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# 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]

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## 1. Is ethics review required? (screen C)

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

[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.

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.

Research that will involve **accessing security-sensitive material** (question C3): if your research will involve accessing material related to terrorism or violent extremism of any kind, you should ensure that in addition to your ethics submission you also complete a Data Management Plan and submit this to the Data Librarian for feedback (see section G6 below). This is important to ensure that you access such materials in a safe/secure way.

## 2. Departmental vs REC review/approval (screen F)

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].

## 3. 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.

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.);

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

[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.

- 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?

## 4. 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.

## 5. 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.

## 6. Anonymity vs naming of participants

As a general rule, we strongly recommend that all participants are anonymised or pseudonymised in any research outputs. True anonymisation is difficult to achieve – researchers need to consider both direct and indirect identifiers. For instance, is there any contextual or publicly-available data that if combined could lead to the identification of participants? Researchers should refer to the guidance in the Research Data Toolkit or the UK Data Archive guidance on anonymisation.

Naming participants may be justified in some cases, for instance where the participant is a public figure, an expert or similar, or where participants are activists who may wish to be named so that their voices are heard. In these cases naming them in your research is fine provided they explicitly consent to their name being used.

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.

## 7. 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?

## 8. 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.

## 9. 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.

Note that for research that will involve discussion of topics that may be upsetting to participants, an outline of the planned questions should be attached to the ethics form submission.

## 10. 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.

## 11. 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.

## 12. Use of Generative AI, translators and transcription services

The use of Generative AI tools in research can give rise to data protection/privacy issues. Please refer to the LSE Guidance on the use of Generative AI for research[6]. Furthermore, some participants may feel uncomfortable with the thought that the information they provide will be fed into AI tools. If you plan to use any personal data in a Generative AI tool and/or the data will be shared with third parties via the tool or used to train models, this should be explained in the Participant Information Sheet and consent obtained.

Where (human) translators or transcribers will be used, researchers should ensure they sign a confidentiality agreement. We have a sample Non-disclosure agreement template that can be adapted.

[6] https://www.lse.ac.uk/DSI/Assets/documents/LSE-Guidance-on-the-use-of-Generative-AI-for-research-2024-09-26.pdf Further guidance on the use of generative AI to support research are available at: https://www.lse.ac.uk/DSI/AI/AI-Research

Researchers should be aware that automated/AI powered translation or transcription services can give rise to data protection concerns, especially in the case of sensitive research. Please refer to the Research Data Toolkit (link above) and contact the Cyber Security & Risk team for advice. Similarly, Large Language Models such as ChatGPT should not be used to upload interview transcripts or other data which may be sensitive or include commercial data where you are not the copyright holder. If in doubt please contact the Research Data Librarian.

**Note: Use of AI when completing the ethics review form**

Please note that whilst use of AI may help give you some useful ideas of some of the ethics considerations to bear in mind and ways to mitigate any ethics concerns your study may give rise to, we strongly discourage researchers from copying responses from AI into the ethics form. Doing so is likely to result in the inclusion of generic information that is not relevant to your study or that contradicts information you provide elsewhere in the form or attachments. Where this is the case it is likely to delay the review of your ethics form.

## 13. Use of Crowdsourcing platforms

When planning to use online crowdsourcing platforms such as Prolific, MTurk (Amazon Mechanical Turk) or Crowd-Flower, we recommend that researchers consider the following issues before posting their call for participants.

**Compensating participants fairly**

To collect data on these platforms, researchers must agree to pay respondents; the pay should be fair (i.e. based on the platform's instructions and at least equivalent to the minimum living wage in the country where participants are based). In the call for participants and informed consent information, it should be clear to them what minimum payment they can expect. Clear and honest information is essential if researchers want to avoid a situation where participants get upset, abandon the study, and/or complain to the online platform or to the School.

Any participant promised payment (in the information sheet/description of the study/call for participants) should receive it, unless they do not meet eligibility criteria which have been clearly stated. This includes cases where there is an element of deception in the research design and, following the de-brief, participants no longer consent to having their data included.

In some cases the research design may include the payment of bonuses to participants. However, researchers need to ensure that the payment of bonuses does not compromise research integrity (for example, if pay is based on response time, this might create an incentive for ill-thought-out responses or responses that are too short.

Participants' survey responses should not be rejected without good case - this can affect their rating on the platform, and may thus lead to loss of future work/income.

**Budgeting**

It is essential that researchers possess sufficient budget to pay participants the maximum amount that they have been promised. When budgeting for participant recruitment,

researchers should ensure that they have enough to fund the maximum number of participants, for the longest time they take to complete the tasks or answer questions.

**Debriefing research participants**

If participants are presented with different conditions, or any fictitious information, then an explanatory de-brief section should be added at the end of the survey/experiment. When participants cannot be fully informed about the research ahead of time (i.e., an element of deception is used), then they should be asked to explicitly consent to data inclusion after being debriefed (this is key to confirm their informed consent).

## 14. 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