield findings beyond or against such priors. Hence, where relevant, the student should be transparent and explicit about such possible conflicts of interest, in the direction of full disclosure.

5. Research Data Management (RDM)

Practices to prevent and identify fraud in empirical research and the need for replicability require information about and, where possible, access to the data used in research. However, for various practical and ethical reasons, making data available is not always possible. The AISSR thus advises you to follow the motto "open when possible, closed when necessary."

Supervisors may ask you to make data available, for example as an appendix to your thesis, and you should be prepared to explain why any given data cannot be disclosed. At the same time, you have the responsibility to protect your sources where necessary, for example by anonymizing interview subjects when they have so requested, or when making their identities public may lead to their coming to harm. Making decisions about which data to disclose and which not may be difficult. When in doubt, it is important to discuss these questions with your supervisor. (See also section II.3.)

And what happens to your own papers and theses?

We employ a plagiarism check software called Turnitin. Usually, when you are asked to submit a paper, and certainly when you are asked to submit your master thesis, you are asked to submit it via this software (which is integrated with our electronic teaching platform Canvas). Turnitin stores your work

² In addition to the AISSR Integrity Protocol, this section draws from the UvA's [Regulations Governing Fraud and Plagiarism for UvA Students](#). Please refer to this document for details, binding definitions and regulations currently in place.

³ Regulations Governing Fraud and Plagiarism for UvA Students, article 3h.

within its database. However, their terms of operation stipulate that the data in this database can be used only for purposes of future plagiarism checks (for example, to see whether someone else rips off your thesis in the future). Your thesis does not in this way end up in the public domain. After graduation, theses are also stored digitally in the administrative archives for accreditation purposes (this is required for seven years) and, if you give express permission, also in the UvA library. However, you keep the intellectual property right over your own work. This also means that there are no problems with presenting (parts of) our thesis or paper at a conference, or even publishing (parts of) it.

II. Questions for Ethical Reflection

The following list of questions comes from the [AISSR support document for ethical review of research plans](#). Its purpose is not to provide the student with a standard form to be filled in and submitted, although different degree programs inside the GSSS may well use such a form. Nor are all the questions necessarily relevant for each project. Rather, the list offers a structure for reflection upon your research plan. You should discuss these questions in a one-on-one conversation with your supervisor early on in the process. You can also use them to write a section on research ethics, if that is required as a part of a research proposal or final thesis.

1. Who and what to study

1a. Approaching people

Social science research frequently involves working with informants, participants or interviewees – and their rights are to be respected. How will you recruit these people? Will you be working through other institutions (e.g. healthcare facilities, schools)? If so, how will you make clear your relative independence from these institutions (so that they will not treat those who participate in your research differently from those who do not)? Are you thinking of handing out money or other rewards for participation in your research? If so, why? What consequences will this have? What alternatives might there be? What other issues of decent conduct will arise at this point and how will you handle them?

1b. Not neglecting people

If in your research you work with publicly available data, if you study built environments, infrastructures or practices (e.g. mobility patterns, neighbourhood dynamics), or if otherwise you do not directly depend on people and their willingness to talk with you: how will you still incorporate in your work respect for the interests and concerns of those whose lives your work may affect?

How do your research questions address, reflect on, critique or otherwise relate to the concerns of the various people to whom your research pertains? How do your concerns map onto or clash with those of relevant others?

How will you explain your research and its purposes not only to social scientists but to the people it concerns or affects?

2. Relating your research back to the social world

2a. Impact on people

Will your information gathering have the potential to harm people? If so, do you intend to protect your research subjects/informants (etc.) against the potential negative consequences of their participation? If so, how? If not, why not? This may become pressing in situations where your

informants are 'undercover' (e.g. illegal) and/or where states or other organisations are at least as curious about them as you are. What kinds of risk-reducing measures will you take? What other harms might there be in store for them, and how will you avoid and/or reduce these harms? If you are not sure you can avoid harm, does your goal merit the risks?

2b. Establishing ground rules with your research subjects

Will you ask people for their consent to be researched? If so, what exactly will you ask them to consent to? At what stage in the process? What about your research procedure or the use of your research will you share with them or leave open? If you would like to ask for signatures on forms, do you think that it is indeed wise: what kind of burden might that represent for them, and is that burden warranted? If you want to work with forms, which shape do you give these? If paperwork is not opportune in the settings where you will be working, in which other way will you show you are respectful or provide guarantees?

Will you guarantee anonymity? How will you ensure it? By using pseudonyms in note taking or in reports and/or by altering relevant details about people in your texts? Providing anonymity may come at the cost of a lack of openness about your sources. Is that relevant in your case? If so, how do you intend to handle this tension? What do you do when people want to have their names used? Or when they are public figures whose identity cannot be hidden?

2c. Tough cases

What extra safeguards will you use if your research subjects/informants are minors, or otherwise in a more vulnerable position, or are less able to understand what is going on?

Will you find yourself in a situation where you are passively observing, so that your research subjects might not be aware that you are doing research? If so, how will you still work towards decency, fairness, and safety for yourself and your research subjects?

And if you will not directly face and talk with the people to whom your research pertains, how will you attend to their interests and concerns?

2d. Beyond establishing ground rules

Your responsibility does not end with shifting decisions and choices to your research subjects/informants. How will you avoid or reduce the risk that your research process will harm them? That is, what will you do to protect your research subjects/informants against the potential negative consequences of their participation? What might such negative consequences be?

How will you protect yourself and other researchers and research assistants involved against potential negative consequences of the research process? Situations of illegality come to mind here. But the risks may also be social (e.g. being confronted with violence) or mental/psychological. If this is relevant in your case, what kind of personal and emotional preparations and support will you organise for yourself and other researchers (assistants, fellow students, etc.)?

3. After assembling your data

3a. Data storage

How will you deal with the materials you have assembled? How will you store/archive them so that they are protected against theft (e.g. using password protection)?

3b. Data accessibility

Once you have data, there may be tensions here between keeping these hidden to ensure the privacy of respondents/informants or sharing them with fellow researchers and/or other publics. How will you balance keeping sensitive issues from inquisitive eyes with proving enough openness to assure others of the truthfulness of your results? In other words, how will you handle the potential tension between the ethical ideal of data protection and the integrity ideal of data sharing?

If you intend to open up your data, when will you do so – immediately, or after a certain embargo time? Will others be able and invited to use them? Will you also preserve your data for later reuse (e.g. after a few decades)? Or will it be better in your case to destroy your raw materials so that the original research subjects/informants are better protected, or for another reason (if so, which reason)? Here, the same tensions arise but, as the timeline is longer, specificities may change.

3c. Analysing data

How will you work with the data you gather? How will you do justice to them, both in the sense of bringing out true results and in that of attending to relevant concerns?

4. Writing up the thesis (or research paper)

4a. Communicating your choices

How will you explain and lay out the methods that you used to gather, treat and analyse your data? What, in your case, are the relevant ethical issues in this context?

4b. Your audience

Where, when and for whom will you write? Where do you think your work should be circulated and in which language(s)? How does this relate to your concerns, to the concerns of your research subjects/informants, and/or to what is relevant in the practices that you studied?

4c. Implications of your findings

How will you ensure, overall, that your research products will be good in the ethical sense of the word? Are you sure that they will not harm those who have put their trust in you? Have you considered what might happen to your results, what others might do with them? Have you taken into account what role you might play in this? If you want to express criticism, will your criticism be clearly directed, well-argued, and respectful of the individuals concerned?

III. Procedure for Obtaining Ethical Clearance for a Student Research Project

Sometimes, research may get you into dangerous situations. If you feel that you are in any sort of danger (physically or emotionally), or if you feel that it might be better to conceal your purpose or identity – get out of that situation immediately! If you cannot be honest about who you are and what you are doing without feeling at risk, you are doing something wrong. Stop it, and get in touch with your supervisor to talk about how to adjust your work and get back onto safe ground.

GSSS degree programmes may decide to ask students to obtain ethical clearance for a research project. If this is the case, the following procedure applies.

Ethical review of research conducted by students

If a proposed research project (research proposal) fails to comply with the ethical standards presented in this and the referenced documents, the GSSS degree programme may reject it. Approval must always be granted by the supervising lecturer or thesis supervisor. Supervisors have the authority to veto certain topics and types of research based on the principles expressed here. (For example, your supervisor may not want you to interview traumatized children if you do not have the proper skills in order to prevent their being harmed by your research.) The lecturer/supervisor is the person who can give ethical clearance, based on having been declared competent to do so by the Examinations Board. It is then the responsibility of the student to behave in line with the terms of the clearance in all phases of the research. In the event of doubt whether a proposed research project is ethically justified, the lecturer/supervisor may first consult a colleague, the director of the relevant AISSR research programme group, or the programme director. In the event of continuing doubt, or if the lecturer/supervisor and the student fail to reach a mutually agreed solution, the proposed research project will be submitted to the Examinations Board for review. If the Examinations Board is unable or unwilling to make a judgement, or if the student or lecturer lodge an objection against the proposed decision of the Examinations Board, the Examinations Board will submit the research proposal to the AISSR Ethics Committee for advice. Based on the advice issued by the AISSR Ethics Committee, the Examinations Board will decide after consulting the GSSS director. An appeal may then be brought against the decision of the Examinations Board, following the customary appeals procedure.

Step-by-step procedure:

- The lecturer/supervisor reviews the ethical acceptability of the research proposal.
- If it is rejected, the student must revise the proposal.
- In the event of doubt, the lecturer/supervisor consults a relevant colleague.
- If doubt continues, or student and lecturer/supervisor cannot come to an agreement on the needed changes, the proposal is submitted to the Examinations Board.
- The Examinations Board reviews the research proposal and will either issue approval or a rejection.
- If the Examinations Board cannot come to a decision, it will submit the case to the AISSR Ethics Committee.
- Having heard (and following on from) the AISSR Ethics Committee, the Examinations Board will reach a final judgement.
- The usual appeals procedures relating to decisions of the Examinations Board apply to any further steps.

If you submit a master thesis to a programme requiring ethical clearance without having received such clearance, you have not met one of the important learning outcomes of your degree programme: awareness of your ethical responsibilities as a researcher. This means that you do not qualify for the degree, even if your thesis exhibits no other weaknesses. In practice, it means that your thesis will not be assessed. You receive no credit for it and have to start from scratch.

Sometimes hosting institutions abroad ask us to provide formal ethical clearance, perhaps because they do not have a procedure themselves and are not content with merely a written declaration by the supervisor. In those cases, the Examinations Board can provide a clearance document for the foreign institution.

IV. Guidelines for Research Work Placements and Fieldwork Outside the Netherlands

As a rule, the supervising lecturer grants approval for fieldwork or research work placements outside the Netherlands as part of the degree programme. S/he has been declared competent to assess the feasibility and safety of the proposed research project abroad by the Examinations Board. In the event of doubt, approval will not be granted. In that case a new research proposal must be drawn up (with a different location for gathering data) and approved by the lecturer/supervisor. If the student disagrees with the rejection, the student may approach the Examinations Board, and the Examinations Board may overrule the lecturer/supervisor.

In any case no approval will be granted for a formal study component abroad if the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued a warning 'advising against non-essential travel' for that particular country or region (a so-called "code red").⁴ If the Ministry issues such a warning in the period between approval of the research proposal and the student's actual departure, the approval will have to be revoked. Students are perceived to have an individual responsibility to adhere to the advice issued by the Dutch embassy (or by their country of origin, if they are non-Dutch nationals) for the relevant country or region. In cases where hardship results from such a revocation of approval (e.g. because flights have been paid for), the student may approach the GSSS International Office with a plea for extra financial support (which is, however, not guaranteed).

If a student travels abroad despite consent not having been granted, the proposed research plan will be deemed unapproved and the rights to supervision and assessment of the research project will lapse.

The student is responsible for acquiring the proper type of visa for the stay abroad, as needed.

Extracurricular stays abroad fall outside the scope of the degree programme and, in principle, will not be approved by the degree programme. This is based on the principle that a student should be available full-time to complete their degree programme within the duration defined by the relevant programme.

Step-by-step procedure:

- The lecturer/supervisor and the student assess the safety-related aspects of the research destination.
- If the Ministry has issued a warning 'advising against non-essential travel', the proposal is rejected.
- In the event of doubt, the lecturer/supervisor rejects the proposal and discusses this with the student.
- If the student disagrees with the rejection (and continues to do so after discussion), the proposal may be submitted to the Examinations Board.
- The Examinations Board reviews the research proposal and will either issue approval or rejection.
- If, despite a negative decision, a student still goes ahead with the research in accordance with the rejected plan, the rights to supervision and assessment lapse.

⁴ For up-to-date travel advice please consult <https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/reizen/reisadviezen> (in Dutch).