

SOCIAL, BEHAVIOURAL AND EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (REC: SBE)

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Document name	Social Behavioural and Education Research Ethics Committee (REC: SBE) Terms of Reference
Developed by	Office of Research Integrity and Ethics (ORIE)
Type of document	Terms of Reference
Relevant institutional policies/guidelines	Stellenbosch University Policy for Responsible Research Conduct (2022)
Approved by	Senate Research Ethics Committee
Previous versions	2020
Date of approval	13 November 2025
Implementation date	1 January 2026
Revision schedule	Every three (3) years, or earlier if necessitated by legislative, policy, or operational changes.

SIGNATURE:



Prof Sibusiso Moyo
DVC: Research, Innovation, and Internationalisation
Stellenbosch University

ABBREVIATIONS

DESC	Departmental Ethics Screening Committee
FESC	Faculty Ethics Screening Committee
NDoH	National Department of Health
NHA	National Health Act
NHREC	National Health Research Ethics Council
ORIE	Office for Research Integrity and Ethics
REC	Research Ethics Committee
REC: SBE	Social, Behavioural and Education Research Ethics Committee
RIMS	Research Information Management System
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SREC	Senate Research Ethics Committee
SU	Stellenbosch University
TOR	Terms of Reference

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Stellenbosch University (SU) is committed to the highest standards of ethical research and complies with all relevant legislation, guidelines, and procedures governing human research.
- 1.2. The Social, Behavioural and Education Research Ethics Committee (REC: SBE)'s Terms of Reference are aligned with the Stellenbosch University Policy on Responsible Research Conduct (2022), the National Health Act 61 of 2003, and the National Department of Health's Ethics in Health Research Guidelines (NDoH 2024).

2. Authority

- 2.1. The REC: SBE is constituted by the Senate Research Ethics Committee (SREC), which derives its authority from the Senate. The REC: SBE acts in accordance with these Terms of Reference and the National Health Act 61 of 2003 as outlined in the NDoH 2024. It reports annually to the NHREC and to the SREC.
- 2.2. The REC: SBE is registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC), in accordance with the National Health Act 61 of 2003. Its registration number is REC-050411-032.
- 2.3. The REC: SBE is administratively supported by dedicated staff within the Office of Research Integrity and Ethics (ORIE) in the Division for Research Development (DRD).
- 2.4. The Chairperson of the REC: SBE has the authority to appoint a standing or ad hoc subcommittee or co-opt expert reviewers to investigate or finalise certain matters under its jurisdiction, in compliance with applicable norms, rules, and regulations, as prescribed in these Terms of Reference and related Standard Operating Procedures.
- 2.5. The REC: SBE may establish subcommittees to deal with specific aspects of the work of the REC, for example, the review of undergraduate research, and other designated categories of research.
- 2.6. The REC: SBE may delegate its review and provisional approval of low-risk research to registered sub-committees. These sub-committees, once registered, will function as formal sub-committees of the REC: SBE and must operate under the same principles and standards as discussed in these Terms of Reference.
- 2.7. The REC: SBE is authorised to:
 - 2.7.1. conduct prospective, independent, and rigorous ethics review of all human research protocols undertaken by members of staff, registered students, and research affiliates of Stellenbosch University to safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, welfare, and well-being of human participants and researchers. Retrospective review is not permitted.
 - 2.7.2. ensure that proposed research complies with ethical norms and standards outlined in the NDoH 2024, having due regard for the requirements of applicable professional bodies, academic societies, relevant regulatory agencies, applicable laws, and relevant institutional requirements.
 - 2.7.3. ensure that research protocols are scientifically sound and feasible.
 - 2.7.4. decide whether to approve, require modifications, or reject protocols for lack of compliance with scientific or ethical norms and standards.
 - 2.7.5. ensure appropriate reporting and monitoring occur to fulfil the REC: SBE's oversight obligation in terms of participants' welfare interests.

3. Mandate

- 3.1. The REC: SBE is mandated to review and provide comprehensive ethics oversight over non-medical research with humans and the processing of personal information for the purpose of research conducted by SU and SU-affiliated persons. This includes but is not limited to evaluating scientific validity, methodological rigour, risk-benefit analysis, and all other ethical considerations necessary to ensure research integrity and participant protection.
- 3.2. In cases where a protocol falls outside the scope of the REC: SBE, the REC may exercise its discretion to decide whether to review a protocol jointly with another SU-affiliated REC, or to refer the applicant to another SU-affiliated REC to access appropriate expertise and capacity to review the application. A fee may be levied for such a service.
- 3.3. The REC: SBE does not review research protocols from researchers without a formal affiliation to Stellenbosch University.
- 3.4. The REC: SBE will evaluate research according to the three broad ethics principles that underlie the conduct of behavioural research involving human subjects, as defined in the Belmont Report (1979) and the eight key norms and standards as defined in Chapter Two and Three of the Department of Health Guidelines (NDoH 2024, 3rd ed), but specifically adapted for research in the Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities as proposed by Wassenaar and Mamotte (2012). The REC: SBE will evaluate research according to these principles, norms, and standards regardless of the applicant's level of study, their position at the institution, or their level of seniority. Any sub-committees of the REC: SBE must evaluate research according to the same principles, norms, and standards.
- 3.5. When strict compliance with the letter of a particular requirement of these declarations and codes is not possible, REC: SBE will ensure that the proposed research is in keeping with the spirit of the declarations and codes.
- 3.6. The REC: SBE can recommend measures aimed at minimising or avoiding potential or actual risks of harm – acknowledging that ethical considerations in the conduct of social science research can never be fully separated from its scientific dimensions.
- 3.7. Ethics approval must be obtained before any participant recruitment and data collection from participants, or the capturing of their personal information commences. The REC: SBE will not consider projects for approval if it is apparent that empirical work involving human participants has already been conducted.

4. Scope of Operations

- 4.1. Research that involves the recruitment or participation of human participants in a healthcare or clinical setting, the review of medical or healthcare records, or clinical research is excluded from the scope of the REC: SBE. Health research in the narrow definition must be reviewed by the Health Research Ethics Committees (HREC1 or HREC2) of Stellenbosch University.
- 4.2. The following research is deemed to be beyond the scope of the REC: SBE:
 - 4.2.1. Biomedical, clinical, healthcare, and pharmaceutical research.
 - 4.2.2. Biomechanical research, or research that involves the use of biomedical technology and applications, or the testing of mobility aids.
 - 4.2.3. Research where human biological material (e.g. blood, tissue samples) will be collected or analysed.

- 4.2.4. Research targeting persons diagnosed with a medical, healthcare, psychiatric, or physical condition, where the purpose of the research is to study the condition itself and/or test interventions that could improve the condition or the quality of life of the participant;
- 4.2.5. Research that involves interaction with or the observation of patients in hospitals or other healthcare settings;
- 4.2.6. Research that involves the testing and consumption of products, drinks, or foodstuffs by human panel members which have been enhanced by additives, not usually found in the food product or from which key ingredients such as a particular vitamin, macronutrient or amino acid have been removed.
- 4.2.7. The retrospective review and analysis of identifiable patient and/or other medical records.

5. Meetings, Code of Conduct, and documentation

- 5.1. The REC: SBE typically meets monthly, except in January and December. The REC: SBE has the prerogative to change its annual submission and meeting dates when it is deemed necessary.
- 5.2. The deadlines for submissions and meeting dates will be published on the website of the Division for Research Development (<https://www.su.ac.za/en/research/research-development>).
- 5.3. The REC: SBE has a Code of Conduct for its members that describes what is expected of members, a Confidentiality Agreement and a Conflict-of-Interest Declaration.
- 5.4. The REC: SBE has a transparent and inclusive recruitment and appointment process for members of the REC that pays attention to achieving demographic representativity and succession planning.
- 5.5. The REC: SBE's Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) systematically describe all the processes and procedures involved in its work, including the institutional arrangements and reporting obligations. The REC ensures that the SOPs are reviewed every three to four years or more frequently as necessitated by changes in legislation or practices around research ethics.
- 5.6. The REC: SBE is responsible for making accessible appropriate documentation, including application forms, guidance documents, review guidance, information and consent document guidance, as well as report templates (amongst others), to facilitate appropriate processing of applications and to assist researchers to comply with requirements.

6. REC: SBE Composition and membership

- 6.1 The Research Ethics Committee must consist of at least 15 members, including the Chairperson.¹

¹ The minimum number of members may be amended in consultation with the Senate Research Ethics Committee, considering the number of submissions for ethics review and the number of applications received from a specific faculty over a three-year period

6.2 The Research Ethics Committee should consist of academic staff from at least the following faculties²:

- Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
- Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences
- Faculty of Education
- Faculty of Theology
- Faculty of Military Sciences
- Faculty of Engineering
- Faculty of Law
- Faculty of AgriSciences
- Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences
- Faculty of Science

6.3 The composition of the REC: SBE must meet the minimum standards and requirements, as set out in the National Department of Health (2024) Ethics in Health research: Principles, Structures and Processes.³

6.4 In consideration of the specific expertise necessary for relevant review of Social Science, Behavioural and Education research, the REC membership must include:

6.4.1 at least one member who is legally qualified (which may be one of the persons listed above)

6.4.2 at least one representative of the broader community who is not a staff member of Stellenbosch University (which may be a representative of the SU student community)

6.4.3 a representative with expertise in sampling within Social Science research (which may be one of the persons listed above)

6.4.4 at least one person with expertise in research involving minors (which may be one of the persons listed above)

6.4.5 at least one member with knowledge of, and current experience in, the professional care or counselling of people. Such a member might be a psychologist, social worker or nurse (which may be one of the persons listed above)

6.4.6 at least one person with current experience in quantitative research methodologies (which may be one of the persons listed above)

6.4.7 at least one person with current experience in qualitative research methodologies (which may be one of the persons listed above)

6.4.8 at least one member with expertise in research ethics (which may be one of the persons listed above)

6.5 The Chairperson of the Research Ethics Committee can consult with or co-opt any expert that he/she deems necessary for the appraisal of a particular research proposal. A person with experience and knowledge of working with prisoners, must be co-opted when research involving the participation of prisoners, inmates, or persons under the jurisdiction of the Department of Correctional Services is to be reviewed.

² Faculty representation and the number of members required per faculty should be proportionate to the number of submissions received from the faculty. The REC will consult with the Senate Research Ethics Committee and Deans, if amendments are required in terms of composition by faculty.

³ 'South African Ethics in Health Research: Principles, Processes and Structures, 3rd edition (NDOH 2024), page 83; REC: SBE Standard Operating Procedures, 2020, version 1.6

- 6.6 Ideally, the REC should include ethnically and culturally diverse members with an appropriate mix of males and females.
- 6.7 At least 50 percent (plus 1) of voting members (if the REC has less than 15 members) must be present at the meeting to reach a quorum. If the REC consists of more than 15 members, a third of membership make a quorum.

7. Appointment of members

- 7.1 The representatives of faculties are appointed to the Research Ethics Committee by the respective Deans of the Faculties. It is the duty of respective Deans to identify and recruit academic staff to the REC, in consultation with the REC: SBE, taking into consideration the expertise required by the National Department of Health.⁴
- 7.2 Any academic staff member(s) may also volunteer to serve on the REC: SBE with formal approval from their Dean or Head of Department.
- 7.3 The Director: Research Integrity and Ethics within the Division for Research Development, in consultation with the REC manager and coordinator, appoints representative(s) of the broader community, taking into account what "the broader community" is, and who may be a "representative" of it.
- 7.4 In certain cases, the Research Ethics Committee (REC) may ask researchers to identify a representative from a specific community where the research will be conducted, as well as potential research participants or special interest groups. This representative may be temporarily added to the REC by the Chairperson for the purpose of reviewing that particular research proposal.
- 7.5 Members of the Research Ethics Committee are appointed for a term of three years, subject to consultation with the respective Dean of the Faculty. Reappointment is subject to approval by the relevant Faculty.
- 7.6 Members are required to recruit an alternate member who will stand in for them in the event of their absence from a meeting.
- 7.7 The Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson(s) of the Research Ethics Committee are elected at a meeting of the Research Ethics Committee, and their respective identities are reported to the Senate Research Ethics Committee once they are appointed.
- 7.8 If a member misses two consecutive meetings without an apology, the Chairperson will verbally and in writing address the absence with the specific member. Following this, the Chairperson may make a recommendation to the relevant Faculty, which has the authority to remove the non-attending member from the Research Ethics Committee and to appoint another representative for the remainder of the disqualified member's term.
- 7.9 Disengagement from the Research Ethics Committee can be initiated by the Chairperson or the member of the Research Ethics Committee and must be in writing. The disengaging members must inform his/her Dean of his/her decision, and the Dean must appoint an alternative member within one month after receiving such notice. In these cases, the alternate member may replace the disengaged member.

⁴ The membership and composition of the REC will be continuously monitored to ensure appropriate representation. When a member resigns from the REC, the choice of a replacement takes into account the overall balance of the committee and specific expertise required.

- 7.10 Upon appointment and upon re-appointment to the Research Ethics Committee, members must sign applicable non-disclosure agreements.
- 7.11 Members will receive a letter of appointment from the SREC soon after their appointment is confirmed. Letters of appointment are kept on record by the REC: SBE Secretariat.
- 7.12 Stellenbosch University obtains professional liability insurance to cover both affiliated and non-affiliated members when carrying out any professional duties under the auspices of the REC: SBE.

8. Ratification Subcommittee

- 8.1 Besides the REC: SBE's main committee, it also has a Ratification Subcommittee that handles only the ratification and audit of low-risk applications. The Vice-Chairperson of the REC: SBE main committee will serve as the Chairperson of the Ratification Subcommittee, and a supporting Vice Chairperson may be elected by the ratification subcommittee from its members.
- 8.2 The Ratification sub-committee has a dedicated Secretariat within the Office of Research Integrity and Ethics (ORIE) within the DRD.
- 8.3 The following mechanisms operate to ensure that the quality of ethics review is consistent across all committees, and specifically the Ratification Subcommittee:
- 8.3.1 The Chairperson of the Ratification Subcommittee serves as a full member and Vice Chairperson of the REC: SBE to ensure consistency and integration across committees.
 - 8.3.2 At a minimum, the Chairperson, or Vice- Chairperson of the Ratification subcommittee, attends REC: SBE committee meetings to report on the reviews of the Low-Risk applications serving for REC: SBE ratification;
 - 8.3.3 At a minimum, the Chairperson, or Secretariat of REC: SBE Ratifications committee attends REC: SBE Executive Committee meetings;
 - 8.3.4 Members of the Ratification subcommittee serve as representatives on REC: SBE and attend REC: SBE meetings on a rotational basis throughout the year. This ensures cross-representation between REC: SBE and the Ratification subcommittee, over and above the existing representation of the Ratification subcommittee Chair, and Secretariat on the REC: SBE Executive Committee.

9 REC: SBE Executive Committee (REC: SBE EXCO)

9.1 Purpose and scope

- 9.1.1 The REC: SBE's Executive Committee (EXCO) deals with matters between meetings, duly authorised by the full committee and must report back to the REC:SBE at their scheduled meetings;
- 9.1.2 The REC: SBE EXCO monitors the work of the REC: SBE, the Ratification Sub Committee, and D/FESCs over time, reflects on the synergistic functioning and the meaningfulness of processes and arrangements in place;
- 9.1.3 Establishes and conducts formal audits of Level 2 Departmental Ethics Screening Committees (DESCs) to ensure compliance with institutional governance documents, ethical standards, and national guidelines;
- 9.1.4 Considers overarching matters identified or referred to the REC: SBE EXCO;
- 9.1.5 Discusses and finds solutions to pressing conceptual interpretations and concerns, if any;
- 9.1.6 Provides opportunities for networking and mentorship and;

- 9.1.7 Develops, reviews and approves documents and processes before submission to Stellenbosch University Senate Research Ethics Committee (SREC).

9.2 Membership, Quorum and Officers

- 9.2.1 The REC EXCO consists of the Chairpersons, Vice Chairpersons, Secretariats of both the REC: SBE and its Ratification subcommittee, the Director: Research Integrity and Ethics (ORIE), and the Manager of the Research Ethics Office;
- 9.2.2 The Chair of the REC: SBE EXCO is the Chairperson of the REC: SBE;
- 9.2.3 The REC: SBE EXCO meets at least three times per year. Additional meetings may be held as necessary to address urgent or emerging matters related to REC business;
- 9.2.4 The Manager of REC: SBE shall provide secretariat services to the REC: SBE with administrative support from the REC Coordinators;
- 9.2.5 A quorum constitutes at least two representatives of REC: SBE and the Ratification Committee (one from each), one coordinator, and the Manager of the REC: SBE office or their officially delegated representative;
- 9.2.6 Formal agendas and minutes are maintained and are distributed according to sound governance practices;
- 9.2.7 Decisions are made by seeking consensus and if consensus cannot be reached by simple majority. Should there be an equal outcome after the vote, the chair must exercise a casting vote. The Committee may extend the rights of audience and debate on an ad hoc basis.

10 Organisational Relationship between the REC: SBE and the Ratification Subcommittee

- 10.1 The outcomes of the deliberations and decisions of EXCO are communicated to REC: SBE and Ratification subcommittee members during regularly convened monthly meetings where such decisions are discussed and confirmed;
- 10.2 The REC: SBE or Ratification subcommittee may choose to debate, question and/or refer a decision back to the REC: SBE EXCO for reconsideration and resubmission to the REC: SBE;
- 10.3 The implementation of an EXCO decision depends on REC: SBE confirmation.
- 10.4 In cases of urgent or time-sensitive matters, REC: SBE may retrospectively confirm such a decision.

11 Approval Process for Terms of Reference

These Terms of Reference were approved by the REC: EXCO on 15/10/2025 and by the Senate Research Ethics Committee on 13 November 2025.

Signed by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies on