

Research Ethics in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The early stages of the research process rarely receive the scrutiny they deserve, even though this is where decisions are made that shape the ethical and scholarly quality of the entire project. How participants are recruited, how confidentiality is protected, and how carefully the methods are planned all test a researcher's judgement and integrity. The rise of generative artificial intelligence does not change this principle, but it does introduce new challenges and force us to reconsider what responsibility means in research.

Research integrity begins before data collection

A research project may meet rigorous methodological standards and still raise serious ethical concerns. A survey of students may create pressure, particularly when it is administered by someone who has influence over their grades or academic standing. An interview about experiences of violence may trigger renewed distress or difficult emotions. Even publicly available collections of social media posts may contain combinations of details that make their authors identifiable. Seemingly neutral survey questions may also inadvertently touch on areas requiring particular protection, from health and financial circumstances to religious beliefs, political opinions, or sexual orientation.

Ethical reflection should therefore not be treated as a procedure completed only at the end of a project. It should accompany the entire research lifecycle, from the initial concept through the collection and archiving of materials to publication. The fourth edition of the [Code of Ethics for Researchers of the Polish Academy of Sciences](#), published in 2024, emphasises that adherence to ethical standards underpins the credibility of science and public trust. The Code addresses not only relationships with participants but also integrity in conducting and documenting research, data management, publication practices, and the ethics of peer review.

This approach is fully consistent with standards across the European Research Area. The revised [European Charter for Researchers](#) places ethics and research integrity at the beginning of the principles addressed to researchers, employers, and funding organisations. A responsible academic environment does more than put rules in writing: it builds a culture of integrity, provides specialist training, and establishes transparent procedures for responding to misconduct. Within this wider system, bodies such as the UITM Research Ethics Committee become important partners in researchers' day-to-day work.

The [European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity](#) developed by ALLEA provides a similarly coherent foundation. Its four principles can be summarised as follows:

- Reliability – ensuring the quality of research through its design, methodology, analysis, and use of resources.
- Honesty – developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting, and communicating research in a transparent, fair, full, and unbiased way.

- Respect – for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and the environment.
- Accountability – for research from idea to publication, for its management and organisation, for training and supervision, and for its wider impacts.

These values demonstrate that academic integrity extends far beyond avoiding plagiarism. It encompasses careful and methodologically sound research design, transparent reporting of limitations, appropriate attribution of authorship, adequate data protection, disclosure of conflicts of interest, and a willingness to correct errors.

Ethical requirements before a project begins

Although no single ethics form is appropriate for every academic discipline, projects involving human participants, personal data, or potentially sensitive materials must address at least four fundamental issues in advance. The first is genuine voluntariness, which requires more than obtaining a signature on a consent form. Participants should understand the purpose and course of the study, any potential inconvenience, how their materials will be used, and the conditions under which they may decline or withdraw. This includes any limitations on deleting data once they have been irreversibly anonymised or incorporated into aggregate analyses. Particular care is needed in relationships of dependency, where a student, employee, or patient may fear that declining to participate could affect their grades, employment, or access to support.

The second issue is data minimisation: researchers should collect only the information genuinely necessary to address their research questions and objectives. The technical ability to obtain data does not in itself justify collecting them. Researchers should determine what information is needed, who will have access to it, how long it will be retained, and how it will be secured. Anonymisation should prevent a person from being identified by means that can reasonably be expected to be used. Simply removing a name may amount only to pseudonymisation if the individual can still be identified from other information.

The third issue is the assessment of potential risk, which is not limited to physical harm. It may include psychological distress, stigmatisation, unauthorised disclosure of information, harm to a participant's employment, or the identification of a distinctive statement within a small community. Researchers should mitigate these risks and establish appropriate procedures for responding to unforeseen difficulties.

The fourth issue is a transparent account of the research process. Research integrity requires researchers to document significant methodological decisions, changes made during the project, analytical procedures, and limitations. This also applies to findings that do not support the original expectations. Selectively omitting inconvenient data or tailoring conclusions without methodological justification breaches the principles of research integrity.

Institutional Support: The Role of the UITM Research Ethics Committee

At the University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów (UITM), researchers receive formal and substantive support from the [Research Ethics Committee](#). The Committee was appointed under Rector's Order No. 78/2025 of 15 September 2025 for a term ending on 31 August 2030. Its role is to review planned projects for compliance with ethical standards.

UITM procedures identify, in particular, categories of research that require a favourable opinion from the Committee before they begin. These include studies involving people whose ability to make decisions or give free and informed consent is limited, including children and people with intellectual disabilities, as well as projects conducted within relationships of dependency, for example, research involving students during classes or employees in the workplace. Review is also required, among other cases, for studies involving deception or conducted without participants' knowledge; studies involving people who are especially vulnerable to psychological harm; active interventions intended to modify human behaviour; research on controversial topics or matters requiring particular sensitivity; lengthy or burdensome studies; and projects involving personal data, especially special categories of personal data. The list is not exhaustive: review may also be appropriate where the context of the study makes participants particularly vulnerable to risk.

A detailed list of requirements and instructions for submitting applications is available on the University website, together with the Committee's Rules of Procedure, the current application template, and an informed consent form. The Committee does not review medical research that constitutes a medical experiment, nor projects for which the law requires an opinion or approval from another competent body. A favourable opinion from the Committee does not release researchers from their obligations under the law, data protection requirements, or the standards of their discipline. Nor does the Committee replace the Data Protection Officer or bodies responsible for investigating research misconduct. Its opinion can, however, help identify and mitigate risks that may be overlooked by those directly involved in a project.

Generative Artificial Intelligence: A Research Tool, but Human Responsibility

Generative AI tools can assist researchers in organising materials, working with analytical code, translating, and editing language. They should not, however, be treated as independent or reliable sources of scholarly knowledge. These systems may generate plausible but false information and inaccurate references, reproduce biases embedded in their training data, and make the provenance of information difficult to establish. Depending on the service and its configuration, submitting content to an external tool may also create risks to confidentiality, data protection, or intellectual property rights.

A recent case involving Virginia Dignum, Professor of Responsible Artificial Intelligence at Umeå University, and her popular science book *The AI Paradox* illustrates the importance of verification. [According to the complainant](#), six references pointed to sources that did not exist, and the concerns were referred to Sweden's National Board for Assessment of Research

Misconduct (NPOF). [Professor Dignum](#) rejected the allegation of fabrication, stating that all the sources existed and that the problems concerned errors in their bibliographic details. She nevertheless acknowledged that some of the errors arose when AI was used to assist in converting references into BibTeX format and were not identified before publication. As the matter remains under review by NPOF, no conclusion can yet be drawn about the nature of the errors or the researcher's responsibility. Whatever the eventual outcome, the case illustrates a broader principle: authors remain responsible for verifying facts and references even when they use tools that automate editing or reference conversion.

This principle is reflected in the third edition of the European Commission's [Living Guidelines on the Responsible Use of Generative AI in Research](#), published in May 2026. The document states that researchers remain responsible for the content and outcomes of their work and must critically verify results produced with the assistance of AI. Substantial uses of AI should be disclosed in accordance with disciplinary standards and publishers' policies. The guidelines advise researchers not to upload unpublished or protected materials to external systems unless there are credible assurances regarding their subsequent use and all requirements relating to confidentiality, data protection, and intellectual property have been met. They also highlight the risks of plagiarism, copyright infringement, hallucinations, and bias. Researchers should refrain from substantially using generative AI in activities that affect other researchers or institutions, such as peer review and the assessment of grant proposals, because of the risks of breaching confidentiality and producing unfair evaluations.

Poland's [National Science Centre \(NCN\)](#) takes a similar position. It permits AI tools to be used in a supporting role when preparing parts of a grant proposal, such as abstracts, translations, illustrations, and language editing, while leaving researchers fully responsible for checking the content and complying with the principles of research integrity, ethics, and copyright. Reviewers, however, may not use AI tools to prepare assessments or submit application materials to them. This follows from their duty of confidentiality and the requirement that evaluations be the product of their own independent work.

Particular caution is required when uploading interview transcripts, forms containing personal data, non-anonymised participant statements, or confidential medical records to external tools. The level of security, processing arrangements, and data retention policies depend on the service, its configuration, its contractual terms, and its privacy policy. Researchers should therefore not assume that submitted content is automatically protected or excluded from subsequent reuse. Removing a person's name may not be sufficient if their job, life experience, or a combination of details makes them identifiable. Before using AI to process research materials, researchers should establish what information will be submitted, who will process it, where and under what conditions it will be processed, whether it may be reused, and the legal basis for processing any personal data. They should also determine what information must be provided to participants and whether consent is the appropriate legal basis in the particular case. If adequate protection cannot be ensured, the materials should not be submitted to an external service.

The Ethics Committee as a Partner in Responsible Research

An ethics committee should not be seen solely as an administrative hurdle before a project can begin. Its role is to provide an independent perspective on the proposed research, taking account of participants, the level of risk, and relevant scholarly standards. A well-prepared ethics application helps researchers organise their ideas, define recruitment procedures, refine the information provided to participants, and plan how research materials will be secured.

A favourable opinion does not transfer responsibility from the researcher to the Committee. If the methodology, participant group, scope of the information collected, or channels through which data circulate change substantially, the ethics assessment may need to be updated in accordance with the relevant committee's procedures. Research integrity is not a one-off formality but an ongoing practice requiring attention throughout the project lifecycle.

Modern research enjoys public trust not because it is free from risk or human error, but because it has mechanisms to prevent mistakes, identify them promptly, and correct them transparently. These principles matter even more in an age of widely available generative AI. Reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability become especially significant when the boundary between technological assistance and the uncritical replacement of human judgement can be remarkably thin.

Useful Sources and Documents

- [European Charter for Researchers](#)
- [Code of Ethics for Researchers of the Polish Academy of Sciences \(2024 edition\)](#)
- [ALLEA European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity \(2023 revised edition\)](#)
- [European Commission Living Guidelines on the Responsible Use of Generative AI in Research \(2026 update\)](#)
- [NCN Position on Generative AI](#)
- [UITM Research Ethics Committee](#)
- [Submitting an Application to the WSIiZ Committee](#)
- [UITM Committee Documents](#)
- [UITM Report on Artificial Intelligence in the Work of University Teachers](#)
- [PAP Report on the Proceedings Concerning Professor Virginia Dignum's Book](#)