



# Common Awards

## Research Ethics Policy and Guidance 2024-25

### Scope of this Policy

This policy applies to all students enrolled on Common Awards programmes delivered by St Augustine's College of Theology. It specifically applies to all *students who are undertaking independent learning projects and/or dissertations, which involve research involving human participants. It also applies to students submitting work for placement-based modules.*

This policy should be read in conjunction with the [Common Awards policy on Academic Misconduct: Research Ethics](#), which sets out the procedure to be followed in cases where a suspicion arises that a student has not followed the College's Research Ethics Policy when pursuing academic assignments for a Common Awards module.

There is much activity carried out by students, especially in placements and contexts, which does not count as research for the purposes of this policy, for example asking people to fill in sermon feedback forms, or writing a reflection on a pastoral visit. Nevertheless, these activities may still have ethical implications, and these are dealt with in **Section A**.

**Section B** and **Section C** deal with students who wish to engage in *research involving human participants* through the use of *questionnaires, interviews, focus groups or formal observations of activity*. Separate advice and permission must be sought for any research activity involving human participants not covered under these headings.

St Augustine's College of Theology is committed to treating all human beings with respect, and expects the highest standards of integrity in those who are its students. The well-being of participants in research and placement work must be at the forefront of the researchers' concern and any risk must be minimised.

### Review of this Policy

This policy will be reviewed by the College every three years, or earlier if a serious concern is raised in the Common Awards Management Committee.

### Contact Us

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## **SECTION A: PLACEMENTS AND EXPERIENCE-BASED REFLECTIONS**

Work leading to placement or other experience-based reflections does not generally count as research for the purposes of this policy. Although the student may use encounters with others for their reflections, the emphasis of these forms of assessment is on self-reflection and integrating that with critical theological enquiry. The sources for reflection will primarily include journals, personal stories, evaluation by others of a specific activity with which the student was recently involved, and similar sources, rather than people's personal details. They are less likely to involve what are clearly research methods such as questionnaires, interviews, focus groups or formal observation of individuals. When they do include such methods, or if there are other reasons to judge that a formal research project is being undertaken, the guidance in Section B and the ethics approval process in Section C must be followed.

### **Safeguarding**

- Though most students will have already obtained DBS Disclosure, it is the responsibility of the receiving placement organisation to assure themselves that necessary DBS or other safeguarding and Health & Safety checks are in place. Students are expected to follow the safeguarding policies and procedures of the host organisation.
- In order to engage in pastoral work theological students must be under supervision and need to be assessed. Such supervision and assessment is carried out through conversation and through written work. Subject to safeguarding guidelines, any personal details discussed in supervision are confidential to the supervision process; personal details recorded in written work are also confidential to the assessment process.

### **Informed Consent**

- In the case of reflection on a student's observation of a group activity involving adults (e.g. worship) where direct contact with those individuals is not involved, the consent of the organisation (e.g. PCC) will be sufficient. Information packs for supervisors should advise that congregations/church groups be informed of the kind of reflections that students will be required to write as part of their placement submissions. Forms which allow members of a placement church congregation to evaluate student activity should make clear the way these will subsequently be used. The use of video recording needs specific consent from any identifiable subjects.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

- Placement submissions in Common Awards programmes require the student to reflect on context as a relevant aspect of ministerial practice. This does not remove the expectation of anonymising persons and locations that appear in experience-based reflections, or in evidence provided as appendices to assignments. General details should be used in order to contextualise the work rather than naming the location.
- When referring to evidence of the nature of the context, students are expected to exercise discretion and sensitivity. For example, parish demographics developed by the Church of England statistics department can be referred to but it is expected that students render their citations general, referring to the page and publication year, but not the specific parish.

- Written work remains the intellectual property of the student and will not be shared by the supervisor or examiners with others, except those bound by the confidentiality of the assessment process. Supervisors or examiners who wish to cite students' work in any context should seek the permission of the student and ascertain that if any personal stories are retold, the appropriate written permissions have been obtained. Students who subsequently wish to make available their writing or reflections to a wider audience should seek the written permission of those whose stories they wish to tell – even if names have been altered – in order to preserve confidentiality and confidence.

### **Data Protection**

- Information held on computer relating to an identifiable subject falls within the scope of the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. It is the responsibility of the student to work within the Data Protection policies and procedures of St Augustine's College of Theology.

## **SECTION B: RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**

Ethics approval must be sought for any research involving human participants. If there is any doubt about whether Ethics approval is necessary, students should seek the guidance of their Director of Studies or supervisor.

### **Safeguarding**

- Where research includes the participation of children or vulnerable adults, researchers must have received an enhanced disclosure by the Disclosure and Barring Service. This is a key requirement. Normally, students who are preparing for recognised ministry will have obtained such disclosure at the beginning of their programme. Other students will need to undergo checking before commencing research.
- Interviews with children, young people under the age of 18, or vulnerable adults, whether individually or in a group must never be conducted by the interviewer alone. A responsible adult such as a parent, carer or teacher must be present. It is the responsibility of students to ascertain and adhere to the safeguarding guidelines of the church or other context in which research is conducted. Any commitment to confidentiality made to participants does not obviate the need to follow safeguarding guidelines.

### **Informed Consent**

- All participants in research must give their informed consent to participate. Where specific individuals are invited consent should be in writing. Participants must have been informed, in writing, of the nature of the research and their participation in it, of any risks, and of the intended use for any information they give. In this way their consent will be informed, valid, and

freely given. The extent of the readership of the final project should also make clear: whether it will be read only by examiners, available to library users, or be published more widely.

- In addition, permission for the proposed research must also be sought from any institution, school or church, where the research takes place.
- Where participants are recruited from clients of a particular service-provider, whether public or private, written permission must be sought from that provider, eg NHS, Social Services etc.
- Where participants under the age of 16 are involved in any research, informed consent must be obtained in writing from their parents or legal guardians.
- Specific consent must be obtained where interviews or observations are going to be audio or video recorded.
- The right for a participant to withdraw from the research in which the student is gathering data, and withdraw their consent, must be made clear and the mechanism to do so communicated to the participant. In the case of anonymised research, participants should be able to withdraw up until the point of anonymisation. In other cases, participants should be able to withdraw up until academic submission of the research.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

- The confidentiality of participants must be respected, particularly with respect to any personal information obtained from them. Participants must be informed, in writing, of how this will be secured.
- Normally, information used in final forms of assessment must be anonymised, along with the details of other identifying information (the names of local churches or projects, etc). Descriptions of the location of research should be general rather than specific (e.g. referring to 'a church in an industrial district of a large urban city, with very high proportion of racial and religious diversity' rather than 'St Peter's, Moss Side).
- Remember that people may be easily identifiable from their role or details of context. If such factors mean that anonymity cannot be guaranteed, this must be made clear at the point at which consent is obtained.
- Only where express permission has been given by an individual in writing to the use of personally identifiable information being used may it be so.
- If it seems necessary to include in the supporting documentation something such as a church newsletter that will identify the place where the research was undertaken and it is not possible to remove or obscure such details, permission must be obtained from a recognised authoritative body eg PCC or incumbent, and from anyone whose character, opinions, etc., feature in the assignment and who can be identified by means of the material in the supporting documentation.
- Assessors of submitted work are bound by the same expectations of confidentiality.
- The submission of work for assessment is distinct from work that will be published. The former has a confidential system of assessment, the latter has a wider public audience. If there is the possibility of publication, participants must be made aware of this in advance of the research beginning and this possibility must form an explicit part of the consent obtained. If publication becomes a possibility after consents have been obtained, new written consent must be gained.

## **Data Protection**

- All research must be carried out within the bounds of the General Data Protection Regulation and Data Protection Act 2018. This includes requirements for secure data storage and destruction of data. It is the responsibility of the student to inform themselves of these parameters, and to work within the Data Protection policies and procedures of St Augustine's College of Theology.
- Informed consent must be obtained by participants when any personal data is to be held about them.

Informed consent means that participants must be clear about what data will be stored, why, how, and for how long.

## **The Conduct of Interviews**

- Act politely and courteously at all times.
- Explain to the interviewee(s) the nature and purpose of your project.
- Explain how the interview is to be used.
- Obtain permission for the interview to be recorded, if this will be necessary.
- Clearly set out the scope of confidentiality within the interview.
- Make it clear that the participant can terminate the interview at any time.
- Obtain any consents in writing.

## **SECTION C: ETHICS APPROVAL PROCESS FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**

Ethics approval is sought using the Ethics Approval Form (Appendix 3). This requires an outline of the nature and purpose of the research and the completion of a checklist that identifies ethical issues and subsequent comment to assess the risk involved.

An ethics submission will not normally be considered until a Dissertation or Learning Project proposal has been approved, and a supervisor has been allocated, by the Board of Examiners. Indeed it is wise to work with a supervisor to confirm the methodology, prior to making an ethics approval submission. If the methodology changes in any way subsequent to ethics approval, including for example widening participation, changing interview questions, or storing additional data, then a new ethics approval will be required before any data collection begins.

An Ethics Approval Form, when submitted, must be accompanied by:

- The approved Independent Learning Project proposal form or Dissertation Proposal Form.

- A participant information sheet that clearly explains the study such that they are in a position to give informed consent (see guidelines in Appendix 1).<sup>1</sup>
- A consent form for use by participants which will also specifically include permission to record any interview or observations if relevant, and detail the opportunity to withdraw (see example in Appendix 2).
- Any questionnaires that will be used.
- In the case of a structured, or semi-structured interview, an account of the questions and/or areas that are to be discussed.

Ethics approval forms are reviewed by the College's Research Ethics Panel. The Panel may require alterations to the documentation or to the research design itself and in these cases all documents must be resubmitted. No data collection should begin until the researcher has received written approval from the Director of Studies.

Where high risk proposals are made (for example dealing with vulnerable groups and/or addressing sensitive issues) the College will ensure it draws on appropriate expertise to make the decision, which may need to be from beyond the College. The College's University Liaison officer and/or External examiner may be asked to advise either on the proposal or on where such expertise may be found.

## **Research Ethics Panel**

The Research Ethics Panel reports to the Management Committee (Board of Studies). It is responsible for reviewing and approving research activity involving human participants, and ensuring that the College follows best practice.

## **Submission Deadlines**

The Research Panel will normally have four regular meetings throughout the year: one at the beginning and one at the end of Michaelmas Term; one halfway Lent Term; and one halfway Trinity Term. (Deadlines are publicised at Moodle > Online Student Handbook > Research Ethics.)

In cases when a research proposal does not receive approval from the Panel, candidates will be able to submit a revised proposal at any time. The Panel will then respond within a month of resubmission.

Version 1.4 – October 2022

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<sup>1</sup> St Augustine's aims to make dissertations available to the wider College community. If your research is part of a dissertation, please make sure that participants are made aware of this (and give their consent on that basis) – unless such dissemination would be inappropriate for your project. Obviously, a key requirement for dissemination is that the dissertation itself does not contain any confidential information. If the latter cannot be avoided, then it might be possible in some cases to disseminate an amended or abbreviated version of the dissertation. For further information, see Section B of ('Confidentiality and Anonymity').