Ethics review considerations: A quick guide for researchers (students or staff)

The following is intended as a short guide of key things to consider when completing an ethics review application.[1] It is not meant to be comprehensive, but focuses on those issues which frequently appear not to be well-addressed by researchers. Where relevant, we indicate what sections/questions of the ethics review form these relate to.[2]

Screen C – is ethics review required

Screen C is a filter screen to determine whether ethics review is required. It thus asks about what data will be collected (e.g. as part of the process of recruiting/contacting participants) and is separate to questions, further in the form, as to what data will be *presented* in outputs.

Please ensure that your answers to C1 and C2 are consistent with what you state in the abstract (A3) and about your planned data collection (A4).

Where a researcher answers No to all parts of questions C1 and C2 the form stops there.

When the researcher submits the form, the project supervisor[3] will receive a notification asking them to check the form. If they have no questions they will confirm 'Approval not required' (you will receive a confirmation email); if they have any questions, you will receive an email notification with their comments/any changes required. You will need to address these and re-submit.

Screen F – Departmental vs REC review/approval

Screen F (Yes/No answers only) is another filter screen – it determines whether an application can be reviewed/approved at Departmental level or whether Research Ethics Committee review/approval will be required.

For student applications, Departmental review is conducted by the relevant supervisor (who should be named in B7 of the form). Staff should name the relevant Departmental ethics approver[4].

Informed consent (F6, G5, H4, attachments)

This is the most important element when it comes to conducting research ethically.

Written consent should always be sought other than where there is a good rationale for using verbal consent only. 'Written' consent can be recorded either by the signing of a consent form or by indicating agreement via email or a similar electronic format.

An acceptable rationale for only using verbal consent might be where participants are not fully literate, or in cultures/contexts where the signing of a form might cause anxiety/distrust or raise the risk to participants. The rationale should be provided in question H4.

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[1] Please also see our Instructions on how to *use* the online ethics review system

[2] Please see our pdf version of what questions are asked in the ethics review form

[3] The word 'supervisor' is used to encompass project/dissertation/thesis supervisor (or academic mentor/ advisor) as appropriate.

[4] A list of Departmental ethics approvers can be found here.

Sometimes researchers state that the participants are individuals who would be too busy to give written consent. That is not an acceptable rationale – participants presumably have to be contacted in some way (e.g. in order to agree to an interview), thus 'written' consent can be obtained as part of that communication.[5]

Please refer to our **Guidance on informed consent**, which includes **sample templates** (including a sample verbal consent script).

There is additional guidance relating to consent where **children or vulnerable groups** are involved, or where **social media/internet data** will be used: please see relevant sections below.

PLEASE ensure you check the information sheet/consent form:

- Is it written accessibly/appropriately for the participants in question? (It should not include academic jargon, detailed methodology, etc.);
- Does there need to be more than one version (if different participant groups, with e.g. different literacy levels, are involved)?
- Are the information sheet and consent form consistent with each other AND with what you have stated in the ethics form at G6, e.g. re anonymity (see below). [A common mistake we see is that in the information sheet participants are told their information will be anonymised, but the consent form includes the option/request to use their real names. In most instances the latter option should be deleted.]

Online surveys: a brief version of an information sheet should be provided as the first screen of the survey; participants should only be able to progress to the survey if they have explicitly ticked a box confirming they have understood and agree to take part. (This counts as 'written' consent.)

Ethnographic research/observations: have you given good consideration of how consent will be negotiated, or provided a justification for situations where consent cannot be obtained. Have you considered other ways in which you can let people know that the research is taking place?

Children & other vulnerable groups (F2, G1, H1)

There should be a clear rationale as to why children or vulnerable groups are involved.

Please ensure that you have referred to our guidance 'Working with children and other vulnerable groups', especially with regard to consent. DBS/background checks will be required where the research will involve unsupervised access to children and young people.

Social media / internet data

When using social media or data from the internet consent is not always needed. However, there are some instances where consent *is* required, even when using information posted on a public platform or forum. Please ensure you have referred to our guidance Using data from the internet and social media in research and also Social media, personal data and research guidance.

[5] We have had occasion where consent has been subsequently denied; thus written consent is as much a protection for you as it is for the participant.

Anonymity/naming of participants

As a general rule, we strongly recommend that all participants are anonymised in any research outputs. However, there are of course exceptions: naming participants may be justified where the participant is a public figure, an expert or similar, provided they explicitly consent to their name being used. In some circumstances, for example where participants are activists, they may wish to be named so that their voices are heard.

In all cases where participants may be named you must show a clear understanding of what risks this might present. You should also make clear to participants that you reserve the right to *not* name them if you consider the risks too high.

Use of photography/video

The use of photos or videos compromises anonymity and is more intrusive. We recommend you reflect on the following questions when completing your ethics application:

- Do you have a good understanding of these issues and the implications for consent?
- Does your information sheet/consent form make clear how the photo/video materials will be used, who will have access to the images, how long they will be retained, etc.?
- If the photos/videos will be used in study outputs, have you considered how to anonymise images (and/or voice)?
- Are there individuals in the photos/videos who are not directly involved and have not given consent? How will you handle this?

Gatekeepers (G2)

If you are recruiting participants via a third party (individual or organisation) you must demonstrate you have a good understanding of what risks that might present to participants. For example, will participants feel unduly obligated to take part? Are there risks if the gatekeeper is an employer? In these circumstances you should ensure that the gatekeeper does not know who agrees to take part and that they do not have access to the data that is collected.

If a third party organisation is *providing* data, a data sharing agreement will most likely be needed. You should contact the data librarian for advice.

Sensitive topics (F3, H2, H3)

Where the topic of the research is very sensitive, please reflect on the following questions.

Do you have a deep understanding of how this might affect participants? Are you fully aware of any cultural norms/sensitivities? We recommend that you include some links to sources of support that the participant can access should they be affected (this should usually be added to the end of the information sheet).

If interviews are to be conducted, do you need training/interview practice?

If there is a risk that participants might disclose that they or someone else is at risk of significant harm (and cannot act for themselves), you should think through how you would respond. We recommend referring to the School's Safeguarding in Research and International Activities policy. Students should always first take advice from their project supervisor and/or contact the

research ethics team before taking any action (other than in situations requiring emergency services). Confidentiality should not be broken without first discussing with the participant.

Benefits and/or compensation for participants (G3, G12)

Researchers need to be careful that their research is not extractive. Compensation, or gifts in kind, should be considered, especially where participants are in an economically precarious situation. Please ensure you refer to our guidance Payments and benefits to research participants.

If you will be using crowd-based platforms (such as MTurk, Prolific) you must ensure your name and contact details are given clearly as part of the informed consent at the start, that participants are paid fairly and that their responses are not rejected without very clear reasons.

Data management (G6)

We strongly recommend that researchers complete a Data Management Plan and submit this to the Data Librarian for feedback. There is guidance on these in the Research Data Toolkit or on the webpage Research Data Management and Open Data.

In G6, please ensure you are explicit about where you will store your data. Any data collected on mobile devices (laptops, mobile phone or audio recorders) should be uploaded at the earliest possible time to secure LSE storage (LSE OneDrive or H-space) and deleted from the mobile device. Dropbox or Google drives must not be used due to lack of full compliance with UK/EU data protection regulations.

Similarly, Google forms should not be used for surveys due to data protection regulations. You are advised to use Qualtrics or MS Forms. For other survey software, please refer to the Research Data Toolkit (see link above) or check with the Data Librarian.

Use of translators / transcribers

Researchers should ensure that any translators or transcribers sign a confidentiality agreement. We have a sample Non-disclosure agreement template that can be adapted.

Deception/withholding of information re true purpose (F4, H5)

Where a study involves any use of deception or intentional withholding of information about the true purpose of the study, there should always be strong scientific grounds for this. Participants should always be given a de-brief at the end of the study explaining what the true purpose was and be given the opportunity to re-consent and/or withdraw their data at that point.

Help

If you have any questions, please contact the research ethics team