

## Research Risk Assessment at Edge Hill University

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### Introduction

It is vital that all research planned and undertaken by staff and students at Edge Hill University undergoes an appropriate risk assessment. A formal and structured risk assessment can maximise the chances of research being executed successfully, minimise or eliminate the risk of adverse impacts and help to ensure that projects are fully costed and can be completed within the project timetable.

This document sets out Edge Hill University's broad approach to risk assessment for research projects.

### Key principles

The following key principles inform the University's approach to the assessment of risk in research projects:

- **Projects to be assessed on their own merits:** Each research project is unique and carries different risks. It is vital that each project is assessed on its own merits. It should not be the case that, because similar activity has been undertaken before, risks can be assumed to be known, manageable and acceptable.
  - **Proportionate and appropriate risk assessment processes:** Different types of research carry different types and grades of risk: risk assessment processes should reflect this.
  - **Risk assessment is the primary responsibility of the project leader/principal investigator:** The research project leader or principal investigator is responsible for ensuring that the project undergoes adequate risk assessment, drawing on advice and support from colleagues in the Research Office (as the lead point of contact) and other parts of the University as appropriate. In some cases, the project leader will need to ensure that risk assessment is undertaken by a suitably trained individual (for example, where the research involves working with human tissue).
  - **Risk assessment should inform research design and costing:** Research risk assessment should not be viewed solely as an administrative requirement. Early and informal risk assessment may identify costs for which funding will need to be requested or the need to consider alternative approaches. Project leaders and principal investigators are encouraged to consider and discuss potential risks and the management of risks at an early stage in the research planning process.
  - **The results of risk assessments should be shared with all project staff:** All team members should be given a copy of the completed risk assessment(s) to ensure that they have a full understanding of all of the issues identified and addressed. This document – and any measures to manage risks – should be discussed at the team project inception meeting and revisited periodically; particularly before any individual tasks identified as posing a significant risk are commenced.
  - **The risks of an activity should always be assessed independently of its hoped-for benefits:** all activity carries some risk and that risk will need to be weighed against the hoped-
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for benefits that that activity may provide. Some risk will need to be accepted and traded-off against these hoped-for benefits. This should be done explicitly, and only once the risk assessment process has been completed.

## Types of research risk

Risks can be grouped together under a number of different risk areas. Many of these risk areas are relevant potentially to all types of research, while others will not be relevant to many projects. These risk areas are:

- **Risks to Researchers** — this risk area includes risks of (or associated with):
  - Lone working (project leaders should ensure that all work complies with University guidelines on lone working and adhere to any departmental policies and guidelines)
  - Physical threat and abuse
  - Being in a compromising situation, in which there might be accusations of improper behaviour
  - Psychological trauma, as a result of actual or threatened violence or the nature of what is disclosed during interaction with research subjects
  - Increased exposure to risks of everyday life and social interaction, such as road accidents and infectious illness
  - Causing psychological or physical harm to others
  - Other health and safety issues: for research tasks performed in the UK and overseas it is essential that project leaders, team members and the University consider the risks of personal injury, illness or death that may arise during or as a result of those tasks.
  - Travelling and working overseas: travelling and working overseas can introduce risks that are not present in the UK. Both can also increase the likelihood of some risks being realised, and the potential severity of their impact.
- **Risks to research subjects (human, animal, natural and built environments)** — this risk area includes:
  - Health and safety: human research subjects taking active part in research may have an increased risk of injury, illness or death during or as a result of their involvement. All members of the research team must consider the risk of injury, illness or death arising from any research task undertaken and take steps to eliminate and/or manage these risks appropriately.
  - Emotional well-being (for example, harm arising from the need to revive distressing memories)
  - Damage, degradation or disruption of the natural or built environments, including flora and fauna and natural or built environmental systems.
  - Management of research data: Potential breaches of anonymity, confidentiality and invasions of privacy are risks that should be identified, assessed and managed. Researchers should also ensure that data are stored for a sufficient period of time in the correct formats, complying with the data management policies of funders, publications and

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- good practice (for example, complying with guidance set out by the UK Data Archive and RCUK)
  - Damage to the best interests of research subjects who are not competent to give consent or who are vulnerable to the impact of incentives.
  - **Risks to the general public** — this risk area includes:
    - Health and safety: there may be an increased risk of injury, illness or death to members of the public during or as a result of research tasks undertaken during Edge Hill research.
  - **Risks to the University's reputation** — this risk area includes potential damage to the reputation of the University arising from:
    - The quality of the research and research output
    - Failure to comply with recognised good practice, as set out in the University's Research Code of Practice (available on the research wiki)
    - Accusations or suggestions of unethical behaviour in research
    - Associations with individuals, organisations, aims and activities that may undermine the integrity of the University's research.
  - **Financial and legal liability** — this risk area includes:
    - Inadequate cost recovery
    - Exposure to potential fines, other penalties and censure
    - Exposure to potential legal action by research subjects, research users and other parties in order to recover their costs or meet future costs, provide compensation, or to enforce liability.
  - **Other project or field-specific risks identified**

## Assessing risk in research projects

The University seeks to adopt a proportionate approach to research risk assessment. This means that some projects will require more consideration of risk and risk management than others. As such, there is no single process that applies to all projects.

Our broad approach to the assessment of risk in research projects is as follows:

- Identification of risks: project leaders are responsible for drawing up and maintaining a register of risks for the project. It is recommended that they do this in conjunction with other members of their research team or through discussions with colleagues across the University (for example, the Research Office).
- Completion of an initial risk assessment: all identified research risks are assessed in terms of the following:
  - Probability: the likelihood of adverse events or outcomes arising.
  - Impact: the estimated impact of the adverse events or outcomes should they occur.
- Identification of risk management measures: after the initial risk assessment, project leaders will need to identify the ways in which the assessed risks will be mitigated or avoided.

- Completion of a residual risk assessment: residual risk is that risk which is thought to remain after risk management measures have been identified. This is the key measure of risk and must be assessed in terms of:
  - Probability: the likelihood of adverse events or outcomes arising
  - Impact: the estimated impact of the adverse events or outcomes should they occur.

Both in the initial and the residual risk assessments it is important that risk is assessed independently of any estimation of the hoped-for benefits of the activity. All activity carries some form of risk and these risks need to be weighed (and traded-off) against the benefits that it is hoped it will deliver. However, it is vital that this trading off of possible risk and possible benefit is done explicitly, after the residual risk assessment has been completed.

## Completing risk assessment for research projects

Project leads are required to carry out a risk assessment for their research and should record this in writing with other project documentation. In some cases there will be additional forms to complete, as follows:

- **Overseas Travel Risk Assessment:** in addition to the standard University Approval to Travel form, the University requires all staff travelling overseas (including to Northern Ireland) on University business (whatever the purpose) to complete an [overseas travel risk assessment](#) before that travel can be covered under University insurance.
- **Health and Safety Risk Assessment:** the University requires a [health and safety risk assessment](#) to be completed for a wide range of activities. All project leaders should feed the results of this risk assessment into the Research Risk Assessment in summary form.

**Risk Assessment for Activity Regulated under the Human Tissue Act:** if research involves activity which is known or suspected to fall within the scope of the Human Tissue Act (or if the researcher is uncertain as to whether or not this is the case), the project lead should contact the Research Office in the first instance. A separate risk assessment will need to be undertaken in conjunction with the Designated Individual identified on the University's license as issued by the Human Tissue Authority.

Each risk considered should be assessed in terms of its probability and impact. Both of these dimensions of risk should be graded as follows:

- Low
- Medium
- High

When completing the initial risk assessment, the project leader should briefly set out the reasoning for the gradings of risk.

*This document was approved in 2012/13 and updated in November 2014*