LSE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Research Ethics Committee (REC) is a sub-committee of the School's Research Committee. Its core functions are:

- to review and make recommendations on the School's Research Ethics Policy and procedure and related guidance;
- to take responsibility for the review and approval of ethics applications submitted by staff or students which are designated as high risk and/or requiring Committee review;
- to provide guidance to departments, staff and students on matters relating to research ethics.

1.2 The Committee meets formally at least once per term. During the 2023-24 academic year the Committee met three times. Research ethics applications are reviewed electronically by Committee members as and when they are received (they do not need to wait for a Committee meeting).

1.3 The Committee periodically conducts a selective audit of current research projects. In addition, in the case of particularly sensitive or complex applications, a researcher may be invited to provide feedback to the Committee on the progress of the project after an initial period of data collection or at the end of the project.

1.4 Committee meetings aim, where possible, to include an item by way of training for members. This may take the form of discussion of a topical or developing issue relating to research ethics.

1.5 The Senior Research Ethics Manager is Secretary to the Committee and works closely with relevant colleagues across the School to ensure that the ethics review process is undertaken in conjunction with data management, data security, data protection and risk assessment processes.

1.6 Key areas of business dealt with by the Committee during 2023-24 are summarized in sections 2-11 below.

2. MEMBERSHIP CHANGES, 2023-24

2.1 Dr Siva Thambisetty (Law) was appointed Acting Chair of the Committee for the Winter and Spring Terms 2024 whilst Professor John Chalcraft was on Sick Leave. Dr Bert Provan served as Acting Deputy Chair.

2.2 Two new members joined the Committee for the 2023-24 year: Drs Jean-Christophe Plantin (Media & Communications) and Tengyao Wang (Statistics). The Committee also welcomed back two returning members, Drs Jens Madsen (Psychological and Behavioural Science) and Heather Kappes (Management). PhD student Alia Amir Ali also joined the Committee, primarily to assist with the review of MSc applications during the peak period in the Winter/ Spring Terms. An induction session for new members was held in September 2023.

2.3 At the end of December 2023, Leslie Morphy (Lay member) stepped down. At the end of the academic year, Drs Myria Georgiou (Media & Communications) and Kate Gannon (Grantham Institute) also stepped down.

2.4 The vacancy for the 2nd Lay member has not as yet been filled, pending discussions with the School regarding whether Lay members could be offered an honorarium.

2.5 The full 2023-24 membership is provided in Annex 1.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE, 2023-24

3.1 The Terms of Reference for 2023-24 were approved in November 2023 without changes. The Terms of Reference are provided at Annex 2.

4. SAFEGUARDING IN RESEARCH AND INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES POLICY

4.1 In July 2023 the new policy was approved by Senior Management Committee and was presented to various other committees/groups for information during the course of 2023-24. In addition, the Deputy Chief Operating Officer, Joanne Hay, has established a Safeguarding Policy Implementation Group. The aim of the group is to 'bring together colleagues from relevant local areas to share good practice and put a framework in place which ensures that there is a holistic and consistent approach to implementing Safeguarding Policy across the School'.

5. LSE PRINCIPLES ON AUTHORSHIP

5.1 The Committee discussed the latest version of the paper disseminated to departments and committees in July 2023; members debated the minimum threshold for authorship and whether authorship is an issue of entitlement or eligibility.

5.2 Members noted that there are contexts where cultural practices should be respected in terms of authorship and awareness of the issue of imposing LSE practices on other cultures; however, the Committee agreed that it was best not to add a reference to culture-specific norms as it could open the door to different practices. They highlighted the importance of early discussions about authorship and the need to ensure that everyone is in alignment and agreement before proceeding with the project.

5.3 Members noted that the paper does not address risk management in the case of usurpation of data and that that this is an important issue, especially when it comes to early career researchers, and further work should be done on this.

5.4 At the November 2023 meeting, the Committee supported the approval of the paper.

6. REVIEW OF THE LSE INFORMED CONSENT GUIDANCE

6.1 During the year the Committee reviewed the LSE Informed consent guidance and sample templates. Especial consideration was given to guidance on the choice between written and verbal consent, the consent of vulnerable participants, limits to confidentiality, and the use of AI (see §8 below). Further improvements were planned for the informed consent sample templates, and it was hoped that the revised guidance would be approved in the autumn.

7. LSE GUIDANCE ON ETHICS REVIEW CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 Members discussed the new guidance produced by Committee Secretary Lyn Grove to help staff and students identify the key issues to consider when completing an ethics review. The guidance is also aimed at assisting supervisors when reviewing their students' ethics applications.

7.2 Committee members discussed whether training for new members of staff and new supervisors to learn how to use the online ethics system should be provided; because of capacity issues, it was noted that it is not feasible to train all new supervisors nor all new members of staff. Nevertheless, it was agreed to keep this idea in mind or consider whether it could be offered at department level.

8. LSE GUIDANCE ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI FOR RESEARCH

8.1 At the June 2024 meeting, the Committee discussed a consultation paper from the School AI in Research Working Group. They expressed concern that the consultation paper (one page only) is too short to be meaningful and that no REC members were consulted in the drafting of the paper.

8.2 The Committee discussed the following points, which were included in feedback to the School Working Group:
- That the guidance should emphasize students' responsibility in the ethical use of Generative AI (GAI) tools in their research activities and a distinction between AI-powered tools and Generative AI tools should be made.
- They noted that it is unclear what the risks are for research participants when GAI tools are used to process their data; the Committee would like some guidance from the Data Protection officer on that matter and they wish to understand better what tools applicants are currently using and how.
- Members discussed their responsibility as reviewers of projects using GAI tools and noted that the Committee has received a number of applications partly written with GAI.

8.5 The Committee agreed that some text should be added to the Informed Consent guidance and sample Participant Information Sheets/consent forms (and other research ethics guidance as appropriate) regarding the use of AI.

9. MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE VOLUME OF APPLICATIONS TO THE REC

9.1 Throughout the year the Committee discussed the issue of the volume of applications received by the Committee for review and the measures introduced to reduce it. As a result of these measures (outlined below), by the end of the academic year the total number of applications received was lower than the previous year (c. 600 rather than 700+).

9.2 Measures introduced to help reduce the volume of applications that require REC review included:
- MSc student projects which are not for dissertations, and all undergraduate projects, are now exempted from REC review (unless the supervisor has concerns and opts to refer the application to the REC), even where the project may contain some elements that would normally require REC review approval.
- Changes to the wording of some questions in screen F (which determines whether REC or Departmental review is required) – for instance regarding sensitive topics and risks to the participant or researcher – so that they are not so broad.
- The Committee engaged a PhD student as an additional member to help with reviewing the high volume of MSc applications during the peak period (February-June).

9.3 The Committee agreed to monitor how the various changes are received by researchers and how they affect the volume of submissions going forward.

9.4 A breakdown of applications received by the Committee for ethics review during 2023-24 is provided in Annex 3.

10. PROJECT MONITORING

10.1   The Committee reviewed interim and/or final reports from four researchers whose research entailed complex issues or risks.

11. OTHER ISSUES DISCUSSED

11.1 To help ensure that students do not go ahead with research without ethics approval (where required), research ethics requirements have been specified in the taught student General Assessment Regulations and degree classification schemes. Furthermore, the template assessment coversheet now also includes a declaration regarding ethics approval (where such approval is required according to the Research Ethics Policy).

11.2 The Committee discussed a presentation on the issue of **researcher vulnerability/wellbeing**, made at a recent meeting of the Research Risk Working Group; members noted that this raises an important issue that requires more systematic attention. The Committee will revisit this issue next year, in conjunction with others across the School.

11.3 The Committee also benefited from a presentation by a fellow member on the **ethical, social and global aspects of crowdsourcing as a data collection method**; the Committee agreed to keep these issues under review.

Myriam Fellous-Sigrist, Research Ethics Manager
Lyn Grove, Secretary, Research Ethics Committee/Senior Research Ethics Manager

Report approved by Research Ethics Committee, 30 October 2024
Report approved by Research Committee, 02 December 2024

Annex 1: REC membership 2023-24

Alia Ali	Gender Studies
Dr Cressida Auckland	**Law (Deputy Chair, AT)** (on leave WT)
Prof Michael Bruter	Government
Prof John Chalcraft	**Government (Chair, AT)** (on Sick Leave WT, ST)
Dr Sara Evans-Lacko	Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (on leave ST)
Dr Kate Gannon	Grantham Research Institute
Dr Lucia Garcia	Psychological and Behavioural Science (on leave ST)
Prof Myria Georgiou	Media and Communications
Dr Anna Getmansky	International Relations (on leave AT)
Dr Lucy Kanya	Health Policy
Dr Heather Kappes	Management
Dr Sohini Kar	International Development
Dr Jens Madsen	Psychological and Behavioural Science
Leslie Morphy	Lay member/external
Dr Federico Picinali	Law
Dr Jean-Christophe Plantin	Media and Communications
Dr Eleanor Power	Methodology
Dr Bert Provan	**CASE (Acting Deputy Chair WT, ST)**
Dr Aliya Rao	Methodology (on leave AT)
Dr Sara Salem	Sociology
Dr Romola Sanyal	Geography and Environment
Jenny Stevens	Lay member/external
Dr Siva Thambisetty	**Law (Deputy Chair, AT and Acting Chair WT, ST)**
Dr Harry Walker	Anthropology
Dr Tengyao Wang	Statistics

Annex 2: REC Terms of Reference 2023-24[1]

The Research Ethics Committee (REC) is a sub-committee of Research Committee. Its core functions are: i) to review and make recommendations on the School's Research Ethics Policy and procedure and related guidance[2]; ii) to take responsibility for the review and approval of ethics applications submitted by staff and students which are designated as high risk and/or requiring Committee review; iii) to provide guidance to staff and students on matters relating to research ethics.
More specifically, the Terms of Reference of the REC are as follows:

1. The Committee shall keep under review and make recommendations on the School's Research Ethics Policy.

2. The Committee shall have responsibility for making decisions on applications for ethical approval that have been submitted by members of staff and by students across the School. In doing so, the Committee shall, where necessary:

    a. recognise where advice and guidance is required from colleagues outside the Committee, and if necessary call upon experts to assist with advice and review;
    b. request further information from the researcher where it is considered that the documentation submitted is insufficient for the Committee to make an informed decision;
    c. consult the Health and Safety team to ensure that, so far as may be possible and reasonable, risks are minimised both to participants and researchers;
    d. take advice from the School's Data protection officer, Data Librarian and Information Security team to ensure that researchers comply with data protection procedures and legislation;
    e. ensure that there are no conflicts of interest when making decisions;

3. At each termly meeting the Committee shall review a list of all applications which have been approved by the Committee since the previous meeting and discuss any wider issues which have arisen.

4. The Committee will periodically undertake a selective audit of current research projects.

5. The Committee will liaise with departments and centres and other relevant units of the School (such as LSE LIFE, PhD Academy, the Eden Centre) regarding the provision of research ethics training.

6. Committee members are expected to comply with the School's Ethics Code[3] and the Committee Effective Behaviour Statement[4].

Role of the Chair and Deputy Chair
The duties of the Chair (and/or Deputy Chair, where appropriate) will be as per the normal expectations for LSE Committee Chairs; for instance, to undertake ad hoc work such as attendance at other relevant meetings and events. In addition, the Chair/Deputy Chair will advise and/or make decisions in the following:

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[1] Approved November 2023
[2] https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/research-and-innovation/research/research-ethics/research-ethics
[3] https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Secretarys-Division/Ethics/Ethics-Code
[4] https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/internal/comEffBehSta.pdf

Expedited reviews: In accordance with the LSE Research Ethics Policy and procedure, the Chair/Deputy Chair will, where s/he deems appropriate, undertake expedited reviews of applications for ethical approval which have been submitted to the REC. Decisions taken by expedited review will be reported to the Research Ethics Committee at its next meeting.

Thesis embargo requests: The Chair/Deputy Chair will make a decision on cases referred by the PhD Academy/Research Degrees Sub-Committee relating to embargo or redaction requests where these arise from ethical, security or confidentiality concerns for the research participants (or researchers themselves).

Research conduct: the School Secretary may seek the advice/opinion of the Chair in matters relating to research conduct as and when they arise across the School.

Mode of Operation

The Committee meets at least once per term. The quorum for Committee meetings is half of members plus the Chair. Applications for ethics approval are reviewed as and when they are received - they do not need to wait until a meeting of the Committee. Applications are usually reviewed by two or three members (more for particularly complex applications). Applications may be approved on the basis of the reviewing members recommendations or may require sign-off by the Chair or Deputy Chair (the circumstances for each are set out in appendix A below). The ethics support team assign applications to members for review, trying to ensure that workload is distributed evenly over the course of each term whilst at the same time taking into account members' areas of expertise**.**

Timeframe of REC review process

The Committee aims to review applications and send initial feedback to the researcher within two weeks of receiving the application.[5] In most cases approval may take longer as the researcher may be asked to provide some additional details, clarification or to make amendments before approval can be confirmed. Thus researchers should typically allow four weeks for the REC review process. However complex applications may require even longer and/or further iterations with the researcher, and thus the review process could take up to 5-6 weeks.

Expedited review

Where there is a genuine case for urgency due to circumstances which could not have been anticipated and which are outside of the researcher's control (for example, in the case of fast-track funding to address global or national emergencies), and where the ethical risks of the project are not especially complex, the Research Ethics Committee will expedite the review process as quickly as possible. However, even in expedited cases, time pressure should not be expected to pre-empt the full review process and the iterations or requests for clarification and amendment which require a further round of approval.

Composition of the Committee

Due to the nature of the Committee's work, the Committee has an exemption from the usual School Committee requirement to recruit members from each of the Academic Board constituency groups. As such, the Committee will have the opportunity to review potential candidates and make suggestions to

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[5] Students need to allow time for review by the supervisor first

the Vice Chair of Academic Board where the Committee has particular areas of expertise which it needs in order to fulfil its role.

The Committee currently comprises 18 academic/research staff and two lay members[6].

Appendix A: Chair/Deputy Chair sign-off of applications submitted for REC approval

Chair/Deputy Chair sign-off of applications submitted for REC approval

REC Chair or Deputy Chair sign-off is required where:
- An application has been reviewed by one REC member only (other than the Chair(s))
- An application has been reviewed by two members but the latter are both new to the Committee (within 1st year of membership)
- Two reviewers recommend approval but the study raises quite complex issues/risks

However, where a study appears to raise only minimal issues, the Research Governance Manager[7] may confirm approval on the basis of one member's recommendation of approval.

Research using secondary data only

The Research Governance Manager may, on behalf of the Committee, review and approve applications where[8]:
- the research will only be using secondary data, and
- the dataset is being supplied by a reputable data provider, and
- appropriate data security measures are in place, and
- the study raises no, or only minimal, issues

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[6] This number should have been updated when the ToR was approved in November 2023. The number of members in 2023-24 was 23 academic/research staff and two lay members.
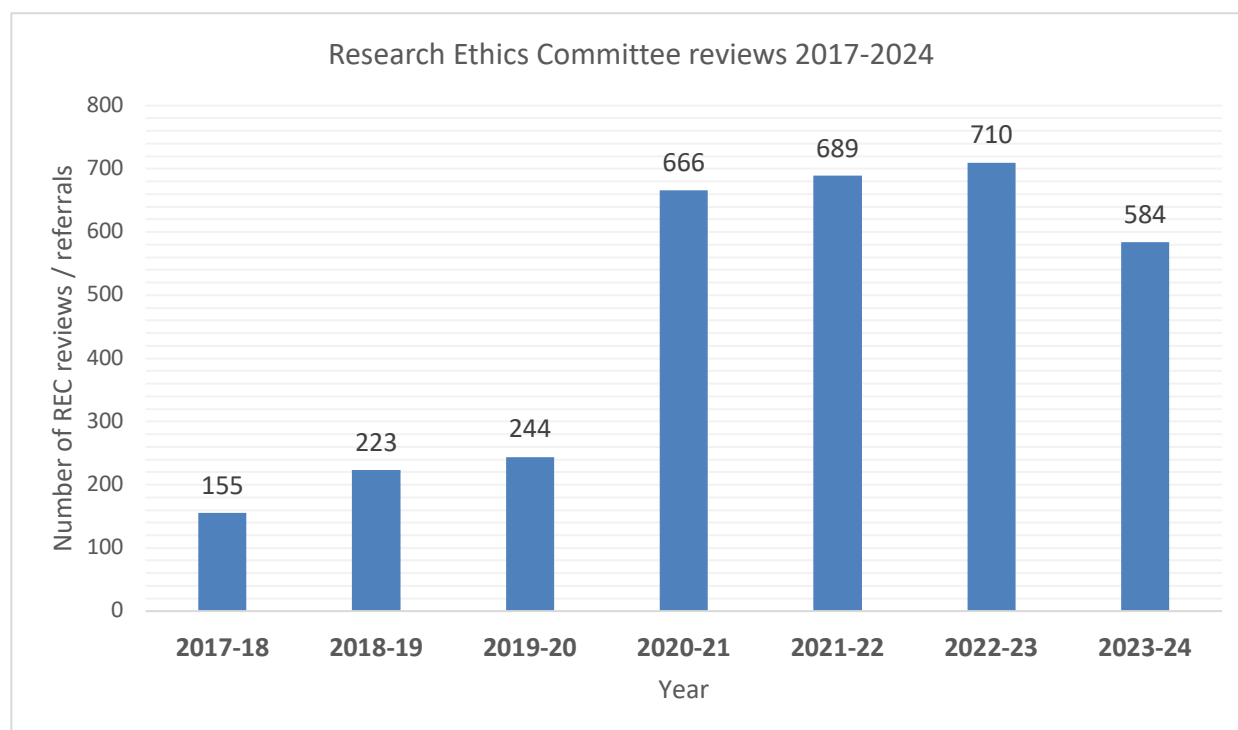
[7] To be reviewed annually and/or should there be a change of Research Governance Manager

[8] As above

Annex 3: Research Ethics applications submitted 2023-24

Figure 1: Research Ethics Committee reviews, 2017-2024

Figure 1: Research Ethics Committee reviews 2017-2024

Notes
- 2020-21: The large increase in volume was due to the launch of the online ethics review submission system. (The categorisation of applications as either low risk/Departmental review versus higher risk/ REC review was automated by the system.)
- 2023-24: the reduction in volume was a result of measures put in place – primarily the exemption of non-dissertation MSc research and all UG research.
- 2020/21-2022/23: the figures for these years have been adjusted following the realisation that the figures previously reported (754, 721, 721 respectively) included applications which, although initially categorised as requiring REC review were subsequently changed and did not come to the REC for review.

Amendments reviewed 2023-24:
In addition to the 584 ethics applications reviewed by the REC, 139 amendment requests were received. Of these, 120 were minor/low risk and handled by the Research Ethics Managers; 19 required review by the Committee.

Table 2: REC reviews by researcher type, 2023-24

	UG	PGT	PGR	Staff	Other
Total number	53	342	71	106	12*
Percentage	9%	59%	12%	18%	2%

*Other = visiting staff, researchers based in non-academic units (e.g. Eden, Careers, EDI, LSE Groups).

Table 3: REC reviews: breakdown per Department, 2023-24

Department	REC reviews	UG	PGT	PGR	Staff/other
Media & Communications	70	-	53	7	10
Psychological/Behavioural Sci	62	7	43	3	9
Sociology	58	17	31	4	6
Management	58	-	39	6	13
Geography & Environment	52	9	31	6	6
Social Policy	45	10	30	4	1
International Development	42	-	31	3	8
Gender studies	36		34	-	2
Government	27	6	10	6	5
European Institute	21	-	17	1	3
Methodology	21	-	10	3	8
International Relations	14	1	2	7	4
Health Policy	9	-	6	2	1
Anthropology	9	-	1	5	3
Economics	8	-	-	5	3
International History	4	-	-	2	2
Public Policy	3	-	3	-	-
Law	1	-	-	-	1
Economic History	1	1	-	-	-
Accounting	1	-	-	1	-
Philosophy	2	2	-	-	-
Statistics	1	-	-	1	-
Centres/Institutes/other	39	-	1	5	33
Totals	584	53	342	71	118

Table 4: Departmental reviews 2023-24

Applications reviewed/approved at Departmental level	2,127
Applications confirmed as 'Approval not required'	1,003