When are ethical reviews required?

A statement on the ethics of a research design, regardless of the discipline in question, must be requested from the University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences if the study meets certain requirements set out under items 1-6 below, as specified by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity.

Under the Medical Research Act (No 488/1999), each hospital district (in Helsinki, the Hospital District of Helsinki and Uusimaa (HUS)) shall have an ethics committee responsible for the prior evaluation of research projects. The University’s Ethical Review Board may, however, assess human research conducted in healthcare settings if it falls outside the scope of medical research as defined in the above Act (http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990488.pdf) or the mandate of the ethics committee of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Helsinki.

The University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences reviews research designs that include the following types of interaction with the research subjects:

1. The study involves an intervention in the physical integrity of subjects.
2. The study deviates from the principle of informed consent. (An ethical review is not required, however, if the research is based on public or published documents, registries or archived data.)
3. The subjects are children under the age of 15, and the data are collected without parental consent and without providing the parents or guardians with an opportunity to prevent the child from taking part in the study, and the study is not part of the normal activities of a school or an institution of early childhood education and care.
4. The study exposes research subjects to exceptionally strong stimuli and evaluating possible harm requires special expertise (for example, studies involving violence or pornography).
5. The study may cause long-term mental harm (trauma, depression, insomnia) beyond the risks encountered in normal life.
6. The study can expose subjects to a security risk (for example, studies involving domestic violence).

A researcher can also request an ethical review if the research subject, funding agency or cooperation partner so wishes or if the results are to be published in a scientific journal which requires ethical review.

As a rule, the Ethical Review Board will not conduct ethical reviews on Master's theses. According to the 2009 Ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences and proposals for ethical review by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, the guidelines for ethical reviews are intended to cover postgraduate research. At the undergraduate stage, thesis supervisors are responsible for ensuring that thesis work complies with ethical principles. However, if the planned thesis research includes any of the features requiring ethical review (see items 1-6 above), the student, together with his or her supervisor, must request an ethical review; the request must be accompanied by the supervisor’s statement on the study in question. This exception was established primarily for situations in which a Master's thesis is written as part of a more extensive scientific research project led by the supervisor, and means that an ethical review may be requested even if some of the project results are published in a Master’s thesis. In such cases, however, the supervisor must request the ethical review.
If the grounds for requesting an ethical review of research for a Master’s thesis are solely based on the publication objective and the publisher's ethical requirements, the supervisor must anticipate the grade of the thesis and the likelihood of its acceptance for publication.

**Is the statement issued by the Ethical Review Board the same as a permit or license?**

The University of Helsinki Ethical Review Board in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences provides statements on the ethics of research designs. This statement does not constitute a research permit, nor does it shift the researcher’s ethical responsibility for his or her work to the Ethical Review Board.

Research approval is normally granted by the target organisation, i.e., the unit under which the material is collected or other research work is conducted in practice. Each individual research subject gives his or her consent to participating in the research.

The ethical principles of research in the humanities and social and behavioural sciences (respecting the autonomy of research subjects, avoiding harm, privacy and data protection) serve as the normative starting point for the work of the Ethical Review Board. The ethical review examines the manner of carrying out the research, in other words, the plan for material collection, research methodology, the information provided to the research subjects as well as the plan for processing and storing data from the perspective of avoiding risks and harm. The review weighs the potential negative effects or harm to the subjects resulting from participation in the study in relation to the intended scientific value of the study. When weighing the potential risks and harm, ethical considerations focus on the encounter between the researcher and the subject, which can include unanticipated factors.