

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE: GUIDANCE FOR SECURITY SENSITIVE RESEARCH

1 Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance for staff and student researchers who are planning on undertaking research that may be considered security sensitive. It is intended to be read in conjunction with the Research Ethics Committees: Policy and Procedures for Research Ethics Approval. All researchers are expected to carry out research in accordance with the UWE Code of Good Research Conduct (2015) and to conduct their research in accordance with the terms of the Concordat.

2 Scope and Definitions

This guidance is for all University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) researchers including (but not restricted to) staff, visiting fellows, postgraduate research students and taught students at all levels of study. It relates to research that may be deemed to be security sensitive and thus fall under the provisions of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (the Act). Under the Act, relevant higher education bodies must have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism (known as the 'Prevent Duty'). Compliance with the duty is monitored by the Office for Students (OfS). UWE Bristol complies with the Duty under the provisions of its Safeguarding Policy within which context this guidance is placed.

3 General Principles

The University Research Ethics Sub-Committee (RESC) recognises the importance of timely research concerning the threat of terrorism and understands that without research into the threat of terrorism solutions cannot be found. The objective of this guidance is not to enable RESC to block security sensitive research, but to consider such projects in the context of the Prevent Duty, which applies to a number of specified authorities, including all UK universities. It will do so by ensuring that projects coming to the attention of the Faculty Research Ethics Committees (FRECs) or RESC will receive timely risk assessment on their safety and will be shared with UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead to enable a final consideration with respect to the Prevent Duty and to enter it on a register of security sensitive research.

4 Guidance

Summary of specific provisions for security sensitive research projects

- At all times, researchers and RESC members should inform themselves and be mindful of relevant legal obligations under the 2015 Counter Terrorism and Security Act (known as "the Prevent Duty") when planning, approving and conducting security sensitive research;

- RESC will maintain a record of all applications for ethical approval considered by the Committee to amount to security sensitive research;
- Applicants making an application for ethical approval should indicate on their application forms that their project may amount to security sensitive research;
- Where a project involves security sensitive research the application will be referred to RESC from the FRECs;
- That once so identified the Chair of RESC will notify UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead of the project. If provided, comment from the Prevent Lead will be taken into account by RESC before Chair's Action is taken;
- All staff involved in security sensitive research, and who make an application for ethical approval, must complete the e-training module The Prevent Duty in Higher Education: An Introduction prior to approval being awarded for the project. A link to the URL for this module is also available at the end of this document;
- RESC will require all security sensitive projects to adhere to stringent data storage, security and destruction protocols and will treat all data relating to such projects collected from primary, secondary or any other source as particularly sensitive.

The scope of security sensitive research

I. It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of research activities that may be deemed security sensitive. However the following is an indicative list of what might be considered security sensitive research:

- Projects concerning extremist religious groups, including where accessing their materials may be interpreted as committing an offence under the provisions of section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Terrorism Act 2006 if not confined to use for purely academic research purposes.
- Projects concerning organisations that could potentially be involved in acts that could breach counter-terrorism legislation under the Terrorism Act (2006), for instance extremist animal rights or Far Right groups;
- Projects concerning cyber-terrorism;
- Projects undertaken for government departments concerning or including sensitive topics, for instance military procurement or weapons technology;
- Online projects which use social media and involve researching potentially sensitive extremist websites;
- Projects concerning making direct contact with extremist groups or individuals;
- Research which has the potential to be used for purposes unintended by the researchers in ways which threaten security despite this not being the intention of the researchers. An example of this type of research may be projects concerning novel IT encryption methods.

Undergraduate or postgraduate taught student projects that involve only public domain sources, for example, literature reviews of published academic papers, will not normally be considered security sensitive research even if they include reference to the terms above. Ethical approval forms or checklists for supervisors of student projects should record if the student's project may legitimately require accessing potentially security sensitive material that is already in the public domain to protect the student if their internet search triggers any security interest. Any such student projects should be notified to the UWE Bristol Prevent Lead who will keep a register of security sensitive research.

How does RESC manage security sensitive research applications and act to protect researchers?

II. Researchers making an application for ethical approval in relation to projects that may be considered security sensitive research should apply for project approval in the usual manner using UWE Bristol's existing Policy and Procedures for Research Ethics Approval relating to ethical review. If the applicant (the project lead) is aware their project is security sensitive this should be mentioned on the application form. The relevant information about UWE Bristol's research ethics application procedure is available at: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/research/researchethics>

III. If the project lead is unaware of, or fails to mention, a potentially security sensitive aspect to their project, the scrutineers will use their best endeavours to identify such projects during the scrutiny process insofar as it is evident from the project protocol. All applications to FRECs so identified as involving security sensitive research will be referred to RESC, either by self-notification by the applicant or by identification during the scrutiny process. Once referred to RESC the application will be scrutinised in the usual way and a decision will be made by RESC Chair's Action. If approved, the RESC Committee will be asked to ratify the decision at the next quarterly RESC meeting following the Chair's Action decision.

IV. In the case of a project identified as involving security sensitive research the RESC Chair will inform UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead of the project and if necessary discuss with the Prevent Lead aspects of the project that require risk assessment over and above that usually undertaken as part of RESC's ethical review process to the extent that such discussion enables UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead to discharge UWE Bristol's duties pursuant to the provisions of the Act.

V. As part of RESC's ethical approval process, all proposed research projects are risk assessed in terms of the safety of research participants, the researcher and UWE Bristol. This risk assessment includes (but is not restricted to) identifying projects that may be security sensitive and to consider associated risks. This, together with the notification to UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead ensures RESC does not exceed its ethical review remit whilst facilitating UWE Bristol's compliance with its statutory Prevent Duty. This process enables UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead to consider:

- i) The application in terms of the counter-terrorism risks known to UWE Bristol;
- ii) What support might be offered; and
- iii) How UWE Bristol might ensure that its usual safeguarding arrangements are followed taking into account the details of the proposed research.

VI. RESC will maintain a record of all projects applying for ethical approval involving security sensitive research but the formal UWE register of such projects will be held by the Prevent Lead. If statutory enquiries relating to the Prevent Duty are made by external agencies information contained on the record may be made available to those agencies insofar as UWE Bristol is required by law to produce it. The research lead will normally be told of this action. By keeping a register UWE Bristol is able to monitor the prevalence and potential risk of identified projects.

Application procedure for security sensitive research projects

VII. For staff and Postgraduate research students:

1. Applications for ethical approval for potentially security sensitive projects should be made by the usual processes;
2. If a researcher indicates that security sensitive research is being undertaken on the ethics application, then the application should be sent for approval to RESC, rather than the relevant FREC. The project will be reviewed in the usual way;
3. If a researcher does not indicate that the project involves security sensitive research the application will be forwarded by the FRECs to RESC for scrutiny and consideration;
4. The ethical principles underpinning RESC scrutiny and Chair's Action will be undertaken in the usual way;
5. The Chair of RESC will inform UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead of the project to enable a risk assessment to be undertaken in relation to UWE Bristol's Prevent Duty and for the Prevent Lead to keep a register of security sensitive research in a secure database;
6. A record of the project will also be held by the research ethics administration team in RBI on their secure database.
7. All staff, PGR students and their supervisors who are conducting research that may be regarded as security sensitive are required to complete the Prevent training module before ethical approval can be given.

VIII. For taught students (PGT and UG)

1. As a general principle RESC does not encourage students on taught programmes to design and undertake any research involving human participants falling into the category of 'high risk'. The definition of 'high risk' research is research that involves a risk over and above that which a supervisor can 'sign off' as 'low risk'. Such risks include human participant projects involving sensitive topics, access to personal and/or sensitive data and projects that create a risk to participants, the researcher or UWE Bristol including a reputational risk. This definition includes security sensitive research.
2. For students undertaking projects and/or equivalent, which might be considered security-sensitive in nature in the first instance the supervisors (or equivalent) must make an early judgement regarding the appropriateness and methodology of the topic and advise students. An auditable record should be kept of such advice. For instance, if the work is relying solely on secondary academic sources then as in (I.) above, it would not normally be regarded as security sensitive research. However, if the student were intending to visit certain extremist websites and/or speak to individuals of concern, then it should be considered as potentially security sensitive. Questions for

supervisors to ask themselves include: Is the topic itself likely to cause concern? Does the supervisor (or equivalent) have the relevant expertise to supervise the project?

3. The supervisor (or equivalent) at this stage can do two things: 1) make a decision (perhaps in consultation with colleagues) that the work should not go ahead, or 2) recommend that the work should proceed. It is envisaged by RESC that projects falling under category 2) will be extremely rare.

4. If the supervisor (or equivalent) decides the project falls under category 2) the project must be regarded as 'high risk' and will require full ethics review by RESC.

5. All supervisors (or equivalent) conducting research that may be regarded as security sensitive are required to complete The Prevent Duty in Higher Education: An Introduction before ethical approval can be given.

6. The Chair of RESC will inform UWE Bristol's Prevent Lead of the project to enable a risk assessment to be undertaken in relation to UWE Bristol's Prevent Duty and for the Prevent Lead to keep a register of security sensitive research in a secure database.

7. A record of the project will also be held by the research ethics administration team in RBI on their secure database.

8. All staff, PGR students and their supervisors who are conducting research that may be regarded as security sensitive are required to complete the Prevent training module before ethical approval can be given.

Advice, support and training

- The Prevent Duty in Higher Education: An Introduction training module is available at: <https://intranet.uwe.ac.uk/tasks-guides/TrainingCourse/The-Prevent-Duty-in-Higher-Education-An-Introduction> (requires Staff login)
- In 2019 Universities UK published updated *Oversight of security-sensitive research material in UK universities: Guidance*. This document contains information about the storage and circulation of security sensitive research material. It is available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/Oversight-security-sensitive-research-material-guidance-3.pdf>
- If you have any concerns about whether or not your research is security sensitive then, if you are a member of staff or supervisor, please speak to the Chair of your FREC in the first instance for further advice. You may also contact the Chair of RESC for advice via: researchethics@uwe.ac.uk

5 Further guidance and support

General advice about the Prevent Duty can be sought from the UWE Bristol Safeguarding Manager, details on the Intranet in the [Safeguarding](#) pages.

If you are a student please speak to your Director of Studies or Supervisor for advice. Both you and your Director of Studies and/or Supervisor or equivalent should keep a written record of this advice.

UWE Bristol has several policies that will be helpful to researchers and committees when considering security sensitive research, in particular the:

- UWE Bristol’s IT Acceptable Use Policy, available at: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/its/itpolicies/itacceptableusepolicy.aspx>
- UWE Bristol’s Conditions of Use and Data Protection for the use of email, available at: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/its/itpolicies/uweemaildataprotection.aspx>
- Further information about UWE Bristol’s safeguarding arrangements is available at: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/students/healthandwellbeing/safeguardingandpreventduty.aspx>
- Arrangements for approving external speakers is available at: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/business/venuehireandevents/externalspeakers.aspx>
- UWE Bristol’s Research Governance policy is available at: <http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/research/researchgovernance.aspx>
- UWE Bristol’s Safety of Social Researchers guidance is available at: https://docs.uwe.ac.uk/sites/health-and-safety/layouts/15/download.aspx?SourceUrl=https://docs.uwe.ac.uk/sites/health-and-safety/Documents/G017_Social_Researchers.docx
- The Concordat to support research integrity is available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/the-concordat-to-support-research-integrity.pdf>

6 Ownership and Oversight

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| Senior Policy Owner: | Chair, Research Ethics Sub-Committee |
| Policy Author: | Chair, Research Ethics Sub-Committee |
| Overseeing committee: | Research Ethics Sub-Committee |
| Compliance measures: | [How will assurances regarding compliance and effectiveness be received] |
| Related policies, procedures and codes of practice: | |
| Related legislative and/or regulatory requirements | Prevent Duty, 2016 |

7 Version history

| Version | Date | Summary of changes | Author |
|---------|---------|--------------------|-------------|
| V1.0 | 1.11.17 | New policy | Chair, UREC |

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|------|----------|---|-------------|
| V1.1 | Dec 2020 | Revision to arrangements for UG and PGT students undertaking literature review | Chair, RESC |
| V2.0 | | [Major changes, typically involving substantive rewrites as a result of review] | Role |