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## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This Research Ethics Policy seeks to ensure that any research with human participants conducted by students and/or academic staff at Escape Studios ensures the dignity, rights, safety, and well-being of the participants and researchers.
- 1.2 Drawing on the definition of the Research Excellence Framework 2014<sup>1</sup>, research is defined as a “process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared”. It should be understood in the broadest possible terms and includes questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, observations, among others. Furthermore, ethical approval is needed for analysis of pre-existing data not available in the public domain that have not been fully anonymised.

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<sup>1</sup> REF2014 Assessment framework and guidance on submissions, REF 02.2011. page 48

- 1.3 All Escape Studios students and permanent staff should have ethical approval prior to commencing data collection.
- 1.4 In case of an external researcher seeking to conduct research at Escape Studios premises or recruit participants from the student body or permanent staff, the external researcher is required to apply for ethical approval as described in this policy or submit ethical approval received from another institution's research ethics committee to the Research Ethics Panel for consideration. Permission from the Dean of School may also be required.
- 1.5 In case of collaborative research that includes partners from other institutions or organisations, Escape Studios permanent staff and students must ensure that their part of any research has research ethics approval. This can be acquired by applying for ethical approval as described in this policy or submitting ethical approval received from another institution's research ethics committee to the Research Ethics Panel for consideration.

## **2 Principles of Ethical Research**

- 2.1 Building on Five Ethical Principles of Social Science Research adopted by the Academy of Social Sciences<sup>2</sup> in March 2015, Escape Studios is committed to foster a research and scholarship environment that is inclusive of different interests, values, methods and perspectives and aims to maximise benefits for individuals and society whilst minimising risk and harm.
- 2.2 When conducting or disseminating research, staff and students should be mindful about their social responsibilities, and respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values and dignity of individuals, groups, and communities. All research should be conducted with integrity and transparency whilst employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.
- 2.3 The principles of ethical research should underpin all stages of research inquiry from the selection of research methods and the recruitment of participants to the analysis of data and the reporting and dissemination of research findings.
- 2.4 Central elements of ethical research are informed consent, confidentiality and/or anonymity, voluntary participation and minimisation of harm to the research participants and others involved, alongside maximisation of benefits.

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<sup>2</sup> Academy Adopts Five Ethical Principles for Social Science Research (2015),  
<https://www.acss.org.uk/developing-generic-ethics-principles-social-science/academy-adopts-five-ethical-principles-for-social-science-research/>

- 2.5 To ensure voluntary participation and informed consent, researchers must inform participants of the following:
- the objectives of the research - the purpose, nature, and scope;
  - what participation will involve (for example, what kind of questions will be asked and how much time it will take);
  - the possible risks and benefits to the participants, if any;
  - how the information will be used from analysis to dissemination (e.g. in a publication; in coursework);
  - the degree of anonymity that can be provided to participants and explicit information on mitigation where anonymity cannot be guaranteed (e.g. anonymous reporting; fictionalised personal characteristics; non-disclosure agreements; confidentiality. See paragraph 2.8);
  - how to withdraw from the study and request removal of data;
  - who will have access to the data and how it will be stored;
  - when data will be deleted when it is no longer needed.
- 2.6 This information should be provided either in a written information sheet, or in an email, and reiterated orally to participants at the start of data collection.
- 2.7 As a default, participants should be offered anonymity and/or confidentiality to ensure both the objectivity of the study and the safety of participants.
- 2.8 Where there is a possibility of identification by association or inference, this should be communicated to intended participants. All reasonable precautions to avoid identification by association or inference should be taken. This might include fictionalisation (e.g. changing any identifiable features or information), or removal of identifiable features from data sections that are published or disseminated. To ensure that the research is conducted with integrity and transparency, all precautions taken to avoid identification should be clearly stated in the information sheet to participants and, importantly, when the research results are reported.
- 2.9 Research where the participants cannot be informed about the nature of the study prior to participating (either because the study requires elements of deception or entails covert observation) counts as high-risk and must be considered and approved by the Research Ethics Panel. The exception to this is observing non-identifiable

behaviours in any public space either real-life or virtual. Any content<sup>3</sup> published or posted on any platform that is clearly aimed for public display can be defined as public behaviour when the following conditions are met: the collection and use of data follow the Terms and Conditions of the platform in which the messages are published and the research is considered low risk (see Paragraph 3.2). In any case, every effort should be taken to ensure the anonymity and fair presentation of participants (see Paragraphs 2.5 - 2.8)

- 2.10 Anonymity entails obligations on not only how the information provided by the participant is used in the research, but also on how the secure storage of raw data and contact details is ensured.
- 2.11 All data must be handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

### **3 Types of Ethical Research Applications**

- 3.1 Escape Studios distinguishes between two types of research ethics applications based on the risk the study poses to participants and researchers: low-risk and high-risk.
- 3.2 Research is considered low risk if the following conditions are met:
  - (i) the data (including an audio recordings) are completely anonymous, with no personal information being collected (apart from name and a record of consent);
  - (ii) the issues being researched are not considered to be sensitive or confidential in nature;
  - (iii) the issues being researched are not likely to upset or disturb participants;
  - (iv) vulnerable or dependant groups are not included;
  - (v) there is no risk of possible disclosures or reporting obligations.
- 3.3 Any research is considered high risk if any of the following applies:
  - (i) participants are under the age of 18 years;
  - (ii) project involves participants who are vulnerable;

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'content' can refer to anything from textual, visual, video or audio content that is posted on a publicly available platform with the exception of email (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, online forums, blogs, chat rooms).

- (iii) participants will participate without their prior consent; the exception to prior consent being required is research observing public behaviours;
  - (iv) study involves discussing personally sensitive subjects;
  - (v) there is a risk that due to the nature of the study, the participants could disclose illegal or harmful activity;
  - (vi) the study could induce psychological stress or anxiety on participants;
  - (vii) project is institutional, regardless of risk level (See Paragraph 4.2).
- 3.4 Students and staff should use the Research Ethics Approval Checklist Tool to determine whether their research is low-risk or high-risk.
- 3.5 Students should discuss their research plans and risk assessment with their tutor. More complex cases where the risk level is not immediately clear should be submitted to the Research Ethics Panel for consideration.
- 3.6 In the case of high-risk research, the risks should be measured against the possible benefits of research for individuals and society, and all reasonable precautions should be taken to minimise the anticipated risk and harm. This is done through a risk assessment in which both the anticipated risk and harm and possible benefits to individuals and society are assessed and addressed.

## **4 Research Ethics Approval Process**

- 4.1 As provided in paragraph 3.1 above, depending on the risk the study poses to participants and researchers, there are two routes for ethics approval: low-risk research ethics applications and high-risk ethics application. Low-risk ethics applications are, normally, assessed within the School, whereas high-risk research ethics applications require approval by the Research Ethics Panel. For further information on the Research Ethics Panel assessment, please consult Research Ethics Panel Terms of Reference, Appendix 1: Research Ethics Panel checklist for applications.
- 4.2 The exception to this rule is research conducted at the institutional level. All research conducted at the institutional level must be submitted to the Research Ethics Panel for consideration regardless of the risk level.
- 4.3 Retrospective approval is not possible for any research. Ethical approval is needed before the start of data collection.
- 4.4 Any research, as specified in paragraph 1.2, that is conducted without ethical approval will be treated as a major academic or research misconduct. Escape Studios

will take no responsibility for such research and the student or member of staff could be subject to disciplinary proceedings.

- 4.5 If, after receiving approval, the research design changes substantially in such a way that new ethical considerations arise, a new risk assessment, as described in paragraphs 3.1 - 3.6, is required, a new application must be submitted either to the Dean of School or to the Research Ethics Panel, as appropriate to the perceived level of risk. The application should include the initial approval, a detailed explanation of how the research design has changed, and how the new ethical considerations are to be addressed in the revised research.

## **5 Student Applications**

- 5.1 Students studying at Levels 4, 5 and 6 are not, normally, permitted to conduct high-risk research (See also Paragraphs 7.1 – 7.3 below).
- 5.2 All students who are conducting low-risk research are required to submit a Research Ethics Approval (Low Risk) form along with any other appropriate documentation to their module tutor, as instructed. The Research Ethics Approval Forms can be downloaded from the Escape Studios' website.
- 5.3 Students conducting high-risk research are required to submit a Research Ethics Approval form along with any other appropriate documentation to the Research Ethics Panel for their consideration prior to the start of the research. The appropriate documentation is listed on the application form and includes the following: participation information sheets, consent forms, interview or focus group protocols, survey questions and any other materials given or distributed to intended participants. In all instances, students are advised to discuss their planned research with their subject tutor.
- 5.4 Ethical approval is also required for non-credit-bearing research with human participants. Non-credit bearing research includes all research activities that are not part of a module or are done in addition to the required coursework. Students conducting non-credit-bearing research are required to assess the risk level using the Research Ethics Approval Checklist Tool, as described in paragraph 3.4, to determine the appropriate research ethics application route. In the case of low-risk research, students are required to submit their Research Ethics Approval form along with any other appropriate documentation to their Module Leader or Programme Leader for consideration. High-risk research applications along with any other appropriate documentation are submitted to the Research Ethics Panel for consideration.

## **6 Staff Applications**

- 6.1 Permanent staff conducting low-risk research are required to submit a Research Ethics Approval (Low Risk) form along with any other appropriate documentation to their Dean of School for approval. In case of institution-wide research, relevant documentation should be submitted to the Dean of Academic Affairs for approval.
- 6.2 Permanent staff conducting high-risk research are required to submit a Research Ethics Approval (High Risk) form along with any other appropriate documentation to the Research Ethics Panel for consideration and approval. The appropriate documentation is listed in the application form and includes the following: participation information sheets, consent forms, interview or focus group protocols, survey questions and any other materials given or distributed to intended participants.

## **7 Ethical Clearance for Level 4 and 5 Modules**

- 7.1 There are cases where Level 4 and 5 modules include a research element, either for the purpose of students learning research techniques or for the purpose of producing small-scale research. In these cases, module leaders must apply for ethical clearance.
- 7.2 For these modules (or groups of modules), module leaders must complete an Ethical Clearance for Level 4 and 5 Modules form and submit it to the Research Ethics Panel before the start of the academic year. The purpose of this is to ensure that students at Level 4 and 5 will not be conducting any high-risk research and that all assignments and assessments reflect this.
- 7.3 The ethical clearance for Level 4 and 5 modules is valid for six years. However, if a module undergoes any major amendments, or minor amendments that affect assessments, a new ethical clearance form must be submitted for consideration.

## **8 Powers of Research Ethics Panel**

- 8.1 The Research Ethics Panel may:
  - (i) Approve the research ethics application.
  - (ii) Approve with minor amendments. In this case, the application is essentially ethically sound, however, minor amendments are required before full approval (normally finalised by Chair's Action).
  - (iii) Approve with major amendments. In this case, the research requires major amendments before it can be re-considered by the Panel.

- (iv) Reject the research. The proposal is deemed unethical.
- (v) Defer approval in cases where the Research Ethics Panel could not reach a decision and needs to seek further advice from the Academic Board.
- (vi) Pause or require amendments to already approved research due to changed circumstances.
- (vii) Approve ethical clearance for Level 4 and 5 modules.
- (viii) Scrutinise ethics applications approved by another institution's research ethics committee, and either confirm or require additional assurances.

## **9 Research Ethics Records**

- 9.1 Research Ethics records will be maintained by the Academic Quality Office.
- 9.2 Schools are required to submit low-risk approvals for record keeping to the Secretary of the Research Ethics Panel who shall be an Academic Quality Officer, appointed by the Dean of Academic Affairs.
- 9.3 Reports on research ethics approvals will be made annually to the Academic Board.



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