

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the [LSE Research Ethics Policy and Procedures](#)

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent is widely accepted as the cornerstone of ethical practice in research that involves human participants or personal data. It entails providing participants with clear information about the purpose of the study, what their participation will involve and how their data will be stored and used in the long-term. The informed consent process should stress that participation is voluntary and can be ended at any point during the research.

There may be some circumstances where gaining informed consent is not possible - for instance, in the case of some anthropological field work¹, or some research in behavioural science - but in these cases the lack of informed consent should be specially argued.

Written or Verbal?

Written consent should be sought wherever possible. Aside from its generally being a better guarantee that participants have indeed given their consent, written consent also provides an auditable record that will prove useful in the event of a dispute or questions arising later regarding the use or storage of data. Research that proposes to use only verbal consent will need to justify why written consent is inappropriate for the study.

For **online surveys** or other digital data collection, appropriate ways should be sought to ensure that participants *explicitly* signal their consent (e.g. by adding their name and explicitly ticking an “I agree” box).

Researchers involved in collecting data from social media platforms should refer to appropriate guidance, for example the [Association of Internet Researchers' ethics guidance](#), or the [UKRIO 'Good practice in internet-mediated research'](#).

Seeking informed and freely-given consent

Whichever method is adopted, researchers must make every effort to ensure that participants are *genuinely* informed about the study and that they have freely consented to take part. The usual method in the case of written consent is that a relatively (but not overly) detailed information-sheet should be given to participants along with a briefer consent form. On both, researchers should **avoid jargon** and use language that is appropriate for the intended participants.

The information sheet

Except in exceptional circumstances (which will require special justification) the information sheet should cover the following topics:

- name of the project and purpose of the research, including:
 - the researcher's institution
 - funding source (if appropriate)
- what participation will involve (e.g. if interviews are proposed, how many and how long they will be and where they will be held)
- risks to participants and benefits to participants and others
- that participants are free to withdraw at any time without prejudice and without providing a reason
- that if the participant withdraws, they should be given the option to have any information they have provided thus far to be removed from the study²

¹ Researchers should refer to the Association of Social Anthropologists' ethical guidelines: <https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf>

- what usage will be made of the data: during the research itself; in the storage and possible archiving of the data (or deletion at the end of the study), sharing of the data, and re-use of the data in possible future research
- strategies for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity
- contact details:
 - contact details for researchers
 - who to contact should they have a complaint (namely, research.ethics@lse.ac.uk)
 - how to request a copy of the data about themselves glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk

A sample participant Information Sheet and consent form is attached in appendix to this document; a Word version can be found [here](#). This, however, is simply intended as one possible way to produce a form that covers the important issues - researchers will, of course, produce their own forms tailored to the particular research context and participant groups involved in their research project (for instance, for online surveys, for research involving children, etc.). Other examples can be found at:

<https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/legal-ethical/consent-data-sharing/overview>

It is important that arrangements are made for researchers carefully to talk through the information sheet and consent form with participants before they are asked to sign the form, and that appropriate time is allowed in order for participants to make this decision.

Opt in/Opt Out

It is generally recognized that assuming that participants have given their consent on the basis that they have not taken an opportunity explicitly to opt out is very unsatisfactory. The General Data Protection Regulation (coming into force May 2018) states that “Silence, pre-ticked boxes or inactivity” is presumed inadequate to signal consent. The default assumption is, therefore, that all research carried out at LSE involves an ‘opt in’ consent procedure. There may, however, be special circumstances in which ‘opt out’ may arguably be the only pragmatically feasible option (e.g. for large studies conducted in schools). Any such proposals should be submitted to the LSE Research Ethics Committee (REC) and will be subject to special scrutiny.

Sensitive issues

Where the research involves sensitive issues (such as questions of ethnicity, sexual behaviour, health, political beliefs, or illegal behaviour), then special attention should clearly be paid to ensuring that the participants are fully informed ahead of time of the nature of the research and are given ample time to think before deciding whether or not to become involved. They should also be reminded during the study that they are free to discontinue their participation at any point. Particular attention also needs to be paid to the confidentiality and [data management](#) of such data.

For further guidance on this we suggest referring to the book ‘[Undertaking Sensitive Research in the Health and Social Sciences](#)’). Hard and e-copies of this are available in the LSE Library.

Research involving vulnerable participants or those with diminished capacity to give informed consent

Participants may be vulnerable for a number of reasons, for instance due to innate characteristics (such as age, in the case of children or the elderly, ethnicity, or sexuality), or due to physical impairment. Vulnerability may also be due to a participant’s economic or political situation. Research involving vulnerable participants raises complex ethical issues concerning which it is difficult to formulate generally applicable rules. Researchers should consult relevant guidance and

² Up until publication: if a participant withdraws after research results have been published, the publication does not need to be changed. However, the data should not be used for further research or publications.

discuss their proposals with those with experience in conducting such research. Useful information on 'special cases' of consent can be found at <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/create-manage/consent-ethics/consent?index=6>. All such research should be submitted to the REC who will give special scrutiny to the proposed procedures for informed consent in such cases.

Data Protection and information security

An important part of informed consent is that participants should be aware of what will happen to the data that is collected during the study, what arrangements will be made to keep participants' identities secret and the data confidential. If it is proposed to share data with other researchers or bodies (or even if this is a possibility), participants must be fully informed.

Researchers must ensure that they comply with the UK Data Protection Act. The Act allows special provisions for research, and researchers should consult the LSE guidance on [Data Protection and Research](#). Researchers should also consult the School's policies and guidance on Information Security, including encryption and audio and video recording. These are available at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/intranet/LSEServices/IMT/about/policies/home.aspx>.

Deception

Certain kinds of social research – particularly in psychology or the behavioural sciences – would be rendered pointless if participants were fully informed in advance of the details of that research. Where an element of deception is involved in a study, the Research Ethics Committee will want to feel assured

(a) that there is no other non-deceptive way of investigating the research problem at issue; **and that the case can be made that the study's prospective scientific (or applied) value outweighs the disvalue of the deception involved.**

(b) that, before data collection begins, participants are informed about the nature of the study as fully as is consistent with the scientific aims of the study;

(c) that the deception will be explained to the participants as early as possible – preferably at the conclusion of their participation, and certainly no later than the conclusion of the overall study's data collection; **and** that participants will be explicitly informed, at that point, that they may withdraw their data³;

(d) that the study does not involve the possibility of participants suffering any degree of pain or substantial emotional distress.

Further information

This policy document cannot cover every type of research context. Where there is any uncertainty, please contact the Research Governance Manager via research.ethics@lse.ac.uk. Please also refer to the School's [Research Ethics Policy and guidance](#).

³ This is in line with the advice given on deception by relevant professional bodies – see, e.g., the American Psychological Association's [Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct](#) (2016) Ethical Standard 8.07

Appendix: Sample Information sheet and consent form

[Title of research study]

Name of researcher:

Department/Centre, LSE

Information for participants

Thank you for considering participating in this study which will take place from [Date from/to].

This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant, if you agree to take part.

1. What is the research about?

Set out the aim of this project/research, and also the methods to be used to collect information, in terms that will be understood by your intended participants

2. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part I/we will ask you to sign a consent form which you can sign and return in advance of the **interview/focus group meeting** or sign at the meeting.

3. What will my involvement be?

Be clear about what participation will involve

4. How do I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw at any point of the study, without having to give a reason. If any questions during the **interview/focus group** make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them and you can withdraw from the **group/interview** at any time for any reason. Withdrawing from the study will have no effect on you. If you withdraw from the study we will not retain the information you have given thus far, unless you are happy for us to do so.

5. What will my information be used for?

I/we will use the collected information for... [a research project, academic paper, future research, etc.]

6. Will my taking part and my data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?

The records from this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Only **myself and my supervisor** will have access to the files and any audio tapes. Your data will be anonymised – your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study.⁴ All digital files, transcripts and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Any hard copies of research information will be kept in locked files at all times.

7. What if I have a question or complaint?

If you have any questions regarding this study please contact the researcher, [X], on [email address].

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the LSE Research Governance Manager via research.ethics@lse.ac.uk.

To request a copy of the data held about you please contact: glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk

If you are happy to take part in this study, please sign the consent sheet attached.

⁴ There are some circumstances in which you may – with their agreement – name your participants in your research; however, caution should be exercised, and you are advised to discuss this with either your supervisor or the REC via research.ethics@lse.ac.uk

CONSENT FORM

[Title of research study]

Name of researcher:

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY.

I agree to taking part in the study	YES / NO
I understand that I am free to decline to participate in this research study, or I may withdraw my participation at any point without penalty. My decision whether or not to participate in this research study will have no negative impacts on me either personally or professionally.	YES / NO
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions I have.	YES / NO
I understand that my data will be... [specify how long (anonymised) data will be kept and whether it will be either archived for re-use/maintained for future research, or destroyed at the end of the study.]	YES / NO
I agree to the interview/focus group being audio recorded [delete if not being audio recorded]	YES / NO
Add additional statements for e.g. video recording, photographs, etc. if relevant	YES / NO

Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant name:

Signature: _____ Date _____

Interviewer name:

Signature: _____ Date _____

For information please contact: **<<name and email address of researcher>>**

Review schedule

Review interval	Next review due by	Next review start
3 years	AY 2020-21	October 2020

Version history

Version	Date	Approved by	Notes
2	1/11/2017	Research Committee	

Links

Reference	Link
Research Ethics Policy and guidance	https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/resEthPolPro.pdf

Contacts

Position	Name	Email	Notes
Research Governance Manager	Lyn Grove	l.grove@lse.ac.uk	Co-author (with REC)