

## RESEARCH IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS PROCEDURE

### 1.0 PROCESS FOR APPLYING TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

- 1.1 To seek approval to conduct research in schools from Diocese of Sale Catholic Education Ltd (DOSCEL), researchers must ensure all applications meet the requirements contained within the DOSCEL *Research in Catholic School Policy* and submit all applications on the approved *Application to Conduct Research in Catholic Schools (Appendix 1)*.
- 1.2 Any modifications to the research proposal will require submission of an amended application to DOSCEL.
- 1.3 DOSCEL approval is given on the understanding that any report or summary of the research findings will be made available to the participating schools and DOSCEL, preferably in an electronic format emailed to [director@doscel.catholic.edu.au](mailto:director@doscel.catholic.edu.au).

### 2.0 REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

- 2.1 **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; overall timeline; who the participants will be and what they are expected to do (i.e. methodology); time demand for each activity; and any school resources required. The letter should also indicate how the principal is to communicate their approval (e.g. 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.

- 2.2 **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; and 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.

- 2.3 **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 wherever possible, so participants have the option of saying yes or no to a particular element, for example being video recorded or their data being used in future research.

- 2.4 **Instruments:** All research instruments (e.g. surveys, interview questions, observation framework) 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 DOSCEL 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 methodology is not sensitive nor intrusive, DOSCEL may be able to provide approval on the draft versions. However, it is more likely DOSCEL will request final copies are submitted before approval is issued, or that particular phase of the research commences.

- 2.5 **Ethics approval:** Ethics committee approval from the researcher's respective university or organisation is required before DOSCEL will issue approval. Researchers are permitted to submit their application to DOSCEL while their institution's ethics approval is still pending, however, it is preferred that the research proposal and documentation submitted to DOSCEL already incorporates ethics committee feedback.

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

- 2.6 **Expectations:** It is expected that all documentation will have been proofread and edited before submission. DOSCEL 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.

### 3.0 REVIEW PROCESS

- 3.1 The review process can take up to six weeks once a completed application has been submitted. The timeline can be shorter or longer depending on: the complexity and sensitivity of the research project; how quickly the researcher/s can respond to feedback and amendment requests; and the volume of DOSCEL applications at the time.
- 3.2 Applications are reviewed using the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2023](#), as well as the *DOSCEL Research in Catholic Schools Policy*. Advice is sought as required from relevant teams across DOSCEL, school staff and colleagues from other Australian jurisdictions.
- 3.3 Researchers are notified by email to respond to DOSCEL queries and requests for change. If all requirements are addressed, the application is recommended for approval.

## 4.0 REVIEW CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 **Benefit and value:** It is expected that when researchers conduct research in Catholic schools in the Diocese of Sale, they do so on the basis that the findings may assist to improve student outcomes, strengthen expert teacher practice, build instructional leadership capacity and increase school effectiveness.
- 4.2 **Burden:** DOSCEL will consider the potential demand and burden of the proposed research project, 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 DOSCEL, and the burden of managing those risks
  - the burden of the review process on DOSCEL and schools for overly complex research projects that do not have a clear purpose or benefit.
- 4.3 **Incentives:** DOSCEL does not support the use of incentives/inducements (e.g. \$20 shopping voucher) as a recruitment strategy for attracting participants.
- 4.4 **Randomised controlled trials (RCTs):** The use of RCTs in educational research is a debated topic that attracts different views from within the education and research communities. DOSCEL 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, DOSCEL 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 control group access to the intervention once the trial is complete and 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.

## 5.0 SENSITIVE TOPICS

- 5.1 The following topics are considered sensitive and must be managed appropriately if DOSCEL 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 issue (mental, physical or social)
  - parenting strategies, including children and young people's attitudes towards parenting
  - fertility, pregnancy.
- 5.2 A research project may also be deemed sensitive if the methodology is intrusive (either physically or emotionally), and if vulnerable participants are being recruited.
- 5.3 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
  - 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 Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

## 6.0 DUTY OF CARE

- 6.1 The safety and wellbeing of students is paramount. If researchers wish to conduct any research activity on school grounds, they must present a valid Working with Children Check (from any Australian State or Territory) to the school principal before the research can commence.
- 6.2 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.

## 7.0 SCHOOL AND SECTOR COMPARISONS

- 7.1 DOSCEL 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. DOSCEL discourages analysing and reporting on evidence that may fuel public perceptions of some schools or sectors as 'better' or 'worse'.

## 8.0 OUTCOME

- 8.1 **Approve:** The principal researcher and primary contact named in the application will receive formal notification of the outcome via posted letter and email. If the application is approved, the correspondence will contain DOSCEL's *Standard Conditions – Research in Catholic Schools*, as well as any additional conditions already communicated and agreed through the review process.
- 8.2 **Decline:** It is DOSCEL's intention to work with researchers to approve applications that meet DOSCEL requirements and have the potential to add value to participants, schools and/or the education community. Occasionally, an application will be declined if DOSCEL requirements are not met as outlined in section 4. DOSCEL is unlikely to support research that is deemed unsuitable for a school environment. The reason/s for declining the application will be clearly communicated to researchers.
- 8.3 **Withdraw:** Researchers may wish to withdraw their application if they no longer need DOSCEL approval or if they are unable to meet DOSCEL requirements outlined during the review process. This can be actioned by the researcher by sending an email to [director@doscel.catholic.edu.au](mailto:director@doscel.catholic.edu.au). DOSCEL can also withdraw an application if researchers do not respond to clarifications or change requests within six months of submission.

## 9.0 ENGAGING SCHOOLS IN RESEARCH

- 9.1 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. Educational research has great potential to add value to school communities when it contributes to an evidence-based approach to improving student outcomes.
- 9.2 Once an application is approved, researchers can approach principals of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Sale inviting them to participate in the research. Principals then decide whether the research may add value to their school community and give informed consent, before the research can begin or any participant is approached. Please note, DOSCEL does not play a role in promoting external research or recruiting schools.
- 9.3 If researchers wish to make changes to their application, either before or after it has been approved, they are required to email [director@doscel.catholic.edu.au](mailto:director@doscel.catholic.edu.au) with: project title; name of the principal researcher; clear details of the amendments; and copies of any changed documentation.
- 9.4 For applications that are more than three years old, or the modifications are major, researchers will be asked to submit a new application.

## 10.0 CONSENT

- 10.1 DOSCEL 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.
- 10.2 When the research involves the participation of children or young people, consent must be provided by their parent/carer, in addition to the assent of 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.
- 10.3 In the case of participants or their parents/carers with limited English language skills, translated information and consent forms should be provided.
- 10.4 In very limited circumstances, DOSCEL may consider and approve parent/carer passive or 'opt-out' consent after careful consideration of the following:
  - size of the desired sample for research validity, and the practicality of gaining active consent
  - sensitivity of the research, and whether parents could reasonably object to their child's participation
  - methodology of the research and whether the data collected will be personal, sensitive and/or identifiable
  - degree of risk or harm to participants, the school and/or DOSCEL if parents believe they were not adequately informed or had sufficient opportunity to 'opt-out'
  - maturity and/or vulnerability of participants and whether their assent/consent alone would be suitable.
- 10.5 On the rare occasion passive 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'.
- 10.6 Bundling consent and using data in future research: Wherever possible, consent should not be bundled so participants are forced to consent to all, or none, of the components of the research. If there are elements that participants might be uncomfortable with, these should be listed separately with a yes/no option. For example, being video recorded, having their height and weight measured, or their data being used in future research. While DOSCEL is supportive of unidentified data being shared in future-ethically approved research, participants should have the opportunity to say yes/no to this component.

## 11.0 FINAL REPORT

- 11.1 It is a condition of DOSCEL approval that researchers submit a summary of their research findings to DOSCEL and participating schools at the conclusion of their study.
- 11.2 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.

## 12.0 CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

- 12.1 Researchers must comply with the [Privacy Act 1988, Commonwealth](#), and protect the privacy, confidentiality and where possible anonymity of participants, both in the collection and storage of data.
- 12.2 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) then participants must be informed of this and confidentiality assured. Individual participants and schools must not be named in any reporting of research findings, unless explicit consent has been given.
- 12.3 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.
- 12.4 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.

## 13.0 ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL

- 13.1 It is expected that almost all applications to conduct research in Catholic schools in the Diocese of Sale will be supported by approval from a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). According to the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2023](#), 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.
- 13.2 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, DOSCEL 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 and reporting of findings.
- 13.3 DOSCEL approval is conditional on ethics committee approval from the relevant institution. While a researcher can apply to DOSCEL and the HREC simultaneously, all changes and updated documentation based on HREC conditions need to be provided to DOSCEL for final approval.

## 14.0 NEED HELP?

- 14.1 For any questions related to these DOSCEL requirements or advice on preparing an application to conduct research in the Diocese of Sale Catholic schools, please contact Mrs Cathy Mason, Manager: Leadership and Growth Culture on 03 5614 5160 or [cmason@doscel.catholic.edu.au](mailto:cmason@doscel.catholic.edu.au).

## 15.0 ATTACHMENTS

- DOSCEL Research in Catholic Schools Policy
- Appendix 1 - Application to Conduct Research in Catholic Schools

## 16.0 REVIEW

**Implementation Date:** November 2020

**Updated:** November 2023

**Review Date:** November 2025