

Guidelines regarding higher education institutions' responsibility for ethics in research abroad

Adopted by SUHF's board on 27 August 2024.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to clarify the ethical requirements that should be set when Swedish higher education institutions conduct research abroad and to give guidance in how the requirements can be complied with.

It is the higher education institution's task to ensure that research is conducted in an ethically defensible manner. Research that entails people, animals, society or the environment being exposed to risks should therefore always be scrutinised from an ethical perspective. When the research occurs abroad, special aspects should be considered in the assessment. These guidelines present a general framework for the work of the higher education institution.

Background

In recent years, questions have arisen regarding researchers' activities abroad. In concrete terms, this relates to research that is made possible abroad because a lower ethical standard applies or that different circumstances exist. Influential research funders such as the Swedish Research Council and the ERC do not permit a lower ethical standard just because the research is conducted outside Sweden or the EU. Research that does not comply with this is sometimes described as "ethics dumping". This can, but does not necessarily, involve the abuse of an economic inequality; consequently, this term has been defined as "the practice of exporting unethical practices to lower income settings" (TRUST Code). In other cases, countries may quite simply have different values, in respect of animal welfare for example, and the issue lies in researchers making use of this to circumvent the (often higher) ethical standards that apply in Sweden. The Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF's) expert group on ethical issues has specified, in its *Guidance for higher education institutions' efforts to prevent, manage and follow up on suspected deviations from good research practice*, that an example of the category of deviation from good research practice that should be handled by the research principals themselves is conducting research abroad that does not live up to the ethical standard that applies in Sweden.

Ethical requirements for research abroad

Swedish higher education institutions' research must follow good research practice wherever in the world it takes place. Such research as occurs entirely or partly abroad should meet at least the same high ethical standard as in Sweden. Researchers must not locate their research abroad for the purpose of avoiding the research ethics standards that apply in Sweden. This applies whether it

relates to avoiding ethical scrutiny, gaining access to material of doubtful origins or conducting unacceptably risky research. Using such action to exploit weaker parties, negligently risk the wellbeing of those who participate in the research or put important environmental values at risk is not acceptable. Ethics dumping can also occur due to ignorance, nonchalance, carelessness, lack of routines or misguided goodwill. Researchers and research principals need to keep themselves informed and be prepared to handle problems of this kind. In this respect, financiers and higher education institutions have noted two important requirements for ensuring ethically acceptable research when working with a foreign partner or conducting research abroad:

1. Researchers and research principals must *ensure that they have sufficient information* to be able to *assess* whether the research that they are to take part in violates good research practice. When they participate in research projects abroad, researchers must therefore ensure that they obtain such information as enables an ethical assessment of the research. This may for example be that an ethics permit exists, that informed consent is obtained or that the project is designed to minimise the risk of harm to people, animals or nature. If it is suspected that the research may be in violation of ethics, the researchers must investigate the conditions under which the research is conducted and whether they risk being ethically unacceptable. This requirement for basic ethical competence means that the higher education institutions must give training, advice and support in these matters and also ensure that researchers familiarise themselves with these.

2. Researchers and higher education institutions *must act on the basis of the information they have* and subsequently be prepared to cease their participation in the research. In cases where significant information is lacking, the research should not be conducted until a well-grounded assessment can be made. Nor should the research be performed when the information that has been obtained indicates that the research, in some significant respect, obviously deviates from the applicable ethical standards. That different economic, legal and social conditions for research unavoidably exist in different countries must always be handled with consideration for the people, animals and community that are the subject of the research. In the event that research occurs under conditions that would not be acceptable according to Swedish rules and guidelines, an acceptable level of protection must be achieved or the research must be terminated. Contracts relating to participation in research should contain clauses that permit the research to be terminated for reasons of this kind.

If a researcher who is connected with a Swedish higher education institution has doubts about whether their own research activities outside Sweden could be perceived as violating the above requirements or applicable Swedish rules and guidelines, the researcher must inform their immediate superior of this and seek advice from an appropriate function at their institution. Other employees of a higher education institution who are involved in research abroad should be aware of the risk of violating these requirements. Depending on the circumstances, it may be necessary to initiate a discussion with the researchers involved, advise appropriate representatives of the higher education institution or report suspected offences according to current regulations. Note also that, in addition to avoiding ethics dumping, international collaboration has a number of other important and closely related aspects to bear in mind, such as questions of democracy, academic freedom, ownership rights, safety and security (see SUHF's checklist below).

Sometimes the kind of decisions relating to these guidelines can be difficult, but they must not be avoided for this reason. It is of the utmost importance that they are made evident and addressed in the research. Only when the research is responsible in this regard does it become ethically acceptable.

Sources

Examples of guidelines:

Forskning och studier utomlands - vägledning avseende etik och riskhantering (Stockholm University guidelines, 2023)

Lunds universitets föreskrift om etisk standard för forskning som avser människor och som bedrivs utomlands (2021)

Recommendations to higher education institutions on how to work with responsible internationalization (STINT, 2022)

Responsible internationalisation: Guidelines for reflection on international academic collaboration (STINT, 2020)

Riktlinjer om etiska principer för humanforskning utanför Sverige (Karolinska institutet, 2022)

Other documents:

Checklist, Global Responsible Engagement, REC 2023:4 (SUHF)

Ethics Dumping Case Studies from North-South Research Collaborations, Doris Schroeder et. al (red), Springer Open, 2018 (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-64731-9>)

TRUST Code (<http://www.globalcodeofconduct.org/>)

Vägledning för lärosätens arbete med att förebygga, hantera och följa upp misstankar om avvikelser från god forskningssed (SUHF, 2023)