

## Honours and Masters by Coursework Research

### Do I need ethics approval for my project?

Will your research project involve any of the following?

- Conducting a survey/questionnaire
- Interviews or focus groups
- Observation of people's behaviour
- Analysis of data not publicly and freely available (i.e., a dataset you need permission to access)
- Use of biospecimens or tissue samples

If you answered yes to any of the above, then you will need to apply for human research ethics approval.

Completing an ethics application is important to ensure that Honours and Masters by Coursework research, like any other human research, is conducted with respect and integrity, and that the safety of participants, student researchers, supervisors, is maintained. Engaging with the ethics process is also an important skill for future research.

In Australia, the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 \(updated 2018\)](#) provides guidelines on the risks and benefits of research and is for use by researchers, ethics reviewers and others. It is essential that student researchers and their supervisors read this document and adopt its principles into the design of the student's research project from its earliest planning stages.

### How is Honours or Masters by Coursework research different?

Like any other human research, Honours and Masters by Coursework research that involves collecting data from people requires ethics approval.

Important differences are the level of experience of the research student, and the level of supervision that student receives. Honours/ Masters by Coursework students are at the beginning of their research journey, and may have less experience conducting interviews, administering surveys, or running workshops compared to Higher Degree by Research candidates.

Supervisors of Honours/Masters by Coursework students may also be supervising a cohort of students and may not be able to provide the same level of individual guidance that HDR candidates enjoy.

These differences have an impact on the merit and integrity of the research. The [National Statement](#) requires that research be "conducted or supervised by persons or teams with experience, qualifications and competence that re appropriate for the research" (1.1e). There are some research methods and participant groups that Honours students should not include in their research. Some of these methods and groups are determined within the Honours program or School, or by the College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN):

- some schools require that Honours/Masters by Coursework students do not collect data from humans and only undertake analysis of secondary data
- some schools may place limits for Honours/Masters by Coursework students for research methods involving:
  - the use of potentially hazardous substances
  - that risk physical injury or harm, or
  - that may reveal illegal activity

- some schools limit the participant groups that are the subject of Honours/Masters by Coursework research. Deliberately selecting a vulnerable participant group as defined in the [National Statement](#) for data collection, such as persons aged under 18 years, or recruiting fellow students where there is a power imbalance, are thereby off-limits.

It is recommended that Honours/Masters by Coursework students not collect data from patients, clients, service users, etc. Honours/Masters by Coursework students may interview professionals or experts, but not people who use a service.

Check with your Honours/Masters by Coursework program coordinator (or course coordinator) if you're unsure if any of these limitations apply to you.

These limitations are in place for two reasons: the particular sensitivities of the research requires experience that many Honours/Masters by Coursework students have not yet developed or guidance that supervisors may not be able to provide; and the successful completion of the research may require resources that the school or program cannot provide for study at this level.

## Timelines

Considering the above, if an Honours/Masters by Coursework project does require human research ethics approval, it is imperative that supervisors work with their students to ensure that the ethics application is submitted early in the **first semester of enrolment** to allow time for the review and approval process.

This can take around six weeks (for low-risk projects) and the Ethics team recommends that this be done by the **second month of semester**. This is so that there will be sufficient time for data collection, data analysis and write-up.

in Honours/Masters by Coursework theses/research projects.

## Further information

For further advice on this topic or other human research ethics matters, please email [humanethics@rmit.edu.au](mailto:humanethics@rmit.edu.au). A Research Governance and Ethics Coordinator will assist you and may connect you to one of the CHEAN or HREC members in your discipline who can offer expert ethics advice.