University of the Witwatersrand

Guidelines for Human Research Ethics Clearance
Application (Non-Medical)

It is important that research which involves gathering data from people (human participants) treats these participants fairly and meets ethical standards. Broadly speaking this involves full disclosure (telling them about the research), non-coercion, and consideration of privacy issues. Remember that ethical conduct in collecting and analysing data from human participants is part of necessary research training, and will help make you a better researcher.

Applying to the right ethics committee

- If you are an Honours (or 4th year student of a professional degree), or a Masters by Coursework and Research Report student, then you should apply for ethics clearance from the appropriate School ethics committee. Exceptions are where you are dealing with vulnerable participants, minors, or where the project is rated as Medium or High Risk. In these instances, you should apply to the main University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), hereafter termed the University ethics committee. (There are some exceptions to this rule, ask your School committee chair for advice). Applying to the School committee is done by completing the Word version of the application form which is available from the School committee chairs.

- If you are a Masters by Dissertation or PhD student, or applying as a member of University staff and not for degree purposes, you must apply to the University ethics committee. The application must be made online at https://www.witsethics.co.za/Login.aspx, not by completing a Word document.

- In both instances, the questions on the application form are exactly the same, and the same documentation must be supplied.

Completing the Ethics Application Form

Please read the application form very carefully.

- Consideration of Risk is an important part of the application process. Definitions of Risk used by University and School ethics committees are available for download from the ethics website and are given at the end of the Word version of the application form – read these definitions carefully. The Risk Table is downloadable from the University Ethics committee website at https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/ (click on Non-Medical and then scroll to the bottom of the page).

- An expert is someone who is giving their professional judgement or opinion on something, and thus they are speaking in an official capacity. Examples of vulnerable groups are given in the notes at the end of the Risk table, please look at this.

- Additional researchers. These are people who are assisting you in your project, and may be field assistants or translators. If you are using such people, they much be named and you must specify exactly what their role is in your project. If you are a student, your supervisor is not an additional researcher. If you are a staff member, you may name students as additional researchers, but if they are collecting data for their own projects as part of your overarching project, they are not covered by your ethics application and they must obtain their own ethics clearance.

Supplying the correct documents

To make an ethics application you need to supply:

- Completed Ethics Application Form.
• Copy of the Research proposal. Ideally this should be the final confirmed and approved proposal, but you can also apply for ethics clearance if you have written the proposal and it is submitted to the School/Department/Faculty body for review or examination.
• Copy of proposed Research instruments (e.g. questionnaires/interview schedules).
• Participant Information Sheets (for each different sample group and/or instrument used/description of the exhibition/performance/ethnographic method).
• Consent /assent forms (for each different sample group and/or instrument used).
• Relevant permission letters if required (from, e.g. company's HR department, National authorities such as Government departments, etc.) - consult the Guidance on the Use of Permission Letters document.

Obtaining an Ethics Waiver
If you are doing research using secondary data or archives which do not involve human subjects, you may be eligible to receive an ethics waiver (see the Risk table for explanation). If this is the case, you must still complete the ethics application form, although your answers for many of the questions may be NO or N/A.

• All research is subject to ethical review.
• Research that does not involve human participants e.g. use of trade statistics, GDP figures, theoretical or conceptual studies, use of secondary non-human data, use of historical archives, and has no risk (see Risk table for explanation) may qualify to receive an Ethics Waiver. Completion of the Ethics Application Form in full is still required, although answers for many questions on the form will be No or N/A.
• All Ethics Waiver applications are recorded, reported and receive an ethics waiver number.

Obtaining permission from authorities
Please refer to the document entitled Guidance on the use of permission letters.

The Participant Information Sheet
The Participant Information Sheet is a short letter (no longer than a page) written in the first person by the researcher, to potential participants. It summarises, in language understandable to the participant, what the research is about, outlines the promises made by the researcher, and explains what will be required from participants. Participants keep this information, which must contain contact details of the researcher(s) and their supervisor (when applicable)

Where potential participants are under 18 years of age, they are legally considered to be minors and thus a separate Participant Information Sheet is required for the parent/legal guardian. This should be worded appropriately for the person being addressed.

The Participant Information Sheet should be short (not more than a page) and should include the following:
• A polite greeting to the potential participant.
• An introduction to yourself if they don't know you, and an explanation of your role as a researcher.
• The title of your research project.
• A brief description of the research, its aims, and potential/direct benefits.
• An invitation (using a friendly tone) to the participant to become involved in the study (e.g. I am inviting you to take part in an interview... (etc)).
• A brief explanation of how/why they were selected.
• An explanation of what specific involvement in the study will require potential participants to do (procedures, duration, place, when).
If ambiguity or misunderstanding arises, clarification that the research does not involve treatment and/or payment.

That participation is voluntary, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the participant is otherwise entitled (e.g. current access to facilities). (If this is not made clear, the researcher risks the accusation that consent was obtained by subtle coercion).

Promises of anonymity (not identifying the person) and/or confidentiality (what is being done with the information gathered). Alternatively (depending on the research in question) potential participants should be informed if they – or their institution/department – may be identifiable in a final research report, even if pseudonyms are used.

In the case of focus groups, a statement indicating that confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

That the participant may refuse to answer questions about which they feel uncomfortable, and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Where applicable, an explanation of any foreseeable risks, discomforts, side effects or benefits (refer to the Risk level categories definitions at the end of the ethics application form, and the document downloadable from the ethics website).

In cases where participation in a research procedure is likely to awaken feelings of past trauma or emotional distress, arrangements must have been made for counselling, and details including the name of a counsellor and their contact information and any costs involved must be provided in the information sheet.

A description about how the data will be managed, stored, retained, re-used or deleted.

How the study will be reported, where it will be available, and to whom (e.g. in a research report / dissertation/ thesis; at seminars/ conferences; in academic papers).

[Note: Wits dissertations and theses are available on the world-wide web through Wired Space accessed through the library website].

An invitation to contact the researcher at any time should the potential participant have questions.

An offer to make a summary of the research available, should the participant request this.

Full Wits University contact details of the researcher and the supervisor(s), as well as the HREC (NM) Secretary.

An example of a participant information sheet is downloadable from the Ethics website. Please tailor the specifics of the information sheet to your particular study.

The use of online data-gathering instruments
In the case of online questionnaires completed anonymously, participants still need to be told about the research, the relevant promises by the researcher, and that their answers, once submitted, will be used for research purposes. This information is usually put on the first page of the online questionnaire. Participants need to be told in this information, that submitting the completed questionnaire is taken to mean consent for participating in the research.

The formal (signed) Consent Form
This is a document that will be signed by participants who agree to become involved in the study. It is NOT the same as the letter of permission. It is written as if by the participant, and includes the following:

- A statement that the research has been explained to them and that they understand about the research;
- A brief list summarising what they have been told (the promises/explanations made to them);
• A clear statement about what the participant is consenting to, by becoming involved in the research (e.g. agreeing to be interviewed / to complete a questionnaire / to be watched as they go about their work). If audio- or video-recording is involved, a separate sentence allowing the potential participant to agree /disagree to being recorded is required in the consent form.
• Consent to retain, destroy or re-use data.
• This form should be signed, dated, and returned to the researcher. However, the Ethics Committee needs to see only a blank copy of the form to be signed when making an ethics application.

In the case of language barriers, consider translating the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (if appropriate), or involve an interpreter who can explain information about the study to potential participants in their language of choice. If any documents are going to be translated for the purposes of data collection, then these MUST be supplied at the ethics application stage.

In the case of communicatively impaired participants, the consent process may require modification to facilitate comprehension of information about the study. In such instances, informed consent should be considered a process rather than a once-off event. The process should be tailored to the level of each participant’s ability. Refer to guidelines in:

Assent forms for children under the age of 18
If the participants are under the age of 18, the form they sign agreeing to participate in the research is called an Assent Form, while the form signed by their parent/legal guardian is a Consent Form. In this instance, separate information sheets and consent/assent forms are needed for these groups. The assent form should be phrased using age-appropriate language that is comprehensible to the minors concerned.

Informal or verbal informed consent
This applies in cases where formal signed consent is not possible or appropriate. Examples include where the research is conducted in informal settings, or in the street, or where signed forms might create risks or power differentials that would not otherwise exist, or in the case of illiteracy.
For informal consent, a full and complete formal consent form must still be supplied. This is because it provides the text which the researcher can then read to the participant. On the Ethics Application Form, you must provide a justification for not obtaining written consent.

An example of a consent form is downloadable from the Ethics website. Please note that this example must be tailored to your specific project.

Social Media and Online Research
Social Media Websites (SMW) such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, You Tube, and other online forums (e.g. online discussion forums such as Blogs/Microblogs; information sites such as Wikipedia; and virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft/Farmville) are increasingly being used as sources for research data.
‘Data mining’ of SMW and online forums is subject to ethical procedures which include:
• Abiding by the privacy and user terms and conditions, and licence agreements of the data platform. Here the researcher is required to familiarise themselves with these per online platform they use. (e.g. Twitter terms of use state that an individual’s username
must always be used when displaying a tweet/retweet however other sites and closed forums may request non-disclosure of identity);

- Requesting access/permission from the creator/moderator of the platform you will be using, as well as from the members of the platform you will be using as to whether you can data mine from the platform;
- Principles of informed consent must be applied to social media and online research such as: (1) making participants aware of who you are, (2) what research you are doing, (3) how you plan use the online platform/data, (4) what you require from the online platform and the online members, (5) seeking their informed consent to data mine the online platform, (6) that participation is voluntary and right of withdrawal is provided for;
- As individual consent is not always possible on large SMW and online platforms, other appropriate avenues should be explored for example by posting the above c 1-6 upon joining the platform/group and each time you ‘logon’ to the platform to collect data;
- SMW and online platforms where minors and vulnerable categories are specifically members and participants of the forum are subject to the same guidelines as outlined in the Risk Table and Ethics Application Form. The same applies to research on sensitive topics.

For more information please see:

**Commercial Research and Intellectual Property Ownership**

- Research conducted should be primarily for academic purposes.
- Any research that is commercially commissioned must go through the Registrar’s Office and Wits Enterprise. A collaboration agreement, memorandum of understanding between parties and CORY may apply.
- Commercial research collaborations must be stated in the Participation Information Sheet and consent from participants regarding this must be explicitly stated in the Consent Form.
- The University of the Witwatersrand and the researcher have the right to retain intellectual property over the research data in instances of research collaborations.

**Use of incentives**

It is NOT compulsory to offer any incentives to participants to encourage them to take part in your research. It is also potentially problematic ethically if you do so because this can bias your sample (in terms of who participates) and bias your responses (in terms of what information participants give you).

- If you want to use students as participants, please note that for any curricula incentives (e.g. additional percentage points added to student marks for particular courses), permission is required from the Registrar’s office and DVC. Guidelines on this procedure are currently being drawn up (TBC).
- If you are running for example an all-day workshop, then light refreshments/snacks can be included. These refreshments are not considered to be ‘incentives’ in this context. If you require participants to travel to a particular place to participate in the study, then a contribution to travel expenses is permitted. The recommended maximum is R150 (this may be in cash).
- If your participants are for example consultants, their participation must be voluntary and in their own time/expense. You cannot pay them their hourly consultancy rate for participation.
• If your study involves performance, you may employ professionals such as actors. In this instance, they are NOT participants in the study, and you need to clearly distinguish their roles as professionals from any potential participation in the study (e.g. interview).

• If you are meeting participants in for example a coffee shop, then buying the participant coffee is appropriate. Buying participants alcohol is not allowed under any circumstances.

• For all types of participants including in government, no bribes or financial incentives of any sort must be offered at any time or in any way.

• In all these instances, where an incentive of any kind is offered, the recommended maximum is R150. This may be in cash, in the form of a voucher, or the monetary equivalent of (for example) a meal.

Auto-Ethnography

Some projects may involve auto-ethnographic or collaborative auto-ethnographic elements. Any such research should involve an ethics application, since there may be particular ethical challenges inherent in such research and also potential risks to the researcher and any potential collaborators. In cases where the research may involve exploration of sensitive topics and/or traumatic experiences, care will need to be taken to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality are not breached. For guidance, please refer to:


Performance and Exhibitions

A distinction needs to be made as to whether a performance-based research project involves the performers as research participants or merely as performers. If the performers are required to participate as research participants (e.g. there is some kind of auto-ethnographic element, or interviews or focus groups or reflective exercises), then ethical clearance must be sought and participants must provide consent. If the performers are merely performing as professionals (actors, dancers etc) and are not part of the research, then they do not need to provide consent and an ethics waiver application may be appropriate. For such projects, department-specific contracts should be drawn up for the performers.

• In cases where performances may include sensitive topics or re-enactment of traumatic experiences, care will need to be taken to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality are not breached.

• In the case of an exhibition of work based on the responses or contribution of research participants, it must be made clear to participants via the Participant Information Sheet that their responses/contributions will be included in an exhibition, as well as exactly how and where their responses/contributions may be used.

• Similarly, if video or audio recordings of participants’ responses or contributions are to be included in a website or shown as part of a conference presentation/exhibition/performance, the precise nature of their use needs to be made clear to participants in the Participant Information Sheet.

Electronic Signatures

The Ethics Application Form must be signed by the applicant and the supervisor. Electronic signatures are acceptable where applicants are applying to the School ethics committees. Applicants to the main University ethics committee who complete the online Ethics Application Form must also supply one complete hard copy set of all documents (including the application form) to the Ethics office in the Research Office. The hard-copy Ethics Application Form must be signed by the researcher (and the supervisor if the applicant is a student). If the supervisor is
not available, the application form can be signed by proxy by a senior academic from the student’s department/School.

**Ethics training**
The application form asks about ethics training that you have received. There are a number of options for completing ethics training – for example, ethics workshops are run by the University Ethics Committee, or ethics training may be completed online.

**TRREE**
This is an online ethics training resource.
- Ethics training can be completed free of charge on the TRREE website - [https://elearning.trree.org/](https://elearning.trree.org/)
- You only need to complete Module 1 (EN): Introduction to Research Ethics.
- You will need to register on the system to complete the training.
- You can download the notes for reading later.
- It takes 2-3 hours to complete the module.
- There is a quiz at the end of module with MCQ questions; you must obtain at least 70% at the first try.
- To obtain a certificate after completion of Module 1: while logged in, return to the home screen and click on Module 1 (EN) again; the system will open up a page with objectives for the module; scroll down and you should find your certificate under the heading 'Training Material'.

**Macquarie University**
This is an online ethics training resource. It is more suited to humanities and social science projects.
- Ethics training can be completed free of charge on the website - [https://ethicstraining.mq.edu.au/](https://ethicstraining.mq.edu.au/)
- You will need to register on the system to complete the course.
- It takes an estimated 4-5 hours to complete the module.
- There is a quiz at the end of each section with MCQ questions. If you fail one section, you may take the quiz in that section again, but you can only do so after 24 hours. You must correctly answer 2/3 of the questions in each section to pass that section.
- After all sections have been passed, you can print a certificate for the ethics training.

**Resources you may wish to consult regarding ethics**
One of the primary 'foundation' documents for research ethics is the Belmont Report, Office of the Secretary, US Department of Health and Human Services. The document 'Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research', produced by The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (April 18, 1979), in the USA, is one of the best guides to general principles.
[http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.htm](http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.htm)

**Southern Africa specific resources on research ethics**

**The Medical Research Council**
The Medical Research Council, South Africa, also has a comprehensive discussion of research ethics on its website. These guidelines relate primarily to medical research, but they may be useful in familiarising researchers with ethical standards, principles and expectations. If your research in the social sciences and humanities involves medical or health aspects, these guidelines will be especially useful. Researchers from the biomedical, biological or physical sciences who are conducting social science-type research may also find these materials useful. Find them at: [http://www.mrc.ac.za/research/ethics/guideline-documents](http://www.mrc.ac.za/research/ethics/guideline-documents)


**After you have received ethics clearance**

If you have applied for ethics clearance from the main University committee, the *ethics clearance certificate* must be signed and a copy (scanned or hard copy) returned to the Ethics office (contact details below), or if required by School committees. In receiving ethics clearance, the researcher agrees to the following:

- That you recognise that it is your responsibility to conduct research in an ethical manner according to Guidelines of the University of the Witwatersrand, according to any laws and/or legal frameworks that may apply, and according to the norms and expectations of my discipline;
- That in preparing this Application for Ethics Clearance form, I have consulted the Guidelines for Human Research Ethics Clearance Application/Non-Medical (available on this website [https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/](https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/)) (that is to say, this document);
- That in receiving ethics clearance, I agree to abide by the conditions of clearance, which are that your research is undertaken using the instruments, data collection methods and participant groups described in your application, and for which you have received clearance;
- That any changes to the instruments, data collection methods or participant groups used must be communicated in writing to the Secretariat, along with a copy of the clearance certificate and all revised documentation, with a motivation for why the change is needed. These revised documents are then reviewed by Ethics committee members (from the main University committee or the School committee, depending where your original application was considered), and you will be informed of the outcome of this process. Please note that the risk level of the project may change if you are using different/additional instruments, which will also be considered in the ethics review process. You may not collect data using these revised instruments/methods/participant groups until clearance has been obtained.
- That any ethics breaches or problems during or after data collection must be reported immediately to the Secretariat.

**Questions and queries**

The ethics office is located at:
Research Office, Solomon Mahlangu House (east campus), 10th floor, room 10004.

**Secretariat:**

*Main University HREC and for all initial queries, including using the online form:*
Shaun Schoeman, Shaun.Schoeman@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-1408)

*Reporting and management of School committees:*
Charmaine Khumalo, Charmaine.khumalo@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-1788)
Main University HREC chair:
Prof Jasper Knight (Room 118, Bernard Price building, east campus), jasper.knight@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-6508)

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