

Himachal Pradesh University
(NAAC Accredited 'A' Grade University)
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication


STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE (SOP)
Departmental Research Ethics Committee

Approved by the Departmental Council on 22.08.2024
(effective immediately)


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PREAMBLE

The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Himachal Pradesh University, recognises that ethical conduct is fundamental to responsible academic research. Research involving human participants must uphold the dignity, autonomy, privacy, rights, safety and well-being of every participant while ensuring scientific integrity and public trust.

The increasing emphasis placed by universities, funding agencies, research councils and international journals on prior ethical review necessitates the establishment of a formal mechanism to examine research proposals involving human participants before the commencement of recruitment or data collection.

Accordingly, the Department hereby establishes the Departmental Research Ethics Committee to review, monitor and oversee research involving human participants conducted by faculty members, doctoral scholars, postgraduate students and other researchers affiliated with the Department.

The Committee shall function independently and impartially and shall be guided by the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, confidentiality, academic integrity and responsible research conduct.

The Committee shall derive guidance from:

1. The National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health Research Involving Human Participants issued by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), as applicable to social and behavioural research;
2. The University Grants Commission regulations on research quality and academic integrity;
3. International ethical principles including the Belmont Report and the Declaration of Helsinki;
4. Other relevant national and institutional policies governing research ethics.

1. Objectives

The objectives of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee are:

1. To safeguard the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of all research participants.
2. To ensure that research conducted within the Department conforms to accepted ethical principles.
3. To promote integrity, transparency and accountability in research.
4. To encourage ethical decision-making throughout the research process.
5. To facilitate responsible publication in national and international journals.
6. To cultivate ethical awareness among faculty members and research scholars.
7. To ensure that risks to participants are minimised and are reasonable in relation to anticipated benefits.

2. Applicability

These SOPs shall apply to all research involving living human participants undertaken under the auspices of the Department, including but not limited to:

1. Doctoral research;
2. Master's dissertations;
3. Faculty research projects;
4. Externally funded research;
5. Consultancy projects involving human participants;
6. Collaborative national and international research;
7. Student projects requiring interaction with human participants.

Ethics approval shall ordinarily be obtained before recruitment of participants or commencement of data collection.

3. Scope

The Committee shall review research involving:

1. Interviews;
2. Focus Group Discussions;
3. Surveys and Questionnaires;
4. Participant Observation;
5. Ethnographic Research;
6. Digital Ethnography;
7. Netnography;
8. Oral History;
9. Media Audience Research;
10. Communication Research;
11. Journalism Research;
12. Documentary Research involving identifiable participants;
13. Social Media Research involving interaction with users;
14. Online Communities;
15. Artificial Intelligence-mediated interaction studies;
16. Recording of audio, photographs or video of participants;
17. Collection of personal or sensitive information;
18. Research involving vulnerable populations.

4. Research Ordinarily Exempt from Full Review

4.1 The following categories may qualify for exemption:

- a. Research exclusively involving published literature.
- b. Analysis of publicly available government reports.

- c. Publicly accessible archival materials.
- d. Anonymous secondary datasets.
- e. Content analysis of publicly available media.
- f. Public speeches and publicly available political communications.

4.2 No investigator shall determine exemption independently. The determination shall rest exclusively with the Departmental Council.

5. Definitions

For the purposes of these SOPs:

1. Committee means the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC).
2. Chairperson means the Chairperson of the Committee.
3. Member Secretary means the officer responsible for administration of the Committee.
4. Researcher means any faculty member, research scholar, student or collaborator conducting research under the Department.
5. Human Participant means a living individual from whom information, opinions, experiences, biological material, images, recordings or identifiable data are obtained for research purposes.
6. Minimal Risk means that the anticipated harm or discomfort is not greater than that ordinarily encountered in daily life or during routine educational, social or psychological activities.
7. Vulnerable Population includes children, older persons with diminished capacity, persons with disabilities affecting consent, economically or socially disadvantaged individuals, refugees, displaced persons, prisoners, survivors of violence, members of marginalized communities, and any participant whose ability to provide free and informed consent may be compromised.
8. Informed Consent means the voluntary agreement of a participant to take part in research after receiving adequate information regarding the purpose, procedures, risks, benefits and rights associated with participation.
9. Confidentiality means the obligation to protect information obtained from participants from unauthorised access or disclosure.

6. Guiding Ethical Principles

All decisions of the Committee shall be based upon the following principles:

1. Respect for Persons
2. Voluntary Participation
3. Informed Consent
4. Beneficence
5. Non-maleficence
6. Justice
7. Privacy
8. Confidentiality
9. Academic Integrity
10. Accountability
11. Transparency
12. Cultural Sensitivity
13. Equity and Non-discrimination
14. Protection of Vulnerable Participants
15. Responsible Data Stewardship

7. Interpretation

7.1 In matters not expressly provided for in these SOPs, the Departmental Research Ethics Committee shall be guided by nationally accepted ethical standards, institutional policies and internationally recognized principles governing research involving human participants.

7.2 The Department Council shall reserve the right to amend SOPs and give concessions from its provisions from time to time in accordance with University regulations and nationally accepted ethical standards.

7.3 Any ambiguity in interpretation shall be resolved by the Committee, whose decision shall ordinarily be final, subject to appeal before the Head of the Department or the competent University authority.

8. Constitution of the Departmental Research Ethics Committee

8.1 The Departmental Research Ethics Committee shall be constituted by the Departmental Council of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Himachal Pradesh University.

8.2 The Committee shall function as an independent advisory and review body responsible for the ethical review of research involving human participants conducted under the academic jurisdiction of the Department.

8.3 The Committee shall review research proposals solely on ethical grounds and shall not evaluate proposals on academic merit except where scientific deficiencies create ethical concerns affecting participant welfare.

8.4 The Committee shall remain independent in its decision-making and shall function free from undue influence by investigators, supervisors, sponsors, funding agencies or any other authority.

8.5 The Committee shall ordinarily function for a period of three years from the date of its constitution or until a new Committee is constituted by the Departmental Council, whichever is later.

9. Composition of the Committee

9.1 The Committee shall ordinarily consist of not fewer than seven and not more than eleven members representing diverse academic expertise. The committee members and their roles shall be as follows:

Position	Member	Roles
Ex-officio Chairperson	Director, Research and Development Cell, Himachal Pradesh University	Leads meetings
Ex Officio Member Secretary	Chairman, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Himachal Pradesh University	Manages submissions/ coordinates meetings
Faculty (Social Sciences) – Member	One faculty member from a department in the Faculty of Social Sciences	Ethics review
Faculty (Humanities) – Member	One faculty member from a department in the Faculty of Languages	Ethics review
Faculty (Legal Studies) – Member	One faculty member from a department in the Faculty of Legal Studies	Reviews legal issues
Statistician/Methodologist – Member	A researcher versed in quantitative and qualitative methodology from Himachal Pradesh University, nominated by the Chairperson of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Himachal Pradesh University	Research quality affecting ethics

Gender Expert – Member	Professor/Director, Centre for Women’s Studies and Development	Equity issues
Community Representative – External Member	Person of public standing/community representative (where feasible)	Independent oversight

9.2 The Committee may co-opt additional experts whenever specialised knowledge is required for the review of a particular proposal.

9.3 Invited experts shall participate only in deliberations relating to the proposal for which they have been invited and shall not possess voting rights.

10. Eligibility of Members

Members shall ordinarily possess:

- a. recognised academic standing;
- b. demonstrated research experience;
- c. familiarity with research methodology;
- d. understanding of ethical principles governing research involving human participants;
- e. willingness to maintain confidentiality;
- f. ability to devote sufficient time for ethical review.

11. Appointment of Members

11.1 Members shall be nominated by the Departmental Council.

11.2 External members shall be appointed on the basis of academic expertise, professional reputation and independence.

11.3 Members may be re-appointed.

12. Tenure

12.1 The normal tenure of membership shall be three years.

12.2 A member shall continue until the successor assumes office.

12.3 Casual vacancies may be filled by the Departmental Council for the remainder of the term.

13. Resignation

13.1 Any member may resign by submitting a written resignation to the Chairperson.

13.2 The resignation shall ordinarily become effective upon acceptance by the Department.

14. Removal of Members

The Departmental Council may remove a member if he or she:

1. repeatedly remains absent without sufficient cause;
2. breaches confidentiality;
3. fails to disclose conflict of interest;
4. engages in conduct prejudicial to the integrity of the Committee;
5. ceases to hold the position by virtue of which membership was granted.

15. Chairperson

15.1 The Chairperson shall:

1. preside over meetings;
2. ensure impartial conduct of deliberations;
3. determine meeting agendas jointly with the Member Secretary;
4. ensure compliance with these SOPs;
5. certify minutes of meetings;
6. sign Ethical Clearance Certificates;
7. represent the Committee before University authorities.

15.2 In the absence of the Chairperson, members present shall elect one senior member to preside over the meeting.

16. Member Secretary

The Member Secretary shall:

1. receive applications;
2. conduct preliminary scrutiny of submissions;
3. assign proposal identification numbers;
4. circulate agenda papers to members;
5. convene meetings with approval of the Chairperson;
6. maintain records;
7. prepare minutes of meetings;
8. communicate Committee decisions;
9. maintain confidential archives;
10. monitor submission of annual reports and study completion reports.

17. Duties of Members

Every member shall:

1. review proposals objectively;
2. attend meetings regularly;
3. maintain confidentiality;
4. declare conflicts of interest;
5. protect participant welfare;
6. participate in discussions and voting;
7. remain guided solely by ethical considerations.

18. Duties of External Members

External members shall:

1. provide an independent perspective;
2. ensure impartiality of review;
3. advise on specialised ethical issues;
4. safeguard participant interests;
5. assist the Committee in maintaining nationally accepted ethical standards.

19. Conflict of Interest

19.1 Every member shall disclose any actual, potential or perceived conflict of interest before deliberations commence.

19.2 Conflict of interest may include:

1. being Principal Investigator;
2. being Co-investigator;
3. being Supervisor;
4. financial interest;
5. collaborative relationship;
6. personal relationship;
7. any circumstance capable of influencing impartial judgement.

19.3 A member having conflict of interest shall:

1. disclose the conflict;
2. withdraw from discussion;
3. abstain from voting;
4. not be counted towards quorum for that proposal.

Such disclosure shall be recorded in the minutes.

20. Confidentiality

20.1 Every member shall maintain strict confidentiality regarding:

1. submitted proposals;
2. research data;
3. deliberations;
4. reviewers' comments;
5. Committee decisions prior to communication.

20.2 Committee documents shall not be disclosed except under lawful authority or with approval of the Committee.

20.3 Every member shall sign a Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Declaration upon appointment.

21. Meetings

21.1 The Committee shall ordinarily meet at least once every semester or more frequently whenever required.

21.2 The Member Secretary shall circulate the agenda and relevant documents ordinarily seven days before the meeting.

21.3 Emergency meetings may be convened by the Chairperson whenever necessary.

21.4 Meetings may be conducted physically, virtually, or in hybrid mode.

22. Quorum

22.1 The quorum shall ordinarily consist of:

- a. Chairperson or nominee;
- b. Member Secretary;
- c. at least one internal members;
- d. at least one external member.

22.2 No decision shall ordinarily be taken in the absence of quorum.

23. Decision-Making

23.1 The Committee shall endeavour to arrive at decisions by consensus.

23.2 Where consensus cannot be achieved, decisions shall be made by majority vote.

23.3 In the event of a tie, the Chairperson shall exercise a casting vote.

23.4 Only members present throughout the discussion shall vote.

23.5 Invited experts shall not possess voting rights.

24. Application Process

24.1 Application for ethical clearance shall be made in the format for application for obtaining ethical clearance for research involving human participants (Annexure 1).

24.2 The application, duly signed by the supervisor (where applicable) should be submitted to the Ex-Officio Member Secretary of the Ethics Committee.

25. Recommendations of the Committee

Following review, the Committee may issue any one of the following decisions:

1. **Approved** — The proposal satisfies ethical requirements and may commence.
2. **Approved Subject to Minor Clarifications** — Approval shall become effective upon submission of satisfactory clarifications.
3. **Approved Subject to Amendment** — Approval shall be granted after incorporation of specified amendments.
4. **Deferred** — The proposal requires substantial revision and shall be reconsidered after resubmission.
5. **Rejected** — The proposal is ethically unacceptable and shall not proceed in its present form.

All decisions shall be communicated to the investigator in writing within fifteen working days of the meeting.

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Departmental Research Ethics Committee

Format for application
for obtaining ethical clearance for research involving human participants

PART A: GENERAL INFORMATION

1. **Title of the Research Project:**
2. **Name of Principal Investigator/Researcher:**
3. **Designation**
 Faculty Ph.D. Scholar M.A. Student Other _____
4. **Name of Supervisor (if applicable):**
5. **Contact Details**
Email:
Phone:
6. **Other research partners (if any):**
7. **Other institutions involved (if any):**
8. **Funding Agency (if any)**
9. **Project Duration:** From _____ To _____

PART B: RESEARCH DETAILS

10. Nature of Research
 Ph.D. Dissertation Faculty Research Funded Project
 Consultancy Other _____
11. Data Collection Methodology:
12. Brief Description of the Study (Maximum 100 words)
13. Objectives of the Study
14. Research Questions/Hypotheses

PART C: PARTICIPANTS

15. Proposed Participants:
16. Estimated Sample Size:
17. Inclusion Criteria:
18. Exclusion Criteria:
19. Does the study involve vulnerable participants? Yes No
If Yes, specify:
20. Method of Recruitment
 Email Telephone Social Media Institutional Permission
 Snowball Sampling Advertisement Other _____

PART D: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

21. Will informed consent be obtained?
 Written Digital Verbal Not Required (justify)
22. Will participants be audio recorded? Yes No
23. Will participants be video recorded? Yes No
24. Will photographs be taken? Yes No
25. Will personally identifiable information be collected? Yes No
26. Describe possible risks (psychological, emotional, legal, social, reputational)

27. Describe anticipated benefits
28. How will confidentiality be maintained?
29. Data Storage Plan
 Password Protected Computer Encrypted Hard Drive Institutional Server
 Cloud Storage Other _____
30. Expected period of data retention
31. Will anonymised data be shared publicly? Yes No

PART E: DIGITAL RESEARCH

32. Does the research involve:
 Social Media WhatsApp Telegram Instagram
 Facebook X (Twitter) Reddit AI Companion Apps
 Chatbots Online Forums Other _____
33. Explain how privacy will be protected in digital environments.

PART F: DOCUMENTS ENCLOSED

Please tick the documents attached.

- Research Proposal
 Participant Information Sheet
 Informed Consent Form
 Interview Schedule
 Questionnaire
 Focus Group Guide
 Recruitment Material
 Permission Letter(s)
 Data Management Plan
 Other _____

DECLARATION

I certify that:

1. The information provided in this application is true.
2. The proposed research will not commence before obtaining written ethical approval.
3. Any modification to the approved protocol will be submitted to the DREC for approval.
4. I shall comply with the Departmental Research Ethics Committee SOP.

Signature of Applicant
Date

Supervisor (where applicable)