



THE
SYCAMORE
SCHOOL

FIND YOUR STRENGTH

CONDUCTING RESEARCH AT THE SYCAMORE SCHOOL

Guidelines for applicants

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1. Introduction

The Sycamore School (TSS) is dedicated to utilising inquiry and research to improve the lives of autistic people.¹ These guidelines provide information for those interested in conducting research with TSS students, staff, and/or community members.

There are three types of applications:

- Researcher led projects.
- Studies co-developed with TSS.
- Projects advertised to TSS's community.

The document outlines the application and assessment processes, offers guidance on developing applications, and provides links to crucial support materials. It is important to read these guidelines in conjunction with:

- The Sycamore School *Research Strategy 2020-2024* which details the School's strategic research priorities as well as guiding principles.
- The *Terms and Conditions for Conducting Research* that all researchers must agree to.

Any researcher whose project involves TSS students, recruitment through the School of children, parents, caregivers, or community members, school employees, or volunteers, or access to school data and/or records must apply.

An ***Application to Conduct Research*** is required if the intent is to disseminate the research's findings beyond the School or to fulfill a research higher degree requirement.

Undergraduate students completing industry-based assessment should first contact the Research Manager to determine if an application to conduct research is necessary.

An ***Application to Proceed with a Research Proposal*** is necessary for research co-designed and co-managed by TSS staff and official university partners if the intention is to apply to a competitive research grant scheme.

An ***Application to Advertise Research*** is required for research *not* conducted in the School but seeking to recruit participants from its community. If the promotion of the research involves direct contact with the School's staff or the community (e.g., via email or speaking at staff or parent meetings), the researcher must submit an *Application to Conduct Research*, not an *Application to Advertise Research*.

The application process aims to ensure that research conducted within TSS, and its community is of high quality, upholds the School's duty of care to its staff and students, and benefits its participants and/or TSS.

¹ We understand that language holds significant power in shaping attitudes and perceptions, and that people use different language to talk about autism. These guidelines use identity-first language to promote respect, dignity and inclusivity. Identity-first language acknowledges and validates the experiences of autistic people in all aspects of the research process, including data collection, analysis and reporting.

1.1. Research and Evaluation Advisory Group

The School's Research and Evaluation Advisory Group (R&EAG) is responsible for assessing applications to conduct research and applications to proceed with a co-developed research proposal. The R&EAG provides recommendations to the Principal and the Board of Directors of ASD Learning Ltd and oversees research and evaluation activities to ensure good governance.² While the R&EAG recommends approval for research projects, the Principal has the final authority to grant permission for research to commence within the School.

The R&EAG meets twice per school term to review applications and make recommendations.

1.2. Research Manager

The School's Research Manager is the main point of contact for any preliminary enquiries, research applications, processes, and status advice. The Research Manager may be contacted via email on research@sycamore.qld.edu.au or by telephone (07) 3117 0966. The Research Manager is responsible for assessing applications to advertise a research project through the School and providing recommendations to the Principal, who grants final approval.

1.3. Research partnerships

The School employs a participatory university partnering model to establish collaborative, cooperative, sustained, mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and School staff. This approach to autism research aims to generate relevant and rigorous research activities and insights.

Partnerships with universities are established with the goal of co-developing and submitting a competitive research funding application within 12 to 18 months.

1.4. Priority research themes

The following five priority research themes support the School's strategic goals:

1. Securing positive life outcomes for autistic people.
2. Ensuring access to learning environments that equip autistic people with the social, emotional, and academic capacities to meet their goals and aspirations.
3. Maintaining effective pedagogies, curriculums, and assessment practices for autistic students.
4. Continuous knowledge and workforce development through research and inquiry.
5. Redressing policy barriers for autistic people accessing effective teaching, learning and support.

² ASD Learning Ltd is a not-for-profit company trading as The Sycamore School and is a registered charity.

Except for *Applications to Advertise Research*, all other applications will initially be assessed according to their alignment to at least one of the priority research themes set out in the School’s *Research Strategy 2020-2024*.

1.5. Outcome focused research

The School believes in outcome-focused research that engages stakeholders early to identify problems in need of solutions and to develop an effective dissemination strategy. The School is committed to working collaboratively with university researchers through continuous inquiry.

The School encourages research that will enhance its ability to track student outcomes over time and ensure that its education and support services are comprehensive, effective, and sustainable. TSS prefers research that increases this capacity and informs its practices and decision making. In other words, the School values research that is likely to positively impact its operations, professional judgments, and activities.

1.6. Guiding principles

Principles to Guide Research Engagement

These principles offer internal and external guidance for bridging the research-to-practice gap, aligned with the School’s values.

1. Shared Objective	To facilitate systematic reflection among educators, fostering learning from success and failures to enhance outcomes for autistic individuals. Additionally, to promote research and evaluation through critical friendships.
2. Reflective and Collaborative Professional Learning	To deepen educators’ understanding of research knowledge bases and processes, supporting the development of relevant solutions to practice challenges.
3. Integration of Practice-Based and Research-Based Knowledge	To facilitate knowledge sharing between researchers and educators, leading to the development of innovative practices that improve outcomes for autistic individuals.
4. Participation and Leadership in Change	Key School stakeholders engage in research planning and execution, ensuring alignment with School needs and facilitating uptake of research findings.
5. Explicit Theories of Action	Researchers and School staff engage in constructive dialogue to identify problems, articulate theories of action, evaluate alternative approaches, and implement agreed-upon strategies for improvement. ³
6. Value of Critical Friendships	Researchers provide input and support to steer learning and improvement initiatives in productive directions.
7. Innovation through Trial and Refinement	Researchers and School staff collaborate in cycles of inquiry to develop and refine research-informed approaches to practice improvement over time.
8. Supportive and Challenging Research Community	Collaborative learning fosters trust, reciprocal support, and engagement with broader ideas and opportunities between researchers and School staff

³ Adapted from Robinson, V. (2017). *Reduce Change to Increase Improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Guiding Principles for Research Design

These principles clarify the School’s expectations for submitted research designs.⁴

1. Rigour, Relevance, and Precision	Research designs should be transparent, applying appropriate tools to meet objectives and addressing real-world issues in practice, using precise terminology for shared understanding.
2. Measurement	Research should focus on identifying measurement or assessment tools to support data-driven improvement without imposing high stakes.
3. Theory of Change or Project Blueprint	Researchers and practitioners should agree on a plan for action, detailing what, how, and why strategies, interventions, or programs will work.
4. Explanation	Research should elucidate effective program components, variations across groups, and reasons for effectiveness to support implementation and uptake
5. Sustainability	Research should contribute to both structural (e.g., curriculum materials, assessment tools) and process-oriented (e.g., collaboration, critical friendships) changes for meaningful and lasting impact.

2. Application timeline

All research projects, except for an *Application to Proceed with a Research Proposal*, must receive clearance from a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) before submitting an application. The following steps outline the process for submitting a research application to TSS:



Step 1: Read these guidelines, The Sycamore School’s *Research Strategy 2020-2024* and the *Terms and Conditions for Conducting Research*. If necessary, consult with the School’s Research Manager about the project’s suitability.



Step 2: Complete and submit the relevant application package to research@sycamore.qld.edu.au. Within two business days, the Research Manager will confirm receipt via return email and provide a reference number. If you do not receive an acknowledgment, contact the Research Manager via email or telephone (07) 3117 0966.



Step 3: The Research Manager will review the application to determine its eligibility for full review. Ineligible applications will be notified within two business days.



Step 4: The eligible application will be reviewed by the R&EAG or the Research Manager, who will make a recommendation to the Principal.

⁴ Adapted from Jones, S., Farrington, A, Jagers, R. et al (2019). *National Commission on social, emotional, and academic development: A research agenda for the next generation*. Retrieved from the Aspen Institute website: <http://nationathope.org/research-practice-and-policy-agendas/research/>



Step 5: The Principal will review the recommendation and provide final approval.



Step 6: The Research Manager will notify the applicant of the outcome and provide site support.

Please allow 5-6 weeks for an R&EAG review and 2-3 weeks for a Research Manager review.

3. Application and assessment processes

To ensure research conducted at TSS adheres to policy requirements and protects the wellbeing of the staff, students, the broader community, and the learning environment, a structured application and assessment process is in place. Although TSS does not have a formally constituted HREC, the assessment process uses a person-oriented ethics approach to the review with the objective of ensuring the strengths and needs of autistic people are considered.⁵

To apply for research approval, submit an application package that includes:

- A completed application form in Word format.
- A completed application checklist (included in the form).
- A signed researcher declaration (included in the form).
- All relevant attachments.

3.1. Application to Conduct Research

Please allow 5-6 weeks for the assessment process.

To conduct research at the School, applicants must meet two requirements.

1. They must have either ethics approval from a HREC or hold a letter confirming exemption from formal review.
2. Their research must align with at least one of the School's priority research themes.

Eligible applicants include experienced researchers, current research partners, potential partners, and university students. Those wishing to pursue a future partnership should contact the Research Manager via email or telephone before submitting their application.

Principal approval of an *Application to Conduct Research* is required to obtain site consent before commencing participant recruitment and data collection.

An *Application to Conduct Research* will be subject to a two-stage assessment process.

Stage 1: Conducted by the Research Manager to determine:

- If the research is sufficiently focused on areas directly relevant to the School's needs.

⁵ Cascio, M.A. and Racine, E. (2018). Person-oriented research ethics: integrating relational and everyday ethics in research. *Accountability in Research*, 25, 3, 170-197.

- The potential contribution of the project to improve life outcomes for autistic people

Stage 2: Conducted by the R&EAG, assessing projects against four criteria:

- Benefit and impact.
- Feasibility and quality of the methodology
- Costs to the School.
- Ethics.

This stage ensures that all research aligns with the School’s vision, mission, research principles and protocols.

Completing the application

Application to Conduct Research sections	
1. Project title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enter the title of the project. Once submitted, your application will receive a research reference number for all future communications.
2. Project contact details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the contact details of all researchers involved in the project. The lead researcher must have the necessary qualifications, experience, and support to manage the research project. • Student applicants must use their university email address in their communications with the School.
3. Project information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a <i>brief</i>, plain language summary of your research, avoiding technical or specialised language. Do not assume reviewers are familiar with the topic or field. • Indicate how your project aligns with the School’s research and strategic priorities (see page 6 of the <i>Research Strategy 2020-2024</i>). This section determines the eligibility of your application for full review.
4. Research methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the level of burden imposed by the project on students, staff, and/or the community. • Demonstrate your familiarity with the support needs of autistic participants. • Consider the feasibility of your research methods given the day-to-day operations of the School and the required resources. • If applicable, outline the level of risk to the School through the proposed use of its data. • Ensure information and consent sheets for autistic students are accessible for complex literacy profiles and adopt a strengths-based and positive approach to autism.
5. Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include evidence of a HREC application, as the School assumes the project has already undergone rigorous ethics review. • Provide details of any payments offered to participants, including the purpose and method of payment to ensure transparency. This information will be used to gauge the School’s duty of care to its students. • Outline specific demands or risks for participating groups to allow for assessment of the relative burden of the project on the School’s community. • Familiarise yourself with person-oriented ethics, or practice guidelines for autism research before submitting your application.

<p>6. Post research follow up and dissemination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicate how you will acknowledge and value the contribution of autistic people or the autism community in your research. • It is important that applicants respect and positively contribute to researcher-participant relationships.
<p>Checklist</p>	<p>Sign the Researcher Declaration and attach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A copy of each researcher’s Blue Card. • Copies of letters to participant groups • If applicable, a copy of letters to parents/guardians. • Applicable consent forms. • Copies of research instruments. • A copy of the letter of approval from your institution’s HREC.

All applications will be notified in writing of the Principal’s decision **within 10 business days** of the R&EAG meeting. Successful applicants will receive site consent (i.e., final approval) from the Principal and will be directed to liaise with the Research Manager for further assistance.

3.2. Application to Proceed with a Research Proposal

The *Application to Proceed with a Research Proposal* will go through a two-part assessment process.

The Research Manager will determine if the research is relevant to the School’s needs and can contribute to improving the lives of autistic people. Eligible applications will be shortlisted for review by the R&EAG.

Projects co-developed and designed with the School’s research partners must complete both Parts A and B of the Application to Proceed with a Research Proposal. This includes:

- **Part A:** Achieving the School’s endorsement of the research plan before submitting a grant application.
- **Part B:** Re-endorsement of the final research plan if awarded funding.

The partnering team, including key School staff and university researchers, will complete the application together.

The approval process for co-developed research is illustrated below.



Part A of the application must be completed before submitting a research funding application. Approved projects will allow researchers to proceed with grant applications and generate the necessary letter of support required by the funding body. Note that **Part A approval does not grant permission to commence research.**

Part B is to be completed after receiving research funds but before signing a Collaborative Research Agreement with the School.

As research designs and methodologies may evolve due to the amount awarded by the funding body, or the HREC review, Part B allows the School to reassess the final research project. Re-endorsement of the final research plan enables the research team to commence the project and manage the partnership via a Collaborative Research Agreement.

Completing the application

Application to proceed with a research proposal	
PART A: To be completed prior to development and finalisation of an external funding application	
1. Proposed project title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter the proposed title of the project. Your application will receive a research reference number for all future communications.
2. Grant scheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide the title of the funding scheme, the requested amount, and if applicable, the university's internal submission date.
3. Project team and contact details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The lead investigator must have the necessary qualifications and experience. Include a brief statement highlighting relevant experience, potential for collaborative research with end-users, mentoring experience, and capacity to manage the project. Provide contact details, areas of expertise, and roles for each co-investigator. The project team must include at least one member of TSS staff and/or the School community.

<p>4. Track record of research or other collaborations with TSS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> List all past or present collaborations (including dates) between the School, the researchers, and their home institutions.
<p>5. Project information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a <i>brief</i>, plain language summary of the research without technical jargon. Reviewers may not be familiar with the topic or field. List the proposed research questions. Indicate how the project aligns with the School’s research and strategic priorities (see page 6 of the <i>Research Strategy 2020-2024</i>). This section informs assessment of the application’s eligibility for full review. State how the project will improve outcomes for autistic young people, including expected short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. A graphic representation of the project and its projected outcomes can be attached.
<p>6. Proposed research design</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide information to allow for the assessment of the project’s burden on students, staff and the community, its feasibility within the School’s operations, and the likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes.
<p>7. Benefit and impact</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describe how the School’s community will directly benefit from participating in the study. List anticipated project outputs and explain how each will contribute to the School. Include a timeline if possible.
<p>8. School contribution to the proposed project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This section helps the School decide on resource allocation. Clearly present project outcomes, benefits, and outputs to support the School’s decision on providing financial and in-kind support.
<p>9. Other partnering organisations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This section allows for the assessment of other partnering organisations’ commitments to the project.
<p>10. Ethics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If the funding application is successful, the project will undergo a thorough ethics review at the lead researcher’s home institution. Outline potential risks to the School and demonstrate understanding of research ethics involving autistic participants. Familiarise yourself with person-oriented ethics and autism research practice guidelines.
<p>11. Post research follow up and dissemination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate recognition and appreciation of the contribution of autistic individuals or the autism community. It is essential that applicants demonstrate respect for and actively contribute to positive researcher-participant relationships.
<p>PART B: To be completed after the funding application is successful.</p>	
<p>1. Project title</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter the confirmed title of the project as it appears on the grant offer letter.
<p>2. Grant scheme</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attach a copy of the grant application and the offer letter. Provide details of requested and received funds and any project changes due to funding adjustments.
<p>3. Project team and contact details</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide any updates on the project team. Attach copies of each of the researcher’s Blue Cards.

4. Research design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update any changes to the original design due to funding adjustments, team changes, or other developments. Confirm research questions and ensure accessibility of information and consent sheets for autistic students.
5. Benefit and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update the benefit and impact of the research if there are any project changes.
6. School contribution to the project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update the School's contribution if there are any project changes.
7. Other partnering organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update any changes to the contributions of partnering organisations.
8. Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit an application to the HREC of the lead researcher's home institution of not already done. Research cannot begin until the School receives a copy of the HREC approval letter. Provide updates on ethical considerations if there have been project changes. Explain how privacy and confidentiality will be managed and the support available to participants.
Checklist	<p>Sign the Researcher Declaration and attach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A copy of the successful application to the research funding scheme. A copy of the letter of offer from the grant scheme indicating the funding to be offered. A copy of each of the researcher's Blue Card, Exemption Card, or evidence of application to obtain either of these cards.

Part A applicants will receive written notification of the Principal's decision. If successful, they will receive an in-principal letter of support for their proposed research project.

Part B applicants will receive written notification of the Principal's decision within 10 business days of the R&EAG meeting. Successful Part B applicants will work with the Research Manager to sign a Collaborative Research Agreement and start project activities.

Note that the project cannot commence until the School is in receipt of the HREC letter of approval.

3.3. Application to Advertise Research

Please allow 2-3 weeks for the assessment process.

To obtain approval to advertise a research project at no cost, researchers must submit an *Application to Advertise* with supporting documents. Approval to advertise research should not be taken as a School endorsement of any aspect of the project.

If the proposed research does not align with the School's priority research themes, researchers may be granted permission to advertise through channels such as the School newsletter, or bulletin boards. However, the School and its staff cannot be asked to recruit participants or endorse the project. If the researcher wishes to involve the School's staff or students or require assistance in recruiting participants (e.g., via distribution of information sheets, opportunity to talk at staff or parent meetings etc.), they must complete an *Application to Conduct Research*.

All research projects must obtain ethics approval from a HREC. Additionally, student applicants must submit a letter from their research supervisor demonstrating approval of the project and its advertisement. The School will critically review projects that incentivise parents or carers for their child’s participation in research.

The Research Manager will assess the *Application to Advertise Research* to ensure that the project is of high quality, meets ethical standards and benefits the School’s community. If the project poses some risk to the School, the researcher will be informed within two business days that their application will be reviewed by the R&EAG.

Application to Advertise Research sections	
1. Project title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enter the title of the project. Upon submission, your application will receive a research reference number for all future communications.
2. Project contact details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide contact details of the primary researcher. This person must have the necessary qualifications, experience, or support to manage the project. Student applicants must include a signed letter from their supervisor’s indicating approval of the advertisement and must use their university email address for communications with the School.
3. Project information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a <i>brief</i>, plain language summary of the project, avoiding technical or specialised language, as reviewers may not be familiar with the topic or field of research. Include details of your advertising methods (e.g., newsletter, posters, social media etc.) and specific tasks required of the School.
4. Advertising method and timeline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicate the type of advertising you require. If selecting ‘other’, provide further details. Provide the start and end dates for the advertisement (not the project). Note that School newsletters are distributed fortnightly during term time only.
5. Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All applications must include a letter of approval from a HREC (where pertinent) as evidence that the project has undergone rigorous ethics review. Information in this section will help determine the level of risk posed to the School, duty of care to students if the research involves payment, and the direct benefit from involvement with the study.
Checklist	Sign the Researcher Declaration and attach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A copy of each advertisement. The letter of approval from your institution’s HREC. A copy of each researcher’s Blue Card. If applicable, a letter from your research supervisor indicating their approval of the advertisement and awareness of this application.

All applicants will be notified of the Principal’s decision within two to three weeks of submitting their application. Approved applicants will be directed to contact the Research Manager for further guidance.

4. Working with the autistic and autism communities

The School expects researchers who wish to conduct research to consider the School's communities.

Researchers conducting studies involving autistic individuals or the autism community should adhere to relevant guidelines such as:

- [Inclusive research practice guidelines and checklists for autism research](#)
- [Guidelines for conducting research studies with the autism community](#)

Key considerations include:

- **Language Use:** Understand the difference between person-first and identity-first language in research design, applications, information sheets, consent forms, communication with autistic participants and their families, and dissemination of findings. Use neurodiversity-affirming language to positively influence participants' self-perception and willingness to participate.
- **Informed Consent:** Build trust with participants by developing accessible information and consent processes using text and multimedia sources. Ensure research protocols minimise anxiety and consider the impact of the research site and data collection demands on autistic participants during the design phase.
- **Research Relevance:** Focus on areas of research that are meaningful to the autistic and autism communities and projects that provide real benefits.
- **Dissemination Strategy:** Develop a strategy that provides meaningful feedback to the autistic community.

5. Ethical research design

The School expects researchers to align their proposals with:

- [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#)
- [Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research](#)
- [Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research](#)
- [Person-orientated autism research ethics](#)
- [Australian Association of Research Education Code of Ethics](#)

Ethical research should respectfully and sincerely acknowledge the role, voice and lived experience of autistic people and ideally be co-designed with the autistic and/or the autism community.

5.1. The collection and management of sensitive information

Sensitive information includes personal details such as racial or ethnic origin and health information, including disabilities. This type of information requires a higher level of protection. Researchers must:

- Obtain consent from participants to collect sensitive information.
- Use the information solely for the research purpose.

- Ensure sensitive information is not shared outside the research team without prior HREC approval.

5.2. Amendments and adjustments to approved research projects

Researchers must promptly inform TSS of any changes to approved research projects by contacting the Research Manager. These changes may include extensions, minor amendments, or variations. Researchers should:

- Provide justification for the changes.
- Indicate the status of their amendment to the HREC.
- Forward a copy of the HREC approval letter for any amendment to the Research Manager.

Significant changes may require an amended application and reassessment by the R&EAG. Contact the Research Manager to discuss any significant changes to the approved research project.

6. Reporting and dissemination

Researchers must include a publication and communication plan that is appropriately targeted at key stakeholders to ensure uptake of their research findings or insights. This plan should include providing a summary of the project's findings to the School and, where appropriate, to participants.

To effectively communicate findings to the autism community and other stakeholders, consider the following

- Provide lay summaries of the research to relevant but non-participating stakeholder groups.
- Use multimedia such as videos and various platforms like websites, email, and discussion forums.
- Organise workshops, public lectures, or seminars to reach a wider audience.
- Offer pre-print or open access journal publications to make the findings more accessible.
- Co-present with community representatives to include their perspectives.