



Royal College of Art

Postgraduate Art & Design

Ethics in Research Funding Policy

Cover sheet

Policy Owner	Pro Vice-Chancellor, Research & Innovation
Policy Overview	Securing funding in order to carry out research is an important part of being an academic. Staff in our Schools and Research Centres routinely submit applications and are awarded funding by organisations from across the public, private and third sectors, to support them to undertake research, knowledge exchange and innovation activities. The Ethics in Research Funding Policy ensures that funding is sought and secured in an ethical way.
Related Policies and Guidance	Donations Acceptance Policy Responsible Investment Policy Ethical Careers Exclusion Criteria Due Diligence and Risk Assessment for RKE Projects
Current Version Number	2.0
Approved by / Date	Research and Innovation Committee, 21 January 2026
Overview of Changes to Current Version	Key updates are: changes to the list of ethical considerations when accepting research funding, the addition of ethical and environmental exclusion criteria list, updates to named roles and committees, and correcting broken links.
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Date of Next Review	January 2029

Research ethics and integrity at the RCA

Secure funding in order to be able to carry out research is an important part of being an academic in a UK university. At the RCA, staff in our Schools and Research Centres routinely submit applications and are awarded funding by organisations from across the public, private and third sectors, to support them to undertake research, knowledge exchange and innovation activities.

These funders include:

- the Office for Students and the UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) funding bodies, including the UK Research Councils, Research England, and InnovateUK
- various EU research funding programmes administered by the European Commission
- UK trusts and foundations that fund research (the Wellcome Trust, the Leverhulme Trust)
- other government and public research funding bodies in the UK and in other countries
- individual businesses across many industry sectors, from SMEs to large multinational corporates based in the UK and in other countries
- charities and NGOs in the UK and in other countries.

Research activity at the RCA is governed by the College's [Research Ethics Policy](#), which is based on sector-wide good practice and professional standards in research ethics. It is founded on the principles of integrity and transparency in research. It includes the requirement for those undertaking and managing research in the College to demonstrate robust risk management and good practice in research ethics and integrity in areas including:

- Health and safety
- Using human participants and animals in research
- Intellectual property rights
- Conflicts of interest
- Data management
- Publication and authorship
- Misconduct in research

The UK research and higher education funding bodies (UKRI and OfS) require HEIs to commit to the principles set out in the [UK Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#) (2012, revised 2025). The RCA is a supporter of this Concordat, whose principles set out a commitment to:

- upholding the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research
- ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards
- supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice and support for the development of researchers
- using transparent, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise
- working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to reviewing progress regularly and openly.

Ethics of research funding sources

As part of broader good practice in research ethics and research integrity, it is appropriate to monitor how we fund our research. When considering whether it is appropriate to accept funds from a particular source to carry out research or knowledge exchange, the principles of ethics, integrity and transparency set out above apply. Four additional key principles also come into play:

1. The principle of **academic freedom** (see below)
2. The need to **avoid conflicts of interest** whether perceived or actual, between the funding source and the research to be carried out, e.g. in the form of **avoiding undue** influence over academic matters such as the research questions, methods, outcomes and outputs for a particular research or knowledge exchange project
3. The need to be **open and transparent** about all sources of funding for a research or knowledge exchange project or activity
4. The need to **permit research activity to be undertaken** and funded, where it is lawful and has received appropriate ethical approval.

Academic freedom

The principle of academic freedom, to which all UK universities adhere, was established by the 1988 Education Reform Act, and is key here. The RCA's Statutes (§23) set out the College's responsibility to adhere to this principle, stating it will 'ensure that Academic Staff have freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges'.

Research undertaken outside the UK is likely to be subject to local law, which may differ from UK law, and the College's research ethics processes require staff working in these circumstances to seek approval from the Research Ethics Committee before undertaking their research.

In the context of considering the ethics of research funding sources, the [Nolan principles in public life](#) – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership – provide a helpful framework for making decisions about whether a funding source is acceptable for a particular programme of research, knowledge exchange, executive education and innovation activity.

Making decisions on the ethics of accepting research funding from a particular source

The key considerations in any decision about whether it is ethical to accept funding for research from a particular source are:

- what is the funding source
- how that relates to the specific programme of research it will support
- what is the purpose of the research to be carried out with the funding
- what are the risks of undermining the integrity and independence of the programme of research carried out

- whether there is a risk of perceived or actual conflict of interest in the funding source's interest in the research project and/or the research findings
- whether the funder might use the results or outputs of the research for unethical purposes
- whether accepting the funding might bring the member of staff, their School or Centre, or the College into disrepute, or undermine the integrity of their research findings
- Will accepting the funding present a conflict with the RCA's values and strategic objectives

All decisions about whether or not a source of research funding is ethical must therefore be considered on an individual basis. What is deemed acceptable in one set of circumstances might not be acceptable in another.

Examples of funding sources considered unethical

Universities UK and Cancer Research UK have a long-standing joint [Protocol on Tobacco Industry Funding to Universities](#) which sets out key principles for universities to follow in scrutinising and accepting sources of research funding, and strongly encourages all UK universities not to accept tobacco industry funding for research or any other activities.

There may be cases where it might be judged acceptable to proceed with a particular source of funding or industry that is considered ethically unacceptable by some, if the funding is used to ask challenging questions and address uncomfortable material or issues, and there is no risk of interference by the funding source in the programme of research and the research findings and outputs. In other cases, there may be a risk that accepting funding from such a source would undermine perceptions of academic independence or even place researchers at risk of reprisals or attack (verbal or physical), and in such circumstances, the decision may be that it is not appropriate to accept such funding. Equally, a funding source may appear ethically sound but the funder may wish to influence the programme of research or the research findings and outputs, and in such circumstances the decision may be that it is not appropriate to accept such funding for that particular purpose. Where research activity and funding is lawful and has received ethical approval, the principle should be that it should proceed, and not be blocked unreasonably by parties with conflicting interests.

Ethical evaluation of sources of research funding includes a due diligence and risk assessment process to support decision making and inform an understanding of the benefits and risks when engaging in externally funded research, knowledge exchange and innovation activities. This is separate from the due diligence assessments that form part of the College's [Donation Acceptance Policy](#), which applies to philanthropic donations. The principles, however, are similar, with the Donation Acceptance Policy requiring donations to be accepted only if they support the RCA's mission, values and ethics, do not pose an unacceptable reputational risk to the College, do not create an unacceptable conflict of interest, do not restrict academic freedom and independence, and do not conflict with the College's charitable aims and socially responsible approach.

The RCA will not engage in relationships with funders when it is possible to identify that they are subject to these exclusion criteria for ethical and environmental reasons, including:

- Arms and Defence Industries
- Fossil Fuel and High Emission Energy Companies

- Mining Companies
- Tobacco Companies
- A history of Human Rights and Labour Standard Violations

Links to the different contexts in which related policies apply:

- [Donations Acceptance Policy](#)
- [Statement on Ethics and Sources of Research Funding](#)
- [Responsible Investment Policy](#)
- [Ethical Careers Exclusion Criteria](#)
- [Due Diligence and Risk Assessment for RKE Projects](#)

Process for seeking ethical approval of a funding source

All research and research funding has an ethical dimension, ranging from minor to substantial considerations. The principles set out in the College's [Statement on Ethics and Sources of in Research Funding](#) provide a benchmark and checklist against which staff undertaking research at the College should evaluate any research, knowledge exchange or innovation activity, and provide a statement on how the Principle Investigator will mitigate any research ethics and research integrity issues that arise, seeking approval from the College's [Research Ethics Committee](#) where appropriate.

The RCA's Research & Innovation Committee is the body responsible for making decisions about any ethical questions that arise about the suitability of a particular source of research funding. The Pro Vice-Chancellor of Research & Innovation, as Chair of that committee, has the final say if agreement cannot be reached, and the Pro Vice-Chancellor may request advice from the College's Research Ethics Committee where appropriate.

Pro Vice-Chancellor of Research & Innovation
January 2026