

University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) Annual Report

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INTRODUCTION

The University is committed to providing high ethical standards in research and safeguarding the dignity, rights and welfare of all those involved in research and the implementation of its results, as a fundamental part of its principles of research integrity.

Research ethics in the University mainly focuses on the considerations of ethical issues that are raised when people are involved as participants in our research, although this does extend beyond this. When we refer to research, we mean this in the broadest sense of the word to include any gathering of data, information and facts for the advancement of knowledge. For example, this could include surveys that are sent out by the library, by ITCS colleagues, focus groups run by members of the Students Union, for Athena SWAN activities, for Outreach work with our local schools, for any of our business intelligence unit activities, as well as the practices that we would expect to see for more standard research related activities by our academic staff members and students.

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (UREC)

The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) held its inaugural meeting on 31st November 2006. On 15th June 2011, Senate approved that UREC would be a subcommittee of Senate (for academics matters) and Council (for matters of management, health and safety etc). In 22/23, UREC was aligned to being a subcommittee of Senate only.

UREC meets three times a year and its membership¹ includes the UREC Chair, 10 Research Ethics Subcommittee (S-REC) Chairs, the 4 Associate Deans for Research (ADR), the Data Protection Officer (DPO), a Lay Member, and the Research Integrity Manager who also acts as the UREC Secretary.

UREC RESPONSIBILITIES

UREC² oversees the S-RECs³ and sets the strategic direction for research ethics and research integrity within UEA. The Committee defines the University's [Research Ethics Policy](#) and operational principles to ensure that anyone engaged in research that involves the University is aware of the high-level expectations and ethical principles that the University upholds, and has

¹ UREC membership: <https://my.uea.ac.uk/divisions/research-and-innovation/research-innovation-services/research-support/research-integrity-and-ethics/research-ethics/university-research-ethics-committee>

² UREC Terms of Reference: <https://my.uea.ac.uk/f/185899/x/2f8a57791d/urec-terms-of-reference-23-02-22.pdf>

³ S-REC Terms of Reference: <https://my.uea.ac.uk/f/185899/x/130f0213b2/s-rec-terms-of-reference-04-02-22.pdf>

access to the guidance necessary to comply with those principles. Any ethical lapses in research could lead to serious consequences such as harm to human and animal subjects, researchers, the public, and ultimately damage to reputation, loss of funding, and even legal action.

The primary role of UREC is to advocate for and support the delivery of ethical working practices in the University to ensure that the highest ethical standards of research are met. Under the guidance of the UREC Chair, the S-REC Chairs support and promote the universal principles on research integrity and ethics across Schools and Faculties at UEA, drawing on discipline specific and multidisciplinary expertise to facilitate high quality research and research related activities. The S-REC Chairs provide an integral function for the University in keeping abreast of how different disciplines and professions interpret these ethical principles and how to apply them within our current framework. They are also central in highlighting new developments in areas such as Generative AI technology that allow UREC and the University to take a leading role across the HEI sector in addressing knowledge gaps and increasing capacity for proactive and responsive actions. The UREC and S-REC Chairs role ranges from considering the care and protection of participants to helping researchers consider the 'what if' scenarios of working with different groups of participants. The starting position of the University's ethics review bodies is an intention to provide ethics approval, and ethics reviews are always undertaken within a framework of an open and transparent context where support enables, rather than restricts, projects to run as the researchers would hope. In this way we can see the value of the University's ethics reviews in improving the excellence of projects. The UREC membership also benefits hugely from the inclusion of the DPO who assists in applying the legal requirements to the Committee's ethical considerations of personal data management. Also, the Committee's Lay Member provides an important public perspective on the best practices UREC discusses and implements, and the ADRs are an important conduit for passing information from the Committee to their Faculties and to the University Research Executive.

UREC KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

UREC's core objectives of promoting good practice; contributing to the development of a positive culture of integrity and ethics in research; supporting researchers to adopt best practice in relation to ethical, legal and professional requirements; supporting the University's commitment to the [*Concordat to Support Research Integrity*](#), have been addressed by the Committee through the following activities:

- New University [policy, procedures, guidance](#), and training to support and protect researchers when using Generative AI technology. The University has been contacted by other universities, the UK Research Integrity Office ([UKRIO](#)) and the [Times Higher Education](#) to seek our advice.
- New ethics review processes for the approval of [security sensitive research](#) including requests for access to an external website, for legitimate research purposes, that has been blocked by either the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit (CTIRU), or the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF).

- Scheduled reviews undertaken of the University's [Research Ethics Policy](#) and [Ethics Review Appeal Procedures](#) to ensure they remain fit for purpose and maintain compliance with external funder policies; regulations; Concordats; Codes of Practice etc. Staff and students are made aware of the revisions through the University's e-bulletins and digital signage. UREC members cascade information to their relevant School(s)/Faculty.
- Updated the suite of University [Ethics Guidance Notes](#) to provide researchers with access to advice and guidance and recently produced a new Ethics Guidance Note on 'Debriefing Participants'. It is good practice in any research project involving human participants to provide an opportunity to debrief and feedback to participants.
- Promoting that the University's ethics review supports good research practice and enhances research design.
- 2093 ethics applications were reviewed by the University's S-RECs in 23/24. In addition, UREC reviewed 109 ethics applications. To ensure that the University maintains its high ethical standards, the University has an online system, [Ethics Monitor](#), to support the University's ethics review of projects. The system has streamlined processes ensuring consistency across the organisation, adding to funder confidence in the University's delivery of ethical research and enhancing research integrity.
- Providing a 'safe space' in the meetings for members to raise issues/queries to air and share with their colleagues and seek comments pertaining to best practice which is cascaded down to researchers in their School(s)/Faculty. Outside of the formal UREC meetings, the Committee has a MS Teams Group to enable communication between the UREC Chair, the UREC Secretary, the S-REC Chairs and the S-REC Deputy Chairs on best practices, challenges, FAQs etc.
- Introduced new S-REC annual reporting to capture examples of local research integrity and ethics activities in the Schools to assist the drafting of the University's Annual Research Integrity Report and other reporting requirements in connection with the University's compliance of the [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#). This S-REC annual reporting also allows regular monitoring of the S-RECs to demonstrate the high quality and consistency of the work they are undertaking and to subsequently share best practices/experiences across the S-RECs.
- [Case Studies](#) to illustrate ethics issues and promote good research practices to help other researchers or members of the S-RECs have been developed and shared as good practice with other organisations.
- Launched the University's [e-Learning Module on 'Research Integrity and Ethics'](#), which is mandatory for new academic staff, technicians and new S-REC members. Refresher training is expected every 3 years. 90% of Learners have rated the course 5*. Research Integrity training is now a requirement for receipt of grant funding from many funders.
- Developing new processes with the University's Information Compliance team to assess UEA's research activities that are planning to process 'high risk' personal data. This assessment is essential to support the University when it is deemed to be the Data Controller for research activities that are processing personal data.

- Shaping revisions to the [*Concordat to Support Research Integrity*](#), the UK's national framework for research integrity. It was first published in 2012 then revised in 2019 and is now undergoing a [5-year review](#). The University and its researchers have responsibilities under the Concordat and are accountable to funding bodies.
- Developing UEA Research Integrity indicators against a shortlist of [16 potential Research Integrity indicators](#) identified by the UK Committee on Research Integrity ([UKCORI](#)) as most important for HEIs to consider using to understand the status and trajectory of the conditions that support research integrity.
- Enhanced the University's [externally facing webpages](#) to mirror internal information, which is updated regularly on the [Research Integrity and Ethics portal pages](#), and to be open and transparent about our approach to research integrity and ethics in the University.