

MACS Researcher Guidelines



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Introduction

These guidelines will assist researchers to plan their research projects and to submit an application to conduct research in a Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS) school that meets MACS requirements and expectations.

MACS values high-quality and ethical research that aims to improve the outcomes of students, staff and families in Catholic school communities.

Specifically, MACS welcomes research that:

- supports and improves student learning, wellbeing and engagement
- strengthens school leader, teacher and parent capability to support children and young peoples' learning and development
- encourages jurisdictions, government and community partners to reflect on and enhance their capability to better serve and lead schools
- seeks to engage schools as important and respected stakeholders in educational research
- contributes to the knowledge and capacity of the broader community to enhance the outcomes of children and young people, locally and globally.

The primary purpose of schools is to educate the children and young people in their care. While academic research has the potential to add great value, researchers should be mindful that school participation in research involves contributing time and resources beyond their day-to-day work. Minimising the impact on schools and maximising the benefits should be a key consideration (see page 8: *Engaging schools in research*).

Distinctiveness of the MACS process

MACS reviews research applications using a similar process to a human research ethics committee (HREC), in that we are guided by the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#). However, as a jurisdiction focused on providing support and leadership to MACS schools, we also consider:

- how the research process may benefit MACS schools and the value of the potential research outcomes to our schools and jurisdiction
- if the demand and interruption to schools may outweigh any potential benefit, or significantly disrupt the core work of schools (i.e. learning and teaching)
- the alignment with the Catholic ethos, and MACS' strategic plan, programs and approach to supporting schools
- the potential risks to our schools and jurisdiction in the conduct of the research, reporting of findings and achievement of MACS' mission and strategic priorities
- how potential risks will be prevented or minimised
- the appropriateness of conducting the research in a school setting.

Research that requires MACS approval

Applications to conduct research in MACS schools are required from:

1. all non-school based researchers
2. school-based researchers conducting research as part of a **PhD** or **professional doctorate**
3. all researchers wishing to conduct research that is deemed sensitive (see page 10: *Sensitivities* for details).

An application is required even if a researcher only wishes to **promote** their research



through schools (i.e. not conduct the research within schools). Parents may perceive research advertised in school communications as an endorsement, therefore, MACS needs to ensure the research is appropriate.

MACS approval is not an endorsement, but an indication to schools that the research is ethically sound and meets MACS' requirements. Ultimately, it is the principal's decision whether their school participates in the research or not.

Research that does **not** require MACS approval

MACS approval is **not** required from:

1. school staff undertaking research in their own school for the purposes of ongoing learning, reflection and improvement, and with no intention to publish the findings in the public domain
2. student researchers wishing to conduct research as part of **undergraduate study** or **postgraduate study** at **diploma, honours** or **masters level**, if the research:
 - a. is appropriate for a student researcher to conduct in school/s (i.e. the topic is not sensitive according to page 10: *Sensitivities*, and the methodology is not intrusive)
 - b. is negligible or low risk research, according to the NHMRC guidelines and, therefore, highly unlikely to raise concerns for participants or the school community
 - c. is supervised by an experienced researcher and given ethical clearance by the relevant institution
 - d. minimises any risk of participants being identified given the small sample sizes associated with student research.

Student researchers who meet all of the criteria in point 2 above can seek approval directly from the school principal, however, principals have the right to request the student seeks MACS approval.

Principals, student researchers and/or supervisors can also seek MACS advice on any of these matters by contacting the Strategy Implementation team via research@macs.vic.edu.au.

Research that MACS is unlikely to support

MACS may decline or request changes to applications where:

- e. the research does not support MACS strategic objectives or educational priorities
- f. the content of the research proposal may raise issues contrary to the ethos of the Catholic Church (e.g. abortion, contraception, euthanasia)
- g. the potential benefits of the research to Catholic education or the broader community are not demonstrated; or the research is for commercial, journalistic or marketing purposes
- h. the benefits of the research are outweighed by the demands placed on participants and school resources, including excessive gathering of data beyond the immediate research objectives
- i. the required documentation is incomplete or inadequate
- j. the study method is intrusive and has the potential to stimulate distress or risk-



- taking behaviour, or lead participants to incriminate themselves
- k. the study is inappropriate for a school setting as it does not relate to the core work of schools, and/or the methodology and instruments are more clinical in nature and require specialist support and expertise
 - l. the researcher lacks the experience or qualifications to conduct research on:
 - a. personal or sensitive issues, e.g. body image, mental health, family relations, sexuality; or
 - b. negative, risk-taking behaviour, e.g. under-age drinking, illicit drug-taking, violence, stealing, suicide
 - m. the research focuses on behaviour outside the experience and age range of the participants
 - n. there is an unacceptable level of risk to participants, schools and/or MACS
 - o. additional support is not provided in relation to matters that may negatively impact participants
 - p. the confidentiality and privacy of participants is not adequately protected
 - q. inappropriate inducements are offered to participants or schools
 - r. there is a financial cost to participate in the research
 - s. schools and/or participants are not provided with adequate information and appropriate consent is not sought
 - t. the research is not adequately monitored by an ethics committee, and findings reported in the public domain are not subject to a peer-review process.

Process for applying to conduct research

Preparing and submitting an application

Researchers must submit an online application through MACS' online [Research Register](#). For detailed instructions on this process, applicants should refer to the [Research Register: User Guide for Researchers](#).

The applicant must first register as a new user of the Research Register, or login if they are an existing user. An online application form needs to be completed and all relevant documentation uploaded.

Documentation

Principal letter

Principal permission must be sought before the research can begin or any participants are contacted. Therefore, an introductory letter should be provided which clearly outlines:

- the purpose of the research
- the overall timeline of the research
- who the participants will be and what they are expected to do (i.e. methods)
- the time demand for each activity
- any school resources required.

The letter should also indicate how the principal is to communicate their approval (e.g. an attached consent form or reply email).

Information to principals should also include the research instruments, plain language statements, consent forms and any other documents to be provided to participants.



Plain language statements

Plain language statements (PLS) should be provided for each participant type and clearly state:

- the purpose of the research
- what the participant will be asked to do
- the time demand for each activity
- how their data and identity will be protected
- the process for withdrawing if they no longer wish to participate and/or want their data removed
- how to access follow-up support if the research has the potential to cause discomfort.

A parent PLS is sufficient for children and young people, however, it is respectful for students to also have their own PLS, especially those in secondary school. If information statements are provided for students, they must be written in age-appropriate language.

Consent forms

Consent forms should be provided for each participant type and clearly outline the components of the research that the participant is consenting to. Avoid bundling consent forms wherever possible, so that participants have the option of saying yes or no to a particular element they may or may not be comfortable with (e.g. being filmed, having their height and weight measured or their data being used in future research).

While MACS is supportive of unidentified data being shared in future ethically approved research, participants should have the opportunity to say yes/no to this component.

Instruments

All research instruments (e.g. surveys, interview questions, observation frameworks) should be provided with the initial research application as they form an important part of the review process.

Final versions are strongly preferred and are less likely to delay MACS approval. Occasionally, researchers may not be able to provide the final instrument because it is dependent on early research findings, however, an indicative draft is still required.

If the research topic and method is not sensitive or intrusive, MACS may be able to provide approval on the draft versions. However, it is more likely that MACS will request the submission of final copies before approval is issued or before that particular phase of the research commences.

Evidence of Working with Children Checks

A Working with Children Check (WWCC) indicates the researcher's dedication to the welfare of child participants. All researchers involved with children or students in their studies, or handling children's data, must present their WWCC with a valid date.

Evidence of public liability insurances

Researchers should present evidence of professional liability and indemnity insurance to demonstrate their commitment to ethical standards and participant welfare. This insurance coverage is essential for protecting both the researchers and participants from potential risks associated with the research activities.

Ethics approval

Approval from the researcher's respective university or organisation's HREC is required before MACS will issue approval. Researchers are permitted to submit their application to MACS while their institution's ethics approval is still pending, however, it is preferred that the research proposal and documentation submitted to MACS already incorporates HREC



feedback.

If the researcher/s choose to submit to MACS and the HREC simultaneously, a copy of the institution's ethics approval and all revised documentation need to be submitted to MACS before final approval will be issued.

Language

All documentation should be proofread and edited before submission. MACS will not provide editing feedback unless the information is confusing or misleading to schools or participants.

If the research is targeting school communities with participants who speak English as a second language, researchers should consider having plain language statements, consent forms and instruments translated into the participants' preferred language.

Review process

MACS' review process can take up to 12 weeks once a completed application has been submitted. The timeline can vary depending on:

- the complexity and sensitivity of the research project
- how quickly the researcher/s can respond to feedback and amendment requests
- the volume of research applications to MACS at the time.

Applications are reviewed using the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, as well as this document about the MACS Requirements for Seeking Approval and Conducting Research. Advice is sought as required from school staff, relevant teams from the MACS office, the MACS Research Committee and colleagues from other Australian jurisdictions.

Feedback is provided in the online Research Register and researchers are notified by email to login to the system and respond to MACS' queries and requests for change. The review and communication process is all conducted within the Research Register to ensure accurate records are maintained. If all requirements are addressed, the application is recommended for approval.

Outcome

Approve

The principal researcher and primary contact named in the online application will receive formal notification of the outcome via email. If the application is approved, the email will contain MACS' standard conditions of approval, as well as any additional conditions already communicated and agreed through the review process.

Decline

Occasionally, an application will be declined if MACS' requirements are not met as outlined in page 4: *Research that MACS is unlikely to support*. The reason/s for declining the application will be clearly communicated to researchers via email and in the Research Register.

Withdraw

Researchers may wish to withdraw their application if they no longer need MACS approval or if they are unable to meet MACS' requirements outlined during the review process. This can be actioned by the researcher from within the Research Register, or by sending an email to research@macs.vic.edu.au.

MACS can also withdraw an application if researchers do not respond to clarifications or change requests within six months of submission.



Approaching schools

Once an application is approved, researchers can approach principals in MACS schools inviting them to participate. Principals then decide whether the research will add value to their school community and give informed consent. Principal consent must be granted before the research can begin or any participant is approached.

Note: MACS does not play a role in promoting external research, recruiting schools or providing contact details.

Amendments

If researchers wish to make changes to their application, either before or after it has been approved, they are required to email research@macs.vic.edu.au with:

- the project number
- the project title
- the name of the principal researcher
- clear details of the amendments
- copies of any changed documentation.

For major modifications, or if the application is more than three years old, researchers will be asked to submit a new application.

Final report

It is a condition of MACS' approval that researchers submit a summary of their research findings to MACS and participating schools at the conclusion of their study.

The final report should include:

- the title of the research
- the name of the principal researcher and their organisation or institution
- a summary/abstract of the research
- the rationale for the research and how it sought to add value to education
- the research questions and hypotheses that were explored
- a brief outline of the research design and methodology
- findings in relation to the research questions
- implications of the findings for schools and the broader education community.

Engaging schools in research

Schools are primarily sites for learning and teaching, and school leaders and teachers are understandably critical of activities that take them away from their core work. While educational research has great potential to add value to school communities, many requests to participate in research are turned down by schools.

Schools reported to MACS that they most often reject research requests because:

- the demand on their time and resources is too great
- the timing is not right and the research would compete with other projects and priorities
- the research topic is not related to school and student needs.

Schools also reported that they are more favourable to research projects that:

- focus on topics that align with their priorities and school improvement goals (i.e. seen as relevant to them)
- are seeking to improve teacher capability and student outcomes
- offer tangible benefits and outcomes (e.g. workshops for students, professional learning sessions for staff)
- are not too time consuming or burdensome on staff, students and families



- have a capacity building component for staff (e.g. professional learning) not just a data gathering exercise
- are led by researcher/s who understand and are respectful of the school context
- have clear and concise communications, where the purpose, benefit and demand are made clear up front
- do not compete with other school demands (e.g. start/end of the year, report writing time, NAPLAN)
- will provide school-specific feedback or at least a copy of the research findings.

Given schools are critical stakeholders in educational research, researchers are encouraged to consider ways to meaningfully engage schools throughout the research process.

Benefit and burden

Benefit

It is expected that when researchers conduct research in MACS schools, they do so on the basis that the findings may assist to improve student outcomes, strengthen teacher and school leader capability, and increase school effectiveness. Research in areas beyond the immediate concerns of schools should be conducted only when it can be demonstrated that the findings may have a potential benefit for the participants themselves.

To enhance the benefit and value of conducting research, researchers should consider and demonstrate:

- the gap in knowledge, understanding and practice the research is seeking to address
- how the research will add value to participants, schools, jurisdictions and the broader education community
- how they can work in partnership with school communities throughout the research process
- how they will communicate the findings and engage stakeholders in the potential implications.

Burden

MACS will consider the potential demand and burden of the proposed research project on schools, including:

- the time, resources and coordination required from participating schools
- the effort and commitment expected from participants (i.e. staff, students and parents)
- the extent to which the research may disrupt regular school activity or divert attention from school priorities
- the potential risks to participants, schools and MACS, and the burden of managing those risks
- the burden of the review process on MACS and schools for overly complex research projects that do not have a clear purpose or benefit.

Incentives

MACS discourages the use of incentives (e.g. a \$20 shopping voucher) as a recruitment strategy for attracting participants. Vouchers or monetary compensation may be appropriate when participants are required to give a significant amount of their own time or resources to participate in the research. However, the compensation amount/item should be proportional to the effort and take into account the customs and practices of the school.

Researchers should consider what they might give back to the school that is of educational value, to compensate for the time and resources a school may contribute to a study (e.g.



educational books or resources, professional learning sessions for staff, interactive workshops for students).

Randomised controlled trials

The use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in educational research is a debated topic that attracts different views from within the education and research communities. MACS acknowledges that RCTs may be an appropriate methodology for some educational research and can make an important contribution to the evidence base.

However, if a proposal includes an RCT in the research design, MACS will consider the demand on control groups/schools, as well as potential risks (e.g. cost of excluding a group from an intervention, and the likelihood of conflict or division arising between the groups).

Researchers proposing RCTs in their research design should consider:

- providing the control group access to the intervention once the trial is completed and if found to be successful
- providing a report of the data collected in a format that could be of use to schools
- offering professional learning to staff in the area of researcher expertise
- giving control groups priority in future phases of research or related programs.

Sensitivities

The following topics are considered sensitive and must be managed appropriately **if** MACS approval is granted:

- body image, eating disorders, psychological disorders, depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicide
- sexuality, gender identity, sexual behaviour
- sensitive cultural issues, race, ethnic identity, religious beliefs or world views
- gambling, alcohol use, illicit drug use, criminal activity or anti-social behaviour
- disease or health issues (mental, physical or social)
- fertility, pregnancy, parenting (including children and young people's attitudes towards parenting).

A research project may also be deemed sensitive if the methodology is intrusive (either physically or emotionally), and if vulnerable participants are being recruited.

If researchers wish to conduct research in schools that is deemed sensitive, they must demonstrate:

- they have the necessary qualifications and experience to manage the research project
- they are aware of relevant ethical and legal obligations
- how potential risks will be managed without placing too much burden on the school
- they have a risk protocol or risk minimisation strategy that outlines the potential risks involved and the measures taken to minimise them
- how referral and follow up support will be provided if required by a participant
- how the school will be supported should the research reveal concerning findings
- the project has been reviewed and approved by a HREC.

Duty of care

The safety and wellbeing of students is paramount. If researchers wish to conduct any research activity on schoolgrounds, they must present a valid Working with Children Check (from any Australian state or territory) to the school principal before the research can commence.



If the research involves face-to-face interaction with students (e.g. interviews, focus groups, testing), such activities must take place in the presence of a teacher or other adult with legal duty of care, or in an open space in view of school staff. If at any time during a research project a researcher identifies that a student may be at risk of harm, the researcher must report this information, including the identity of the student, to the principal.

School and sector comparisons

MACS does not support school or sector comparisons in the reporting of external research findings because it may lead to unfair judgement and scrutiny at the school or jurisdiction level, rather than focusing on the intervention, program or approach that was researched. MACS discourages analysing and reporting on evidence that may fuel public perceptions of some schools or sectors as 'better' or 'worse'.

Consent

MACS requires that active consent is sought for all participants in all but exceptional circumstances, and consent must be provided in written format. In the case of parents, not only is informed and active consent an ethical consideration, it is also an opportunity for schools to actively engage parents in a school-agreed activity.

When the research involves the participation of children or young people, consent must be provided by their parent/carer, in addition to the student. Children and young people must still be given the option to decline to participate in the research even if their parents/carers have provided consent.

In the case of participants or their parents/carers with limited English language skills, translated information and consent forms should be provided.

In very limited circumstances, MACS may consider and approve parent/carer passive or 'opt-out' consent after careful consideration of the following:

- the size of the desired sample for research validity and the practicality of gaining active consent
- the significance of the research and the likely interest in the findings from schools and the broader public
- the sensitivity of the research and whether parents could reasonably object to their child's participation
- the methodology of the research and whether the data collected will be personal, sensitive and/or identifiable
- the degree of risk or harm to participants, the school and/or MACS if parents believe they were not adequately informed or had sufficient opportunity to 'opt-out'
- the maturity and/or vulnerability of participants and whether their assent/consent alone would be suitable.

On the rare occasion passive or 'opt-out' parent/carer consent is approved, researchers must:

- confirm with participating school principals that they are comfortable with a passive consent process
- ensure parent information and consent forms very clearly state and highlight it is a passive/opt-out consent process (e.g. bold relevant text, put consent information in a shaded box)
- work with the participating schools to ensure multiple communications are sent to parents, and adequate time is given for parents/carers to ask questions and/or opt-out.



Confidentiality and privacy

Researchers must comply with the [Privacy Act 1988 \(Cth\)](#) and protect the privacy, confidentiality and, where possible, anonymity of participants both in the collection and storage of data.

If anonymity is not possible or guaranteed (due to audio or video taping participants, small sample size, collecting identifying information for longitudinal studies, tracking and data-linking purposes), participants must be informed of this, and should take steps to protect the confidentiality of research participants. Individual participants and schools must not be named in any reporting of research findings, unless explicit consent has been given.

Data should only be used for the purpose for which it was collected, and if researchers wish to use de-identified data in future ethically approved research, they must seek active consent from participants.

Researchers need to outline in their application and information to schools and participants:

- how they will ensure confidentiality in the collection, analysis and storage of data, and in the reporting of research findings
- adequate processes for the secure storage of and access to data
- justification for any limitations to confidentiality and anonymity.

Ethics committee approval

It is expected that almost all applications to conduct research in Melbourne Catholic schools will be supported by approval from a HREC. According to the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#), all research that is more than 'low risk' and/or proposes to collect personal or sensitive information, including physical, mental or psychological health data, must be reviewed by a formal HREC.

Researchers who are not based at a university or believe their research does not require formal ethical review, must justify why their research will not be accompanied by HREC approval. In addition, MACS may request the researcher/s provide a statement outlining how their research will be conducted ethically, addressing issues of:

- informed and voluntary consent
- confidentiality and privacy
- safe management of data
- risk management
- reporting of findings.

MACS approval is conditional on HREC approval from the relevant institution. While a researcher can apply to MACS and the HREC simultaneously, all changes and updated documentation based on HREC conditions need to be provided to MACS for final approval.

Contact information

For any questions related to these MACS requirements or advice on preparing an application to conduct research in MACS schools, please contact the Strategy Implementation team via research@macs.vic.edu.au. See also the MACS [Researcher Checklist](#) for a helpful quick reference guide.

