# Text Description automatically generated **CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS GUIDELINES**

## **1.0 PURPOSE**

The purpose of this document is to outline the process the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) follows in conducting research with Catholic Education Commissions, Dioceses and schools.

The key position for NCEC is that research will require active or opt-in[[1]](#footnote-2) consent, as well as detailed disclosures to participants.

## **2.0 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Research in schools**

As an organisation dedicated to learning, faith formation and wellbeing outcomes for students and families in Catholic schools, NCEC is committed to being informed by high quality research[[2]](#footnote-3) that is consistent with the provisions of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and meets additional guidelines for research.

NCEC encourages research that:

* has quality research design and methodologies and a strong evidence base
* is of benefit to Catholic systems, schools or students
* contributes to new knowledge and/or builds on prior research
* aligns to the NCEC’s mission and strategic priorities and Catholic values and teaching
* is ethical and includes privacy, security and storage protocols and
* meets requirements of the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/research-policy/ethics/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research)

Each Catholic Education Authority in Australia assesses school research applications independently according to their research approval guidelines. When assessing research applications, Catholic education authorities consider:

* benefit – the potential benefit of the research, especially educational benefit
* feasibility – the likelihood that these benefits will be realised
* impact – on time and effort required by staff and students as participants and co-investigators and, on the learning programs of students
* ethical requirements – whether the participants (including staff, students and parents/carers) are accorded the respect and protection that is due to them
* legislative and policy requirements – privacy and confidentiality, the risk of participants legally incriminating themselves or others and the high levels of duty of care expected of all educational jurisdictions for the students in their care
* sensitivities – the appropriateness of conducting the proposed research activities in a school setting, consent processes, the data to be collected and the method of data collection.

The researcher will provide Catholic Education Authorities and the principal with a copy of the research proposal (Appendix 2) any consent forms (Appendix 3), confidentiality declaration by the principal researcher, a research checklist form (Appendix 1), agreement to provide research findings to the school and education authority and valid working with children check documentation.

In alignment with the Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of research, ethics approval is required if research involves student data. This includes both identifiable/ re-identifiable student data. If the research proposal does not involve students and is considered ‘low risk’ and/or of a non-sensitive nature, then ethics approval is recommended, but not essential. There are over 200 registered Human Research Committees across states and territories that review research proposals to ensure they are ethically acceptable. These include the Australian Catholic University and the University of Notre Dame.

**2.2 National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Statement)**

NCEC promotes and ensures that any research involving Catholic systems or schools complies with the following legislation:

* NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (2007, updated 2018)
* Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018)
* Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities: Guidelines for Researchers and Stakeholders (2018).

NCEC acknowledges the importance of this National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, and like many systems/sectors, has used aspects of this Statement to help shape research application documents and procedures. This Statement supports principles on which decisions can be made when assessing research applications. However, NCEC acknowledges that these broad principles may not be relevant to every research application.

Researchers conducting educational research with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities must ensure that the research follows a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the researcher and the individuals and/or communities involved in the research. To this end, researchers should ensure that their research follows the Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Peoples and Communities.

## **3.0 IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES GOVERNING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

### **3.1 General Guidelines**

Any research involving humans as participants generally requires ethics approval in accordance with these Guidelines before the research can be undertaken. The need to obtain ethics approval is based on the need to protect the welfare and rights of participants in research, the researcher(s), National, state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, Dioceses and the school community in general.

No research project in schools should be commenced by a researcher until the required ethics approval has been granted. Funding for any research will not be released by NCEC until the required ethics approval has been granted.

Ethics approval can be obtained through a registered Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) with the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). The list of organisations can be found at <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/research-policy/ethics/human-research-ethics-committees>

Any researchers and assistants, who during the research interact in any way with students or student data, will need to produce a Working with Children Check (WWC) document directly to the location at which they intend to conduct their research. The original document, or a verified copy, must be provided to the principal at the school where the research will be conducted. If the research does not involve direct contact with students or student data, a WWC may not be necessary.

Approval to undertake the research is required from the Catholic Diocese and the principal of each school in which the research is to be conducted. Approval for research in Catholic schools is granted on the basis that individual students, schools and the Catholic sector itself, are not specifically identified in published research data and conclusions. Approval is also contingent upon meeting the conditions outlined in the checklist Appendix 1.

Stakeholder participation in school research includes, but is not limited to, the involvement of staff, students and parents through:

* participation in surveys
* interviews and being observed by researchers and
* involvement in focus groups

NCEC does not generally encourage research conducted during class time, however, this may be negotiated with the relevant principal if there is a clear benefit to improving student outcomes. Student learning outcomes and staff time should not be compromised as a result of participation.

## **4.0 RISK, CONSENT, DUTY of CARE**

### **4.1 Risk**

The National Statement provides the following comments relating to risk.

A risk is a potential for harm, discomfort or inconvenience (discussed below). It involves:

* the likelihood that a harm (or discomfort or inconvenience) will occur; and
* the severity of the harm, including its consequences.

Researchers are expected to adequately anticipate any potential risk(s) the research may cause to participants and have appropriate high-quality mitigation processes in place. Where research includes sensitive topics, it is expected that researchers have appropriate training (mental health or first aid) and apply de-escalation protocols to manage any distress incidents.

In some cases, research may lead to harm, discomfort or inconvenience for participants or others. Harm includes:

* physical harm, including injury, illness and pain
* psychological harm, including distress
* social harm, including social stigmatisation
* spiritual harm, including coercion and control by one individual on another
* economic harm, including the imposition of direct or indirect costs on participants
* legal harm, including disclosure of criminal conduct.

In section 2.1.6 the National Statement indicates that, ‘Research is ‘low risk’ where the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort. Where the risk is more serious than discomfort, the research is no longer deemed ‘low risk’ and is considered ‘medium risk’. The expression ‘negligible risk research’ describes research in which there is no foreseeable consequence of harm or discomfort or that any foreseeable consequence is no more than an inconvenience.

A significant amount of educational research carries low or negligible risk. In designing research projects, researchers should gauge the level of risk and have strategies in place to minimise this risk. Information about such strategies needs to be outlined in information sheets for participants.

All researchers have a responsibility to design their research and report the findings in ways that are sensitive to and respectful of:

* cultural, religious and other such differences amongst research participants
* the impact that publication could have on participants.

### **4.2 Consent**

The NCEC requires that active consent be granted for all participants using consent forms for all projects (Appendix 3). Research that uses active consent (opt-in methodology) is preferred. That is, a parent or guardian is required to sign and return a form to give permission for the student to participate in the research.

There are five key elements of consent:

* the individual gives consent voluntarily
* the individual is adequately informed before giving consent
* the consent is specific unless standing consent is used
* the consent is current
* the individual can understand and communicate their consent.

Researchers should make it clear to the participant that they are entitled to change their minds and revoke their consent later, without penalty as long as the information has not been published. In the case of participants or their parents/carers with limited English language skills, translated information and consent forms should be provided. Where participants or their parents/carers are not literate in their first language, interpreters should be provided to ensure informed consent.

If video, photographic or audio recording is used to collect data, the following information is required in consent forms and information sheets:

* the purpose of the research project and how the research/collected information will be used
* the intention to use video, photographic and/or audio recording to collect data
* how participant anonymity will be protected
* the approach to be used for any non-consenting participants, to ensure they are not captured in any recordings without consent
* the option to consent to a child participating in the research but not being photographed or filmed.

Researchers intending to obtain work samples from students for data collection purposes must obtain the consent of the student and parent or guardian. The intention to collect student work samples must be communicated in the consent forms and information sheets that are attached to the application.  
Many dioceses have a standing consent as part of enrolment. Standing parental consent enables parents/carers to give consent for their child’s involvement in particular types of research, in the school setting, for the period of the school year. Parents/carers are notified of each project but are not required to give further consent in each instance. They are reminded with each notification that they may withdraw their consent for a particular project. Parents/carers may withdraw their standing consent at any time.

Schools may arrange for standing parental consent to be given for a child’s participation in research that is for the benefit of children and comprises no more than:

* overt observation in school classrooms
* anonymous or coded questionnaires that are potentially identifiable
* surveys on subject matter not involving sensitive personal information or personal or family relationships.

### **4.3 Duty of care**

Diocesan officers and schools must be satisfied that research involving the participation of students is not contrary to their best interests. In tangential activities such as some research, it is reasonable that principals will expect NCEC and state and territory commissions to adopt a conservative approach to the research methodology and consent procedures. It is also important to recognise that duty of care is owed to every single child. In the case of some socio-emotional/cultural research, the parent and the principal may be aware of circumstances where participation in the research would not be in the child’s best interest.

NCEC considers that even a single undesirable reaction from a research participant should be avoided where possible and that informed consent may cover such circumstances. If at any time during a research project, a researcher identifies that a student may be at risk of harm, the researcher must report this information, including the identity of the student to the principal. Likewise, if a research participant discloses to a researcher, confidential information in relation to sexual or physical, spiritual abuse/harm or circumstances where a student’s health, safety or wellbeing is in danger, the researcher is required to disclose this information to the school principal immediately.

## **5.0 DATA, PRIVACY and STORAGE**

The collection, storage, use and disclosure of data must comply with the Privacy Act (1998) or other legislation where appropriate. Data collected must not be used for any purpose other than the stated purpose of the research without the written approval of all participants in that research.

### **5.1 Data requests**

No data will be released that identifies, or could lead to the identification of, individual students, teachers or schools. Aggregate data may be released on the basis that the quantum of individual or school data used in the aggregation is sufficiently large to prohibit re-identification of individuals or schools. Data will only be released subject to an assessment of its compliance with the Commonwealth Privacy Act (1998).

### **5.2 Privacy**

Maintaining privacy and the secure storage of data is of paramount importance. Researchers are responsible for ensuring data is collected, stored, and disposed of in compliance with relevant legislation and ethical standards, including the Commonwealth Privacy Act 1998, Information Act 2002 and any relevant statutory guidelines or codes of practice issued under this legislation.  
Any data collected from a survey should be collected anonymously so that the individual cannot be identified from the information. ‘Data’ includes, but is not limited to, quantitative data, work samples, recordings and photographs. When anonymous data collection cannot be achieved, such as when information is being gathered by audiotape or videotape or identifying information is needed to track participants in longitudinal studies, the confidentiality of participants must be assured.

Persons other than the researcher must not be able to link the information collected to individual participants. Researchers need to ensure that in reporting the findings of the research, that small sizes (usually five or less) containing information that could potentially identify individuals are suppressed. School participation must remain anonymous unless they explicitly agree to be identified.

Filming and any other process by which a child could be identified will not be approved in any research application unless the following conditions are met:

* Research participants and caregivers are fully informed regarding the intent, nature and scope of the research and that written consent is specifically given by the caregivers concerning any filming/photography/videoing of participants.
* That the above condition also applies to research projects that involve longitudinal studies.
* The researchers must provide details of the procedures they will use to ensure participant confidentiality – for example, strategies for information storage, access and disposal of data.
* Additional, written consent from the primary caregiver and research participants will be required, prior to utilising filming or any other participant identifying information, in any forum such as conference, teacher in-service, professional development, teaching instruction etc.

### **5.3 Storage**

Any research needs to be kept secure and data access restricted. As cloud servers can carry significant risk, if using a cloud platform, researchers are urged to consider what personal information is essential to the research and ensure appropriate security is in place to protect data. The less identifying information collected, the easier it will be to mitigate identified risks. Secure destruction methods also need to be built into research plans. Any data that is collected for research will be kept secure and only held for the duration of the project. Data will be deleted once the research is completed.

## **6.0 DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Research applications are expected to include an appropriate dissemination strategy for research findings. When appropriate, a copy of the summary findings and/or a school level report should be provided to participants and the principal of participating sites. Any findings should be disseminated in formats that are easy to use and access.

Research processes and findings relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be communicated via mutually agreed upon tools/languages. When conducting research with remote communities, some additional considerations may be required when developing a dissemination strategy. This may include:

* allowing guardians of cultural knowledge adequate time to review publications and raise any questions or concerns
* sharing authorship should be considered, if appropriate
* ensuring findings are returned to the community in an appropriate format
* discussing how best to cite knowledge that is owned collectively
* discussing how to appropriately use and publish culturally restricted information.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **RESEARCH CHECKLIST**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Conditions to be met** | **Please  🗷** |
| A research proposal is attached which includes the research instruments e.g survey questionnaire. |  |
| Copies of any questionnaires or surveys will be provided to the principal. |  |
| Active consent of parents and teachers/school staff, if applicable, will be obtained. |  |
| The research complies with the ethics proposal approved by the organisation’s accepted ethics requirements. |  |
| The research complies with any provisions under the Privacy Act (1998) that may require adherence by researchers in gathering and reporting data.  It is understood that the data will not be used for any purposes other than the stated research, without the written approval of the relevant data custodians. |  |
| Opt-In consent will be sought from teachers, and if applicable, parents and students |  |
| Where students are involved, the researcher will carry out the research within view of the class teacher or authorised school observer. |  |
| The research does not have the potential to adversely affect the school education setting including effecting educational progress or having the potential for a high level of personal intrusion on participants emotionally, psychologically and/or physically |  |
| Sector requirements relating to child protection and police checks are met by ALL researchers:   * all researchers and assistants, who during the research interact in any way with students or student data, are required to provide evidence of an acceptable working with children check |  |
| NCEC, state and territory commissions, dioceses and/or schools have the appropriate indemnity insurance to undertake the research. |  |

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Principal researcher contact details** | | |
| Name Click or tap here to enter text. | | |
| Address Click or tap here to enter text. | | |
| Telephone | Work Click or tap here to enter text. | Mobile Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Email | Click or tap here to enter text. | |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **NCEC or Catholic Commission contact** | | |
| Name Click or tap here to enter text. | | |
| Address Click or tap here to enter text. | | |
| Telephone | Work Click or tap here to enter text. | Mobile Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Email | Click or tap here to enter text. | |
| Name Click or tap here to enter text. | | |
| Address Click or tap here to enter text. | | |
| Telephone | Work Click or tap here to enter text. | Mobile Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Email | Click or tap here to enter text. | |

| **Overview of research** |
| --- |
| **Research project title**  Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Brief overview of research project – including procedures and extent of school leader, teacher, student and parental involvement (approximately 250 words)  Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Brief description of benefits of the research to the participants eg how teachers and students will benefit from your research; long term and more general benefits to the Catholic Education community  Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Brief description of the research design and methodology and any strategies to be employed to ensure validity and reliability. Please attach copies of data collection instruments and surveys.  Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Please attach any examples of permission letters/consent forms  Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Details of procedures for establishing confidentiality and protecting privacy including information management practices  Click or tap here to enter text. |
| List school name/s and addresses and the groups that will be requested to participate in the research  Click or tap here to enter text. |
| Research commencement date: \_ \_/\_ \_ /\_ \_ \_ \_ |
| Research conclusion date: \_ \_/\_ \_ /\_ \_ \_ \_ |

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **SAMPLE CONSENT FORM**

Research on < name of project>

Please complete this form and return to <name of school, centre, organisation, etc> by

<date>.

I, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (please print name of parent/carer) declare that I have responsibility for   
  
  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (please print name of child) and I give consent to their participation in to be held on .

In giving my consent, I:

* have read the information about the project and understand what is involved
* have discussed participation in the project with my child and they are willing to take part
* am happy for my child to participate in
* understand that is conducting the and that may also participate
* understand that the consultation will be audio/video recorded and that quotes may be used in the report, on the website or other materials, but that my child’s name or any identifying information will not be used.

Please tick ‘Yes’ if you agree and ‘No’ if you do not agree:   
  
I agree to my child’s voice being recorded and quotes being used   
Yes 🞏 No 🞏

I understand that my child’s photo may be taken and used in the Report   
Yes 🞏 No 🞏

on the < name of the organisation> website or other materials, but that my child’s name or any identifying information will not be used.

Details of Parent/Carer Name   
Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Mobile/Phone: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. 1.Active consent (opt in consent) – where the participant, after receiving appropriate disclosure of the nature and implications of the research, provides written agreement to participate [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Quality research is well designed and capable of producing sound results that are relevant to the research goals. This requires that the project demonstrates care and systematic attention to detail in planning and is described in sufficient detail to make the project transparent to peers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)