School of Education Research Ethics Committee

Principles[1] and Procedures for Undertaking Research in Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Programmes.

Key Ethical Practices and Expectations for Postgraduate Students and Supervisors.

Introduction

This document has been produced to provide guidance on the principles and procedures of research ethics in the School of Education. Its intention is to guide and, where necessary, regulate the scholarly activities of students (hereafter referred to as researchers) at undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels within the School of Education, UCC. It also aims to promote a stronger appreciation of ethical considerations in research within our programmes and when supervising postgraduate students (Masters by Research and Ph.D.). This document is underpinned by the UCC Code of Research Conduct [UCC Code of Research Conduct] and the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) within UCC [SREC]. Links to these ethics guidelines should be provided in the relevant Research Module sections of programme Canvas sites.

This document provides:

- A common set of ethical principles to guide and support the professional conduct of research and research-related activities within undergraduate and taught postgraduate Education programmes, and when supervising postgraduate research.

- The School of Education procedures by which research proposals can be assessed and ethical clearance provided.

The School of Education Research Ethics Committee (SEREC) will monitor the procedures outlined in this document. The principles outlined place a considerable emphasis on the personal responsibility of researchers to act ethically and to promote ethical behaviour in all aspects of research activities. As it is recognised that statements of principles and procedures cannot expect to cover every aspect of a complex area such as research ethics, we outline the most pertinent to our School and programmes.

---

[1] Adapted from UCC's *Code of Research Conduct* and the University of Gloucestershire's *Research Ethics: A Handbook of Principles and Procedures*.

Ethical Principles

1. Introduction

The guiding principles of ethical research reflect the UCC Code of Research Conduct [UCC Code of Research Conduct, page 5]. It aligns with the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2017) and the revised National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland (2019). UCC is committed to ensuring the highest standards of integrity in all aspects of our research, founded on basic principles of good research practice to be observed by all researchers and research organisations. The EU Code specifies four basic principles that underpin all research integrity and good practice in carrying out research, which we endorse here. These are principles that all scientific and scholarly researchers and practitioners must observe directly in performing their own individual research, and in dealings with research partners and the audience that receives their research reports.

These principles are:

- **Reliability** in ensuring the quality of research, reflected in the design, the methodology, the analysis and the use of resources.

- **Honesty** in developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting and communicating research in a transparent, fair, full and unbiased way. (see Para. 6)

- **Respect** for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage and the environment.

- **Accountability** for the research from idea to publication, for its management and organisation, for training, supervision and mentoring and for its wider impacts.

All research conducted in School of Education undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, and in Masters by Research and Ph.D. studies, must be consistent with the forgoing principles and with Irish law and policy, including data protection (GDPR) and related policies of the University.

The primary responsibility for the conduct of ethical research lies with the researcher. Researchers have a responsibility to make themselves aware of and ensure that all relevant requirements of Irish law and University Policy are met. Programme Directors, Research Module Coordinators and Research Supervisors must ensure that their students are provided with materials and resources to support this requirement, and to consult where appropriate concerning ethical issues. The following provides some further detail relating to the School of Education ethical principles.

2. General Responsibilities

➢ Researchers have a responsibility to ensure as far as possible that the physical, social and psychological well-being of their research participants is not detrimentally affected by the research. Research relationships should be characterised, whenever possible, by mutual respect and trust.

➢ Researchers should avoid, wherever possible, actions which may have harmful consequences for other researchers, or which might undermine the reputation of their discipline. Those directing research should bear in mind their responsibilities towards members of their research teams and should aim to anticipate and guard against the possible harmful consequences of the research for team members.

3. Informed Consent in Respect of Research Study Participation

The overarching principle of research ethics is respect for the autonomy of participants; this includes the protection of participants from physical or psychological harm whilst participating in a research study. Central to this is the concept of Informed Consent. Informed Consent is the process by which a participant **voluntarily** confirms his or her willingness to participate in a study, having been informed of the full details of the project. The following details the process for obtaining informed consent from potential participants in research studies. It outlines the informed consent procedures for adults and for children.

3.1 General principles for gaining informed consent

➢ Potential participants in research studies must normally have the right to choose whether or not they will participate**.** Obtaining informed consent is therefore central to the ethical conduct of all research involving human participants. Fully informed consent in this context means consent which is freely given with proper understanding of the nature and consequences of what is proposed.

➢ Informed consent from participants is required for all research studies undertaken by researchers. Consent processes must ask participants to actively opt-in to a given study. Ideally, written informed consent should be obtained but where this is challenging, there are a number of other ways this can be undertaken:

    o Ticking an opt-in box on paper or electronically.

    o Clicking an opt-in button or link online.

- Selecting from equally prominent yes/no options.

        o   Responding to an email requesting consent.

        o   Answering yes to a clear oral consent request.

➢ Prior to undertaking the research study, ethics approval must be sought through the researcher's supervisor from the School of Education Research Ethics Committee (taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes). Masters by Research and Ph.D. students must seek ethical approval from the Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) in UCC. An application for ethics approval will include examples of the consent form(s)/approach(es) and participant information sheet(s)which must be approved by the relevant Committee before the process of gaining informed consent commences.

➢ It is ultimately the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that participants have fully understood what they are consenting to by agreeing to participate in the research project.

3.2 The consent form/process

Participant consent form(s)/approach(es) to be used **must** have been approved by SEREC/SREC prior to commencement of the project. In order to meet requirements, the consent form/approach should:

- Be printed on UCC headed paper when utilising written consent. The UCC logo should be included in other approaches where possible.

- Include the correct title of the study.

- Include a statement (written/oral) that the participant has had the study explained to them and by whom and confirm that the risks and any benefits related to their participation have been discussed and all the participant's questions have been satisfactorily answered.

- Include a statement (written/oral) that participation is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

- Include a statement (written/oral) that confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study.

In order to meet these minimum standards, use of the School of Education exemplar form is recommended (the exemplar forms should be provided in the relevant Research Module sections of programme Canvas sites and/or by the Supervisor). This exemplar is a written consent form, but the material/structure can be utilised for all other options of gaining consent outlined in Section 3.1.

3.3 Procedure for taking informed consent

In order to ensure fully informed consent has been obtained, researchers should follow the process below:

1. Where possible, each participant should be given an oral explanation of what participation in the project will entail.

2. Each participant should be given an information sheet explaining in simple, non-technical terms, the procedures involved, any potential risks and hoped for benefits.

3. The participant should be given reasonable time to consider this information and to consult others as necessary.

4. The participant should be asked to sign a consent form and/or the other options outlined in Section 3.1. In cases where participants are children (under the age of 18) consent should normally be gained from a parent or guardian with the participant giving informed assent (see below for further details).

5. Throughout the process there should be sufficient time allowed to answer any questions raised by the potential participant. Potential participants should not be coerced to participate.

When providing information to participants, either verbally or in writing, researchers should explain the following:

- The purpose of the study and any background information which might be relevant.

- The reason that they have been approached to participate.

- That confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study.

- The design of the study and all procedures required as part of the study.

- The potential benefits and risks of participation in the study.

- That participation in the study is voluntary and that participants may withdraw at any time without penalty.

- Their responsibility as a participant in the project.

- That, despite providing informed consent, they may withdraw from the study at any stage.

➤ Ideally, these points should be verbally discussed with the potential participant. They should

then be provided with a written participant information sheet/email/online document and separate consent form/approach. In order to meet these minimum standards, use of the School of Education exemplar Participant Information Sheet is recommended. This exemplar is a written information sheet, but the material/structure can be utilised for all other options of gaining consent outlined in Section 3.1.

➢ A written consent form should be signed and dated by the potential participant and the person seeking consent. Each should also print their name next to their signature. A copy of the signed form should be given to the participant and the original retained for inclusion in the project file.

➢ If written consent is not possible, it is important that how and when consent was given is documented so as that evidence can be supplied if needed. Key elements that need to be documented include:

  o Who consented.

  o When they consented: a copy of a dated document, or online records that include a timestamp, or for oral consent, a note of the time and date which was made at the time of the conversation.

  o What the participant(s) was told at the time.

  o How they consented.

  o Whether they have withdrawn at any stage.

➢ Contact details of the researcher and their Supervisor should be provided so that individual participants can contact them for further information about the study if required. UCC contact details (e.g. UCC telephone number and email) rather than personal contact details should be provided.

➢ It is important to note that the informed consent process does not end once the consent form has been signed. The practice of providing information about the study to participants should be an ongoing process performed by all members of the research team.

➢ As the timing of the signing of the consent form relative to the commencement of the study may be subject to review, it is important to record dates correctly on both the consent form and/or any associated documentation. Consent must be provided by the participant prior to any aspect of their involvement in the study.

4. Projects Involving Participants under the Age of 18

In essence, researchers carrying out studies involving participants under the age of 18 should follow the same process as outlined above. However, researchers should also ensure that their study meets the additional requirements outlined in this section.

➢ It is essential that any study involving participants under the age of 18 either relates directly to this group or can *only* be carried out with this group.

➢ The study should be designed to minimise pain, discomfort, fear and any other foreseeable risk in relation to the child's stage of development and continuous monitoring should take place throughout the study to ensure this remains so.

➢ In studies involving children, generally UCC requires that both the assent of the child and the consent of the parent or guardian are obtained prior to commencement of the project. Separate information sheets should be provided for parents and children to take account of their different cognitive abilities. Both should make clear that the participant may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

➢ *Child assent should be sought in a way which is appropriate to the age and ability of the child.* For example, in the case of younger children, this may involve the use of pictures to signify how the child feels about participating in the project.

In addition to the above, the School of Education requires that:

➢ The power imbalance between researcher and researched should be considered. Care should be taken to ensure that the latter are not pressurised into participation. Research participants should be aware of their right to refuse participation at any time and should not be given the impression that they are required to participate.

➢ The researcher should explain how far research participants will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality and participants should have the option of rejecting the use of data-gathering devices such as audio-recorders.

➢ If there is a likelihood of data being shared with or divulged to other researchers, the potential uses of the data should be discussed with the participants and their agreement to such use should be obtained.

➢ In addition to obtaining the informed consent of those under study, researchers should attempt to anticipate and guard against the possible harmful consequences of their research for participants.

➢ Researchers must have Garda Vetting clearance.

5. Confidentiality and Anonymity

➢ Intrusion into the privacy of participants must be kept to the minimum necessary to fulfil the purposes of the research.

➢ Confidentiality and anonymity are important principles in dealing with data from participants. The term "confidential" usually refers inter alia, to the identity of participants, which should normally be kept private. It is inappropriate to use this term to refer to information which will be published: the appropriate term in this case is "anonymous".

➢ The anonymity and privacy of research participants should be respected and personal information relating to participants should be kept confidential and secure. Researchers must comply with the provisions of the Data Protection Acts 1988 and 2003 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016) and should consider whether it is appropriate to record certain kinds of sensitive information.

➢ Confidentiality/anonymity (as appropriate) of personal data relating to participants must be protected through implementation of appropriate safeguards. Where participants' identities need to be retained for matching of data purposes, they must be encoded, and the cipher held separately and securely.

➢ Where relevant, researchers must seek appropriate data security/management advice in relation to encryption/anonymisation.

6. Records and Data Management

It is recognised that research data and records can take many forms; however, the principles below must be applied where relevant. Further information and resources are available through the UCC library [Library Guide Data Storage and Backup].

➢ Researchers working with data have a responsibility to familiarise themselves and comply with the UCC Research Data Management Policy and the General Data Protection Regulation (the "GDPR"). The GDPR directly imposes obligations on organisations, bodies and individuals involved in processing of personal data. Researchers working with personal data have a responsibility to ensure that any such data are handled in accordance with these obligations.

➢ Masters by Research and Ph.D. studies students who are applying for ethical approval through SREC may need to complete a Data Protection Impact Assessment Process prior to the collection of data. This is a GDPR led process to help researchers identify and minimise the

data protection risks of a project. There is a screening checklist to help researchers decide whether or not they need to complete a DPIA. However, any project which gathers data concerning vulnerable people (including children) must carry out a DPIA (https://www.ucc.ie/en/gdpr/dataprotectionimpactassessmentsdpias/). Please see UCC information on vulnerable groups VulnerabilityGuidanceDocumentApril2019.pdf (ucc.ie).

➢ Researchers should consider the treatment and management of their data before, during and after a research project, including identifying roles and responsibilities relating to data management.

➢ Throughout their work, researchers are required to keep clear and accurate records of research procedures followed and results obtained.

➢ Data and records generated in the course of research must be kept securely in paper or electronic form, as appropriate, and back-up must always be kept for data and records stored on a computer. Data and records must be stored in such a way that permits a complete retrospective review, if necessary. The following is a link to the IT data storage options available, their benefits and drawbacks: Storage Options | University College Cork (ucc.ie)

➢ Post-project the University expects data and records to be stored securely for a minimum period. All undergraduate and taught postgraduate programme research records are subject to a retention period of 13 months after the appeal period has expired. Masters by Research and Ph.D. studies are expected to store data for a 10-year period after the completion of a research project.

Procedures

For procedures relating to Masters by Research and Ph.D. studies please see Research Ethics | University College Cork (ucc.ie) and Social Research | University College Cork (ucc.ie). **Masters and Ph.D. research supervisors have a responsibility to advise and support their students in gaining ethical approval prior to any data collection commencing.** In addition, should a change in supervision occur for a registered student, the new supervision team have a responsibility to check that all is place/in progress in relation to gaining ethical approval for any research study being undertaken.

SEREC has endeavoured to develop a system of procedures sufficiently flexible to accommodate the needs of the various *undergraduate and taught postgraduate* programmes within the School. Programme Directors who believe that the procedures do not adequately address their specific situation may consult directly with the Chair of SEREC.

Please note: time should be allowed for this process, as well as any action required from SEREC feedback before the start of the research.

1. School of Education Research Ethics Committee

The aim of SEREC is to consider and, in accordance with the principles expressed in this document, grant or refuse permission for the undertaking of research investigations. Its second aim is to act as an advisory body to staff and research Supervisors within the School of Education on matters related to research ethics. SEREC will meet on a regular basis and in response to applications submitted to it. Key dates relating to undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes should be agreed with the Chair of SEREC in advance of the beginning of the Academic Year to ensure adequate planning for the Committee and meeting various programme requirements throughout the year.

2. Procedures for Securing Approval for Research Projects

All undergraduate and taught postgraduate students are required to complete the UCC Educational Research Study Ethics Application form prior to undertaking their proposed research project(s). This form should be completed with their assigned Supervisor (or Research Module leader if a supervisor has not been assigned at this stage of the process). Figure 1 provides the key steps that need to be undertaken to complete the ethics application process.

2.1 Postgraduate taught students seeking approval

The general framework for approval will apply to students following taught postgraduate courses. Additionally, all Postgraduate students should be offered appropriate education and training in research ethics in their Research Methods module(s) or its equivalent. Programme Director(s) and dissertation module coordinators are responsible for ensuring that all students are aware of, and agree to abide by, the principles expressed in this document, through their respective programme guides. All postgraduate taught students are required to signal their adherence to the principles expressed in this document **prior** to undertaking research, through completion of the appropriate UCC Educational Research Study Ethics Application form.

2.2 Undergraduate students seeking approval

The general framework for approval will apply to students following programmes within the Undergraduate Modular Scheme. Additionally, all students should be offered appropriate education and training in research ethics in their Research Methods module or its equivalent. Programme and module coordinators and where relevant research/dissertation supervisors, in the Undergraduate Modular Scheme are responsible for ensuring that all undergraduate students are aware of, and agree to abide by, the principles expressed in this document, through their respective programme guides. All undergraduate students are required to signal their adherence to the principles expressed in this document **prior** to undertaking research, through completion of the appropriate UCC Educational Research Study Ethics Application form.
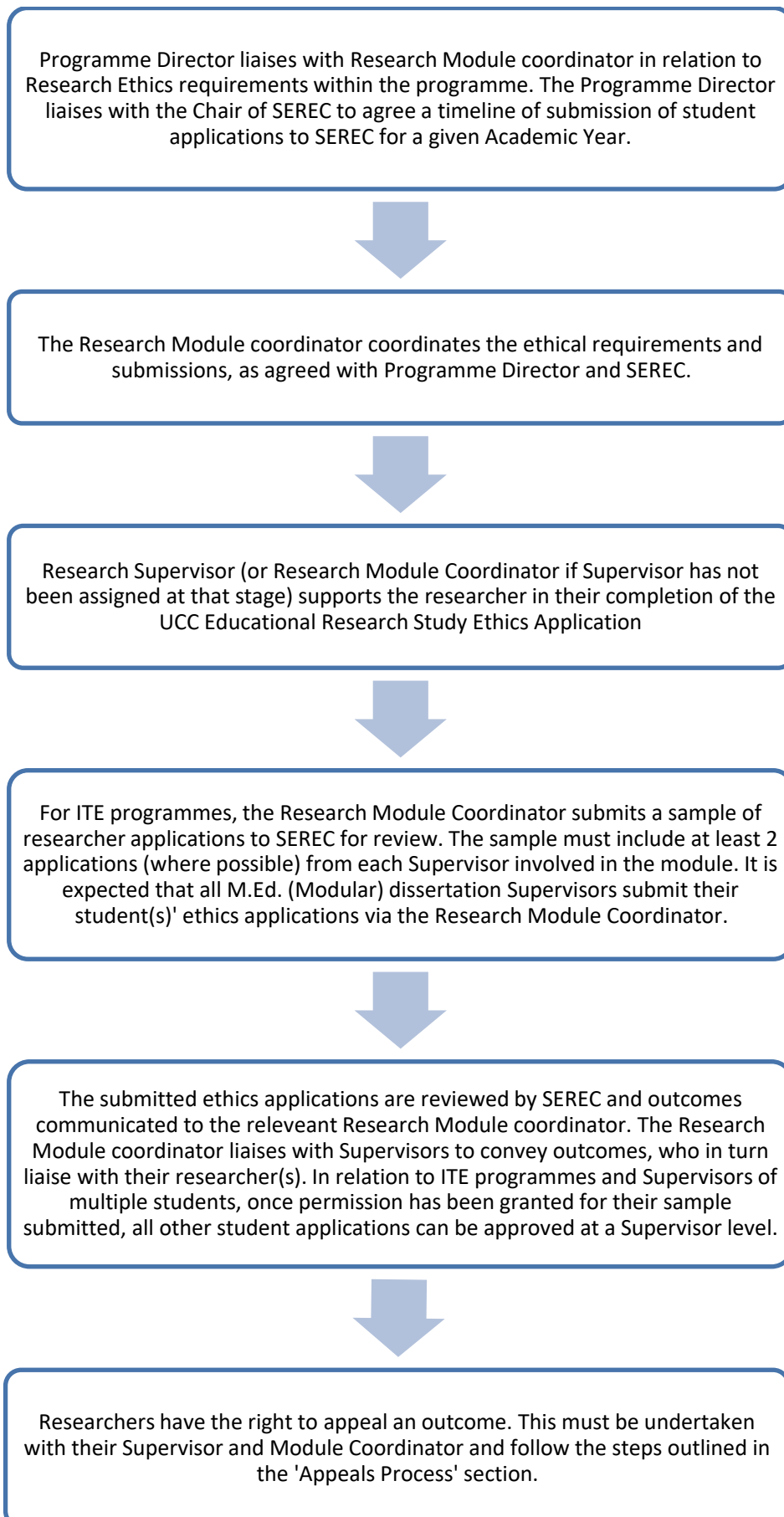
2.3 Supervisor role

➤ The research Supervisor (or Research Module coordinator if Supervisor has not been assigned at that stage) supports the researcher in their completion of the UCC Educational Research Study Ethics Application. All researchers must complete and submit the form to their Supervisor and both must sign off on the application.

➤ For Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, the Research Module coordinator submits a sample of researcher applications to SEREC for review. The sample must include at least 2 applications (where possible) from each Supervisor involved in the module. Once permission has been granted for a Supervisor's sample submitted, all other student applications can be approved at a Supervisor level.

➤ It is expected that all M.Ed. (Modular) dissertation Supervisors submit their student(s)' ethics applications via the Research Module coordinator for consideration by SEREC.

➢ If the supervisor has concerns about approving a project, they can refer the work to the appropriate gatekeeper (Research Module coordinator first, Programme Director thereafter if required) within the school. The relevant gatekeeper acts as a conduit between the researcher and the possible use of SEREC. The gatekeeper will guide the researcher in areas of uncertainty and ensure that informed consent is obtained in an appropriate form. In particular, where a research proposal raises concern, or there is a dispute between supervisor and student, the gatekeeper will judge whether or not a proposal should be submitted to SEREC for formal approval.

Figure 1: Ethics Approval Process – School of Education

Programme Director liaises with Research Module coordinator in relation to Research Ethics requirements within the programme. The Programme Director liaises with the Chair of SEREC to agree a timeline of submission of student applications to SEREC for a given Academic Year.

↓

The Research Module coordinator coordinates the ethical requirements and submissions, as agreed with Programme Director and SEREC.

↓

Research Supervisor (or Research Module Coordinator if Supervisor has not been assigned at that stage) supports the researcher in their completion of the UCC Educational Research Study Ethics Application

↓

For ITE programmes, the Research Module Coordinator submits a sample of researcher applications to SEREC for review. The sample must include at least 2 applications (where possible) from each Supervisor involved in the module. It is expected that all M.Ed. (Modular) dissertation Supervisors submit their student(s)' ethics applications via the Research Module Coordinator.

↓

The submitted ethics applications are reviewed by SEREC and outcomes communicated to the releveant Research Module coordinator. The Research Module coordinator liaises with Supervisors to convey outcomes, who in turn liaise with their researcher(s). In relation to ITE programmes and Supervisors of multiple students, once permission has been granted for their sample submitted, all other student applications can be approved at a Supervisor level.

↓

Researchers have the right to appeal an outcome. This must be undertaken with their Supervisor and Module Coordinator and follow the steps outlined in the 'Appeals Process' section.

3. Appeals Procedure

All researchers have the right to appeal against the judgement of SEREC. There are two grounds for such appeal:

1. where the researcher feels that SEREC has been unfair in its consideration of a proposal and/or has not properly understood it;

2. where there have been any irregularities in the procedures adopted by SEREC.

A researcher has the right to appeal in writing against a decision made by SEREC within ten working days of the notification of that decision. This must be undertaken in conjunction with their Supervisor and the Research Module Coordinator. The Chair will convene a meeting of SEREC with the proposer to review the proposal and the grounds for the SEREC decision. This meeting will normally be held within ten working days of notification of the appeal. There will be at least two SEREC members in addition to the Chair in attendance.

At this stage the SEREC may:

- uphold its original decision to reject the proposal;

- uphold the appeal of the researcher and approve the original proposal;

- uphold the appeal of the researcher but refer the decision until appropriate revisions have been made to the proposal.