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1. Introduction

The process of conducting a detailed study to uncover new insights and expand the scope of human knowledge can be described as research. The Malta College of Arts, Science, and Technology (MCAST) acknowledges the essential role of high-quality research in enhancing education and is dedicated to engaging in research responsibly with all researchers and students.

The concept of research integrity involves adhering to the highest standards of professionalism and rigour throughout the research process, ensuring the accuracy and integrity of research findings in publications and elsewhere. MCAST is committed to maintaining these standards among its institutes, staff, and students whilst complying with prevailing legislation. To support this commitment, a Code has been established to guide researchers towards best practices and underline the support mechanisms in place to uphold the highest levels of research integrity.

Aligned with national guidance and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, MCAST's dedication is evident in its Code of Good Research Practice. This Code mirrors the commitments of the national regulations and aligns with the core principles and practices advocated by the EU Code of Conduct. It also incorporates principles from the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) Guidelines for ethical practice and research integrity, ensuring good ethical research practices within Malta's Further and Higher Education sectors.

The Code of Good Research Practice is a vital document for the entire MCAST research community, including employees and students. It acts as a cornerstone in upholding a respectful, ethical, and professional research environment and outlines the expectations and standards for conduct within the College's research community, highlighting the principles of integrity, responsibility, and respect for others and hence ensuring that MCAST remains a place of learning, innovation, and collaboration, committed to excellence and inclusivity across all research and academic endeavours.

All individuals engaged in research at MCAST, whether as employees or students, and regardless of their funding sources or research area, are expected to uphold these principles. This includes adhering to the standards of integrity and good practice pertinent to their specific field of work. To support this commitment, the document offers comprehensive guidelines on research best practices. Additionally, it addresses the ethical considerations relevant to research involving humans, personal data and special categories of personal data, and animals. This ensures that all research activities conducted at or on behalf of MCAST meet the highest ethical standards.

2. Purpose

This document aims to outline principles and obligations for maintaining excellence in research, offering guidance on proper research conduct, work quality, and the ethical behaviour expected of everyone involved in MCAST's research activities. It aligns with MCAST's mission and values, ensuring that all research conducted under its auspices meets the highest standards of integrity and professionalism.

3. Scope

This policy, with its procedures, addresses the need to assist those who submit research requests at MCAST, whether they are College members (staff or students) or non-MCAST researchers who may wish to conduct their research at MCAST.

Additionally, it should be noted that this Code doesn't cover all regulations in detail. Instead, it provides a framework designed to guide members of the community, introducing the main relevant issues and topics, and, where useful or necessary, referring to further reading. By clarifying expected conduct

and promoting effective practices, this code contributes to an atmosphere of openness and integrity. This Code is a dynamic document that will be regularly updated to reflect evolving standards and practices. The most current version will be available on the College's intranet.

4. Core Principles

MCAST is committed to fostering a culture of research integrity and excellence, guided by the four fundamental principles outlined in the *'European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity'* (ALLEA, 2023). These principles are applicable across all scientific and scholarly fields, highlighting the universal significance of integrity in the pursuit of knowledge. They address the practical, ethical, and intellectual challenges inherent in research and play a crucial role in maintaining the research system's integrity and trustworthiness. By adhering to these principles, the College ensures that its research community conducts its work ethically, responsibly, and to the highest standards of integrity. The core principles, as defined by ALLEA (2023), are:

- **Reliability:** This principle emphasises the importance of *"ensuring the quality of research across all stages—design, methodology, analysis, and use of resources."* It advocates for research to be conducted carefully and meticulously to enhance its robustness, reliability, and quality.
- **Honesty:** Honesty in research involves *"developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting, and communicating research in a transparent, fair, full, and unbiased"* manner. This principle is vital for fostering an open and honest research environment that values truth and integrity over results that may be influenced by personal or external biases. Plagiarism, falsification, fabrication, or misrepresentation of data is strictly prohibited.
- **Respect:** This principle, aligned with the 'Do No Harm' philosophy, encompasses a wide range of considerations. It emphasizes *"respect for colleagues, research participants, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and the environment."* This principle is crucial in research, ensuring that the rights, dignity, and autonomy of all stakeholders are respected, and that research practices do not cause harm to individuals, communities, or the natural world.
- **Accountability:** Accountability in research entails responsibility for the entire research process, *"from the initial idea to its publication"*. This includes *"the management and organisation of research, training, supervision, and mentoring, and the consideration of the wider societal impacts."* Researchers are expected to be accountable for their actions and decisions, ensuring that their work contributes positively to the advancement of knowledge and society.

5. Good Research Practices

It is essential to embody each of the four principles mentioned above to ensure that all research conducted at MCAST meets the highest ethical standards. The following guidelines are tailored to implement these principles within MCAST's specific context, in order to guarantee that the MCAST research community can operate ethically, responsibly, and with integrity.

5.1 General considerations:

- Ensure adherence to all applicable legal, regulatory, and ethical frameworks both in Malta and in any jurisdictions where the research activities are undertaken or where the participants are based. This adherence should be consistent across the specific field of study, as well as in alignment with the requirements of funding entities and collaborative partner organisations.
- Consider potential ethical challenges related to the goals, methodologies, and setting of the research.
- When research involves any form of deception, a full explanation must be provided detailing why a covert or deceptive approach is necessary, why no acceptable alternative exists, and the scientific justification for using deception.

- Proactively evaluate the potential adverse impacts and risks of the research on individuals, communities, and broader society.
- Consistently monitor for any developments that may affect the ethical considerations of the research.
- Disclose any real or potential conflicts of interest (financial, personal, academic). Ensure these conflicts do not compromise integrity or objectivity.
- Adherence to copyright, ownership of data, patents, and licensing agreements. Agreements should be in place if collaborating with third parties or external supervisors.

5.2 Research involving human participants:

- Ensure the implementation of informed consent processes for research participants, in full compliance with data protection requirements.
- Participation must be entirely voluntary.
- Ensure the treatment of research participants with respect and dignity, safeguarding them from significant physical or psychological harm or stress stemming from the research activities.
- For research involving new medical devices or innovative processes with human participation, strict adherence to **Regulation (EU) No 536/2014 on clinical trials on medical products for human use** is mandatory. Researchers must ensure that all protocols, safety measures, and reporting requirements specified by this Regulation are fully implemented. In regards to Clinical Medical/Health-Related Research, observance of specific laws and regulations is a necessity (e.g. Clinical Trials Regulation, Medical Device Regulations, Health Ethics Committee oversight, etc.)

5.3 Personal data

If **personal data** is collected as part of participation **AND/OR** personal data is processed for research methods (e.g. contacting a participant for an interview, even if no personal data is collected during the interview), dissemination (e.g., using participants' personal details to send them a questionnaire), **AND/OR** if there's a possibility of participant identification (e.g., due to the specific group of participants or Internet Protocol (IP) tracking), researchers must adhere to the six principles of data processing outlined in the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679) ('GDPR'), which has been incorporated into Maltese law by the Data Protection Act (Chapter 586 of the Laws of Malta) ('the Act'). The processing of personal data of natural persons must be:

(i) Conducted fairly, lawfully, and in a transparent manner;
(ii) Collected for specific, explicit, and legitimate purposes and not further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes (data minimisation);
(iii) Adequate, relevant, and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed;
(iv) Accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date;
(v) Kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed (storage limitation);
(vi) Processed in a manner that ensures appropriate security of the personal data.

In addition, when conducting **surveys, interviews or focus groups** where personal information is gathered and stored, researchers must also pay attention to:

- privacy,
- data protection,

- data management (developing a Data Management Plan (DMP) for the research project is considered good practice, and for some externally funded research, this may be mandatory),
- the health and safety of participants.

Data Handling

In addition to the above, ensure secure data storage and transmission. Use encryption / secure systems where personal or sensitive data is involved. Data should be retained only as long as necessary; disposed of or archived securely when no longer needed.

Where possible, anonymize data. If this is not possible, use pseudonymization or other techniques to protect identity.

5.4 Special categories of personal data

5.4.1 Researchers processing genetic, biometric, or health-related data for statistical or research purposes in the public interest must obtain data protection clearance from the MCAST Data Protection Office **(DPO),** in accordance with **CAP. 586, Article 7**.

5.4.2 All other special categories of personal data listed below must be handled in compliance with the general principles of CAP 586, but **do not** require prior DPO clearance:

(i) Data related to the management of social care services, including quality control, information management, and national supervision.
(ii) Data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership.
(iii) Data concerning an individual's sex life or sexual orientation.

5.5 Participants' informed consent and other approvals for research participation

5.5.1 Researchers must secure and clearly document participants' informed consent beforehand.

5.5.2 Participants should be provided with a specific informed consent form along with detailed information sheets.

5.5.3 Consent must be obtained in writing from participants, where applicable. In addition to the participant, the form shall be signed by the Researcher and, where applicable, by the Supervisor. Researchers must ensure that each participant, or their legally authorised representative, who signs the written consent form receives a copy of it. Researchers should provide sufficient time for the participant or their representative to read the form before signing. These consent forms should be stored securely, preferably under lock and key, and kept separate from the collected data.

5.5.4 For participants under the age of 16 years, researchers must obtain advance consent from the child's parent or legal guardian for participation in research. For research that is not anonymous — for example, participation in forums, focus groups, or interviews conducted in an educational (non-online) context — a student aged 16 and over may provide their own consent to participate without parental/guardian consent, provided that the research is for educational purposes and questions do not involve special categories of data ("sensitive data"). If sensitive data are to be collected, parental or legal guardian consent is required for all participants under the age of 18.

5.5.5 All participants must be given a specific **informed consent form** and detailed **information sheets** that:

- are written in a language and in terms they can fully understand;
- clearly describe the objectives, methods, and potential outcomes of the research activity, state the nature of the participation and any benefits;
- who will conduct the research, how any personal information will be used and who will have access to the data, and how long the data collected will be kept for;
- state the expected duration of participants' involvement;
- clearly inform participants about any potential risks or discomforts that could result from their involvement. The consent form should detail these risks or discomforts, along with information on how participants can access psychological and emotional support services. If no risks are anticipated, this should also be clearly indicated.
- for research involving more than minimal risk, contain an explanation as to whether there are any treatments or services if injury occurs and, if so, what they consist of, or where further information may be obtained.
- explicitly state that participation is voluntary, and participants have the right to ask questions, refuse to participate, and withdraw their participation, samples or data at any time without facing any adverse consequences. In addition, clearly explain the withdrawal mechanism and how this right will be communicated should participants choose to exercise it.
- specify the handling of data collected from participants who decide to withdraw from the study;
- detail the measures taken to ensure data protection, confidentiality, and privacy (e.g. one of the best ways how to avoid/limit data protection issues for research is to use anonymised or pseudonymised data). Details on the methods of personal data storage (specifying how and where it is stored), the duration of data retention and the justification for retaining data for that particular period, and the identification of individuals authorized to access the data should also be included;
- If audio or visual recordings are to be utilised, this must be clearly stated in the information sheet, detailing how the recordings will be securely stored (e.g. in a password-protected system) and the timing of their transcription (including data protection measures, such as the use of pseudonyms). In the Consent Form, an additional section should be included where the participant acknowledges and consents to the processing and retention of his/her personal data as described in the information sheet.
- state how biological samples and data will be collected and protected during the research, and whether they will be destroyed or reused afterwards. It is necessary to Obtain appropriate consent for collection, storage, transfer, and use and ensure biosecurity, safety, ethical handling, and compliance with international standards and local laws.
- state what procedures will be implemented in the event of unexpected or incidental findings (in particular, how and when participants will be informed about such finding);
- include a reference for inquiries related to the research, specifying the name and contact details of the researcher and, if applicable, the supervisor, as well as information on research subjects' rights;
- provide information about what will happen to the results of the research;
- Consideration should be given to any dual roles arising from the research and their potential impact on students and colleagues; such issues must be addressed accordingly.

5.5.6 If the afore-mentioned elements are included in the information sheet but not in the consent form, they must be incorporated into the consent form by reference. Additionally, participants must be provided with copies of all pertinent documents.

5.5.7 Research conducted in institutions (e.g., schools, correctional facilities, hospitals) requires prior permission from the appropriate authority.

5.5.8 When recruiting minors from independent schools, permission from the head of school is required, whereas for church and state schools, approval from the relevant central authorities is necessary.

5.6 Additional ethical considerations

5.6.1 *Disclosure:* Researchers must inform participants that if, during the study, they uncover unethical behavior or identify evidence of potential serious harm to themselves or others, confidentiality may need to be breached, and the relevant authorities notified. It is essential that researchers explain the reasons and procedures for any disclosure to the participants or their legal guardians/responsible parties and maintain written records of these decisions.

5.6.2 *Debriefing:* Participants should be debriefed at the conclusion of the research. If debriefing is not conducted, the rationale for its omission and details of the intended debriefing process must be documented and submitted with the research application.

5.6.3 *Giving advice:* Researchers should refrain from assuming an authoritative role when offering advice. In all instances, participants must be directed to appropriately qualified professionals for guidance.

5.6.4 *Research in public places:* When conducting research in public spaces, researchers must adhere to legal standards regarding obscenity and public decency while also considering relevant religious and cultural sensitivities.

5.7 Vulnerable participants

5.7.1 Special care must be taken when research involves vulnerable groups, such as minors, patients, discriminated individuals, minorities, those unable to consent, immigrant or minority communities, and others.

5.7.2 In cases where research involves minors or individuals unable to make decisions for themselves, it is imperative for researchers to maintain an active relationship with the participants' legal guardians or carers and seek their consent, while also allowing them to oversee the research activities. Informed consent for minors must be obtained from the child's legally authorised representative (i.e., parents or guardian). Additionally, minors over 12 years should sign an individual assent form for participation.

5.7.3 Researchers must obtain **data protection approval** from the **DPO** when research targets the processing of special categories of personal data (Article 9 GDPR).

5.7.4 When research involves vulnerable young people or adults with physical or mental disabilities, additional safeguards must be implemented. Researchers should explore alternative methods to ensure the best possible authentic response.

5.7.5 For research including participants with mental disabilities, consideration must be given to **the Mental Health Act (CAP. 525)**, specifically to Article 31 (3) and Article 35 (1-4).

5.8 Research involving animals

At MCAST and within the European Union (as per Article 13 of the Treaty on the Function of the European Union) ('TFEU'), animal welfare is a fundamental value. Animals, being sentient beings with intrinsic value, must be treated with respect.

5.8.1 When involving animals in research, researchers must justify the necessity of using animals.

5.8.2 Research activities at MCAST are required to adhere to the highest ethical standards and:

- comply with applicable international, EU, and national laws, in particular with the EU Directive 2010/63 on the use of animals for scientific purposes. The Directive is aimed at enhancing the welfare of animals used in scientific procedures. This directive takes into consideration new scientific insights into factors affecting animal welfare and the abilities of animals to experience and exhibit pain, suffering, distress, and lasting harm. It advocates for minimising animal testing for scientific purposes by establishing EU-wide animal welfare standards, which include authorizations, restrictions on using certain types of animals, standards for procedures, minimum personnel requirements, record-keeping and traceability, and care and accommodation standards.
- This mandates the exploration of alternative methods to animal use wherever possible and the implementation of the **'three Rs'** principles: **replacement** (finding alternative methods), **reduction** (using the minimum number of animals necessary), and **refinement** (minimising distress and enhancing welfare).
- Researchers must consult with the Animal Welfare Body in Malta to ensure that the research complies with local regulations and does not violate the Animal Welfare Act (Chapter 439 of the Laws of Malta).

5.9 Social responsibility and sustainability in Good Research Practice

5.9.1 Prioritise social responsibility and sustainability:

(i) Conduct a thorough assessment to identify if the research outcomes could adversely affect societal interests, including health, safety, well-being, opportunities, rights, or contributing to inequality and discrimination. Implement measures to mitigate identified risks and involve relevant stakeholders in the mitigation process as appropriate.

(ii) Review whether research could lead to non-eco-friendly products, technologies, or applications that negatively impact the environment, animals, and plants. Justify the continuation of such research and aim to reduce environmental damage while promoting sustainable practices.

(iii) Ensure that research practices respect biodiversity and avoid causing irreversible harm to the environment or disrupting ecological balance. Recognise the importance of preserving the natural world for current and future generations.

(iv) Acknowledge that the ultimate goal of research is to benefit society. Consider public concerns about potential threats posed by research seriously, recognising that some research practices may need to be reconsidered or even discontinued if they pose significant risks.

(v) In research conducted fully or partially in lower- and lower-middle-income countries or regions, carefully examine any particular risks to researchers and participants. Implement fair benefit-sharing measures and ensure that ethical review processes are harmonised between MCAST and local authorities, respecting local cultures and norms.

5.10 Research Security and Risk Appraisal

5.10.1 Emerging technologies

Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, drones, quantum computing, and blockchain, offer both enhanced capabilities and new vulnerabilities. Researchers should ensure they are up to date with the latest national and European legislation, policies and guidelines before engaging in research related to such technologies (irrespective of whether the technology is being developed, used, or otherwise) to ensure compliance, ethical integrity, and responsible use. Examples of such legislation include European AI ACT, UNESCO Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, OECD AI Principles.

When using emerging technologies like artificial intelligence or automated decision-making, ensure transparency, fairness, and accountability. Assess risks of bias, misuse, or privacy infringement.

5.10.2 Dual-use technologies

Dual-use technologies are those that can serve both civilian and military or security purposes. They include a wide range of fields such as artificial intelligence, advanced materials, nanotechnology, cybersecurity tools, satellite technologies, biotechnologies, quantum, aerospace and drones, and more. The European Commission has been working to strengthen support for research and development in this area Dual-use technologies. While these technologies have their advantages, at the same time, dual-use research comes with particular challenges. These include the risks of misuse, the need to comply with export controls, and the ethical concerns that arise when technologies may be adapted for military purposes. Therefore, when conducting research using technologies that may have dual use, researchers must anticipate risks, put safeguards in place, be transparent about dual-use potential and seem formal approval from the Institute Director and relevant MCAST bodies as guided by the Institute's Management, immediately.

5.10.3 International Research and Innovation Collaboration

In international research and innovation collaboration, it is essential to consider potential risks that may impact research integrity, security, and long-term sustainability. The European Commission highlights risk appraisal as a key element in safeguarding research. Risk appraisal involves assessing mainly four dimensions:

(i) Organisational profile – strengths, vulnerabilities, and financial dependencies of the institution.
(ii) Research domain – whether the field involves sensitive, dual-use, or ethically complex technologies.
(iii) Country profile – political, legal, and academic conditions of the partner's country, including sanctions or civil-military concerns.
(iv) Partner organisation profile – governance, affiliations, funding sources, reputation, and researchers' backgrounds.

Risk appraisal should be part of decision-making before entering international partnerships and may be required by funders at national or EU level. It is not intended to block cooperation, but to identify and manage risks responsibly.

Researchers should use structured appraisal tools (e.g. intake forms with guided questions), document uncertainties, and, where needed, develop a risk management plan with mitigation

strategies. If risks cannot be adequately mitigated, the collaboration may need to be reconsidered or declined. Researchers should also follow updated guidance provided at a national and European level, such as *Strategic Autonomy and European Economic and Research Security - European Commission*

6. Publication and dissemination

As part of the Code of Good Research Practice, MCAST emphasises the importance of the FAIR principles—**Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reusability**—in the publication and dissemination of research findings. MCAST encourages researchers to share the results of research responsibly, being mindful of the potential impact such dissemination may have beyond the academic community. Researchers must also ensure that all publications, including those on the Internet, do not directly or indirectly compromise the confidentiality or anonymity agreed upon.

7. Related documentation

This Code should be read alongside all other relevant existing policies and procedures of MCAST, as compiled in the RESEARCH ETHICS POLICY AND PROCEDURE and STUDENT CONDUCT REGULATIONS.

Researchers should also be aware of the National Regulations on Ethics and Research in Malta, the Data Protection Act (Chapter 586 of the Laws of Malta), the MFHEA's Guidelines for ethical practice and research integrity, the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679), Strategic Autonomy and European Economic and Research Security - European Commission and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, and other respective documentation. It should be noted that the list of the above rules and regulations is not exhaustive and is being provided for guidance purposes only. Compliance with any national directives, conventions (e.g. Council of Europe, UNESCO, UN conventions, EU Regulations) is also to be respected. Researchers are to conform not only to these norms but also to all other applicable rules and regulations that may be in force at the time. Where multiple jurisdictions are involved, compliance with all relevant jurisdictions is required.