

University of South Africa Research Ethics Committees	
Title	URERC Standard Operating Procedure for Complaint Procedures
SOP No	SOP 6_URERC
Date of approval	19/05/2020
Revision date	2023
Pages	

1 COMPILATION AND AUTHORISATION

Action	Designated person	Date	Signature
Compiled by:	Ms MK Gill (Research Ethics Officer) and Dr RG Visagie	19 May 2020	
Checked by:	Dr RG Visagie (Deputy Chairperson: URERC)		
Approved by:	URERC Prof Les Labuschagne (Chair: URERC)		
Authorised by:	VP: Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Studies and Commercialization Prof T Meyiwa Chair of the SRIPCC and		

2 DOCUMENT HISTORY

Date	Version no	Reason for revision
19 May 2020	1	Not applicable (Approved by URERC)

3. DISTRIBUTION

College/department/committee	Name	Date	Signature

4. ABBREVIATIONS AND/OR DEFINITIONS

Abbreviation/concept	Description/definition
Complaint	A statement that some research aspects and/or conduct by a researcher is unsatisfactory or not acceptable, or not in compliance with universal research ethics principles and/or the university procedures.
External researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Researcher associated with another institution or organization, who has obtained research ethics approval certificate and permission certificate from Unisa to conduct research at Unisa b) Unisa employee who has registered for a qualification at another university and has obtained ethics approval certificate and permission certificate to conduct research at Unisa
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure/s
ERC/REC	The Ethics Review Committee (synonymous with Research Ethics Committee) that is representing a specific UNISA business unit or College, either on unit or departmental level.
Principal researcher	A permanently appointed UNISA employee and an employee on a contract of less than three years who has been tasked with conducting research as well as a valid, current Academic Associate (excluding an Emeritus Professor) and a postdoctoral fellow
URERC	Unisa Research Ethics Review Committee
Unisa participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Unisa employees; they could be permanent or on contract, and could be academics, professional, administrative or support staff. b) Unisa students, whether registered for a Short Learning Programme, undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

SRIPCC	Senate Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Studies and Commercialisation Committee
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5. PURPOSE OF THE SOP

This SOP provides guidelines for the management of three types of complaints:

- 5.1 Complaints from Unisa or Non-Unisa researchers, supervisors and/or students about a member of an ERC (including URERC), meeting procedures, application management and reviewer reports.
- 5.2 Complaints from a member of an ERC (including URERC) itself about a Unisa or non-Unisa researcher or a member of a research team, meeting procedures or application management.
- 5.3 Complaints received from a research participant, co-researcher, a member of a research team, or an interested community member or member of public about research conduct and/or the researcher or a member of research team.

During the investigation of a complaint, the ERC/URERC shall be guided by the following principles:

- Fairness
- Confidentiality
- Human dignity
- Honesty/Integrity

6. SCOPE

- 6.1 The scope of this SOP covers the establishment of the procedure to follow for the management of complaints. The document also covers the responsibilities and procedures to follow relating to the complaint process. Notwithstanding this complaint procedure, all REC registered at the National Health Research Ethics Council will comply with National Regulations.
- 6.2 All URERC/ERC members, researchers, research ethics administrators/research ethics and integrity advisors and heads of research and postgraduate studies should be aware of the procedures to follow in dealing with complaints.
- 6.3 The chair of the URERC or a college ERC retains the right to suspend or terminate a research study that violates Unisa policy or National Regulations.

7. RESPONSIBILITIES

- 7.1 Unisa and non-Unisa Researchers have the primary responsibility to ensure that the research conducted in their respective disciplines will maintain research integrity by upholding the values and principles associated with research ethics and integrity.
- 7.2 Postgraduate supervisors must encourage and promote responsible conduct of research.
- 7.3 URERC/ERCs must apply sound research ethics oversight practices to protect the dignity and welfare of research participants, animals, communities, collectives, researchers and members of research teams.

7.4 URERC/ERCs must be adequately composed, demonstrate procedural justice, interactional justice, impartiality, pro-science sensitivity, competence, willingness to mentor and consult and effective and efficient functioning.

8. PROCEDURES

8.1 Procedure for complaints from a Non-Unisa researcher against the conduct of a URERC member or the URERC procedures and research ethics review system

- 8.1.1 If an external researcher is dissatisfied with the conduct of a URERC member or the URERC procedures, he/she has the right to lodge a complaint with the URERC.
- 8.1.2 The complaint shall be against a perceived treatment and procedures, and not against the decision of the committee; as this would constitute an appeal. Appeals shall be handled according to the appeals procedure.
- 8.1.3 All complaints must be lodged in writing, using the URERC endorsed complaint form (Appendix A) and shall be submitted to the Manager: Research Integrity/Deputy Chair: URERC.
- 8.1.4 The respondent/member will be informed of the complaint and requested to submit a response (Appendix B).
- 8.1.5 On receiving the written complaint, the Deputy Chairperson of the URERC shall convene a meeting with the complainant to discuss the complaint to find an amicable solution (depending on the complexity of the complaint the member will either be invited to the meeting or a second meeting with the member individually will follow).
- 8.1.6 The meeting shall be convened within a week of receiving the complaint.
- 8.1.7 If the complainant is a postgraduate student, the supervisor will be included in this discussion.
- 8.1.8 If an agreement regarding a workable solution is reached, the matter will be considered resolved.
- 8.1.9 The Deputy Chair, with the assistance of the Research Ethics Officer, will compile a written report of this meeting and the incident will be reported to the Chairperson of URERC.
- 8.1.10 The URERC will be notified of the incident and how it was resolved.
- 8.1.11 If agreement can not be reached, the process will proceed as follows:
 - (a) The Deputy Chair shall convene a meeting as soon as possible with the complainant, the Chair of the URERC, the member/respondent and the postgraduate supervisor (if applicable) to discuss the complaint in an attempt to resolve the matter.
 - (b) If required, members of URERC or other individuals with relevant expertise can be invited to participate in the discussion.
 - (c) The Deputy Chair, with the assistance of the Research Ethics Officer, will compile a written report of this meeting for submission to the Chair of the URERC.
 - (d) If an agreement regarding a workable solution is reached, the matter will be considered resolved.
- 8.1.12 If not, the process will proceed to the next phase as described below:
 - (a) The complainant will be referred to the VP: Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Studies and Commercialisation to lodge the unresolved complaint in writing.
 - (b) Proof must be provided on the internal mediation process that was followed unsuccessfully.

- (c) The VP: Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Studies and Commercialisation may appoint a sub-committee of the SRIPCC that will meet with the complainant and try and resolve the matter, or s/he may decide to bring the complaint before the full SRIPCC to deliberate on the complaint.

8.2 Procedure for complaints from a Unisa researcher against the conduct of an ERC member or the ERC procedures and research ethics review system

- 8.2.1 If a Unisa researcher or postgraduate student is dissatisfied with the conduct of an ERC member or the ERC procedures, he/she has the right to lodge a complaint with the ERC.
- 8.2.2 The complaint shall be against a perceived treatment and procedures, and not against the decision of the committee; as this would constitute an appeal. Appeals shall be handled according to the appeals procedure.
- 8.2.3 All complaints must be lodged in writing, using the URERC endorsed complaint form (Appendix A) and shall be submitted to the Chairperson of the ERC. Should the complaint be against the Chair, the complaint should be lodged in writing to the Manager: Research Integrity/deputy chair of the URERC.
- 8.2.4 The member/respondent will be informed about the complaint by the Chairperson of the ERC and requested to complete the response form (Appendix B).
- 8.2.5 On receiving the written complaint, the Chairperson of the ERC shall convene a meeting with the Deputy Chairperson, complainant and the member/respondent (depending of the complexity of the complaint) to discuss the complaint and to find an amicable solution.
- 8.2.6 The meeting shall be convened within a week of receiving the complaint.
- 8.2.7 If the complainant is a postgraduate student, the supervisor will be included in this discussion.
- 8.2.8 If an agreement regarding a workable solution is reached, the matter will be considered resolved.
- 8.2.9 The Chair will compile a written report of this meeting and the incident will be reported to the Chairperson and the Manager: Research Integrity of URERC.
- 8.2.10 If agreement cannot be reached, the process will proceed as follows:
- (e) The Chair shall convene a meeting as soon as possible with the Deputy Chairperson, complainant, the member, the Executive Dean, the Manager: Research Integrity and/or the postgraduate supervisor (if applicable) to discuss the complaint in an attempt to resolve the matter.
 - (f) If required, members of the ERC or other individuals with relevant expertise can be invited to participate in the meeting.
 - (g) The Chair will compile a written report of this meeting for submission to the Chair of the URERC, Executive Dean and the Manager: Research Integrity.
 - (h) If a mutual agreement regarding a workable solution is reached, the matter will be considered resolved.
- 8.2.11 If not, the process will proceed to the next phase as described below:
- (a) The complainant will be referred to the Chair: URERC to lodge the unresolved complaint in writing.
 - (b) Proof must be provided on the internal mediation process that was followed unsuccessfully.
 - (c) The Chair of the URERC may appoint a sub-committee of the URERC that will meet with the complainant and try and resolve the matter, or s/he may decide to bring the complaint before the full URERC to deliberate on the complaint.

8.3 Procedure for complaints from a research participant, co-researcher, member of a research team or interested community member about the research conduct of a researcher

- 8.3.1 The Unisa Informed Consent templates states that in case a research participant has any queries or complaints against a researcher or a research misconduct, s/he may contact the Manager: Research Integrity (visagrg@unisa.ac.za) or in the case of an HREC, the HREC chair.
- 8.3.2 A complaint can be lodged by a co-researcher, a member of a research team, or interested community member about the research conducted and /or the researcher or any member of the research team.
- 8.3.3 A formal complaint must be lodged in writing with the Manager: Research Integrity using the UERC endorsed complaints form.
- 8.3.4 A complaint logged telephonically should be followed by an email to keep a written record of the complaint.
- 8.3.5 The Manager: Research Integrity will refer all College-specific complaints to the chairperson of the relevant ERC, while complaints relating to UERC approved studies will be managed by the Manager: Research Integrity, in collaboration with the Chair of the UERC.
- 8.3.6 The Chair of the UERC and Executive Dean of the College will be notified of any College-specific complaints.
- 8.3.7 Within a week of receiving the complaint, the Manager: Research Integrity (UERC-specific complaints) or the Chair of the College ERC (College-specific complaints) shall call a meeting with the complainant. Thereafter, with the researcher and in the case of a student, with the supervisor.
- 8.3.8 The outcome of the two meetings (one with the complainant and one with the researcher) will inform the necessity of a further meeting as soon as possible where the researcher, complainant and the Manager: Research Integrity (UERC-specific complaint) or the chair of the College ERC (College-specific complaint) will finalise the complaint.
- 8.3.9 For UERC-specific complaints, the Manager: Research Integrity will keep a written record of the meeting and its outcome and shall communicate it to the UERC chairperson.
- 8.3.10 For College-specific complaints, the Chair of the College ERC will keep a written record of the meeting and its outcome and shall communicate it to the UERC chairperson, the Executive Dean and the Manager: Research Integrity.
- 8.3.11 Should the UERC-specific complaint not be resolved, a final meeting between all the parties mentioned previously, as well as the UERC Chair will be called as soon as possible to find an amicable solution. Additional expertise could be cooped by inviting individuals with specific expertise to form part of the deliberations.
- 8.3.12 Should the College-specific complaint not be resolved, a final meeting between all the parties mentioned previously, as well as the UERC Chair, Executive Dean, Director of the applicable research entity and the Manager: Research Integrity will be called as soon as possible to find an amicable solution. Additional expertise could be cooped by inviting individuals with specific expertise to form part of the deliberations.
- 8.3.13 A detailed written report of the aforementioned processes and outcomes will be compiled by the chair of the College ERC and circulated for correctness and fairness.

- 8.3.14 If an agreement regarding a workable solution is reached, the matter will be considered resolved.
- 8.3.15 If not, the process will proceed to the next phase as described below:
- (a) The complainant will be referred to the VP: Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Studies and Commercialisation to lodge the unresolved complaint in writing.
 - (b) Proof must be provided on the internal mediation process that was followed unsuccessfully.
 - (c) The VP: Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Studies and Commercialisation may appoint a sub-committee of the SRIPCC that will meet with the complainant and try and resolve the matter, or s/he may decide to bring the complaint before the full SRIPCC to deliberate on the complaint.
 - (d) If the SRIPCC is unable to find an amicable solution or it becomes apparent that the researcher acted in a deliberate maleficent manner, the matter shall be escalated to the HR department for formal disciplinary action.

8. REFERENCES

- Keith-Spiegel, P & Tabachnick, B (2006) What scientists want from their research ethics committees? *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*. April 2006.
- North West University Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office SOP on Complaints Management
- Google Dictionary

APPENDIX A

Complaints Form¹

Contact the Unisa Hotline if you want to remain completely anonymous at 0800 203 785

1. Complainant:

Name				
Telephone number(s)	Work:			
Email address	Mobile:			
Do you wish to remain anonymous?	YES		NO	

2. Details of person or entity against whom/which the complaint is lodged:

Name				
Telephone number(s)	Work:			
Email address	Mobile:			

3. Category of complaint/query

Category of complaint	Please tick the relevant	Category of complaint	Please tick the relevant	Category of complaint	Please tick the relevant
About conduct in an approved study		Conduct of a researcher		Discrimination	
Informed consent process		Conflict of interest		Data security	
Inappropriate communication, etc.		General REC processes		About the REC in general	
Human participant wellbeing / monitoring		Animal wellbeing / monitoring		Guidance or clarification	

¹ Form adapted from NHREC form available online at <http://nhrec.health.gov.za/index.php/2016-07-19-08-07-16>. Accessed [27 June 2019]. Unisa Ethics Hotline number is 0800 203 785.

Health and Safety issues		Researcher/fieldworker wellbeing		About alleged protocol/ approval violations	
Other					

4. Nature of the Complaint.

4.1 If the complaint pertains to a particular research project, please provide the following information (if available):

Title of the research study	
Name of Principal Researcher	
Contact details of the Principal Researcher	
Site where research is being conducted	
Name of the Research Ethics Committee that approved the study	

4.2 Please provide sufficient details of the complaint, with supporting evidence if possible.

4.3 What steps did you first take or try to exhaust in order to bring the complaint to the attention of the relevant people or to have it resolved?

I hereby declare that the above submission is accurate and true to the best of my knowledge.

Signed this _____ day of _____ 20_____

Signature: _____

Full Name: _____

(Please Print)

APPENDIX B

Response Form²

2. Respondent:

Name	
Telephone number(s)	Work: Mobile:
Email address	

2. Details of the Research Study

Title of the research study	
Name of Principal Researcher	
Contact details of the Principal Researcher	Work: Mobile:
Site where research is being conducted	

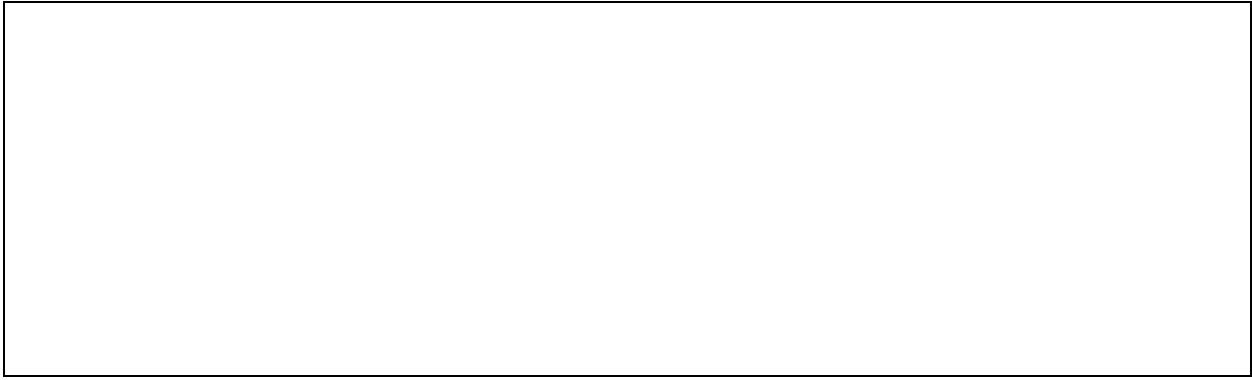
3. Details of the Ethics Review Committee

Name of Ethics Review Committee (ERC) that approved the study	
Chairperson of the Committee	
Contact details of the Chairperson	
Is the ERC registered with the NHREC	

4. The response of the Principal Researcher

The Principal Investigator response to the complaints/query – providing comprehensive details of the research procedures followed, including the protocol/proposal, proof of ethics clearance, status of the study as at the date of submission of this response, with evidence where possible.

² Response form adapted from the NHREC form available online at <http://nhrec.health.gov.za/index.php/2016-07-19-08-07-16>. Accessed [27 June 2019]. Unisa Ethics Hotline number is 0200 203 785.



I hereby declare that the above submission is accurate and true to the best of my knowledge.

Signed this _____ day of _____ 20_____

Signature: _____

Full Name: _____

(Please Print)