

Converge Evaluation and Research Team Handbook



Converge Evaluation and Research Team
insight through experience

January 2026

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To get in touch with CERT, contact Ruth Lambley, the CERT Co-ordinator at r.lambley@yorksj.ac.uk or 07572 112404.

Alternatively, get in touch with the Converge office in the usual way converge@yorksj.ac.uk or 07764 337116.

CERT's mission statement and values:

CERT listens to people with experience of mental health challenges, to influence service provision through research and evaluation

Converge students who participate in CERT are known as **CERT Researchers**.

Insight – CERT's shared lived experience of mental health challenges means that we understand the lives and experiences of other people with these difficulties. We use this understanding (insight) in all stages of the evaluation and research process. We believe this makes our findings more meaningful and useful.

Empowering people – Our priority is to empower both CERT Researchers and research participants who are marginalised and get missed by traditional research. We seek to empower these participants to get fully involved in the whole research and evaluation process, and to make sure that their perspectives are always heard.

Alongside – CERT Researchers work alongside our research participants, coproducing the research as much as possible. This can include training research participants in the research methods we are using, for example, how to create and carry out interviews. This means our research participants have the skills and confidence to fully engage with the whole research process alongside CERT Researchers.

Creativity – We believe in using and developing creative research methods, especially those which make the experience of research more comfortable for participants, for example, photographs, music and creative writing. The use of non-traditional and creative research methods makes participating more accessible for people who struggle with traditional methods, for example, because it is more interesting to them and it reduces the demand placed on them.

Accessibility – By empowering people and working alongside them, we seek to remove the power dynamic which often exists in traditional research. We also ensure the sharing (dissemination) of findings is accessible, for example, creating formal written reports, easy-read reports, film and theatre performances. We also seek to make CERT fully inclusive and accessible to all people who are interested in joining us. On-going training and development allows CERT Researchers to be fully involved in projects.

CERT Researcher contract

We want CERT Researchers to learn and have a meaningful experience in CERT. We want to build an environment where Researchers feel comfortable and where you can support each other. Below are four commitments we ask you to make.

Confidentiality: Sometimes people will share personal information or experiences. Please don't share anything personal you learn about anyone outside of the classroom.

Choice: Each CERT Researcher has the right to choose what they want to do or say in the group. Please don't:

- Push anyone to do anything they don't want to do.
- Ask people to share more than they're comfortable.

Speak for yourself: Don't assume that other people share your opinions or experiences. Try to avoid giving advice - you can share your own experiences or facts.

Listen: you will learn a lot from your fellow CERT Researchers.

The types of projects CERT engage in

CERT carries out:

- Evaluations of mental health related projects
- Consultancy work
- Academic research
- Collaborative writing projects
- Research methods training

How CERT works

CERT is different from other Converge courses. This is because it is a long-term group which meets weekly throughout the year (apart from a break during August), rather than operating on a termly basis as other Converge courses are run. You do not need to re-enrol for CERT each term.

CERT leadership

CERT has **two homes** at York St John University (YSJU). CERT is very much part of **Converge**, but also is part of YSJ's **Institute for Social Justice** (ISJ).

Ruth Lambley is the CERT Co-ordinator and manages CERT's day to day work.

Dr Amy Skinner is an associate professor of co-production in mental health research and is in the YSJ core team. Amy assists Ruth in delivering CERT projects.

Professor Simon Procter is the Director of Converge and has oversight over CERT and offers practical support to CERT. Simon regularly attends face to face CERT activities.

Our Tuesday morning meetings

CERT meets on Zoom every Tuesday between 11 and 12pm, apart from the first Tuesday of the month when we meet face-to-face on campus (occasionally this changes due to room availability. Our on-campus meetings are followed by lunch.

In these meetings, we collectively discuss the projects we are currently working on. CERT usually have several projects running at the same time.

We often use this meeting time to talk about new methodologies we would like to learn about and we discuss any CERT Researcher's ideas for potential projects.



Converge
AT YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY



Work on **specific projects** is usually **done outside** of our Tuesday meetings (see below about CERT's project management procedures). This work might be face to face on campus, by Zoom or by email.

CERT is flexible

While we encourage CERT researchers to come to our Tuesday meetings, we are very flexible about how individuals choose to be involved in CERT activity.

CERT Researchers can engage in CERT as they wish. Some CERT Researchers only attend our Zoom meetings, some only come to face to face meetings and others attend a mixture.

We realise that for a wide range of reasons (e.g. physical or mental health, employment, or caring responsibilities) CERT Researchers might not be able to attend our meetings or be involved other activities for a while. This is absolutely fine.

Researchers who have not engaged in any CERT activity for 6 months will be offered the choice of continuing to receive communication about CERT projects or to be removed from our email list. If the CERT Researcher chooses not to be involved any longer or does not respond to emails, any associated IT accounts will be closed (see page 12).

Past CERT Researchers are **always welcome to come back** when they choose.

CERT's project management process

For University purposes, either Simon or Amy will be the Principal Investigator for CERT projects (the person with ultimate responsibility).

CERT's project management process means that more experienced CERT researchers become project managers. Project managers take the lead on co-ordinating the work for a specific project. They organise project work which is done outside of our Tuesday morning meeting. They will support the involvement of any CERT researchers who want to participate in the project.

There is **no pressure** for CERT Researchers to work on any projects: CERT Researchers can choose to be involved in projects as much or as little as they wish.

CERT is a YSJU research group

This means CERT is embedded within the YSJU research community. CERT researchers can attend relevant meetings and collaborate with other research groups.



When we get offered paid work

CERT often gets research or evaluation projects for which CERT Researchers can be paid at the University's research assistant pay grade (band 5).

To be paid for CERT work, you will need to be registered as a YSJU casual staff member. You will be paid directly into your bank account via BACS, monthly in arrears.

Paid hours **must be agreed** with Ruth and the project manager **before** any work is undertaken.

Sometimes we may be able to offer CERT Researchers vouchers for their involvement. However, you should be aware that vouchers also count as payment as far as welfare benefits/the DWP are concerned.

If you are currently receiving sickness or unemployment benefits, we strongly recommend seeking advice from the DWP about how payment for CERT work may affect your benefits.

You should do this before you claim for any work through the University. CERT and Converge cannot be held responsible for any problems which may arise from you receiving pay for CERT-related work.

If it would be helpful for you, we can write a letter to the DWP to explain your involvement in CERT/Converge.

Accessing IT and other YSJU resources

Because of the **sensitive nature** of the work CERT carries out (see data protection guidance on page 16), many CERT researchers have a **university IT account** to use for CERT-related purposes. This includes use of **email** and **Microsoft Teams** to share data and other documents. This is to ensure that research-related material is **kept securely within the University's system**, which is a **data protection condition** of the University.

Without a university IT account, research or evaluation-related material **cannot be shared with you**.

Having a university IT account means you get a York St John University email address and can access the library and other online resources such as Journal articles and e-books. You will also get access to Microsoft Office products (such as Word, Excel and PowerPoint).

However, **it is not compulsory** for CERT researchers to have an IT account, for example, if they don't want to work on CERT business via email or using Teams.

CERT's trauma informed approach

During CERT's work, it is possible that you come across things which **may cause you emotional distress**.

We are aware that many CERT Researchers have experienced trauma in their lives. Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as harmful or life threatening.

Trauma-informed practice is an approach grounded in the understanding that trauma exposure can impact an individual's neurological, biological, psychological and social development.

CERT's trauma-informed practice aims to **increase CERT Researchers' awareness** of how trauma can negatively impact on individuals and communities, and their ability to feel safe or develop trusting relationships.

CERT seeks to **avoid re-traumatisation** (the re-experiencing of thoughts, feelings or sensations experienced at the time of a traumatic event or circumstance in a person's past) which may arise in research or evaluation projects.

This trauma informed practice applies to both how CERT Researchers engage with each other, and also how we engage with our research/evaluation participants.

Key principles of CERT's trauma informed practice

1. Safety

The physical, psychological and emotional safety of CERT Researchers and our participants is prioritised by:

- people knowing they are safe or feeling they can ask for what they need to feel safe
- there being reasonable freedom from threat or harm
- actively seeking to prevent re-traumatisation
- CERT putting necessary policies, practices and Safeguarding arrangements in place

2. Trustworthiness

Transparency exists in CERT and YSJU's policies and procedures, with the aim of building trust among CERT and the wider community by:

- CERT explaining what they are doing and why
- CERT doing what they say they will do
- expectations being made clear and CERT not overpromising

3. Choice

CERT Researchers are supported in shared decision-making, choice and goal setting to determine the plan of action they need to heal and move forward by:

- ensuring CERT Researchers have a voice in CERT's decision-making process
- listening to the needs and wishes of CERT Researchers
- explaining choices clearly and transparently
- acknowledging that people who have experienced or are experiencing trauma may feel a lack of safety or control over the course of their life which can cause difficulties in developing trusting relationships

4. Collaboration

The value of CERT Researchers' lived experience is recognised in overcoming challenges and improving the research process by:

- CERT using formal and informal peer support and mutual self-help
- CERT asking CERT Researchers what they need and collaboratively considering how these needs can be met
- CERT focussing on working alongside and actively involving our participants in our research/evaluation projects

5. Empowerment

CERT aims to share power and give CERT Researchers a strong voice in decision-making, at both individual and organisational level by:

- validating feelings and concerns of CERT Researchers
- listening to what CERT Researchers want and need
- supporting CERT Researchers to make decisions and take action
- acknowledging that some CERT Researchers who have experienced, or are experiencing, trauma may feel powerless to control what happens to them, be isolated by their experiences and have feelings of low self-worth

6. Cultural consideration

CERT aims to move past cultural stereotypes and biases based on, for example, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, geography, race or ethnicity by:

- leveraging the healing value of traditional cultural connections
- incorporating policies, protocols and processes that are responsive to the needs of individuals served

Adapted from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice/working-definition-of-trauma-informed-practice>

In the **preparatory stage of any CERT project**, the Project Manager always carefully explores with CERT Researchers **any possible factors** arising from the project which may cause individual CERT Researchers distress.

Where potentially distressing factors are identified, ways of supporting CERT Researchers **who wish to participate** are put in place. Considering researcher safety forms part of the YSJ ethics procedures (page 13). After reflecting on the potential for distress, CERT Researchers who choose not to participate **will not be at any disadvantage** with respect to future research opportunities.

Participating or not participating in any CERT project is completely the choice of the CERT Researcher

Actions to support CERT researchers may include putting in place additional emotional support (e.g. check-ins and debriefs following the work) to help a CERT Researcher participate in the project. **This support will always be planned and agreed in collaboration with the CERT Researcher.**

Should it be needed, **further emotional support can be arranged through Converge**. Please ask Ruth, Simon or Amy if you think it may be helpful for you.

CERT is a very **emotionally aware** group, and **no pressure will be put on researchers** to do things they are not comfortable with.

CERT Researchers can **choose not to engage in, or to withdraw** from research projects as they wish, **without needing to explain why**.

Such withdrawal has **no impact on their future involvement** in CERT projects.

Training and development opportunities

CERT strongly believes in the **importance of researchers receiving training to help develop** their research skills. If you have a specific interest which you want further training in, please discuss it with Ruth, Amy or Simon.

Occasionally external training courses are available and will be shared with the group. If you find any training of interest to you, please ask Ruth, Amy or Simon.

Introduction to Community Research Methods course

CERT offers a Community Research Methods course to Converge students in the Autumn term. This course covers:

- Introduction to research and ethics
- An introduction to quantitative and qualitative methods; validity and bias
- Using academic literature (writing), conducting literature searches, and carrying out systematic reviews
- Using questionnaires in research
- Co-research with children and young people
- Using focus groups in research
- Planning, conducting and analysing research interviews
- Conducting a thematic analysis
- Using visual art and photo elicitation/photo voice in research
- Using creative writing in research
- Researcher safety
- Dissemination (sharing findings)

The course is now accredited by YSJU as a Foundation level course. It carries 20 credits.

CERT encourages CERT Researchers who are new to research to complete this course, but it is not mandatory.

If you would like a copy of the Introduction to Community Research Methods Course Handbook please ask Ruth.

Research ethics and integrity

YSJU is committed to maintaining the highest ethical and integrity standards in research carried out by its staff and students. There is a full research ethics and integrity policy available at: <https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/policies-and-documents/research/ethics-and-integrity/>

All research undertaken by CERT must follow the YSJU's policies

Research participant rights:

- Opportunity to give or refuse informed consent to participate or to withdraw from research projects without inducement or adverse consequence
- Appropriate confidentiality
- Security – including appropriate anonymisation and storage of their data
- A clear framework for raising queries, concerns or complaints

Our obligations as researchers:

- Integrity and sensitivity
- Compliance with the law
- Regard for participants, especially those considered to be vulnerable
- Regard for obtaining informed consent
- Any risk to participants or researchers is proportionate and managed

The research process at YSJU

All research activity conducted by CERT must be assessed by a University Research Ethics Committee **before it can begin**.

Converge falls under the School of the Arts for research purposes. Dr Tilo Reifenstein is the chair of the School of the Arts ethics committee t.reifenstein@yorksj.ac.uk.

For more information about the research process at YSJU, see:

<https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/policies-and-documents/research/ethics-and-integrity/process-for-research-ethics-approval/>

At YSJU, application for ethical approval is done online via Haplo Ethics Monitor:
<https://researchethics.yorksj.ac.uk/do/ysj-login/login>

The following information and documents are needed at the online application stage (to input via Haplo):

1. A **project proposal** which clearly explains what precisely the research will involve. This includes information about:
 - The project outline
 - The objectives of the research
 - Any research collaborators (this may include both internal and external partners)
 - The proposed research method and procedure
 - Method of participant recruitment (including copies of proposed adverts)
 - Details about what the research participants will be expected to do
 - Details of/copies of questionnaires, interview questions etc. you plan to use
 - A completed **research ethics checklist** covering:
 - How you will capture personal data in your project (how it will be held securely)
 - How you will address participant anonymity
 - How you will address the safety of both the researchers and research participants
 - Whether a gatekeeper is required to access research participants
 - How you will address fully informed consent
 - How you will address the right of participants to withdraw
 - How you will manage potential distress (for both researchers and research participants)
 - Safeguarding considerations (when might it be necessary to breach confidentiality – see below)
 - A consideration of how power dynamics may operate in the project
 - An explanation of any incentives you may be offering research participants (e.g. payment, vouchers, refreshments)

- How data will be collected and managed (including a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) covering which data protection-related actions will be taken and who is responsible for completing those actions)
- How you will address privacy and related risks (risks to individuals and risks to the university and the likelihood of this harm)
- Questions about data sharing with external organisations
- Questions about risk management (identifying all possible risks which might arise and explaining how you will reduce the risk)

2. A **Participant Information Sheet** which explains what the research will involve in language which participants will understand, to allow them to provide fully informed consent
3. A **consent form** which all participants need to sign before participating
4. A **full risk assessment** covering risks to both research participants and CERT Researchers

YSJU's whistle blowing policy

If you are unhappy or have a complaint or concern about CERT which you feel cannot come to us with, then for issues related to ethical conduct contact Dr Tilo Reifenstein t.reifenstein@yorksj.ac.uk giving details of the complaint you would like to make. The YSJU whistleblowing policy can be found here:

[https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/Whistleblowing-Policy-\(2\).pdf](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/document-directory/documents/Whistleblowing-Policy-(2).pdf)

Other useful links:

More information about misconduct in research at YSJU can be found here:

[https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/registry/research-degrees/complaints-appeals-and-disciplinary/Research-Misconduct-Policy-and-Procedures-\(2\).docx](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/registry/research-degrees/complaints-appeals-and-disciplinary/Research-Misconduct-Policy-and-Procedures-(2).docx)

More information about YSJU Research Ethics and Integrity can be found here:

<https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/policies-and-documents/research/ethics-and-integrity/>

YSJU's research and ethics policy can be found here:

<https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/research/documents/York-St-John-Research-Ethics-Policy.docx>

YSJU's Safeguarding policy can be found here:

<https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/university-secretary-office/documents/uso-site/Safeguarding-Policy---2024.pdf>

YSJU and CERT Data Protection guidance

YSJU strives to maintain the highest standards of rigour in data processing.

All personal information gathered by and held by YSJU is treated with the care and confidentiality required by the data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679) (GDPR); Data Protection Act 2018).

YSJ's full Data Protection Policy can be found here:

<https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/media/content-assets/university-secretary-office/documents/data-protection/York-St-John-University-Data-Protection-Policy-May-2025.pdf>

If you suspect that a data breach security incident involving personal information held by YSJU has occurred, please complete this Data Security Incident Form as soon as possible: <https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/policies-and-documents/data-protection/report-a-data-breach/>

If you have any concerns about the way in which YSJU has processed your personal data or that of another person, it is important that you are aware of your right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office: <https://ico.org.uk> or 0303 123 1113.

Converge has its own data protection policy which you can request to see. Contact the Converge office: converge@yorksj.ac.uk

As a CERT researcher, you have obligations to protect information under data protection laws

- Personal data is any information that relates to an identified or identifiable person. This includes both information which directly identifies the person (such as their name, date of birth or address), but also information that which when combined with other information may mean the person can be identified (e.g. an employee number or car registration plate or membership of a particular organisation).
- In your work with CERT, you may have access to personal information which is regarded as **particularly important and sensitive in law**. This sensitive data includes any information about physical or mental health, racial/ethnic origin, political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life or criminal history.
- If you are ever unsure about any matters relating to data protection, **please ask for advice as soon as possible**.

What does this mean for CERT Researchers?

- Take extra care to protect **participants' anonymity** – don't talk about research participants or data with anyone outside of CERT.
- When arranging meetings with or recruiting participants, be very conscious of your responsibilities with respect to the **need for confidentiality**, especially relating to **sensitive areas** such as their **mental health status**.
- **Be careful about what you say in emails** and who you copy into them.
- For recording interviews, you should **use an approved encrypted device** (not your personal mobile phone). Always ask if you are not sure about your device.
- With recording devices, the data should be downloaded onto a secure computer **as soon as possible** (within the day where possible) and **deleted from the recording device immediately** after this is done.
- Completed **consent forms must be collected from participants before any data collection begins**. Paper copies must be given to Ruth Lambley for secure storage; digital copies should be sent to Ruth to be securely stored on YSJU's OneDrive .
- **Paper copies** of any research data (e.g. questionnaires, interview notes) should be brought to Ruth Lambley and will be **destroyed securely** once digitised.
- **Only use YSJU email accounts or Microsoft Teams** to share any research-related data and other information (including interview transcripts) **NOT your personal accounts**.
- Only use **password protected** and encrypted computers/mobile devices for CERT Research activities.
- **Do not share any information** which is **not totally anonymised** with anyone who is not a member of CERT.
- Ensure that any **CERT data is totally erased** from any computer/other device before selling or scrapping it.
- Once a project is completed, **any undigitized data** (paper copies of transcripts, notes or other information) you have **relating to the project** should be returned to the Ruth for **archiving and to be destroyed securely**.
- Once a project is completed, ensure **any digital data you have** (interview transcripts, questionnaire data, notes etc.) has been saved to the **research archive** in the CERT folder on the OneDrive. Once this has happened, you should **delete all data relating to the project from your personal devices** (it is ok to keep a copy of the final report).

CERT's Generative AI guidance

Adapted from YSJU's Guidelines: <https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/policies-and-documents/generative-artificial-intelligence/>

YSJU's position

We recognise that Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools - like Open AI's ChatGPT, Microsoft CoPilot, Grammarly, or Google's Gemini - are now part of how many people think, write, plan, and communicate.

We also acknowledge many others have ongoing concerns about GenAI's environmental and socioeconomic impacts.

At York St John, we support the thoughtful and responsible use of GenAI - not as a replacement for your thinking, but as a tool that supports your work, when appropriate.

Six guiding principles for using GenAI at YSJU

1. You stay in charge

AI tools should support your learning, not do the work for you. You are always responsible for your ideas, analysis, and writing.

You are also responsible for making up your own mind about the ethics of AI.

2. Be honest and transparent

If you use a GenAI tool as part of your learning or writing, you must clearly state this on your work. This might involve:

- Describing how you used it, on a cover sheet or reflective note, and
- Submitting your prompts and outputs with your work.

3. Check the facts

GenAI tools are not experts. They can invent information or reinforce harmful stereotypes. Always check:

- Factual accuracy
- Sources, and
- Bias in wording, imagery or assumptions.

4. Think critically

Using GenAI should help you to practise and build your skills - not bypass them. If you rely too much on AI, you may miss chances to develop your own:

- Voice and ideas
- Academic and digital literacy
- Critical thinking
- Ethical position

5. Act fairly

Everyone should have an equal chance to succeed. Not all GenAI tools are free or accessible. You will not be expected to use paid AI tools.

6. Use with care

You are responsible for what you input into GenAI tools and how you use the outputs.

Sharing your personal information, including contact details, health information or personal opinions, might be appropriate in specific contexts but could be abused by some.

Sharing personal information of other people without their consent could be a breach of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

What you could or should not use AI for in research

You can use AI to:

- Generate ideas to stimulate your own academic explorations
- Provide an accessible summary of concepts, ideas or bodies of literature freely available online
- Review and summarise your own notes or those generated in group work or discussion (with consent from your fellow participants)
- Ask for feedback on an assignment structure or plan (while likely simplistic, this could provide a foundation for your own development)
- Provide feedback on your writing style or clarity of expression
- Experiment with different writing styles or levels of formality
- Debug code
- Generate presentation slides from your notes
- Formulate practice questions for the Q&A part of a presentation or project pitch

It is inappropriate to make any use of GenAI that passes off the work of others as if it were your own

The following usages, which do not make up an exhaustive list, **are prohibited**.

- Submitting GenAI generated content without citation of the AI tool or evidence of how you used it (Principles 1 and 2)
- Submitting GenAI generated content as if it were your own work (Principles 1 and 2)
- Paraphrasing text (whether published or the work of another student) in order to pass off the work of others as your own (Principles 1 and 2)
- Translating into English the work of another person originally published in another language, without acknowledgement and citation of the original source (Principles 3 and 4)
- Translating the majority of your own work into English (Principle 4)
- Fabricating empirical data to use in a research project or other assessment (Principles 2 and 3)
- Generating code for programming without acknowledgement of the source (Principle 2)
- Uploading participant data or responses into GenAI without the participants' consent or ethical approval (Principle 6)

Using GenAI in these ways will be a breach of YSJU's academic integrity policy which can be found here: <https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/policies-and-documents/academic-integrity/>

No matter how you choose to engage with AI, be prepared to demonstrate and explain your approach in accordance with the second principle: **Be honest and transparent**.