

AFL Research Governance Framework

2023 - 2025



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Background

The AFL Research Governance Framework (Framework) outlines a set of guiding principles to ensure research within the AFL is conducted appropriately at all times.¹

Research governance refers to the principles, requirements, and standards of research to protect participants, support the safety and quality of research outcomes, ensure privacy and confidentiality, along with other legal, risk, and regulatory matters². As outlined by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), research must be appropriately governed at all stages.

Human Research Ethics Committees (such as those available through Universities and through private organisations) are a uniformly regulated mechanism through which National standards on the safe and ethical conduct of research are upheld. However, research governance is also widely accepted as a responsibility of the organisation where the research is being conducted. Research governance is therefore an integral part of an organisations corporate governance.

¹ The Framework's guiding principles are drawn from National Standards on the safe and ethical conduct of research. Though research conducted by stakeholders other than the AFL and without the AFL as a collaborator may sit outside the remit of this Framework, it is strongly advised that all research conducted about the AFL ecosystem is governed by the principles upheld in the Framework.

² NHMRC Research Governance Handbook: Guidance for the national approach to single ethical review December 2011.

³ NHMRC Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders

Purpose

The ultimate purpose of the Framework is to ensure that research within the AFL is conducted within the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct for Research, Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct of Human Research, and the NHMRC Guidelines for Research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

The Framework draws upon existing publications that support research governance² and has been established to ensure:

- Responsibilities and accountabilities for individuals and groups are understood, enacted and maintained;
- Research is promoted as a valued activity across the AFL;

- Research governance activities are monitored and assessed and the Framework is modified accordingly;
- The Framework is accessible to all relevant parties and understood;
- The rights and reputations of researchers and research participants are respected and conflicts of interest are declared and appropriately managed; and
- The outcomes of research are disseminated and communicated responsibly.



Figure 1: Key Principles²

Key principles

To meet our aims, and underpinning the AFL Research Governance Framework the AFL supports the following key principles.

- **Safety:** Research is conducted with the safety and wellbeing of individuals as the primary requirement.
- **Competence:** Individuals involved in the research are qualified in terms of training, experience and/or education, or supervised by an appropriately qualified individual.
- **Ethical:** All research is ethical and compliant with any ethics review required of that research. This does not necessarily mean that all projects require ethics approval (see [here](#) for guidelines on when ethics review is required), but it is expected that all research adheres to ethical practice.
- **Integrity, Quality and Transparency:** Research and associated processes are conducted in a way that ensures integrity, quality, and transparency.
- **Legality:** Those conducting or supporting research are familiar with, and adhere to, relevant legislation and guidance in respect of managing and conducting the research.
- **Reporting and monitoring:** Where appropriate, information about the design, progress and findings of the research will be made available, in a suitable format and timely manner.
- **Respect for privacy:** All research and associated data are stored appropriately. Individual research participants remains confidential. This includes project outlines, signed consent forms, or any other supporting documentation that feeds into the research work.
- **Compliance:** Non-compliance with these principles may include appropriate and proportionate sanctions.

The components

The components of the Framework represent the activities outlined below and draw directly upon the [Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Research Governance Handbook](#). These components and associated activities are applied in the context of the lifespan of a project from project development, through to project closure. The key responsibilities as they relate to the components of the AFL Research Governance Framework are detailed in the following section.

PROJECT DESIGN

The project design stage will include an initial assessment of the project to assess the alignment of the project to the AFL's organisational priorities and adherence to the above key principles for safe and ethical research.

Specifically;

- There is an assessment of whether the AFL has appropriate facilities, infrastructure, and skills to successfully engage in the project. For research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, there is specific consideration as to whether relevant stakeholders are consulted with and engaged in the project as per Ethical Guidelines³ (i.e., research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities is initiated and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples).

- Conflict of interest and funding sources are discussed and managed.
- The AFL Research Board (as detailed below) is engaged by the relevant AFL Department Head (or appropriate delegate) to support the above processes.
- It is noted that whilst the AFL Research Board will support these processes, the assessment of a project's alignment to AFL and/or Department priorities, and the development of the specific operational processes of a project (e.g., recruitment and data collection, ethics applications) remains the responsibility of Department Heads and their teams.

PROJECT AUTHORISATION

The project authorisation stage is the endorsement and sign off phase for a project.

Specifically;

- This involves sign-off of the project's financials, legal obligations, intellectual property arrangements by the appropriate AFL delegate.
- An external Human Research Ethics Committee would be engaged, either for relevant approvals, or exemption from ethical review as appropriate, by the appropriate AFL delegate.

- As detailed below, the organisational responsibilities for the above process remain with relevant AFL Departments (e.g., Legal, Risk, Procurement) however the AFL Research Board provides general guidance on research governance as it relates to the specific project.
- The AFL Research Board will assess that all research governance activities have been satisfactorily completed.

PROJECT DELIVERY

The project delivery stage will involve the regular monitoring of the project through the relevant AFL Department Head and operations of the AFL Research Board.

Specifically;

- This includes documenting any changes to the project (ethics amendments), progress reports, and overall information sharing as required.
- The above processes will foster a culture of good research practice.
- A self-audit on research will be conducted by the AFL Research Board through which compliance will be evaluated, and documentation and reporting will be ensured.

- Throughout the project delivery, the appropriate pre-existing organisational complaints and allegations of misconduct processes will be maintained, alongside the external processes upheld by HREC.

PROJECT CLOSURE

The project closure stage will involve ensuring the requirements in relation to reporting, data storage, dissemination of findings, and provision of outcomes to participants (if appropriate) are enacted.

Specifically;

- Document storage processes will be achieved through an end-of-project checklist.
- This stage also involves closing out financial and other agreement or legal responsibilities, as per normal organisational processes.

The figure below, adopted from the [Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Research Governance Handbook](#) illustrates the AFL Research Governance Framework components in the context of the life-cycle of the project.

Overview

FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

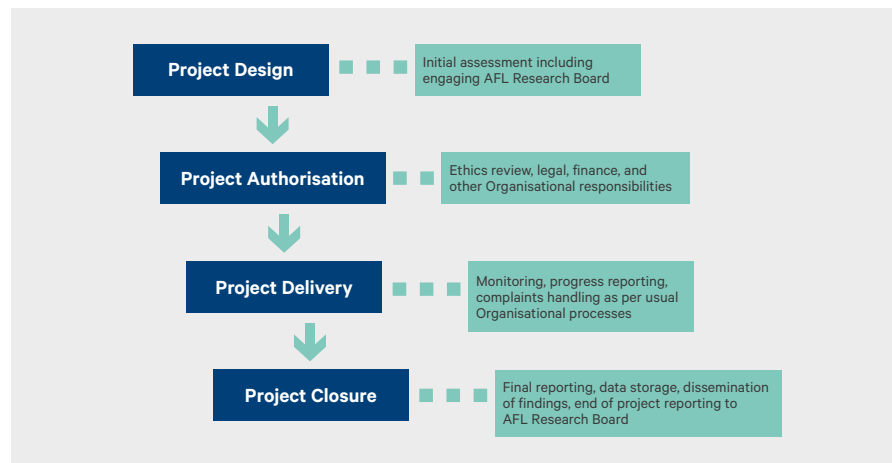


Figure 2:
Framework Overview as directly informed by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Research Governance Handbook.

KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

The following key responsibilities are outlined that support the AFL Research Governance Framework.

AFL RESEARCH BOARD

The AFL Research Board is responsible for ensuring the above principles are upheld, and to provide expert advice and guidance on research activities throughout the Organisation, as they relate to ethics and other research governance issues.

The AFL Research Board will;

- Monitor and assess research activities throughout the AFL, including University/academic partnerships, research consultancy projects, and in-house quality assurance and evaluation activities;
- Provide expert advice on how the findings of research will be communicated responsibly;
- Provide a mandated pre-review process for AFL departments prior to project commencement;

- Ensure appropriate processes are in place for information recording, handling and storage;
- Provide consultations and expert advice and guidance on research activities as they relate to the ethical conduct of research;
- Provide expert advice on the integrity, quality and transparency of research design and management including guidance on declaration and management of conflict of interest as they relate to research activities;
- Build capacity across the AFL to engage in ethical and safe research practices;
- To review and revise the AFL Research Governance Framework and Board activities to ensure continuous improvement in research governance across the AFL.
- Ensure the financial, legal and other organisational matters are appropriately handled by relevant pre-existing organisational processes (i.e., Legal, Risk, Procurement);
- Hold responsibility for final sign-off on the project (following engagement and support from the AFL Research Board);
- Maintain responsibility for the on-going project operations, including sharing information and liaising with the AFL Research Board as requested/required;
- Provide progress reports and final reports and other documentation are shared with the AFL Research Board to comply with the above principles.

AFL DEPARTMENT HEADS

The relevant AFL Department Head will remain responsible for the initial project development, engagement of consultants or partners, endorsement, and overall appropriateness of project in terms of AFL organisational priorities.

The relevant Department Head (or appropriate delegate) will;

- Engage the AFL Research Board in the project design phase and seek guidance from the Board as required in regard to research governance activities;

TYPES OF PROJECTS

Research activities operate across many levels and forms throughout the AFL, thus it is important to clarify the projects to which this Framework applies.

The following projects would be expected to meet pre-review criteria to which the AFL Research Governance Framework would apply.

- Traditional research projects that involve University, Government, consultants or other academic partners;
- Projects that involve vulnerable groups including young people under the age of 18 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and people in unequal relationships with the Investigator (e.g., employer/employee);

- Projects that cover sensitive issues including cultural, psychological, or other personal information, or projects in which such issues may emerge;
- Projects which use methods in which individuals might be identified such as interviews, focus groups, or audio or visual recordings.

The AFL Research Board should be consulted for clarification in regard to individual projects.

The Process

PROCESS FOR ENGAGING THE AFL RESEARCH BOARD

As the major facilitator to research governance across the AFL, the AFL Research Board pre-review process, as outlined below, should be engaged during the Project Design phase as above. Specifically, this would be expected after relevant Department Head approval has been secured to engage in the Project Design (i.e., after it has been established that the project aligns with relevant Department priorities and the project is expected to progress to the authorisation stage).

A summary of the process for engaging the AFL Research Board and the potential outcomes is provided below.

The Process

AFL PRE-REVIEW PROCESS AND POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

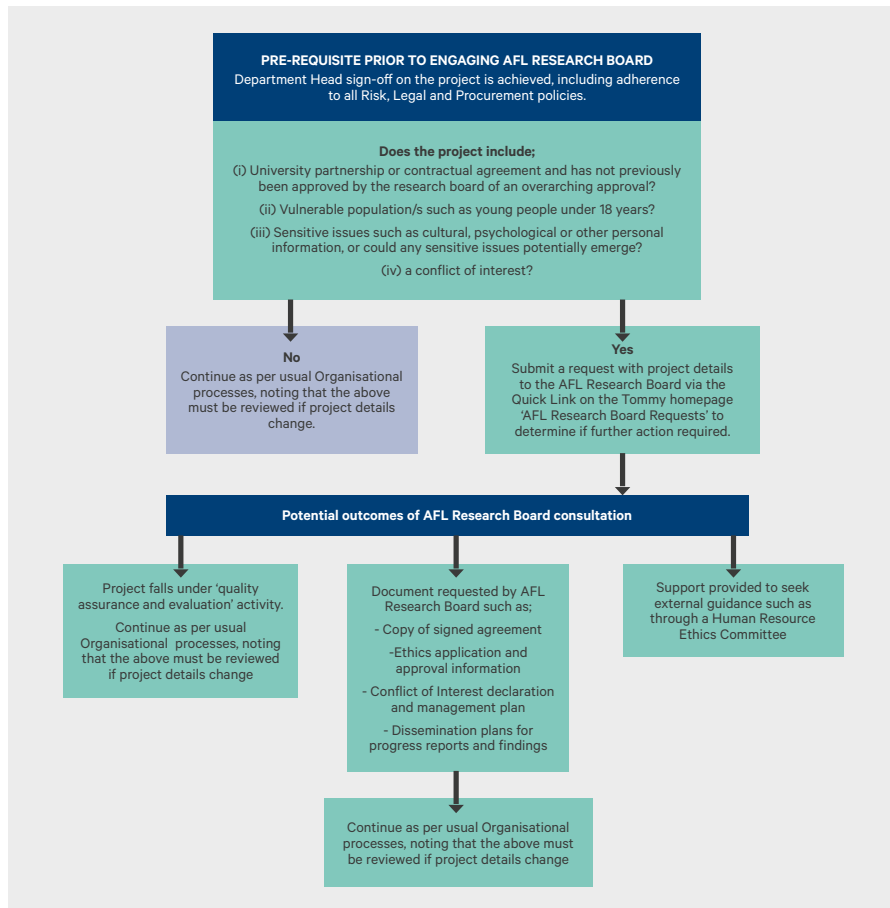


Figure 3:
AFL Pre-review Process
and Potential Outcomes

ASSOCIATED DOCUMENTATION

The following documents accompanying this Framework

- AFL Research Board Terms of Reference
- AFL Research Board Pre-review Checklist
- AFL Conflict of Interest declaration and management form

Summary

The AFL Research Governance Framework will guide the responsible and safe conduct of research throughout the Organisation. This Framework will be reviewed and revised as appropriate.

