

CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Guidelines for applicants



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Education
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1. RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

The Research in Schools and Early Childhood Settings (RISEC) application process is managed by the Department of Education and Training (the Department). It aims to ensure that research conducted with the involvement of government schools and early childhood settings¹ is appropriate to the goals of the education system and upholds the Department's duty of care for students and staff.

The Department of Education and Training does not have a formally-constituted Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The RISEC review process does not substitute for review by a HREC.

Projects commissioned by the Department are subject to the same application and review process as projects which are initiated externally.

The RISEC process provides approval for researchers to approach schools and early childhood settings to request participation in research. Participation in research by either the school, site operator or individual participants is completely voluntary and at their own discretion.

Research involving schools and early childhood settings is required to adhere to all relevant regulations and laws, including but not limited to:

- the [Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014 \(Victoria\)](#) and [Health Records Act 2001 \(Victoria\)](#)
- the [Child Safe Standards \(Ministerial Order No. 870\)](#) and the [Department's policy on visitors to schools](#)
- [Working With Children Check, Victoria](#)
- the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2007\)](#)
- any requirements of a HREC where applicable.

¹ Early childhood services regulated by the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

1.1 DO I NEED TO APPLY?

You **must** apply to the Department if:

- the research will be conducted in Victorian government schools and/or any early childhood settings in Victoria
- the research will include participants recruited through Victorian government schools and/or any early childhood settings in Victoria—participants including children, young people, families, or staff employed in these settings.

Included is research in Victorian government schools and/or early childhood settings in Victoria that:

- is undertaken for a Masters by Research degree or by PhD candidates (including Departmental staff)
- is an evaluation study commissioned by the Department, or other State or Commonwealth Government departments.

You **do not** need to apply if:

- the research is being conducted by undergraduate, post-graduate diploma, or Masters students where the study is confined to one site and the findings will not be published
- the research is being conducted by practitioners enrolled in Bastow Institute leadership courses and the research findings will not be published
 - *e.g. Master in School Leadership (Monash); Master of School Leadership; Master of Numeracy; Master of Literacy (The University of Melbourne)*
- the research is being conducted by primary and secondary students within their own or neighbouring schools (*Note: there is a requirement for the principal of each school to provide approval*).

In these circumstances the researcher will need to apply directly to the principal of the Government school or early childhood site operator.

Applications **will not** be approved if any of the following apply:

- research uses opt-out consent
- research uses incentivised participation
- research uses invasive techniques without adequate justification and without a HREC application
- research is being undertaken for commercial purposes or material gain, including market research
- research is on topics that are not relevant to school education or childhood development
- research involves contact with children and evidence of a current Working with Children Check is not provided

- the application is incomplete or has significant spelling or grammatical errors
- the links between research goals, methodology, research instruments, attachments (e.g. consent forms), and the broader purposes to which the research contributes are not clear.

In order to exercise duty of care for students or children and to protect the interests of the Victorian education system, the Department **will not approve** research that places students/children at risk or which puts an unnecessary burden on schools, including research that meets the above criteria.

Where proposed research is identified as overlapping with existing or planned Department research or evaluations, the ability for the Department to carry out its research or evaluation and minimising the potential burden on schools will be prioritised. This may affect the timelines and sampling approved for applications.

1.2 APPLICATION TIERS

Research applications are processed in **one of two tiers**, depending on their **risk**.

- **Tier One:** comprises **lower risk** research. These applications may be subject to more **streamlined assessment processes** and are likely to be processed more quickly.
- **Tier Two:** comprises **higher risk** research. These applications typically require **additional review processes** and as a result may take longer to assess.

Applications that meet any of the following criteria are Tier Two applications:

- more than 10 Victorian government schools or early childhood settings are to be recruited to undertake the research
- the research is assessed by the researcher as higher than 'low risk'² and/or includes:
 - content or topics that may be sensitive in schools and early childhood settings including body image, drugs, death, mental health (including suicidal ideation or self-harm), sexual health and behaviour, family issues, research focusing on vulnerable cohorts, violence (including family violence), abuse, illegal activity, bullying and cultural sensitivities issues
 - invasive techniques (e.g. blood tests, mouth swabs)
 - the collection and/or collection of attributable personal information, sensitive information or health data, as defined by the [Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014](#) (Victoria) and [Health Records Act 2001](#) (Victoria).

Applications must include evidence of a HREC application (where applicable) and information to demonstrate the strategies and controls that will be used by researchers to mitigate and manage risks and issues related to ethics and conduct. This includes detailing how participants will be protected from harm and the steps that will be taken to collect, store and manage personal or sensitive information and health data (where it will be collected). Citing a university or organisation policy is an insufficient description of the steps that will be taken.

² As defined by the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NHMRC 2007) or which poses any level of risk to the site or the Department.

1.3 ACCESS TO DEPARTMENT-OWNED DATA

The Department collects data across schools and early childhood services for monitoring performance and improving the delivery of services.

Some of this data can be accessed via:

- the Department of Education and Training [website](#)
- the [Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System \(VCAMS\) portal](#)
- the education category on the [DataVic website](#).

Researchers seeking access to unpublished Department-owned data can apply for access via a request form:

- [Data request form](#)

Complete the form and email it to data.governance@edumail.vic.gov.au.

Please note that single school-level data will not be released by the Department.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) also manages a range of research and statistical information regarding the operation and conduct of curriculum and assessment activities in the Victorian education system. Application for data collected and held by the VCAA is subject to a different data request. For more information visit the [VCAA website](#).

2. COMPLETING AND SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

Please note that the Department will not accept incomplete applications. Applications that are incomplete will not be registered and the applicant will be informed. Applicants can resubmit the application in full once it has been completed.

Applications must include:

1. **Application form**—containing sufficient information to enable a full understanding of the aims, methodology and procedures of the research, including: an indication of the proposed sample; resources expected of the site; the number of hours that participation in the research will require; identification of any potential risks and how they will be managed; and arrangements for maintaining confidentiality and protecting privacy.

Researchers are asked to identify whether their research is within Tier 1 or Tier 2, as per the criteria above, and provide additional information as required for Tier Two applications.

2. **Application checklist** (included in the form)—to be used by the applicant to ensure they have compiled a complete application.

3. **Signed research agreement** (included in the form)—in signing the agreement, the applicant agrees to adhere to provisions relating to privacy, insurance, departmental policies and procedures, and providing research outputs to the Department.
4. **All relevant attachments**—an application should include HREC approval or evidence of application to a HREC (where applicable), copies of any survey instruments, plain language statements, consent forms and other attachments referenced in the application checklist.

The application form, checklist and other relevant information is available on the Department website on the [Conduct research](#) page.

Applications must:

- not contain typographical errors or grammatical mistakes in survey instruments, plain language statements, consent forms or any other documents which will be provided to sites or participants
- be written in plain English
- have attachments (e.g. plain language statements and consent forms) which are individually and clearly titled, and which use the letterhead of the lead university or research organisation
- have attachments (e.g. plain language and consent forms) which clearly indicate the use of audio and/or video recording of participants, where applicable
- demonstrate clear links between the research question(s), methodology, research instruments, attachments (e.g. consent forms), and the broader purposes to which the research contributes
- be complete.

Applications and all attachments must be sent in Word format to:

research@edumail.vic.gov.au

Unless provided for in a separate agreement with the Department of Education and Training, the Department does not claim ownership of the intellectual property of the research proposals submitted as part of the RISEC process. Project titles and the names of researchers may appear on the Department's website. Other information provided by applicants will not be shared outside of the Department without the permission of the applicant or their organisation.

3. REVIEW OF THE APPLICATION

Contentious or complex proposals may be referred to executive members or committees of the Department for consideration with reference to advice from program area experts. Proposals which are health-related may be referred to the Principal Medical Adviser and may take longer to review.

To **assist the assessor** in considering the research methodology the application should:

- clearly define the research question/s, sampling and recruitment strategy, and outline logical methods of data collection and analysis which are likely to lead to useful findings

- detail the time required for each activity, a timeline for the research with precise commencement and end dates, and ensure that the letter to the principal/site manager provides information about the time and resources expected to be committed by the site.

Important details about the Department’s requirements and considerations in the review process are included at Appendix A: Department requirements and considerations.

Applications will be closed without approval if researchers do not respond to Department feedback within three weeks. In the event that an application is closed, researchers may consider submitting a new application.

Applications may take up to six weeks to be finalised.

4. APPLICATION OUTCOMES

At the completion of the review process **the Department advises the researchers** by email of the decision.

4.1 WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF MY APPLICATION IS APPROVED?

Approval provides researchers with the **authority to approach school principals or early childhood site managers** to invite them to participate in the research.

Even if approval has been attained by the researcher through the RISEC application process, **participation in the research study is completely voluntary** and at the discretion of the school or early childhood setting and the individuals who are invited to participate.

In determining whether to accept a research proposal the principal/site manager may **consider the potential benefits** to the site and the participants. These benefits will be balanced against the **level of intrusion and the commitment of resources**. There is no obligation for a principal/site manager to permit the researcher(s) to enter the site or access their staff.

Approval by the Department **does not signify endorsement** of the project, its outcomes or recommendations, and does not imply that the Department endorses or supports the development or evaluation of a program or intervention as part of the research.

4.2 WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF MY APPLICATION IS NOT APPROVED?

Research applications that **do not meet the requirements** outlined in these guidelines will not be approved. If your application is not approved, you **cannot approach school principals or site managers** to invite them to participate in the research.

There is no process for appealing decisions to reject an application, but researchers may consider submitting a new application which addresses the issues raised.

When an application is **not approved** the Department will provide reasons for the decision.

4.3 REPORTING REQUIREMENTS FOR APPROVED RESEARCH

The Department is interested in the findings of research conducted in schools and early childhood settings. It is a condition of approval that researchers report to the Department at the conclusion of their research project.

At the conclusion of the project, researchers are required to:

- **provide the Department with a concise two-to-three page summary report and its key findings**
- **provide a report to the participating schools/centres in a format agreed to by the principal(s)/site manager(s) of participating schools/sites. The researcher might consider providing an information session or debriefing session with participants**
- **acknowledge the role of the Department in any publications arising from the research.**

The reports must not contain data that identifies any individuals or participating schools.

5. FURTHER INFORMATION

If you require further information regarding the RISEC application process you can:

- visit the Conduct research page of the [Department's website](#)
- email the Performance and Evaluation Division, at research@edumail.vic.gov.au.

APPENDIX A: DEPARTMENT REQUIREMENTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Applications

Applications must be complete with all required attachments, and be written in plain English. Materials that will be circulated to sites and participants must be free of typographical errors and grammatical mistakes. The link between research goals, methodology, research instruments, attachments (e.g. consent forms), and the broader purposes to which the research contributes should be clear. **Applications failing to meet these standards will not be approved.**

Researchers must demonstrate that they have the necessary qualifications, competence, experience, and support to manage the particular requirements of their research project, including the management of unexpected situations.

Participation and consent process

Through the RISEC process, the Department provides approval for researchers to approach government schools and early childhood settings. Whether these sites participate, however, remains at the discretion of the school principal or site manager, and the involvement of individual participants is always entirely voluntary.

Sites and individuals who do not wish to participate in a research project, or who wish to withdraw from a project they are involved in, are not required to provide a reason and may do so at any stage.

The participation of children and young people under the age of 18 requires HREC approval (where relevant) and the written permission of parents or guardians, obtained through an informed opt-in consent process. However, the children themselves should also be given the opportunity to assent or decline to participate in the project, as facilitated by age-appropriate plain language statements. Students over the age of 18 may provide their own consent.

Long-term projects spanning years may need to renegotiate consent from sites and individuals at each data collection point.

Incentives and coercion

The Department does not approve applications using incentives to recruit either students/children or staff for participation in research. This includes the distribution of cash, vouchers or the inclusion of participants in a prize draw.

Researchers may consider making contributions of educational value to participating sites, for example, vouchers for books or sports equipment, or funding for Casual Relief Teachers or professional development.

Photography, video and audio recording

Plain language statements must identify where photography, video and audio recording are to be used as methods of data collection and explain how these media are to be used, and whether they will be published in any form, including online. Consent forms should also specifically seek permission to use these methods where relevant.

Steps must be taken to prevent capturing footage of non-participants, for example if video recording classroom practice. These steps need to be described in RISEC applications.

Confidentiality and privacy

The identity of individuals and schools participating in research projects should remain confidential in publications, unless schools have explicitly agreed to have the name of the school identified.

Applications must adhere to all relevant privacy legislation, including the *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014* (Victoria), and related protocols regarding the transport of data out of the state of Victoria.

Adequate steps must be taken to ensure that stored data is secure and can only be accessed by relevant project staff. Storage and access protocols should be described in RISEC applications.

Ethical and legal requirements

Projects must comply with all relevant Department and school policies, professional and ethical standards, as well as legal requirements.

The Department's review process does not substitute for review by a HREC or other NHMRC-endorsed body. Information about the status of HREC approval must be submitted with RISEC applications.

Applications must consider any potential risks to participants inherent in their research topic, and demonstrate adequate steps to mitigate these risks.

Supervision of students or children

A teacher or other adult with a legal duty of care must be present during student or child participation in research activities. This means that during interviews, for example, students must be within view of a teacher or other member of school staff. Applications and associated documents provided to schools should demonstrate an awareness of these supervision requirements and detail the resources required from schools to meet them.

Working with Children Checks

The Department requires that all researchers in direct contact with children and young people have a current [Working with Children Check](#). Direct contact includes, but is not limited to, conducting interviews, focus groups, electronic communication, or visiting schools or early childhood settings to conduct observations.

Child Safe Standards

All Victorian organisations that provide services or facilities to children are required by law to comply with the [Child Safe Standards](#) (Ministerial Order No. 870), which include strategies and practices to promote child safety and remove risks of child abuse. Researchers are required to adhere to the policies and processes implemented by schools and early childhood settings to meet these standards.

Disclosure of abuse or neglect

If a child or young person makes a disclosure of abuse or neglect or becomes at risk of harm, during the course of a research study, the researcher has a responsibility to report this to the supervising teacher or principal. In this case the duty-of-care to protect the child outweighs the need to maintain confidentiality.

Coercion and pressure

Pre-existing relationships between participants and researchers, e.g. teachers and their students, may compromise the voluntary nature of the decision to participate. Tertiary students or teachers conducting research in schools where they teach must ensure their position of authority does not result in students feeling obliged to participate.

Cultural heritage and diversity

Researchers must demonstrate respect for the cultural heritage and diversity of participants. In some cases, it may be necessary to consult with Aboriginal elders, community leaders, or translate plain language statements and consent forms into languages other than English, before research can be undertaken.

Burden on schools and students

Research in schools should be designed to minimise the burden on schools and students, and interference with classes and other school activities.

Where research involves whole-class participation, it may be necessary to arrange alternative activities and supervision for non-participating students.

Arrangements should be discussed with relevant school staff in advance, and any related costs should be covered by the researcher.