GUIDELINES

FOR APPROVING APPLICATIONS

FROM EXTERNAL AGENCIES

TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

IN TAFE NSW
1. Guiding Principles

The NSW Technical and Further Education Commission (TAFE NSW) has a responsibility to ensure that research conducted within its precincts is likely to contribute to the enhancement of the quality of education and training provision, does not infringe upon the rights or jeopardise the welfare of its students, customers and staff, and that the research activity does not impede the provision of TAFE NSW products and services.

Accordingly, proposals to conduct research by and through external agencies should be assessed with the intention of ensuring:

- the rights of TAFE NSW students, customers and staff are protected
- the welfare of TAFE NSW students, customers and staff is ensured
- the research, in conduct and outcome, does not unreasonably create a risk to the TAFE NSW position in the VET market place nor expose its intellectual property to risk
- the probity of research undertaken within TAFE NSW Institutes and TAFE Educational Services Divisions (Divisions)
- the research question is of sufficient value, purpose, or significance to justify the expenditure of any necessary time and effort required of TAFE NSW students, customers and clients and/or staff
- the research methodologies are appropriate and capable of producing valid outcomes
- the research findings are presented fairly and accurately.

It is stressed that the last three parameters should not be interpreted as an attempt to stifle research but simply as an effort to ensure that the findings of such research are both valid and accurately presented.

These guidelines have been prepared as a guide to Directors of TAFE NSW Institutes, Divisions, and to potential researchers, and with the aim of ensuring a consistent approach to approving research activity throughout TAFE NSW. The adoption of a consistent set of principles and procedures should ensure that:

- a uniform standard of protection is provided for all TAFE NSW students, customers and staff
- decisions made by approving authorities are consistent and made in accordance with established guidelines
- potential researchers have a clear understanding of what is required prior to developing proposals
- external researchers conducting research in more than one TAFE NSW site do not have to conform to different and possibly conflicting requirements
- all research in TAFE NSW is conducted in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans.

The adoption of a common approvals process also facilitates the establishment of a database of research activity across TAFE NSW (see section 4.1). Such a database is a valuable source of information for researchers and potential researchers.
These guidelines are intended as a basis for evaluating and providing approval for proposals to conduct research within TAFE NSW and are not intended as a code of ethics for researchers. Accordingly, they presume but do not specifically address the issue of ethical conduct in research and do not attempt to cover all aspects of the research process. It is assumed in granting approval to conduct research, however, that such research will be carried out in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. TAFE NSW, along with most research institutions and organisations, has established codes of ethics and it is assumed that researchers will conduct their research in accordance with the codes of the institutions and/or organisations with which they are affiliated. (The Code of Ethics for Research in TAFE NSW is available in TAFE Gazette Number 32 of 1995)

It is recognised that research activity which is unrelated to the provision of education and training also occurs within TAFE NSW. These guidelines are not intended to relate to such activity. They are intended only as a guide for approving research relating to the provision of education and training. If researchers are in any doubt as to whether these guidelines apply to the proposed research project they should seek the advice of the relevant Institute/Division Director, or the office of the Deputy Director-General of TAFE NSW.

Any inquiries concerning research approval principles or procedures, from potential researchers and TAFE NSW personnel, should be addressed to the Deputy Director-General of TAFE NSW.

2. Approval Procedures

Research conducted in TAFE NSW precincts is varied in scale and scope. The level at which research activity will be approved is dependent, therefore, on the scale and scope of that activity. All research involving TAFE NSW students, customers and/or staff must be approved by either

- the Deputy Director-General of TAFE NSW
- the appropriate Institute/Division Director

Approval by the Deputy Director General of TAFE NSW

Research which reflects on TAFE NSW and has implications for the system as a whole and/or research which is intended to involve students, customers and/or staff in more than one TAFE NSW Institute/Division must be approved by the Deputy Director-General of TAFE NSW.

Research approved by Institute/Division Directors

All other research activity must be approved by the Director of the Institute in which the activity is to occur. This includes research associated with TAFE NSW courses and university degrees and research undertaken by external organisations such as university research centres, private research consultancies and the NCVER. (TAFE NSW personnel should note that, when undertaking research which is not directly
and wholly related to their work within TAFE NSW - e.g. when undertaking research related to the pursuit of post-graduate qualifications - they are also deemed to be acting as or on behalf of an external agency and must ensure that their research has been approved by the appropriate authority.)

Institute/Division Directors may wish to establish research advisory committees to provide advice on the appropriateness of research proposals but final approval should be provided by the Director.

All research proposals, regardless of the level at which approval is sought, should satisfy the *Criteria for Approving Applications to Conduct Research* (see Section 3). Directors should approve only research proposals with satisfy these criteria. Researchers should provide copies of all of the appropriate documentation when seeking approval to conduct research (see Section 4).

In some situations TAFE NSW may seek more detailed undertakings from researchers concerning methods of analysis and presentation. Such undertakings may be considered necessary to ensure that “the research methodologies are appropriate and capable of producing valid outcomes” and that “the research findings are presented fairly and accurately”. Approval will be conditional on researchers agreeing to abide by such undertakings.

When a proposal has been approved, researchers will be provided with a letter of approval signed by the authorising agent (Deputy Director-General of TAFE NSW or relevant Director).

### 3. Criteria for Approving Applications to Conduct Research

These criteria are in accord with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* and comply with the Information Protection Principles contained in the New South Wales *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998*.

#### 3.1 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Whenever possible, the anonymity of participants must be protected.

Thus, for example, if the research is of a survey kind, the information should be collected anonymously. It should not be possible to link the information collected to individual participants. When this cannot be achieved, for example when information is being gathered by audiotape or videotape or identifying information is needed to track participants in longitudinal studies, the confidentiality of participants must be assured. That is, persons other than the researcher must not be able to link the information collected to individual participants.

Researchers who wish to collect information which enables participants to be identified by the researcher must be able to demonstrate the necessity for collecting such information and describe the procedures which will be adopted to ensure confidentiality. Procedures for storing, accessing and disposing of data which
enables participants to be identified, such as audiotapes and videotapes, need to be outlined. Such information should be retained for only as long as is necessary for the purpose for which it was collected; should be stored securely and protected by taking reasonable precautions against unauthorised access, use, modification or disclosure, and against all other misuse; and should be disposed of securely.

In addition, only proposals which ensure the confidentiality of participating institutions will normally be approved. Institute/Division Directors may agree to waive this condition, however, if it is considered appropriate to identify their institution in the research findings.

### 3.2 Informed consent

The consent of participants must be obtained before research begins.

Accordingly, all potential participants must be supplied with an information sheet which outlines the nature and conduct of the research and any other factors which might reasonably be expected to influence their willingness to participate, including information relating to the procedures for storing, accessing and disposing of data.

Potential participants should also be informed:

- that their participation is voluntary
- that a decision not to participate will in no way prejudice their academic standing or relationship with the NSW TAFE system
- that they are free to withdraw their participation at any time
- of the status of the researcher and the researcher’s institutional affiliation.

It is generally appropriate to accept participation as an indication of the participant’s informed consent: that is, participants should not generally be required to indicate in writing their willingness to participate.

When participants’ involvement is ongoing and there are significant changes in the nature or conduct of the research which might reasonably be expected to influence their willingness to participate, participants must be informed by the researcher of such changes in writing. The willingness of participants to continue participation must be obtained.

The requirement for informed consent may be waived for student participants who will simply be observed and will not be required to interact directly with the researcher, provided that the students are aware of the researcher's presence.

Under no circumstances are classroom observations to be made without the informed consent of the teacher of that class.

In accord with Section 4.2 of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*, the consent of a primary caregiver (1) is required, in addition to

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1. The term ‘primary caregiver’ is used throughout to refer to any person with the authority to provide the approval required by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*. 
the consent of the participant, if the participant is under the age of 18. Primary caregivers also have the right to be fully informed of the intent and nature of the research when agreeing to allow participation.

When the informed consent of a primary caregiver is required this must be in writing. Passive consent by the primary caregiver, that is where consent is assumed to be provided unless the primary caregiver indicates otherwise, is generally not acceptable.

3.3 Access to Information

TAFE NSW students, customers and staff have the right to determine whether information which can be linked to them personally is made available by other parties for research purposes. Accordingly, such information should not be sought from TAFE NSW personnel unless participants have given written consent for its release. (Written consent is required as TAFE NSW personnel will need to satisfy themselves that consent for release has been given.) Where it is intended to seek such information, this must be indicated clearly and unambiguously on consent forms.

Researchers should note that Institute/Division personnel are not authorised to release aggregated Institute or State level data (eg. course participation and completion rates). Permission to access aggregated data must be sought from the Deputy Director-General of TAFE NSW.

3.4 Sensitivity

TAFE NSW has a responsibility to ensure that its students, customers and staff are treated with sensitivity and with due regard to their personal and private lives and their cultural, religious and other beliefs. All researchers, therefore, have a responsibility to inform themselves of cultural, religious and other such differences in the research population, and only those studies which are sensitive to and respect these differences will be approved.

3.5 Minimisation of Risk or Harm

TAFE NSW has a duty to ensure that students receive the best possible education and training and are protected at all times from physical, psychological and other forms of harm. Accordingly, research designs should not adversely affect students’ educational progress or students’ and other individuals' well-being. For example, adverse effects can result from:

- loss of privacy
- loss of educational opportunities
- harmful social, cultural, psychological or other consequences (eg. from the collection of information that may result in individuals becoming distressed or being ‘labelled’ or categorised in particular ways by their peers).
3.6 Prevention of Unnecessary Disruption

TAFE NSW has a responsibility to ensure that research activity does not impose an undue burden on TAFE NSW Institutes, Central Units/Divisions and TAFE NSW personnel. The potential contribution of the research should be of sufficient importance to warrant the involvement which participants will be asked to make. This means, of course, that the level of disruption which is considered acceptable will be dependent on the potential value of the research. Research that imposes unacceptable levels of disruption to the teaching and learning program of Institutes and the work of Central Units/Divisions will not be approved.

3.7 Methodological Adequacy

TAFE NSW has a responsibility to ensure that research methodologies are appropriate and capable of providing a valid assessment of educational processes and outcomes. The researcher has a responsibility to articulate and provide justification for the methodology, and to outline strategies employed to ensure methodological validity and reliability. TAFE NSW reserves the right to withhold approval of studies which are considered to be methodologically inadequate.

3.8 Commercial Gain

TAFE NSW does not generally provide approval for research which is undertaken primarily for commercial or material gain.

3.9 Research Involving Students under 18 Years of Age

TAFE NSW has a responsibility to ensure that research participants under 18 years of age are accorded the same level of protection as their counterparts in NSW Department of Education and Training schools. Accordingly, researchers wishing to conduct research with such students will need to be aware of and to acknowledge their responsibilities in relation to the Department of Education and Training child protection policies which are articulated in the document Protecting and Supporting Children and Young People: Revised Procedures, December 2000. “This document details procedures to be followed when, in the course of their work, staff develop concerns about suspected risk of harm to a child or young person or ‘a class’ of children or young people.”

In addition, researchers will be required to declare that they have not been convicted of a serious sex offence as defined in Section 5 of the Child Protection Act. (Section 5 of the Child Protection Act, 1988 defines a serious sex offence as an offence involving sexual activity or acts of indecency that were committed in NSW and that was punishable by imprisonment of 12 months or more, or an offence of a similar nature that was committed elsewhere and would have been punishable by imprisonment of 12 months or more if it had been committed in NSW.)

Researchers wishing to undertake research involving students under 18 years of age must sign the Confidential Declaration by Principal Researcher attached.
4. Required Documentation

When seeking approval to conduct research, researchers should submit the following:

4.1 Application to Conduct Research (attached)

The attached application form contains the essential details of the proposal and the researcher(s). All researchers must complete and sign this form to acknowledge that the information supplied is correct, that they agree to conduct the research in accordance with the Criteria for Approving Applications and that they and their representatives will maintain the confidentiality of all information collected from participants.

Institute and Division Directors are asked to provide a copy of the application form to the Director of Strategic Research, Level 6, 35 Bridge St, Sydney 2000, when the proposal is approved. The information provided will be used to build up a database of research activity in DET schools and TAFE NSW.

4.2 Proposal Outline

An outline of the research proposal should be provided. This should indicate:

- the research questions or hypotheses
- the context and background for the research
- the means by which the data/information will be gathered
- the participants from whom the data/information will be gathered
- the methods for ensuring the privacy of participants
- a time line for the research.

4.3 Letter to Institute Directors

Approaches to Institute and Division Directors seeking approval to gather data in the colleges or Divisions for which they are responsible must be accompanied by a letter outlining the nature of the research and the commitment required of personnel. A copy of this letter must be included with the proposal.

4.4 Research instruments

The researcher must submit copies of interview schedules, questionnaires or other data collection instruments (including tests or stimulus materials). These are to be in the final form proposed for use. Where modifications are made, the researcher must submit the revised copies before they are used.

4.5 Information / consent letter

The researcher is required to provide an information letter for distribution to all participants, and their primary caregivers if they are under 18 years of age. If the participants are likely to be under the age of 18, the letter must include a section
which allows the primary caregiver to provide informed consent. Information/consent letters must satisfy the requirements of Section 3.2 of the *Criteria for Approving Applications*. Where researchers intend to collect information which enables participants to be identified by the researcher, the procedures for storing, accessing and disposing of data, as outlined in Section 3.1, should be described.

**4.6 Approval for the research from a university’s ethics committee**

It is assumed that research proposals from university staff and students have been or are being assessed by the appropriate university authorities as well as being submitted to the appropriate TAFE NSW authority. Accordingly, if a university requires submission to its human research ethics committee, a copy of the committee’s approval must be submitted before final approval can be given by TAFE NSW. (University human research ethics committees are asked not to make approval by the Commission a condition for their approval or, alternatively, to grant approval subject to approval by TAFE NSW.)

TAFE NSW personnel may consider the proposal at the same time as the university ethics committee is making its own assessment. But final approval will be withheld until notification of the approval of the university ethics committee is supplied.

**4.7 Referees Reports (two separate reports required)**

It is the responsibility of staff at the sponsoring research institution to examine all research proposals to consider their quality, appropriateness and adequacy. Ethical issues also need to be considered, especially in relation to protecting the privacy of the people providing information and the confidentiality of the Institutes taking part. The researcher’s capacity to handle the research should also be considered. Two separate, completed referees’ reports must accompany proposals. Where the research is part of the requirements for the award of a university degree, at least one of the referees must be the research student’s supervisor.

**Note:** The following documents and forms related to these guidelines are available on the TAFE NSW Website:

- Guidelines for approving applications from external agencies to conduct research in TAFE NSW
- Forms associated with these guidelines
- Department of Education and Training Protecting and Supporting Children and Young People Procedures, December 2000
- NSW Privacy And Personal Information Protection Act 1998
- National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans
Application to Conduct Research

Principal Researcher ............................................................................................................. Title .................................................................

Contact Name (if different from above) .................................................................................................................................

Address ..........................................................................................................................................................................................

Telephone ........................................................................................................ Fax .................................................................

E-mail address (if applicable) .................................................................................................................................

Title of Proposal ........................................................................................................................................................................

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Have you previously applied to conduct this or similar research within TAFE NSW?

(Yes / No) ....................

If ‘Yes’, state where and when .................................................................................................................................

Is the proposed research part of a University course? (Yes / No) .................... If ‘Yes’

Degree ................................................. University .................................................................

Supervisor ................................................. Department .................................................................

Faculty ..........................................................................................................................................................................................

Will the findings of the research be primarily used for commercial gain? (Yes / No) ....................

I declare that the above information is correct. I declare that I have read the Criteria for Approving Applications and agree to abide by them in the conduct of this study. I undertake to ensure that I, and any assistants working with me and/or on my behalf, will maintain the confidentiality of all information collected from participants.

........................................................................................................ Signature of Principal Researcher .............................................. Date

Strategic Research Directorate, June 2001
Referee’s Report

Name of Principal Researcher

Title of proposed research

Name of Referee

Referee’s position

Institution

Referee’s address

Post Code

Telephone

Fax

E-mail address

Relationship to researcher

Please comment on the following aspects of the proposal, in relation to the Criteria for Approving Applications.

Significance, purpose and value of the research

Appropriateness of the research design

Methodological adequacy and viability

Ethical considerations

To what extent do you consider the principal researcher to be capable of undertaking the research described in the attached proposal?

Referee’s signature

Date

Strategic Research Directorate, June 2001
Confidential Declaration by Principal Researcher

a) I am aware of the special responsibilities associated with undertaking research with children, in particular, responsibilities in relation to the Department's child protection policies.

b) I declare that I have not been convicted of a serious sex offence as defined by Section 5 of the Child Protection ACT 1998.

c) In relation to assistants conducting research with children and young people with me and/or on my behalf, I will ensure that:
   X they will be made aware of the special responsibilities associated with undertaking research with children, in particular, responsibilities in relation to the Department's child protection policies.
   X they have not been convicted of a serious sex offence as defined by Section 5 of the Child Protection ACT 1998.

I am aware that I may be required to provide a criminal record check if it is considered necessary to verify the above information.

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Signature of Principal Researcher                     Date

Strategic Research Directorate, June 2001