

# **Research Policy on Child Protection**

**HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts**

## 1. Introduction

HOGENT is a University of Applied Sciences and Arts based in the Flemish part of Belgium.

HOGENT strives to excel in education, research, service provision and practice of the arts. Through the expertise of its staff and graduates and the valorisation of its research, HOGENT makes a valuable contribution to a critical, creative and open society.

With its research activities, HOGENT aims to make a difference in and for society. We are resolutely committed to research and services with a sustainable impact. That is why we adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) in our research agenda. Several of these goals directly relate to the protection and the promotion of children's rights, such as eradication of poverty (SDG-1), high quality education (SDG-4), promoting gender equality (SDG-5) and reducing inequality (SDG-10).

HOGENT is committed to making widely known the principles of ethical research among its researcher staff, creating general awareness of it and maintaining a supportive and safe (research) environment, with special attention to the most vulnerable groups, amongst others: children. In 2017 the European Commission awarded the HR Excellence in Research label to HOGENT.<sup>1</sup> This award recognizes institutions for aligning their human resources policies to the principles of the European Charter for Researchers<sup>2</sup> and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers<sup>3</sup>.

HOGENT views children as full citizens. In research activities where children are directly or indirectly involved, it is important to fully include children's views, opinions and experiences. In many cases, this information can be gathered from already available sources. In some cases, children and their representatives are actively involved in research projects where they share their knowledge, opinions and experiences. Leading principles herein are the right of the child to have his/her/their best interests taken as a primary consideration,<sup>4</sup> non-discrimination and freedom from harmful practices (i.e. no-harm).<sup>5</sup> In doing so, it is essential to actively take into account the diversity amongst children in terms of age, gender, maturity, religion, ethnicity, (dis-)ability, legal status and socio-economic position.

The HOGENT Research Policy on Child Protection is a dynamic document and is developed to ensure the highest standards of personal behavior and professional practice of its staff, to ensure no harm occurs in any situation to children and young people during their involvement in HOGENT's research activities.

As an institution HOGENT is involved in several national children's rights organizations, such as for example as an active board member of the Children's Right Knowledge Centre (KEKI)<sup>6</sup>.

This policy is inspired by existing resources of organizations such as Eurochild, Ghent University, KEKI and Terre des Hommes.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/hrs4r>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.euraxess.be/no/node/5769>

<sup>3</sup> <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/charter/code>

<sup>4</sup> General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art. 3, para. 1)

<sup>5</sup> Joint general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on harmful practices

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.keki.be/en>

## 2. Definitions

We use the term '**child**' as defined in this UN convention and we define it as every person under the age of 18 years.

In the HOGENT Research Policy on Child Protection, **harmful practices** - including all forms of violence - are defined as referred to in *Revision of Joint General comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on harmful practices and General recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*.<sup>7</sup> In short, this encompasses any action or behavior that might endanger the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, moral and mental development of the child.

**Safeguarding** is defined as protecting children from abuse, maltreatment and all forms of violence, and as such preventing harm to children's health or their development.

## 3. Leading Standards

HOGENT fully endorses the principles and general comments of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

HOGENT also embraces the international Keeping Children Safe principles<sup>8</sup> and encourages researchers and staff members interacting with children to use the self-assessment tool. Because HOGENT is an institutions for higher education, activities with children are only limited to certain specific activities, and happen mainly in the context of research. This is the reason why the HOGENT Child Protection Policy is mainly focused on research.

HOGENT has, in line with the Keeping Children Safe Standards: developed a policy, ensured that its staff takes responsibility, and created specific procedures so that when children are involved in HOGENT research, the 'no harm' principle can be guaranteed. These policies and procedures are also monitored.

As already mentioned HOGENT's research policy is anchored on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Within those SDG's Children's Right are embedded with specific indicators to improve the future of Children.

## 4. Policy Statement

HOGENT:

- recognizes the relevant applicable (inter-)national legislations on 'children in danger';
- endorses that the safety and well-being of children are of paramount importance, and is committed to applying the highest possible scientific and ethical standards to meet its responsibility to protect and safeguard those children;
- adopts the safest standards and practices to minimize the possibility of harm happening to children, and protect members of the HOGENT community from the necessity to take risks which may leave them open to accusations of abuse or neglect;
- supports staff members of the HOGENT community to raise concerns about the actions and behavior of others which may be harmful to children;
- communicates about available procedures who to report to if any issues arise and how to respond to a given situation in an appropriate manner.

<sup>7</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/134/42/PDF/G1913442.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.keepingchildrensafe.global/accountability>

This Policy is based on the following principles:

- Children have the right to be heard, not to be discriminated against and have their interests respected.
- Children should be protected, treated with respect, listened to and have their own views taken into consideration.
- Children are encouraged and enabled to express their opinions freely, regardless of their age, (dis-)ability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation

Research activities at HOGENT are in the best interest of the child. HOGENT aims to implement children's participation based on the nine requirements for meaningful, safe and inclusive children's participation from Save the Children<sup>9</sup>:

Participation is:

- |                                |                               |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. transparent and informative | 6. inclusive                  |
| 2. voluntary                   | 7. supported by training      |
| 3. respectful                  | 8. safe and sensitive to risk |
| 4. relevant                    | 9. accountable                |
| 5. child-friendly              |                               |

To safeguard the statement and principles, staff engaged in research activities involving interaction with children on behalf of HOGENT will be made aware, through dedicated communication, of their obligations as stated above.

It is important to emphasize that although all children are equal, different children have different needs and are more vulnerable (e.g. impact of discrimination, previous experiences, their level of dependency, communication needs).

## **5. Protection and prevention measures**

For research activities involving children, specific procedures regarding ethical clearance and guidelines - including informed consent designed specifically for children - have been established. Special attention is paid to the research policy on child protection during the kick-off meetings of new research projects involving children, and dedicated internal webpages are available.

In addition, we expect each HOGENT research project to meet all ethical standards. Several procedures are built in to meet these ethical principles.

Both the specific and more general protection and prevention measures are described below.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/basic\\_requirements-english-final.pdf/](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/basic_requirements-english-final.pdf/) and KEKI's Policy for empowering, supporting and protecting children and young people

### **5.1 Recruitment & onboarding**

As part of the selection and recruitment procedures, potential HOGENT employees are required to provide an extract from the criminal register. Furthermore, as part of the onboarding, employees are actively informed about their duties, responsibilities and rights. Research staff are also directed towards the available online resources of the HOGENT regarding ethics & integrity. When researchers are hired for projects involving children, the competences and earlier experiences of working with children are screened.

### **5.2 Ethics Commissions**

In case of research involving children, clearance and advice of an Ethics Commission is by rule mandatory. HOGENT is part of the Association University Ghent. Researchers can as such apply for ethical clearance to the respective Ethics Commissions of Ghent University. When performing experiments on humans and animals, ethical approval is legally required. In those cases HOGENT staff need to appeal to the Medical Ethical Commission of a University Hospital.

HOGENT has a dedicated internal webpage for staff concerning all ethical aspects and procedures of research.

### **5.3 Committee on Scientific Integrity**

HOGENT has a Committee on Scientific Integrity (CWI), which handles complaints and possible breaches of scientific integrity. The CWI is an advisory body that investigates whether there are any violations against the Code of Ethics for Scientific Research in Belgium, to which HOGENT has subscribed and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA Code).

The Research Affairs Office is the first point of contact for: (1) all questions about scientific integrity or the CWI's procedure and (2) reports of alleged breaches of scientific integrity.

The procedure of the CWI is described in the regulations. Following the procedure, the CWI determines whether or not there has been a violation of the 'European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity' and/or if the research practice complies with current regulations at HOGENT related to issues of research integrity, including issues on child protection.

### **5.4 Data protection and management**

All research projects involving the processing of personal data, including children's data, must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

HOGENT emphasizes that anonymization/pseudonymization is mandatory whenever possible. The Data Protection Officer at HOGENT watches over this and helps researchers with all their questions on this topic. In this capacity the Data Protection Officer watches over the protection of children's personal data when such data are collected.

HOGENT researchers register their research in the online Data Management tool, DMPonline.be. DMPonline also invites researchers to reflect about different ethical dimensions of their research when developing the research design. For example, the confidentiality of data obtained with children and how to safely store this data.

### **5.5 Communication & training**

HOGENT has been awarded the "HR Excellence in Research Label" by the European Commission. HOGENT's action plan includes several actions with an emphasis on ethical

principles. For more information see: <https://www.hogent.be/en/external-partners/research/hr-excellence-in-research/>

To ensure that researchers are aware of and have up-to-date information on these ethical principles, HOGENT has dedicated internal web pages on the subject. The HOGENT Research Affairs Office, decides on a regularly basis, which workshops/sessions, debates, training modules or sensibilization campaigns on the broad topics of children's rights (i.e. protection, participation and provision) and ethics in research could be provided. This happens in close collaboration with the VLHORA (The Flemish Council of Universities for Applied Sciences and the Arts) through their dedicated training offer for Universities of Applied Sciences and the Arts) Input/Output.<sup>10</sup>

Research tools, such as, informed consent forms and procedures are provided to ensure proper handling of all research phases. Special attention is paid to child-related issues, e.g. informed consent created specifically for children, specific design of research methods.

Through informed consent forms and oral explanations, legal guardians and children are informed of the objectives and content of the study, potential risks are pointed out. At all times it is important to stress that participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time. Children themselves are always consulted about their interest in participating in the study and specific care is taken to ensure that they understand the entire process (i.e. negotiated consent). Children are made aware of their rights set out in the principles.

### **5.6 Internal and external reporting procedures**

**Internal.** HOGENT has a written policy framework and process flow concerning transgressive behavior and psycho-social risks for its staff and students.

A dedicated trust-person is appointed for all types of complaints regarding for example violence, bullying, inappropriate behavior. The contact information is prominently advertised on the HOGENT internal website.

Although HOGENT invests in creating child friendly research practices and safe spaces, and promotes children's rights, any type of behavior or action of HOGENT staff members which can be defined as harmful practices (see above) - and as such endangers the development, and the integrity of the child - will not be tolerated and sanctioned according to the appropriate procedures that are available under Belgian law.

**External.** By Belgian law all staff - including HOGENT as an organization - are obligated to report to state authorities and law enforcement any form of abuse, violence, mal- and mistreatment committed to children, when they have received such information. As a first-line information and reporting point regarding any form of abuse or violence, staff can contact the government-led and region-wide helpline "1712" (through chat, telephone or email).<sup>11</sup>

As an additional external contact point and information center for both researchers, children and their representatives, HOGENT refers to the Kinderrechtencommissariaat, in those case where the rights of children can be or are negatively impinged upon. If necessary the Kinderrechtencommissariaat, as a Flemish para-parliamentary institution, has the capacity and authority to intervene in specific cases.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.vlaamsehogescholeeraad.be/nl/input-output>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.vlaanderen.be/hulplijn-geweld-misbruik-en-kindermishandeling-1712>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.kinderrechten.be/doelgroepen>

## 6. Implementation of the policy within HOGENT

HOGENT has the responsibility for the implementation of the Research Policy on Child Protection and it is the duty of each member to comply with the Policy. This includes staff members (as well as occasional staff members) and students involved in HOGENT research, as well as all persons more or less directly involved in research or using HOGENT's facilities.

To create a culture of awareness, this policy and the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are disseminated through various internal and external communication channels including the newsletter.

The HOGENT Research Council, as approved by the president of HOGENT, has the mandate to implement and monitor the Research Policy on Child Protection. And this since most interactions with children at HOGENT happen within the context of research.

As a standard, the Research Policy on Child Protection will be reviewed, and if necessary revised, every 4 years. This policy and the different procedures will be monitored and discussed on a regular basis within the HOGENT research community. At all times, researchers can demand for revisions through the Research Affairs Office . Any revision made, needs to be approved by the president of HOGENT, which contributes to a wide acceptance of the policy.

### Contact and info

Contact:

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