

Animal Experimentation Ethics Committee (AEEC) FAQ

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1. What exactly does the Committee assess?

The Australian National University's (ANU) Animal Experimentation Ethics Committee (AEEC) approves, monitors and regulates the use of animals in research and teaching carried out at ANU.

The Committee assesses written protocols prepared by responsible Principal Investigators (see Point 15), to ensure that all research involving animals is conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) [Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes 8th Edition](#) (henceforth "The Code") and the [ACT Animal Welfare Act 1992](#).

The Code states that the Committee "must base its decisions on the information it receives from the applicant in the documentation and in any direct discussions with the applicant, and may use information in addition to that obtained from the applicant" (see Points 11, 14, 16-18).

2. How is the Committee structured?

The membership of the Committee is comprised of volunteers. The Code sets out mandatory membership. The members fall into four categories.

- Category A—a person with qualifications in veterinary science that are recognised for registration as a veterinary surgeon in Australia, and with experience relevant to the institution’s activities or the ability to acquire relevant knowledge.
- Category B—a suitably qualified person with substantial and recent experience in the use of animals for scientific purposes relevant to the institution and the business of the AEC. This must include possession of a higher degree in research or equivalent experience.
- Category C—a person with demonstrable commitment to, and established experience in, furthering the welfare of animals, who is not employed by or otherwise associated with the institution, and who is not currently involved in the care and use of animals for scientific purposes. Veterinarians with specific animal welfare interest and experience may meet the requirements of this category. While not representing an animal welfare organisation, the person should, where possible, be selected on the basis of active membership of, and endorsement by, such an organisation.
- Category D—a person not employed by or otherwise associated with the institution and who has never been involved in the use of animals in scientific or teaching activities, either in their employment or beyond their undergraduate education. Category D members should be viewed by the wider community as bringing a completely independent view to the AEEC, and must not fit the requirements of any other category.

Institutions should consider appointing a chairperson who is independent of the care and use of animals for scientific purposes. The ANU has appointed an independent chair person. Institutions should appoint to the AEEC a person responsible for the routine care of animals within the institution. Since 2004, the AEEC has always appointed two animal care technicians as full voting members. Institutions may appoint additional members with skills and background of value to the AEEC. The AEEC has appointed a number of non-voting advisors.

The membership must comply with The Code and with the animal welfare regulations of each of the Australian State. Members are appointed by the DVC-R.

3. How many members does the Committee have?

The Committee has 14 members and 2 advisors. In accordance with the Code, Categories C and D must comprise at least one third of the voting membership. The ANU appoints more than one mandatory member to each category to support the quorum required at meetings for the Committee to be able to make decisions. Without multiple members in each category researchers would have to wait longer to have their application reviewed.

4. Why is the Committee the size it is?

As the Committee comprises volunteers and there is a heavy workload, it is essential that the Committee can be quorate when it meets in order to expedite the progress of proposal review.

5. Who chairs the Committee?

The Chair should be independent of those involved in the care and use of animals. The ANU Committee is chaired by a senior researcher in the School of Philosophy. The Chair's field of expertise includes applied ethics. The Chair is appointed by the DVC(R&I).

6. How often does the Committee meet?

The Committee meets 11 times a year (every month excluding December) but also undertakes some straightforward activities (as permitted by the Code) out of session. Sometimes extra meetings are called to deal with serious matters involving animal welfare.

7. Is the Committee subject to external review?

The animal ethics activity of the University is subject to a four yearly cycle of review by independent experts. Annually the committee and University's activities are audited by each state and territory Government where the ANU holds a licence to approved animal based research (ACT, VIC, NSW, TAS, QLD, WA, SA).

8. When is the Committee quorate?

At least one member of each mandatory category A, B, C and D must be present.

9. How does the Committee reach decisions?

As required by the Code, the Committee aims to achieve decisions by consensus. Where consensus cannot be reached, and in line with the Code, discussion should take place with the Investigator to attempt to achieve consensus by the Committee, failing which, the Chair may decide to move to a decision by majority voting. This is exceptionally rare and advisors to the AEEC are not able to vote in these instances.

10. Who services and supports the Committee?

The Committee is serviced by staff in the Research Services Division (RSD). RSD provides advice and guidance to assist investigators with the ethics process. Responsibility for the protocol rests with the Principal Investigators. RSD makes no decisions with regard to review of proposals - this all falls to the Committee.

11. Is there a Vet on the Committee?

There is a formal position of University Veterinarian. This position resides within RSD. The Vet provides advice to the Committee but is not a member and takes executive decisions where animal welfare is prejudiced and during any activity classed as an unexpected adverse event (see [Animal Ethics FAQs](#)). There are also other members of University staff who have veterinary qualifications and their expertise is drawn on as required.

12. What volume of activity is undertaken by the Committee?

The Committee reviews around 80 new proposals and 180 amendments every year, as well as annual reviews for all active project (approx. 200). The Committee also undertakes facility inspections and reviews unexpected adverse events and responses.

13. Are AEEC meetings minuted?

All AEEC meetings are formally minuted and confirmed minutes are provided to the DVC-R on a monthly basis. Minutes from AEEC meetings are confidential. As required by the Code, an annual report is provided to University Council that details all AEEC activities.

14. How can I arrange to attend an AEEC meeting to explain my proposal?

The AEEC reviews hundreds of proposals and amendments a year and it is not possible, nor necessary, for investigators to attend AEEC meetings for each protocol. The vast majority of proposals are reviewed and approved within one meeting cycle with minor adjustments made out of meeting by agreement with the lead researcher. Where there are particular levels of complexity the Chair can determine that a face-to-face interaction with an investigator would be beneficial.

15. Who is responsible for the protocol?

The Principal Investigator is responsible for the protocol as required by the Code which states: *“Investigators must only consider using animals when they are satisfied that a case can be made that the proposed use is ethically acceptable, based on whether such use demonstrates the principles in Clause 1.1, and balancing whether the potential effects on the wellbeing of the animals involved is justified by the potential benefits (see Clause 1.3). Investigators should seek advice and information from relevant experts, including other experienced scientists, veterinarians, animal care staff, or specialists in laboratory animals, livestock or wildlife, when necessary.”*

16. Does the Committee take into account scientific information and expert advice?

Yes. The researcher is expected to provide sufficient information within the protocol to aid effective assessment. When necessary, the Committee may take into account expert advice.

17. How can I make suggestions for species-specific experts that could be consulted on my application?

Reference to published articles and species experts that have been consulted in the preparation of the Protocol should be referenced within the Protocol. The AEEC is keen that you engage with experts during the development of the Protocol. Please bear in mind that any expert view needs to be considered in the light not just of the species itself but animal welfare issues which need to be addressed to satisfy the Code.

18. How do I provide and highlight relevant attachments (e.g. key published article) in my proposal?

Relevant documents can be uploaded to the protocol through the online ARIES application system. Upload to the document section of the online form, the AEEC expects that relevant sections of publications be referred to in the body of the application in a way that the AEEC can easily reference back to the attached document. It is the role of the PI to clearly link their application to sections within relevant publications, it is not the responsibility of the AEEC to extensively review publications to find the key information.

19. Who do I contact if I wish to appeal a decision made by the AEEC?

The grounds for appealing a decision are that:

- due process has not been followed
- the views of the Committee cannot be effectively accommodated as a consequence of the Committee acting outside of its remit

The normal route would be to refer the concern initially to the Chair of the Committee or the Director of Research Services Division in the first instance. If this fails to alleviate the concern then the matter should be raised with the DVC(R&I).

The Code states: *“Where complaints concerning the AEEC process of review of an application or report cannot be resolved by communication between the complainant and the AEEC that is the subject of the complaint, the institution should ensure that the complainant has access to a person or agency external to the AEC for review of the process followed by the AEC. This person or agency may be within the institution. Following this review, the AEC may need to review its process in reaching its decision regarding the application or report, and re-evaluate its decision in light of the reviewed process. The ultimate decision regarding the ethical acceptability of an activity lies with the AEC and must not be overridden.”*