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| **Peer Review Guidelines for Human Ethics Applications** |

[**Introduction**](#Introduction)

[**What is Peer Review?**](#WhatisPeerReview)

[**When should Peer Review take place?**](#WhenshouldPeerReviewtakeplace)

[**When is Peer Review not required?**](#WhenisPresubPRnotrequired)

[**Peer Review Process**](#InternalPeerReviewProcess)

**Introduction**

The Australian Catholic University has a responsibility to ensure that research proposals submitted for ethics review are methodologically sound and of a high scholarly standard. In line with the NHMRC’s Peer Review guide and the [Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-code-responsible-conduct-research-2018), peer review means the “impartial and independent assessment of research by others working in the same or a related field”. The peer review process should be fair, rigorous and timely and the University recognises the importance of independent and impartial peer review as a means of validating research merit, enhancing research rigour and quality.

The ACU HREC cannot give ethics approval for projects that do not fulfill peer review requirements.  Evidence of peer review must be submitted with all ethics applications. Undergraduate students and Honours student projects must use the ACU Human Peer Review Checklist.

The ACU Peer Review Checklist must be completed by an experienced independent researcher who meets the criteria outlined in the ACU Human Ethics Peer Review Guidelines and submitted with all ethics applications. Exceptions are:

* PhD students where evidence can be provided that confirmation or milestone reviews included a peer review relevant to the study being submitted for ethical review. Otherwise the ACU Peer Review Checklist should be completed.
* Applications which have undergone peer review as part of a substantial, competitive and successful grant application.

These guidelines seek to provide some guidance as to how to conduct a peer review of a research proposal.

**What is Peer Review?**

Peer review is a process undertaken to review a research project and which may, advantageously, contribute to the validity, quality and originality of your project. Adequate peer review is:

* ***Independent*:** the reviewer must be independent of the project. The reviewer may be external or internal and may be a member of the same department as the investigators; however, the reviewer must not be in a dependent relationship (i.e. must not report to the Principal Investigator) and should be sourced from another department if the Principal Investigator is the Head of Department.
* ***Expert*:** in terms of research experience, understanding of the research methodology and outcomes of the proposed study. Please also consider the appropriateness of the chosen expert for the research field.
* ***Documented*:** clear, written evidence of the review and the researcher response to any reviewer comments is to be submitted with the ethics application.

Peer reviewers may take the opportunity to suggest changes that will improve the methodology and/or conduct of the project. The HREC, at their discretion, may request information about any changes, or justification as to why they have not been incorporated into the project.

**When should Peer Review take place?**

Peer review of a project should be undertaken before your application is submitted for ethics review. The investigators must allow sufficient time to find a reviewer, allow the reviewer sufficient time to conduct the peer review and to address the reviewer’s comments adequately, prior to submission to the HREC.

A checklist for peer review is provided on the [ACU Research Ethics and Integrity](https://staff.acu.edu.au/our_university/research/research-services/research-ethics) website. This is the recommended format for documentation of the reviewer’s comments on the proposal and contains all the required elements for documentation of the review.

**When is Peer Review not required?**

Peer review is not usually required where the research proposal has been peer reviewed in the course of an award from a recognised granting body operating a competitive grants scheme***. Applications for human ethics approval will be required to confirm in writing that the research methods described in the ethics application matches that described in the grant application, if they differ, new peer review would be required***. Details of the grant, and its reference number must be provided within the ethics application form.

**Peer Review Process**

It is the responsibility of the researcher to identify appropriate peer reviewer/s.

1. Researchers seeking peer review should include the following:
   * A 2-4 page summary of the research proposal that covers:
   * A literature review;

* The aims of the proposed research;
  + The design, methodology and/or research procedures (consider including the participant information materials).
  + The proposed study sample and power estimates if appropriate;

1. Investigators should source an appropriate peer reviewer and send to them the research proposal and the Peer Review Checklist. Peer reviewers should be selected based on their expertise, qualifications and experience that is relevant to the research project being reviewed.
2. The peer reviewer documents their review of the Protocol on the Peer Review Checklist which is then returned to the investigators.

Any issues identified through the peer review are to be addressed by the applicant prior to the submission of an application for consideration by an ethics committee.

1. The principal investigator completes the Ethics application form attaching the completed peer review checklist, along with a written response to the reviewer comments outlining any changes they have made based on the review recommendations, or justification for why some feedback may not have been incorporated.

**Please note:** The HREC may request another peer review be obtained for the following circumstances:

* the peer reviewer is not independent (eg: may have a dependent relationship with the Principal Investigator such as a supervisor);
* If the recommended template is not used, the peer review may be considered insufficient;
* The peer reviewer does not have the appropriate research experience and/ or expertise in the research field;
* Thee peer process is required in addition to the Indigenous Research Ethics Advisory Panel (IREAP) Review.