University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Ethics Application Form* for *Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical)
(SCHOOL ETHICS COMMITTEES: Revised November 2023)

Instructions

1. This form must be completed by Honours (4th year) and Masters by Coursework and Research Report students who require ethics clearance, or for ethics clearance for coursework activities as part of a taught degree. Note that staff non-degree applications, PhD and research Masters students must complete the online form.
2. Completed applications must be submitted to the relevant School Ethics Committee.
3. Applications may be submitted as hard or soft (electronic) copies, but the first page of the application must contain the signatures of the student and supervisor. Final revised versions must be in soft (electronic) copy as all documentation will be archived.
4. Incomplete or handwritten applications will **NOT** be considered, including where signatures are missing.
5. Necessary supporting documents (e.g. *Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form*, copies of instruments, permission letters, etc), must be provided.

SECTION A

Please ensure that you have included all the relevant documents in your Ethics Application:

- Completed ***Ethics Application Form***.
- Copy of the ***Research Proposal***.
- Copy of proposed ***Research instruments*** (e.g. questionnaires/interview schedules).
- ***Participant Information Sheets*** (for each different sample group and/or instrument used).
- ***Consent forms*** (for each different sample group and/or instrument used).
- Relevant ***letters requesting permission and/or letters granting permission*** if required - consult the ***Guidance on the use of Permission Letters*** document.

Please complete the signature page below to indicate that you agree with the conditions of application:

SIGNATURES (REQUIRED)

Declaration: We, the signatories, declare that all information on this form is correct and that we will strive to maintain the highest ethical standards in this research at all times, according to disciplinary and university expectations, recognising that ethical practice in research is always a continuing process.

I as the Principal Investigator have prepared this application. I recognise that it is my responsibility to conduct my 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. 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/) and have familiarised myself with the ethical guidelines specific to my discipline. I declare that no data will be collected from human participants until ethics clearance has been obtained.	☐ Yes ☐ No

By signing this form, the researcher and supervisor of this project undertake to ensure that any revisions to this application that are required by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) and School Ethics Committees are made and approved before data collection with human participants commences.

	Date	Name	Signature*
Applicant			
Supervisor			

*electronic signatures are permitted but there are requirements governing this – please see *Guidelines for Applicants* document.

SECTION B

1. Summary of risk categories of this research project	
1.1 Does this project involve human participants? *If NO, an ethics waiver may be appropriate. Please complete the Ethics Waiver application form*	☐ Yes ☐ No
1.2 I have read and understood the risk categories table *Applicants must have read the table of risk level category definitions on the final page of this document. This table is also available on the University Ethics Committee webpage.*	☐ Yes ☐ No

1.3 The applicant must tick the box for the category that best applies to this project:

Risk category	Tick the appropriate box
No risk	
Minimal risk	
Low risk	
Medium risk	
High risk	

Medium or high risk applications must be submitted by the School Ethics Committee to the University HREC

1.4 Will human participant research involve **vulnerable categories**?	☐ Yes ☐ No
If **YES** state which ones:	
If **YES**, how will **existing vulnerabilities** among research participants be addressed?	
1.5 Does this research expose either the participant(s) or the researcher(s) to any **potential risks or harm** to which they would not otherwise be exposed?	☐ Yes ☐ No
If **YES**, describe the nature of the risk and how **potential risks or harm** will be addressed. *See the document for guidance on a distress protocol on the ethics website, if needed*	

NB: Vulnerability is context specific. The term 'vulnerable categories' includes, among others, children under 18, orphans, prisoners, persons with cognitive or communication disorders, people who are traumatised or currently in traumatic situations. Vulnerable categories do not necessarily include poor or marginalised communities, older people, women, people with disabilities (unless it results in diminished capacity to give informed consent). Not all research involving 'vulnerable categories' is Medium or High Risk research: here vulnerability must be considered in terms of the nature of the research and the context in which the research is carried out. Where necessary, include details of steps to be taken to facilitate data collection across language barriers (e.g. interpretation or translation).

2. Researcher's personal data	
Your family name:	Your first name:
Title: ☐ Mr ☐ Ms ☐ Other : _____	
School:	
Your student number:	
Your email:	
Your tel number:	
Name of supervisor(s):	
Your supervisor's Wits email:	
Your supervisor's Wits tel number:	

2.1 Is this application for a multi-student project (i.e. several students working on exactly the same topic under the same supervisor)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If **YES**: List the names and student numbers of additional students working on this project:

3. Research project

3.1 Title of research project:

3.2 Is this research for degree purposes? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If so, for what degree?

☐ Honours ☐ Masters (research report) ☐ Other (specify) _____

3.3 Has the proposal been **approved** by the relevant School or Faculty higher degrees committee or other unit?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Submitted and pending

3.4 Will any **additional researchers** be covered by this ethics protocol (including translators/interpreters, research assistants, etc. but not including supervisors)?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please specify their names, affiliations and roles:

3.5 What are the **aims and objectives** of the research? (Please be specific)

3.6 Summary or abstract of the research (100 words maximum)

Give a brief outline of the research plan such that reviewers can understand what the study is about, who the participants are (and where/how you are recruiting them), and how you will collect the data.

3.7 Do you have any **financial or material interests or a relationship** associated with your research participants or with the organisations that you will be involved with in your research? (such as a familial relationship; lecturer/student relationship; collegial relationship; employer/employee relationship)

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please **explain** this potential conflict of interest:

Also explain how you will **manage any existing or potential conflicts of interest and potential coercion** during recruitment and data collection, if applicable:

4. Formal permission

4.1 Where will the research be carried out? (Please give a specific location)

4.2 Name all organisations or research sites where permissions are needed, if applicable:

4.3 Has appropriate **formal permission been obtained from these organisations or research sites**, if required?

☐ Yes (attached) ☐ Not required ☐ Pending (must be supplied before ethics clearance can be give

NB: Obtaining permission is often necessary when conducting research *within the premises* of a particular site such as an ethnographic study of the functioning of a supermarket or a school, or the way staff interact with clients in a clinic or how members of a closed social media group interact/post on a specific topic. Permission is also required to use data from personal communication with participants or experts. Please note that any research done on Wits University campuses with employees or students of the University requires formal permission from the Registrar. Please read the *Guidance on the Use of Permission Letters* document on the Ethics website.

5. How will data on human research participants be collected (instruments, methods, procedures)? (tick all applicable boxes) (**NB:** All applicable instruments must be attached to the application)

- ☐ Hard copy questionnaires or psychometric tests, etc.
- ☐ Online instruments (e.g. questionnaires, surveys)
- ☐ Individual interviews (e.g. structured, semi-structured, etc.)
- ☐ Group interviews (e.g. seminar/discussion groups, focus groups, etc.)
- ☐ Ethnographic observation, participant observation, other informal descriptive, and/or interactive methods (you **must explain** the ethnographic methods in the box below)
- ☐ Autoethnography (you are the participant in such a study, please refer to the *Guidelines* document)
- ☐ Community-based methods or techniques such as drama workshops, community theatre, training workshops, participant rural appraisal, rapid rural appraisal, etc. (you **must explain** in the box below)
- ☐ Research on/in therapeutic or counselling contexts
- ☐ Putting on your own exhibition / public performance
- ☐ Observation of public performances, and/or public behaviour observation
- ☐ Photography
- ☐ Video recording
- ☐ Audio recording (e.g. of interviews)
- ☐ Use of data from social media
- ☐ Other research methods or techniques (you **must explain** in the box below)

Explanation of **all research methods** specified above, and explanation of any other **research methods that are not listed** above:

6. Who will the research participants be?

6.1 List the **different participant groups** that you will be working with in your project:

6.2 Specify the **age range** and **sample size** for **each participant group**:

6.3 Specify **which participant group** will be doing **which data collection activity** in your project:

7. How will informed consent be obtained?

7.1 How will potential participants be **identified** in your project?

7.2 How will potential participants be **approached and recruited**, and by whom?

7.3 How will **informed consent** be obtained from your participants?

☐ Formal (Signed form) ☐ Informal (e.g. verbal) ☐ Other (e.g. online survey)

7.4 Please explain your strategy for obtaining informed consent:

7.5 Will any **incentives** or **reimbursement of costs** be offered to participants? (**NB**: it is NOT compulsory to offer any incentives. Please note for any curricula incentives, permission is required from the Registrar's office and DVC. Financial incentives or reimbursements are limited to R150 – see *Guidelines* document) ☐ Yes ☐ No

If **YES**, please explain:

NB: Attach *Participant Information Sheets* and *Consent Forms* for each participant group (please label these carefully), and/or other related materials. It is essential that participants be fully informed (irrespective of the method used) and then be able to agree on this basis to participate in the research. Refer to the *Guidelines for Applicants* document for strategies on obtaining informed consent.

8. Protecting participant identities

8.1 Can **confidentiality** of participants' responses be guaranteed throughout the **data collection** process?	☐ Yes ☐ No
8.2 Can **anonymity** be guaranteed throughout the **data collection** process?	☐ Yes ☐ No
8.3 Can **anonymity** be guaranteed in **resulting research reports** or publications?	☐ Yes ☐ No

Definitions: ***Confidentiality***: that any information considered confidential by the participant or researcher will not be disclosed to others. ***Anonymity throughout the data collection process***: that you as the researcher will not be able to identify the participant. ***Anonymity in the resulting reports***: that the participant's name/identifying data will not be disclosed and that anyone reading your results will not be able to identify the participant. **NB**: While confidentiality may be desirable, it cannot be guaranteed in, for example, focus groups, or ethnographic observations. Similarly, anonymity should be preserved in questionnaires, but cannot be offered in workshop methodologies, focus group research, etc. Participants should have the right to remain anonymous in the final report and this must be respected in handling of all data relating to them. Participants need to be informed about these issues through the *Participant Information Sheet*.

9. Protection of data during and after the research

9.1 How will the data and the identities of participants be protected while the research is **in progress**?

9.2 What is to be done with the research data **after completion** of the project? (Please note that usage of data should be consistent with what is indicated to participants in the *Participant Information Sheet* and *Consent Form*.)

☐	Stored in archives (specify below)	☐	Stored in online public database (specify below)
☐	Stored in password protected computer / data cloud	☐	Stored in digital form with all identifying features removed
☐	Stored for future secondary analysis	☐	The data will be kept for … years (insert numbers of years, if applicable), after which it will be destroyed.

Please specify which **archives or online databases** will be used for data storage (if applicable):

Please specify in what **format** the (deidentified) data will be stored and who will have **access** to the data:

NB: 'Raw' or unprocessed data, especially **where the identity or personal data of research participants is included, must be safeguarded** and preserved from unauthorised access. Data may be destroyed after use, but **preservation in an archive or personal collection** may also be appropriate, desirable or even essential. For instance, datasets that contain **historically important information** or information that relates to **national heritage** must be preserved and should be placed in a public archive where possible and appropriate. An **online database** could include secure databases such as REDCAP, or open access databases (see loadb.org for examples). All data should be preserved in a way that **respects the nature of the original participants' consent** and aligns with POPIA. If you are unsure about the procedure of data management and storage, please contact the Data Services Librarian.

10. Summary CV of applicant ALL boxes in the following table must be completed by the applicant. Do not attach a formal CV to your application.	
10.1 List your academic qualifications. Include dates and/or current registration status	
10.2.1 Describe any ethics <u>content</u> training* you have received in the previous 3 years (e.g. ethics short courses; online courses; ethical input as part of a research methods course).	
10.2.2 Please state the **course name/course code** and **date** attended	
10.3 List of instruments or methods used in this project, as listed in Section 5 of the application form (Tick the appropriate boxes and describe these specific instruments if necessary)	☐ Hard copy questionnaires or psychometric tests, etc. ☐ Online instruments (e.g. questionnaires, surveys) ☐ Individual interviews (e.g. structured, semi-structured, etc.) ☐ Group interviews (e.g. seminar/discussion groups, focus groups, etc.) ☐ Ethnographic observation, participant observation, other informal descriptive, and/or interactive methods (you **<u>must explain</u>** the ethnographic methods in the box below) ☐ Autoethnography (you are the participant in such a study, please refer to the *Guidelines* document) ☐ Community-based methods or techniques such as drama workshops, community theatre, training workshops, participant rural appraisal, rapid rural appraisal, etc. (you **<u>must explain</u>** in the box below) ☐ Research on/in therapeutic or counselling contexts ☐ Putting on your own exhibition / public performance ☐ Observation of public performances, and/or public behaviour observation ☐ Photography ☐ Video ☐ Audio recording (e.g. of interviews) ☐ Use of data from social media ☐ Other research methods or techniques (you **<u>must explain</u>** in the box below)
10.4 Describe your previous **experience or training** in deploying the instruments or methods of research which you are applying here (refer to Section 5 and Section 10.3)	

*Ethics training is strongly recommended, especially for postgraduate students. Please consult the *Guidelines for Applicants* document for details of training options.

HREC (Non-Medical) Risk level categories definitions (November 2023)

This table identifies broad categories of risk. Schools/Departments can provide specific examples of these categories that are specific to that particular discipline, or the types of data collection methods or participant groups that are most common in that discipline. Please note that any study involving minors cannot be considered by Schools irrespective of the risk level.

Risk category	Definition	Examples	Notes
No risk	No contact with human participants	• Document analysis or literature review • Studies based on theoretical or secondary analysis alone • Use of non-human, quantitative datasets (e.g. economic data)	These studies do not require full ethics clearance but an ethics waiver form must be completed if required by a university, faculty or external body.
		• Use of previously-collected human datasets (where previous participants gave their consent for their data to be reused – please check this against the original consent forms; and where a permission letter from the P.I. of the previous study has been obtained) • Use of anonymized and aggregated human datasets (e.g. census data)	These studies may require full ethics clearance, dependent on the type of study and faculty requirements. If full clearance is not needed, an ethics waiver form should be completed, if required by a university, faculty or external body. Applications deemed No Risk can be considered at School level.
Minimal risk	Where the likelihood and magnitude of possible harm are no greater than those imposed by daily life in a stable society, or routine educational or psychological tests	• Questions about people's everyday lives, activities and opinions rather than detailed biographical information • No sensitive questions or topics • Review of privileged information (e.g. documentation not publicly available) • Use of posts from social media	Applications deemed Minimal Risk can be considered at School level.
Low risk	Where the only foreseeable risks is that of discomfort, or where there may be some sensitivity involved in terms of the questions asked	• Questions about people's everyday lives, activities and opinions – may include biographical information and some potentially sensitive questions and/or topics • May include some vulnerable participants and / or contexts • Use of posts from social media	Applications deemed Low Risk can be considered at School level.
Medium risk	Where there is a likely risk of some harm for participants and/or the researcher, but where appropriate steps can be taken to mitigate or reduce risk	• Sensitive topics and/or questions that may have potential for trauma and emotional distress • May include vulnerable categories or marginalized groups, may include some types of low-level illegal activities, such as artisanal mining • Research locality itself may contain potential risks to the participants and/or researcher • There is a clear justification to undertake the research using this participant group and/or using the proposed instruments, despite the potential risks	Applications deemed Medium Risk cannot be considered at School level and must be referred to the main committee. Support/counselling services must be provided for participants, if appropriate. A distress protocol should be given, if appropriate.

		• Use of posts from social media	
High risk	Where there is a real and foreseeable risk of harm which may lead to serious adverse consequences if not managed in a responsible manner	• Highly sensitive topics, e.g. experiences of violence, rape, illegal activities • Vulnerable or marginalized groups, or where multiple vulnerabilities exist • Research involving deception of the participants • Research involving serious illegal and criminalized activities, such as violence, fraud • Where the participants place themselves at risk of harm if they participate • Where the researcher may place themselves at risk of harm • Where the researcher may place themselves at risk of breaking the law • Where the research may reveal information that may place the participant or others at risk (e.g. victims of abuse, violence), requiring intervention from government, university or other institutions • There is a clear justification to undertake the research using this participant group and/or using the proposed instruments, despite the potential risks	Applications deemed High Risk cannot be considered at School level and must be referred to the main committee. Remedial interventions by external professionals can be taken should harm occur. Support/counselling services must be provided for participants and/or for the researcher. A distress protocol and debriefing strategy should be given, if appropriate

NOTES:

(1) Definitions of terms

Discomfort refers to a sensation of uneasiness, disturbance or mild pain.

Harm refers to damage incurred (which may include physical, psychological/emotional, social, economic or legal harm) as an outcome of an action, or through emotional distress.

Risk refers to (i) the likelihood of exposure to a particular negative consequence, and/or (ii) the magnitude of the possible consequences of exposure, and/or (iii) the possibility that research could result in harm.

(2) Discussion of risk

Individuals that may be at increased risk include:

• Those who are dependent/reliant on the institution/person who provides/mediates access to researchers;

• Those who are involved in illegal activities or who are criminalized by the state, e.g. drug dealers, sex workers, undocumented migrants.

NB: it is essential to consider the individual – not an aggregated group – when assessing risk.

(3) Discussion of vulnerability

Vulnerability can stem from: a lack of capacity or impaired ability to provide voluntary informed consent; health status; social pressures that may impact on the ability to make a free and informed decision; an inability to protect one's interests in research. Vulnerability may be considered as dynamic and specific to a particular context, and may arise as a result of power asymmetries between participants and researchers/institutions. There may be layers of vulnerability that function and interact within a participant's circumstances. Being vulnerable does not necessarily imply that harm or exploitation will occur, but it does increase the risk of harm or exploitation through research.

In addition to those in vulnerable categories, vulnerability may also include individuals whose ability to provide informed consent may be reduced where:

• Their decision-making capacity is limited due to individual mental health status;

• Their decision-making capacity is limited due to the environment in which they live/work, e.g. prisoners/detainees, residents of drug rehabilitation centres;

• They are under 18 years of age;

• They are dependent on the state to maintain a legal status, e.g. documented asylum seekers, documented refugees.

NB: it is essential to consider the individual – not an aggregated group – when assessing vulnerability.

The researcher needs to minimise the risk of harm, ensure that the consent process supports a truly informed decision, and put in place additional measures to ensure ethical involvement of vulnerable groups. Where necessary, include details of steps to be taken to facilitate data collection across language barriers (e.g. interpretation or translation) and/or in cases of illiteracy.

Useful references:

Bracken-Roche, D., Bell, E., Macdonald, M.E. and Racine, E. (2017). The concept of 'vulnerability' in research ethics: an in-depth analysis of policies and guidelines. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 15 (1), 8, doi:10.1186/s12961-016-0164-6.

Horn, L., Sleem, H. and Ndebele, P. (2014). Research vulnerability. In: M. Kruger, P. Ndebele and L. Horn (Eds.), *Research ethics in Africa: A resource for research ethics committees*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, pp. 81-90.

(4) Distress protocol

A 'distress protocol' is a procedure to follow in emergency situations where, for example, a participant becomes clearly distressed during an interview. Under such situations, the interview is terminated and the distress protocol is enacted. Researchers may need to consider:

1. The possible distress experienced by the participant: e.g. questions that address issues of abuse, abandonment, previous negative sexual experiences, or traumatic memories that may induce distress. A distress protocol must include the name and contact details of an appropriate provider who can provide support, at no cost to the participant. This may include counselling services or access to NGOs/law clinics;

2. The possible distress experienced by the researcher: this may include provisions for how the safety of the researcher will be supported, and should be discussed with supervisor and the name and contact details for counselling services provided if needed.

3. Guidelines on how to draw up a distress protocol are given on the ethics website.