Policy for Research Ethics

Policy Ref:	**VCAG Policy Owner:** Esther Wilkinson
Approving Body: Research Enterprise Committee / Academic Board	**VCEG Lead:** Mark Horton
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1.0 Policy Statement

The Royal Agricultural University seeks to protect the dignity, rights and welfare of all those involved in research (whether they are participants, third parties or staff and students) and to promote high ethical standards of research. The University achieves this by:

fostering a research culture that embraces the principles set down in this policy;

providing ethics guidance that communicates regulatory requirements and best practice, and offering ongoing support and training to staff and students to maintain high ethical standards;

and maintaining a review process that subjects research to a level of scrutiny in proportion to the risk of harm or adverse effect.

The aim of this policy is to set out the responsibilities and requirements for ethical review of Royal Agricultural University research.

2.0 Scope

This policy applies to all staff and students of the Royal Agricultural University who conduct research, whether or not the research is conducted on the University's premises or using the University's facilities. Third parties (for example staff of other institutions working with the Royal Agricultural University) are expected to adhere to the University's ethical standards of research conduct.

3.0 Relevant legislation / guidance

3.1 Research Ethics Committee- Terms of Reference
3.2 The Universal Ethical Code for Scientists
3.3 Market Research Society Code of Conduct
3.4 Economic and Social Research Council Framework for Research Ethics
3.5 National Council for Replacement Reduction and Refinement
3.6 Animals (Scientific Procedures Act) 1986
3.7 The Data Protection Act 2018
3.8 The Police Act 1997 (Enhanced Criminal Record Certificates) (Protection of Vulnerable Adults) Regulations 2002
3.9 The British Psychological Society – Code of Human Research Ethics
3.9.1 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
3.9.2 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 Schedule 8: Plants Which are Protected
3.9.3 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 Schedule 9: Non Native Animals and Plants
3.9.4 Invasive Non-Native (alien) Plant Species: Rules in England and Wales
3.9.5 The Fertilisers Regulations 1991
3.9.6 The Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986
3.9.7 Combatting Illicit Trade: Due diligence guidelines for museums, libraries and archives
3.9.8 Chartered Institute for Archaeologists: Code, regulations, standards and guidance

4.0 Definitions

Research
Creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of original knowledge (Frascati Manual 2015)*.

The definition of research would not normally include:

- Routine audit and evaluation, such as the evaluation of teaching
- The development of teaching and other materials that do not involve generation of original knowledge

Personal Data
The Data Protection Act (2018) defines personal data as any information relating to an identified, or an identifiable natural person (‘data subject’)

Vulnerable Adult:

For the purposes of this policy a Vulnerable Adult is defined as any person aged 18 or over who has one or more of the following:

a) a reduction in mental capacity;

b) severe impairment in the ability to communicate with others; or

c) impairment in a person's ability to protect themselves from assault, abuse or neglect;

Meaning that they are unable to give informed consent

For a full definition as set out in the Police Act 1997, see **item 3.8**

Regulated Procedure

The Animals (Scientific Procedures Act) 1986 defines a 'Regulated Procedure' as any procedure applied to a protected animal for a qualifying purpose which may have the effect of causing the animal a level of pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm equivalent to, or higher than, that caused by the introduction of a needle in accordance with good veterinary practice.

Non-Regulated Procedure

Any procedure applied to a protected animal for a qualifying purpose which may have the effect of causing the animal a level of pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm, deemed to be lower than that caused by the introduction of a needle in accordance with good veterinary practice.

Protected Animal

The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 defines a 'Protected Animal' as any living vertebrate other than humans, and any living cephalopod or decapod.

*OECD (2015), Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for Collecting and Reporting Data on Research and Experimental Development, The Measurement of Scientific, Technological and Innovation Activities, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264239012-en.

5.0 Policy details

5.1. Ethical Review Process

The University is committed to providing a competent, rigorous and moderated ethical review process that balances risk against the benefits to the public good. This commitment is met by:

- Appointing to its Research Ethics Committee (REC) a combination of members with research specialisms in the key disciplines covered at the university and those with significant experience of ethical review, along with appropriate external representation (item 3.1 Research Ethics Committee Terms of Reference);

- Maintaining an electronic ethical review system that automatically approves low risk applications such as literature reviews and projects that utilise data already in the public domain, and forwards all other applications to the most appropriate member of the REC. Projects identified as being higher risk (i.e. those featuring changes to the management of Protected Animals) are normally reviewed by 2 members of the committee;

- Keeping under annual review the effectiveness of the ethics review process, including the composition of its Research Ethics Committee.

5.2 Research Featuring Human Participants

The rights, dignity and **respect for the person** should be ensured throughout the research cycle and will not depend on sex, age, race, religion, sexuality or any other distinguishing feature.

Informed consent should be obtained from human participants before research begins. At the point of seeking consent, the researcher must provide the potential participant with full details of the study including:

- Study background and rationale, to include potential benefits of the research
- Storage arrangements for personal details (if applicable)
- How research data will be collected
- How the data will be stored and for what period of time
- Compliance with the Data Protection Act (2018)
- How the findings will be presented
- The potential risks and benefits to participants
- The likely time commitment
- Contact details of the researcher along with lines of responsibility and accountability
- Conflicts of interest arising from their position within the research context
- An ethics statement that includes an ethical approval number and contact details of the Research Ethics Committee chair.
- The opportunity to have any supplied data destroyed on request

Consent may be withdrawn by the participant at any point, or by a deadline that is clearly stated at the point of seeking consent. With reference to fully anonymised online surveys, it is not possible to identify and withdraw data once a response is submitted. This should be made clear to participants during the consent seeking phase.

Pedagogic research sometimes includes instances whereupon staff use students as research participants, in projects intended to monitor and improve the quality of academic delivery. This eventuality is captured in the relevant outward facing privacy statement **(section 8.3)**. Nevertheless, to ensure ethical conduct in the context of staff-student power dynamic the following measures should be implemented:

- Where specific modules / courses are studied, the researcher should not be the module / course leader

- Consent should be sought and recorded as above
- Clear statements should be provided around bias and measures taken to reduce the impact of bias. For example, if studying a specific module, the research could take place once the module has been completed and assessed.

Privacy of human participants should be respected. Results should normally be reported in such a manner that the identity of individuals cannot be determined. In instances where this is unavoidable, this should be made clear at the consent seeking stage. If 'personal data' is collected, the RAU Data Protection Policy should be adhered to **(Section 8.4)**

Ethical approval will not normally be granted to projects that feature any of the following:

- Participants who are under the age of 18;
- persons who are deemed unable to give informed consent such as 'Vulnerable Adults';
- deception;
- involuntary participation (using covert monitoring for example);
- financial or in-kind inducements.

The British Psychological Society publishes comprehensive guidelines covering the ethical treatment of human research participants (**item 3.9**). Researchers are strongly recommended to consult these during the design and implementation of such research.

5.3 Research Featuring Protected Animals

The principles of **Replacement, Reduction and Refinement** as defined by the National Centre for the 3Rs **(item 3.5)** should be central to the design and conduct of all research projects featuring protected animals. In this respect, researchers will seek, wherever possible, to **replace** animals completely using predictive and robust models and tools, **reduce** the number of animals used consistent with scientific aims, and **refine** protocols such that pain, suffering, distress and lasting harm is minimised.

Regulated Procedures as defined by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act (1986) will not be granted ethical approval, as the RAU does not hold the requisite Home Office Establishment Licence. Instead, any research featuring 'Protected Animals' at the University will involve 'Non-Regulated Procedures' that fall into the following categories:

Significant modification to the management / environment of protected animals

Non-regulated procedures, which nevertheless feature significant change to the environment of either captive or wild animals. Research approaches falling into this category can involve (but are not limited to):

- Trialling of new husbandry regimes for research purposes,
- Testing of feed-stuffs or devices that are not commercially available, or are not currently licenced for use in a given species.
- Sampling strategies which bring about significant behavioural changes to wild protected animals

Ethical approval for projects falling into this category will not normally be granted to undergraduate researchers. In addition, as part of the ethical review phase, researchers may be asked to seek advice from the Animals in Science Regulatory Unit (ASRU), to confirm the status of a proposed procedure in respect of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

Minor modification to the management / environment of protected animals

Research procedures that involve minor change to the environment of captive or wild animals. Protocols falling into this category can involve (but are not limited to) evaluation of commercially available feed-stuffs or devices, or procedures that have minimal impact on the behaviour of wild species.

No modification to the management / environment of protected animals

Research procedures that involve no change to the environment of protected animals. Protocols falling into this category can involve (but are not limited to) non-invasive observation of animals in their natural habitat, and collection of data from animals in pre-existing husbandry regimes.

Trapping of wild protected animals for the purposes of identification, is not considered a regulated procedure as defined by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. However, the RAU will not normally grant ethical approval for projects of this nature.

5.4 Research Featuring Non-Protected Animals

Work involving non-protected species should be encouraged, in line with the principles of replacement under the 3R's (item 3.5). In addition, any work carried out with non-protected animals should embrace other concepts of the 3R's, such as reduction and refinement (e.g. where non-animal alternatives can be used, they should be, and experimental design should be sufficiently refined to ensure the optimal number of animal is used).

5.5 Research Featuring the Natural Environment

General principles

The following general principles should be followed by researchers conducting work featuring the natural environment:

- Informed consent must be obtained and recorded from landowners or land custodians before research commences
- Wherever possible and practicable, researchers should minimise the use and waste of energy, reducing emissions and recycling materials.

- The protection, restoration and enhancement of biodiversity in all terrestrial and marine habitats should be encouraged by reducing pollution.

- Researchers should seek to protect and conserve natural resources for future generations in a sustainable fashion.

- Researchers have a duty to raise the environmental awareness of others, by training and education, especially in relation to the environmental impact of their own research.

- Where appropriate, researchers should develop, with their supervisory team, a set of environmental standards that can be regularly monitored and reviewed in relation to their research.

- Researchers have a duty to communicate the environmental consequences of their practices and findings to a wider public audience, in an open and transparent fashion.

5.6 Research Featuring Plants

Research Trials should be designed such that the minimum quantity of plant matter is removed for the generation of robust data.

Uprooting of any wild plant without the landowners consent is considered an offence (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981). Therefore specific informed consent must be sought and recorded before research that involves the removal of plant material begins.

Picking, uprooting or destruction of **Protected Plant Species** under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 is illegal in the UK **(item 3.9.2)**. Please consult schedule 8 early on in the design stages of any research work. Invasive or Destructive research featuring Protected Plant Species will generally not be granted ethical approval at the RAU. However, there may be circumstances whereby researchers from the RAU collaborate with reputable institutions with the necessary approvals in place. Evidence of such approvals along with collaboration agreements should be submitted with any ethical approval requests.

Research featuring **Invasive Plant Species**, must follow the rules laid down in the Invasive Non-Native Plant Species: Rules in England and Wales directive **(item 3.9.4)**

Projects involving the growing of **Non-Native Plants** included within Schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 **(item 3.9.4)** must not proceed without a Natural England licence (A03 and LR03)

5.7 Research Featuring Soil, Water and Atmosphere

Addition of foreign elements to the soil, water and atmosphere, or the addition of indigenous substances above the naturally occurring concentration, for research purposes, should proceed in line with UK legislation. For example, the Fertilisers Regulations 1991 **(item 3.9.5)** or the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 **(item 3.9.6)**.

Soil sampling protocols should be designed such that a minimum quantity is extracted for the generation of robust data, following the rules laid down below:

- Sampling sites should be backfilled using material from the local area
- Sampling techniques should not threaten the above ground element or root systems of Protected Plant Species

Water and atmospheric sampling strategies should follow the general principles laid down in section 5.5

5.8 Research Featuring Artefacts and Sites of Cultural Heritage

General Principles

In many areas the University's research activities are greatly dependent on a wide range of resources that make up the cultural heritage of varied communities. As some of these resources are finite, irreplaceable and non-renewable, they should be safeguarded and treated with great respect. Ethical and sustainable research does not simply degrade cultural heritage resources, as does, for example, agriculture or development. Rather, it has the potential to enhance them by means including increasing the total of known sites or knowledge of existing sites, refining methods of best practice, and creating new directions of enquiry.

Some research activities, such as archaeological excavation or scientific examination of an object, will result in some loss or physical alteration of artefacts and archaeological deposits. All such loss or alteration must be proportionate to the aims of the project and fully justified in terms of the potential gain in knowledge and/or understanding.

5.8.1 Provenance of Artefacts

Cultural objects that are valuable for the purpose of research, also have an alternative value, especially in commercial art markets. This may encourage illegal acquisition and distribution of such objects at local, national and international level, with consequent destruction or damage of historic and archaeological sites, loss to museum, archive and library collections, as well as resulting loss of knowledge and contextual information. In order to prevent illicit trade of looted, stolen or illegally excavated, exported or removed artefacts, engagement with cultural items for the purposes of research, whether or not

retained within the University, must take place in accordance with the guidelines published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport **(item 3.9.7)**.

5.8.2 Archaeological Prospection and Excavation

Where research involves archaeological excavation, it must be conducted in accordance with the codes of conduct, regulations, standards and guidelines developed by the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists **(item 3.9.8)**, except where there is clear justification for deviation from these, for example on the basis of local conditions. All archaeological remains or other artefacts which have been removed from their original location must be carefully and appropriately transported and stored to ensure their long-term survival where required.

6.0 Responsibilities

Whether you are a student, staff member or authorised third party conducting research at the RAU, it is your responsibility to ensure that you read and adhere to this policy.

7.0 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Research at the RAU will promote and celebrate diversity within research teams, wherever possible ensuring representation across various demographics and backgrounds. We strive for a culture where research participants are diverse and representative of the populations being studied, with a focus on ethical and inclusive research practices.

We also endeavour to make research resources, data, and findings accessible to all members of the university community and beyond.

8.0 Other related policies / procedures

8.1 Disciplinary Policy and Procedures (staff):

https://www.rau.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-08/Disciplinary%20Policy%20and%20Procedure%20March%202023.pdf

8.2 Disciplinary Policy and Procedures (student):

https://www.rau.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/RAU%20Student%20Disciplinary%20Policy%20and%20Procedure.pdf

8.3 RAU Privacy Notice (students and applicants)

https://www.rau.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Students%20and%20Applicants%20Privacy%20Notice%202025.pdf

8.4 RAU Data Protection Policy

https://www.rau.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/Data%20Protection%20Policy%20-%20October%202023.pdf

9.0 Consequences

Where there are cases of non-adherence to this policy, these will be dealt with as follows:

1) **Cases involving staff members will be dealt with in accordance with the RAU Disciplinary Policy and Procedure (staff- section 8.1)**

2) **Cases involving students will be dealt with in accordance with the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure (students- section 8.2)**

See other related policies / procedures (above)

Review

This policy will be reviewed every two years.

Version control

Version number	Change	Name and job title	Date
1	NA	Andrew Hemmings	14/04/2026