

Regulations Research Ethics Review Committee (RERC) Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS)-Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam

Preface

The institutional regulations (part A, below) are based on the national Code of Ethics for research in the social and behavioural sciences involving human participants, version 2.2 (October 2017) , particularly sections A5, K, L and M, complemented with new articles. The operational regulations (part B) are composed by the RERC-FSS-VU.

A. Institutional regulations

1. Composition

The RERC consists of five members: a chair, a vice-chair and three members.

2. Position of members within the faculty

At least four members have a permanent position with a research task within the faculty. When needed the board seeks expertise from outside the faculty.

3. Expertise

The board strives for diversity in composition with respect to discipline and methodological expertise, in order to maximize the coverage of departments and the presence of quantitative as well as qualitative research expertise. For legal expertise the RERC can ask for the support of the dedicated layer of the VU.

4. Appointment

The Faculty Board appoints the members and the chair of the RERC. The RERC can offer suggestions for the appointment of new members.

5. Secretariat

The Faculty Board appoints a secretary to support the RERC and monitor the application procedures.

6. Board

The chair, vice chair and secretary form the board of the RERC. The chair prepares the documents for the meeting, leads the meeting, and corresponds to the Faculty Board and with applicants. The vice-chair takes over the duties of the chair in his absence. The secretary supports the RERC in the preparation and organization of meetings, taking minutes of meetings and the contact with applicants for review.

7. Advisors and reviewers

The RERC may call upon advisors and reviewers who are not members of the RERC.

8. Material support

The Faculty Board supports the RERC with adequate facilities for handling and archiving applications such as storage space on the server and a website for the review procedure.

9. Procedures

The procedures of the RERC are defined in the operational regulations (Section B below).

10. Objections of applicants for review by the RERC

Applicants may appeal against the advice of the RERC within six weeks after the release of the advice at the Faculty Board (portfolio holder for research), which assesses whether the RERC acted correctly.

11. Objections of stakeholders in reviewed research

Stakeholders in research that is reviewed by the RERC can submit an objection through a publicly accessible procedure.

12. Validity of advices of other review committees

Advices of other review committees on specific research are taken over by the RERC.

13. Cooperation in research

Research that is carried out in cooperation with other faculties does not need to be reviewed by both faculties.

14. Term of office

Members are appointed for the period of three years and can be member for a second term. In order to preserve expertise within the RERC the board strives for a spread of the expiration of terms.

B. Operational regulations

1. Activities

The RERC gives two types of advice. First, the RERC gives advice to a researcher about future research on request of the researcher if the application meets the conditions for the review procedure (see article B6). The review procedure ends with an RERC advice.

Secondly the RERC advises the Faculty Board, departments and/or research groups on research ethics and integrity of research. The RERC meets monthly to discuss review requests and policy matters.

2. Publications

The regulations of the RERC and an overview of the composition and terms of the members of the RERC are publicly available on the internet page of the faculty.

The submission form for the review procedure is also available through the website.

Minutes of the meeting and applications and reviews of research are available during and after the review procedure for RERC-members, the research portfolio holder and the Dean in a shared folder on the server of the faculty.

3. Responsibility researcher

The Faculty of Social Sciences expects integrity and responsibility of researchers in the balance between the social and scientific relevance of the proposed research and with respect to the physical, social and psychological burden and risks on physical, social and psychological damage for the participants, the researchers involved, the faculty and the social sciences as a whole.

At the start of a new research project, FSS researchers perform an ethics review themselves with the aid of a list of key questions with explanations, the so called 'self-check', which is available on the website of the RERC. Based on the list the researcher checks whether:

1. the research may possibly damage researchers or research participants;
2. personal and/or sensitive information is collected;
3. research participants receive sufficient and correct information;
4. research participants participate voluntarily and give permission for participation in the research;
5. research participants receive material, social or psychological stimuli;
6. research participants are minors.

The standard research at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam meets the following conditions:

- a. Complete and correct information about the research prior to participation;
- b. Conscious consent with the burden or damage by adults and voluntary participation in research before the participant engages in the research;
- c. The researcher guarantees the confidentiality of information obtained by adequate security and encryption;
- d. The researcher verifies data on risk of disclosure before they be made available to others.

If the research meets these conditions and the researcher has completed the self-check, the researcher receives an email message confirming that ethics review was conducted based on the guidelines of the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences, that the researcher declares that the research conforms to the guidelines, and that the research does not require further review by the Board.

Research that has one or more of the following characteristics is only permissible if this is necessary for the validity and reliability of the research and the obtained data are of great scientific value:

- a. Incomplete, misleading information about the research;
- b. Information about the research is given to participants only in retrospect, participants are not actively giving consent, consent is presumed, participation is unsolicited or mandatory,
- c. physical, social and psychological pressure is exerted on participants.

When the research has one or more of these characteristics, the researcher should submit an application for ethics review by the RERC.

4. Request for review

When the outcome of the self-check or another reason leads to the conclusion that the intended research needs the advice of the RERC, the review procedure can be started with answering the questions in the online submission form. The procedure is also open for reviews desired by external parties, such as magazines and financiers.

5. Liability

The RERC accepts no liability for any harm resulting from research on which RERC advice is delivered.

6. Admission to review procedure

Who can apply? Only researchers at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the VU (project leader, assistant professor, associate professor, (endowed) professor) can submit an application. PhD students can submit an application with the approval of their supervisor. The RERC does not give advice to students. For research performed by master students an application may be submitted by their master thesis supervisor. For research performed by PhD students an application may be submitted by the daily supervisor or any of the other supervisors.

How can researchers submit an application? On the website of the RERC www.fsw.vu.nl/ethischecommissie a form is available to apply for an ethics review: the submission form. The RERC only accepts a request for review when the available submission form is used.

When can researchers request advice? The RERC only gives advice about future research. The RERC does not give advice about current research.

On what kind of research researchers can request advice? The RERC gives advice on any kind of research, in all social-scientific disciplines, on multi-disciplinary research with social-scientific aspects, on both qualitative and quantitative research.

7. Types of review

In its procedure the RERC reviews if the societal and scientific relevance of the proposed research outweigh the physical, social and psychological burden and risks on physical, social and psychological damage for the participants, the researchers involved, the Faculty and the Social Sciences as a whole.

Pre-assessment. The chair and secretary assess how an application will be reviewed on the basis of the extent to which the research raises ethical questions according to the information supplied by the applicant.

Expedited review. When – according to the pre-assessment – the burden and/or risks for participants are small, the secretary invites one member of the RERC to review the application. The RERC member provides a review and discusses it with the chair. The chair will then provide advice directly to the applicant. The review and the advice are available for inspection by all RERC members in the RERC folder on the G drive of the university computer network and are put on the agenda of the (next) RERC meeting, with status: for information. When the review of the RERC member raises ethical questions, a second RERC member will be invited to review the application, including the remarks of the first member and the chair, resulting in an intensive review.

Full review. When – according to the pre-assessment – the burden and/or risks for participants are not small, two members of the RERC are invited to review the application followed by discussion of the research and the reviews in the RERC meeting. The review and the advice are available for all RERC members in the RERC folder on the G drive of the network and are put on the agenda of the (next) RERC meeting, with status: to be discussed.

8. Independence

RERC members refrain from advice on applications in which they are involved. The chair and secretary select reviewers in such a way that conflicts of interests are avoided. Reviewers disclose potential conflicts of interest to the chair and secretary.

9. Decision rule in the RERC meeting

Discussions in RERC meetings aim at consensus in decision making. Deviation from this rule is limited to very exceptional cases. In case of no consensus this will be recorded in the minutes.

10. Result of the review procedure

The review procedure can result in three possible outcomes, where 1 and 2 can occur at the same time:

1. A request for further information to the applicant: the proposal remains in treatment;
2. An advice to revise the design of the research: the proposal remains in treatment;
3. No questions asked and no objection: the proposal is treated.

The RERC informs the Faculty Board if the researcher has not revised the research within four weeks and the final design is in conflict with applicable ethical principles. The Faculty Board will implement the outcome of the RERC advice, after also considering a possible appeal by the applicant to the Faculty Board.

11. Review period

The RERC is committed to deliver advice within one month after the submission of the application. When a full review is necessary the advice follows after the meeting of the Committee in which the research has been discussed. The RERC meets every month. The schedule of meetings is posted at the website.

12. Revision of the research

A researcher can submit a modified design of the research indicating the original application number. The modified design is normally reviewed by the same members as the original design.