

Why Refine Your Topic?

A well-defined research topic ensures:

- **Academic rigor** – Clear focus enhances depth of learning.
- **Ethical compliance** – Avoids delays from high-risk approvals.
- **Feasibility** – Matches HELI's resources and students' timelines.

Step 1: Narrow Your Focus

- Start broad, then refine using the following "**WH questions**" by brainstorming with another student or a group of your peers or academics:
 - **What** exactly will you study? (e.g., "impact of online learning" → "impact of gamification in Australian postgraduate online courses").
 - **Who/Where?** Define your population/setting (avoid vulnerable groups without justification).
 - **Why?** Align with HELI's research priorities (e.g. leadership; innovation in learning; development of e-Learning skills).
 - **When?** Is there any specific timeframe your study is limited to?

Step 2: Mitigate Ethical Risks

Currently, ECA's Research Ethics Review Committee only approves research projects classified as **exempted, negligible, or low risk**. To avoid potential ethics hurdles, research topics should be carefully scoped and designed to ensure they fall within these categories, while still maintaining academic rigour and relevance. HELI's Human Research Ethics Application Form is available via: [Ethics Application | HELI Student Hub](#).

To avoid ethics hurdles:

- Include an ethics feasibility check during topic selection and proposal development phases (RES824).
- Avoid **primary research** with vulnerable groups (e.g., children, Indigenous communities) unless secondary methods are impossible.
- **Use secondary data** (e.g., existing datasets, literature reviews, systematic reviews, scoping reviews, meta-analyses, or umbrella reviews) for sensitive topics (e.g., mental health).
- Consult ECA's Human Research Ethics Review Committee Chair as early as possible.
- Use anonymous and voluntary participation methods when primary data collection is necessary.
- Design surveys and interview protocols to minimise risk (e.g., avoid collecting identifiable or highly sensitive personal information).

Step 3: Align with Supervisor Expertise

- Discuss your topic with supervisors to:
 - Ensure methodological coherence (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative)
 - Confirm HELI's capacity to support the study (e.g., lab access, databases, software, or research training resources).
- Can project be done within 18 months of Research Phase (RES921)?
- Might it require external ethics approval? (If yes, reconsider scope soon and notify the ECA's Human Research Ethics Review Committee Chair)

Example: Refining a Topic

Too broad: "Social media and student mental health."

Refined: "A systematic review of Australian studies (2015–2025) on university policies addressing social media's impact on postgraduate student stress."

Current Procedures to Avoid Ethics Breaches – MRes Research Projects

To ensure the ethical integrity of Master of Research (MRes) projects, the following procedures have been implemented and practiced at HELI in the order of their occurrence:

Step 1. Initial Topic Screening in RES824

In collaboration with the Unit Coordinator of RES824 (*Designing and Communicating Research*), student research topics are reviewed early in the course to minimize potential ethical concerns. This is to ensure that when proposals are prepared, they will involve minimal ethics risk.

- Research topics must clearly specify the methodology and sources of data (primary vs. secondary data).
- Projects exploring mental health or other sensitive issues involving human participants must be structured as secondary studies (e.g., systematic reviews) to eliminate the need for direct human involvement.

Step 2. Topic Submission After RES824

Upon completion of RES824, the Unit Coordinator finalizes a list of students' research topics, including a 100-word abstract for each project. This list is sent to:

- Dean (Research and Scholarship)
- The Course Coordinator
- The Unit Coordinator of RES921

Step 3. Ethical Risk Review

Dean (Research and Scholarship), Course Coordinator and RES921 Unit Coordinator jointly review all topics to ensure they meet ethical standards and propose amendments where necessary to mitigate any ethical risk. If there is a possibility of medium or high ethical risk, proposed topics must be amended to mitigate the risk.

Step 4. Supervisor Allocation

The revised list of proposed research topics is circulated to the supervisor pool for:

- Assignment of a Principal Supervisor
- Assignment of an Associate Supervisor

Step 5. RDC Review and Approval

The proposed list of research topics, along with assigned supervisors, is submitted to both the Research Degree Committee (RDC) and research teams for review. Once research team refine their research topics, RDC involves for approval, and further feedback before submitted to AB for their approval.

Step 6. Academic Board Endorsement

Following RDC approval, the list is presented to the Academic Board (AB) for formal endorsement.

Step 7. Project Commencement

After endorsement by AB:

- Each student and their supervisory team receives an official invitation letter.
- The letter outlines roles, responsibilities, and expectations for project development up to thesis submission and examination.
- An email from the Dean (Research and Scholarship) advises that the research team may introduce minor amendments to their topic of research. Major amendment of the topics requires RDC approval again.

Step 8. Ethics Application Procedures

Each trimester, the Dean (Research and Scholarship) who acts as the Chair of Human Research Ethics Review Committee, invites research teams to submit the appropriate ethics application online via the digital form:

- [Ethics Application | HELI Student Hub](#)

It is important to note that apart from requests for details of the applicant and supervisory team, the MRes Human Research Ethics Review Application Form includes following sections:

- A statement that confirms applicants have successfully completed the Epigeum Research Training Course before applying for ethics approval, and complete institutional research integrity module on Canvas (RES821).
- A link to MS Word version of HELI Human Research Ethics Review Policy and Procedures (presented below)
- A link to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2025)*
- A link to a video explaining how to complete HELI Human Research Ethics Review Application Form.

Step 9. Completion of Academic Integrity Module is required for Ethics Application

It is required to successfully complete the Academic Integrity Module before submitting Ethics Application.

Step 10. Ethics Review by HRERC

- The RERC meet to evaluate the risk level of submitted projects.
- Only 'Exempt', 'Negligible Risk', and 'Low Risk' projects are assessed at HELI.

Step 11. High-Risk Projects

At this time, projects assessed as above "low risk" cannot be conducted at HELI. In the future, any project involving higher ethical risk must be reviewed and approved by a fully constituted HREC at a partner institution. Such projects will only be considered once that partnership has been formally established. To date, we have not received any applications classified as above "low risk."

Step 12. Ethics Approval Notification

If approved, the ethics application outcome and approval number are circulated to the research team by Chair of HRERC.

Step 13. Incomplete Applications

If an application is incomplete:

- The research team is notified and requested to provide the missing information via a system generated message.
- The revised application is then reviewed again at the next earliest opportunity by Chair and Deputy Chair of HRERC.

Step 14. Rejected Applications

If an application is rejected:

- The decision is communicated to the Principal Supervisor by the Chair of HRERC.
- Specific amendments are requested to address and rectify ethical concerns (if any).