University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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.

Applications to the HREC (Non-Medical) need to be made by the principal investigator of the project (in the case of staff projects) or by the student (in the case of student projects) – not by an administrator or research assistant or supervisor.

Applicants are reminded that they MAY NOT start data collection before they have OBTAINED an ethics clearance certificate. Failure to seek ethics clearance may result in disciplinary action and/or the Faculty may not allow the student to graduate. The onus is on the applicant to ensure they are familiar with ethical processes and, in the case of a student, to ensure their supervisor checks and signs off on their application prior to submission.

All documentation referred to in these Guidelines is available from the webpage of the Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) available from https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/ Alternatively, just go to the main university home page, type the word ETHICS, and follow the link to the Ethics Committees. When you reach this ethics page, please click on Non-Medical and then scroll to the bottom of the page. All the documents listed on this page can be downloaded. It is recommended that all applicants familiarize themselves with the documents before they start any application process.

Applicants are required to provide evidence of ethics training in order to receive an ethics clearance certificate. Please refer to the section on ethics training for further details.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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 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 full application form or the waiver form which is available from the School Committee Chairs. Any School-level applications are then ratified by the Main University Ethics Committee.
- 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 and *not by completing a Word document*.

External applicants

- The HREC Non-Medical is able to review and process ethics clearance applications by applicants who are external to the university.
- Consideration of external applications is at the discretion of the HREC Non-Medical on a case-by-case basis. Decisions on whether the HREC will review such applications are final and there is no appeals process.
- The HREC strongly advises external applicants to partner with a Wits University collaborator or affiliate. If there is a link to Wits, this should be clearly stated on the application form. The application should also be accompanied by a cover letter explaining why Wits was chosen to review the application. Please note that all other requirements for the application process must be met (e.g. full proposal, information sheets/consent forms, permission letters, evidence of ethics training, etc).
- Details of the ethics process and how to apply are available on the ethics committee website at https://www.wits.ac.za/research/researcher-support/research-ethics/ethics-committees/
- The fee for external applicants is R15 000, 00 excluding VAT and this must be paid before any final ethics clearance can be granted.
- Be aware of the deadlines and requirements for submission.

Retrospective applications

As per the new NDoH NHREC 2024 Guidelines, the HREC (Non-Medical) may not grant retrospective ethics clearance for studies where researchers have already collected data from human participants without ethics clearance first being in place. This means that any project should be planned well in advance and ethics applications submitted timeously to avoid these issues. Collecting data from human participants without ethics clearance is highly unethical and directly contravenes University policies and the NDoH NHREC 2024 Guidelines. It also has implications for academic integrity. Such actions may lead to rejection of research papers by journals, impact on registration with professional bodies, affect funding or rating applications, delays in graduation, result in unintended consequences for participants, and damage the reputation of both the researcher and the University.

It is recommended that staff members think carefully about future academic and research activities and to have a plan in place for any future unexpected research outcomes. For example, if you think that certain teaching and learning activities may give rise to publishable data, please submit an ethics application in advance to cover this eventuality. If you are convening a

workshop or discussing strategies with colleagues, think about how this discussion can be used to leverage research ideas and applications.

On a case-by-case basis, the HREC (Non-Medical) *may* consider retrospective applications from **students** *with compelling reason*, bearing in mind that in such instances the HREC (Non-Medical) is only able to provide retrospective *acknowledgment* and not full ethics clearance. If a student has intentionally collected data without ethics clearance, such a situation may warrant disciplinary action. Any retrospective applications by students must be submitted online to the main University HREC (Non-Medical) and cannot be considered by School-level Ethics Committees. The application must be accompanied by a cover letter from the student *and* the supervisor to provide a strong motivation for the retrospective application. Any retrospective acknowledgement that the HREC (Non-Medical) may issue only applies to past data collection and no further data may be collected after receipt of such an acknowledgement. If an applicant intends to collect new data after such an acknowledgement has been issued by the HREC (Non-Medical), a new full ethics application must be made.

If you find yourself in any of the above situations, please speak with the HREC (Non-Medical) so that a way forward can be found.

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. Please consult the *Risk Table* available on the ethics website.
- Examples of *vulnerable groups* are given in the notes at the end of the *Risk Table* available on the ethics website, so 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 involving such people in your research, 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.
- If you are a postdoctoral researcher, you do not have a supervisor and therefore this question should be left blank in Section 2 of the application form.

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. You should not apply for ethics clearance if your proposal is still in draft form and has not yet been submitted to the School/Department/Faculty body.
- 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) - guidelines available on the ethics website.
- *Consent /Assent Forms* (for each different sample group and/or instrument used) - guidelines available on the ethics website.

- Relevant *letters granting permission* if required (from, e.g. company's HR department, National authorities such as Government departments, etc.) **OR** a letter requesting permission to conduct research at an organisation - consult the *Guidance on the Use of Permission Letters* document and the guidelines for drafting a letter requesting permission, available on the ethics website.
- A *Distress Protocol* if required – consult the *Distress Protocol* document, available on the ethics website.

Obtaining an Ethics Waiver

If you are doing research that does not involve human participants, you may be eligible to receive an ethics waiver (see the *Risk Table* for explanation, available on the ethics website). If this is the case, you can complete an *Ethics Waiver* application form. Please note: a separate *Ethics Waiver* application form (in Word format) is only available for those applicants who would normally submit to their relevant School Ethics Committee. For those applicants who would normally submit an online application to the main university HREC, you must complete the full online application form, although answers for many questions on the form will be No or N/A. You must also supply evidence of research ethics training within the last 3 years.

- 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, studies involving design or creative output, and has no risk (see *Risk Table* for explanation, available on the ethics website) may qualify to receive an *Ethics Waiver*.
- Research involving social media posts should involve a full ethics application. The reason for this is that not all studies that do not directly involve human participants are always No Risk, there may indeed be risks.
- All *Ethics Waiver* applications are recorded, reported and receive an individual ethics waiver number.

Obtaining permission from authorities

Please refer to the document entitled *Guidance on the use of Permission Letters,* available on the ethics website.

The Participant Information Sheet

The *Participant Information Sheet* is a short letter (approximately one 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 full contact details of the researcher(s), their supervisor(s) (when applicable), and the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). An example of the *Participant Information Sheet* is available on the ethics website.

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. Minors provide assent, parents/legal guardians provide consent. This should be worded appropriately for the person being addressed.

The *Participant Information Sheet* should be short (approximately one 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 or other 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 *Risk Table* 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 Participant Information Sheet. (refer to the *Distress Protocol* document available on the ethics website)
- A description about how the data will be recorded, managed, stored, retained, re-used or destroyed. (Note that you do not need to destroy data and sometimes it may be prudent to preserve it.)
- If interviews or other digital data are being transcribed, you need to state who is transcribing it, and how the transcribed data will be stored (where, whether anonymized, etc) and used, and who will have access. If you are using a commercial online Speech-to-Text transcribing service or a paid transcription company, you need to state what this service is, and that the digital file may not be confidential. We do NOT recommend that researchers use such services since there may be implications for confidentiality and anonymity.
- 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].
- The ethics clearance number (insert this once you receive your certificate).
- 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).

An example of a *Participant Information Sheet* is downloadable from the ethics website. Please tailor the specifics of the Participant Information Sheet to your particular study.

Obtaining consent from participants, especially if vulnerabilities are present, should be seen as a process, not a once-off event. Thus, the consent process may need to involve several discussions about the study with potential participants.

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 included on the first page of the online questionnaire. Participants need to be told in the Participant Information Sheet that submitting the completed questionnaire is taken to mean consent to 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 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.

Readability of Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms

Information for potential research participants should be made available in an easy-to-understand format and pitched at an appropriate level for the participant population. Use simple words, remove research-related jargon and shorten sentences.

The Department of Health guidelines (in their document *Ethics in Health Research*) indicate that the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Grade tool should be used to assess the complexity of Participant Information Sheets. (Note that the guidelines for Participant Information Sheets available on the ethics website are of an appropriate readability index)

Open your Participant Information Sheet in Microsoft Word. Then:

- PC users: Go to File > Options > Proofing > Click “Show readability statistics” box.
- Mac users: Go to Word > Preferences > Spelling and Grammar > Click “Show readability statistics” box.

Run a spelling and grammar check. After you’ve completed this check, you’ll see a box displaying information about the readability of your document – including a Flesch Reading Ease Score and a Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. Scores from 70 to 100 are considered easy to read (appropriate for 4th to 6th grade). Scores from 60 to 70 are considered standard (7th or 8th grade) and scores below 60 are considered hard (high school or college). The target for lay persons should be no more than a grade 8 level equivalent.

For more information, see:

Fischer, A. E., Venter, W. D. F., Collins, S., Carman, M., & Lalla-Edward, S. T. (2021). The readability of informed consent forms for research studies conducted in South Africa. *South African Medical Journal, 111*(2), 180-183.

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:

Penn, C., Frankel, T., Watermeyer, J. & Müller, M. (2009). Informed consent and aphasia: Evidence of pitfalls in the process. *Aphasiology*, 23(1), 3-32.

Translation of Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms

When language accommodations are required, consider what would be most appropriate for the particular context of study and population.

If appropriate, the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form can be translated. If any documents are going to be translated for the purposes of data collection, then these MUST be supplied at the ethics application stage. Merely translating the information and consent documents is not a panacea however: illiteracy is prevalent in some contexts, language dialects vary substantially across regions, some words and terms are not easily translated, translated written materials may not be helpful to some participants, and professional translators are not content experts so mistranslation may occur. Consider whether it may be more useful to train a research assistant/interpreter who can explain information about the study verbally to potential participants in their language of choice.

Any multi-phase studies involving lengthy, complex consent documents should adopt a thorough process of consultation with stakeholders to adapt these documents and support research assistants/enrollers in explaining the study to participants in understandable ways.

Please describe clearly in the application how you plan to address any potential language differences during the consent and research process.

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. Verbal consent may also be appropriate for online or telephonic interviews where a participant is unable to sign a Consent Form (although participants must still be provided with a Participant Information Sheet in such cases).

For informal consent, a full and complete formal Consent Form must still be supplied. This is because it provides the 'script' which the researcher can then read to the participant in order to obtain their consent. 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.

Consent obtained telephonically

In the case of remote data collection, participants can be sent the Participant Information Sheet electronically and consent can be recorded verbally. However, this approach to consent is not advisable for medium and high risk studies or where the type of research is of a sensitive

nature. Any form of remote or telephonic consent carries some degree of risk in terms of authenticating identity or misunderstanding the purpose of the research.

Electronic signatures may also be considered, where applicable, provided security and authentication measures are in place. This method of consent however has the potential to exclude participants with no access to electronic platforms or electronic signatures.

It is important that the type of study and the nature of the research question is carefully considered. In all cases, researchers should provide details of how they will approach informed consent.

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 Participant 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. Consider different strategies for different age groups, taking into consideration linguistic development and comprehension. Second language issues also need to be considered in our context. Additional time will need to be spent explaining the research and ensuring that minors understand the research.

- For minors not yet able to read (under 7 years old), a scripted page with illustrative pictures and very simple sentences can be read to the child and verbal assent can be obtained, if the child is competent to give this and is capable of understanding the nature of the study.
- For 7-11-year olds, a very simple Participant Information Sheet with illustrative pictures can be provided to the child and verbal assent can be obtained. The researcher or research assistant will probably need to help the child to read through this Participant Information Sheet.
- For 12-17-year olds, a simplified Participant Information Sheet can be provided and written assent can be obtained. Pictures or drawings may or may not be useful depending on the complexity of the study.

Consider other child-friendly options e.g. a video explaining the study, photos of research tasks, comics illustrating the research process.

Because of the variability involved in obtaining assent, the HREC NM does not provide a template for an assent form. There are however numerous examples of such documents online that can be adapted towards the needs of the participant group(s) included in your research study. Please consult the example of a consent form for parents/guardians, available on the website.

Questionnaires and surveys

A questionnaire (sometimes called a survey) is a form of data collection that comprises a series of short questions that require generally short answers in either open-ended or closed-ended formats. These answers may be just a single sentence, a short paragraph, or where the participant ticks the appropriate box (e.g. on a Likert scale, or from a list of possible options), or where a closed question (e.g. with a yes/no answer) is being asked.

A questionnaire can be self-completed (where the participant fills out the questionnaire themselves) or researcher-completed, where the researcher asks the questions and then

records the participant's responses. If the questionnaire is self-completed, this can be done as a hard-copy (where the participant fills out a paper questionnaire and then hands this back to the researcher or places it into a box) or online questionnaire, where the participant completes an online survey such as in Google Forms, Redcap or Survey Monkey. Either way, a Participant Information Sheet needs to be given to the potential participant, outlining what the researcher wants to do, what the questionnaire is all about, how long it will take, and whether it is anonymous and/or confidential. In most cases:

- A questionnaire can usually be both anonymous AND confidential. This is because you should NOT ask for any personal identifying information about the participant, such as name, ID number, phone/email, address, date of birth etc. Asking basic demographic information (gender, ethnicity, age category, education status, whether employed etc.) is generally ok but caution is still needed here. Ensure that the information requested has direct relevance to your research. If you are using a researcher-completed questionnaire, you cannot guarantee anonymity in data collection, although this can be guaranteed in reporting.
- A separate Consent Form is usually not needed if the questionnaire will be completed anonymously by the participant. *Hard-copy questionnaire*: You should state on the Participant Information Sheet and at the top of the questionnaire that completing and submitting the questionnaire is taken to mean consent to participate. You must clearly indicate how the questionnaire is to be returned (e.g., by handing it back to the researcher. By dropping it into a box, etc.) *Online questionnaire*: You must state on the Participant Information Sheet and at the top of the questionnaire that completing and submitting the online questionnaire is taken to mean consent to participate. (This will usually mean clicking on Submit or Send or a similar button at the end of the questionnaire.)
- Where appropriate, consider using self administered online questionnaires rather than getting participants to complete a hard copy. Alternatively, hard copy questionnaires can be undertaken where the researcher asks questions and completes the survey for the participant.
- Please think about language and literacy issues when designing a questionnaire – make sure your questions are clear, unambiguous and do not contain complex technical terms. If you are using an online questionnaire, please be aware that some participants might not have access to the internet or to data, and this may skew your sample population or your results. You may need to explore data free options or else provide participants with data in order to complete the questionnaire.
- Ensure you have proofread your questionnaire before disseminating to participants. If you are using an online questionnaire, make sure that the settings allow for participants to leave out questions they do not wish to answer.
- If you are using someone else's already developed questionnaire, especially from an international context, (1) ensure that you have permission to use it if the questionnaire is not in the public domain, and (2) be aware that some questions may not be linguistically, culturally and/or contextually appropriate. Please therefore adapt the questionnaire for the specific context and population of study.
- If your ethics application includes a questionnaire, you need to supply a full Participant Information Sheet and the full draft of the questionnaire.

If you are circulating a survey to the general public, please consider mechanisms to prevent bots from responding. See for example:
Drysdale, K., Wells, N., Smith, A. K., Gunatillaka, N., Sturgiss, E. A., & Wark, T. (2023). Beyond the challenge to research integrity: imposter participation in incentivised qualitative research and its impact on community engagement. *Health Sociology Review*, 32, 372-380.

Interviews

An interview is a verbal exchange held between the researcher and participant, in person or online, using a set of prepared questions or topic areas to probe. These are therefore typically open-ended questions, with the possibility of follow-up questions on some points, depending on the participant's answer. Unlike in a questionnaire, an interview allows the researcher scope to explore/probe issues in more detail and depth. Therefore, an interview will typically last longer than a questionnaire, there will be fewer participants, and the nature of engagement with the participant is fuller and deeper.

If you are doing one-on-one individual interviews, these can be confidential but not anonymous during data collection. By nature, interviews are not anonymous, as the interviewer can see the participant, the interviewer has usually made contact with the participant beforehand in order to set up the interview, and/or other people may be in the vicinity during the interview. If anyone else can hear your conversation, the interview will not be either confidential or anonymous. This is the case with both face-to-face and online interviews.

- Be clear about issues of anonymity and confidentiality in interviews. These conditions must be stated on the Participant Information Sheet. Be aware that some participants might be identifiable based on their job or status, even if you do not use their name.
- For interviews, a separate Consent Form is needed. A signed hard copy Consent Form (termed formal consent) should only be obtained when doing face-to-face interviews. If you are doing online or telephonic interviews, verbal informal consent should be obtained and recorded. This is where the researcher reads the Consent Form to the potential participant, allowing them to say Yes or No to the different conditions of consent. Therefore, you need to prepare and supply a Consent Form (which acts as a script), even if you are using verbal consent. Please be aware of the other conditions under which verbal consent is recommended.
- For some studies, online or telephonic interviews may be preferable to face-to-face interviews. However, in some instances face-to-face interviews are more appropriate (see HREC Guidelines on *Distress Protocols,* available on the ethics website).
- When switching to electronic/online means for your research project, please consider issues such as connectivity, online accessibility, and data costs. This issue is relevant to both researchers and participants. When considering a switch from face-to-face to online interviews, the researcher must consider whether the participants have access to Wi-Fi or data and if not, how access can be managed, and potential costs will be covered. Participants should not have to cover these costs.
- Please think about language and literacy issues when interviewing participants. Consider whether you are able to conduct the interview in the participant's language of choice, or whether you need an interpreter or research assistant. This person should sign a non-disclosure/confidentiality agreement and they will need to be carefully trained and debriefed following data collection.
- Make sure your questions are clear, unambiguous, open and not closed, not leading, and do not contain complex technical terms.
- For interviews, your ethics application must include a full Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and the full draft of the questions to be asked or topic areas to be probed (for each participant group, if you have several). This is called the interview schedule.
- It is common practice to audio record interviews so as to transcribe the interview afterwards. Video recording in most cases is not needed. If you want to use video recording for data collection, this must be clearly justified. If doing remote data collection online, be clear whether you will audio or video record. Some online platforms (e.g. Zoom) allow one to download the audio recording only. The Participant Information Sheet must state the request to record.

- Be clear about what will happen to all data including video and audio recordings and transcripts after data collection and the entire study has taken place.

Focus groups

A focus group is where a number of people are in the same room together (either face-to-face or online) and there is an open discussion on a number of different topics managed by the researcher who therefore acts as the facilitator of the meeting. A focus group may be appropriate if you want to get people from the same community or interest group together, such as residents, community members, farmers, service users etc. (Please be aware that it is difficult to do a focus group activity with people who may have very limited time, such as politicians, managers, experts etc., and therefore individual interviews may be more appropriate here.) In a focus group, different views can be shared, and group members would also be able to respond to or talk with other group members, not just with the researcher.

- Because of the group nature of a focus group, this activity cannot be either confidential or anonymous during data collection. Make this clear on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form.
- As discussed above, a focus group can be face-to-face (in which case formal consent is needed) or online (in which case verbal informal consent is needed). If face-to-face, a separate Consent Form for each participant is needed – i.e. they must not sign the same sheet of paper like an attendance register. A confidentiality (non-disclosure) agreement may also be used.
- Please think about language and literacy issues in focus group activities. Consider whether you are able to conduct the focus group in the participants' language(s) of choice, or whether you need to involve an interpreter or research assistant. This person should sign a non-disclosure/confidentiality agreement and they will need to be carefully trained and debriefed following data collection.
- Make sure your questions are clear, unambiguous, not leading or closed, and do not contain complex technical terms.
- If your ethics application includes focus groups, you need to supply a full Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and the full draft of the questions to be asked or topics to be discussed. This is called the focus group schedule.
- Focus groups are commonly audio recorded. Be aware that video recording as a means of data collection is not usually needed unless there is a clear justification. The Participant Information Sheet must state the request to record once the participant has given their consent. If doing remote data collection online, be clear whether you will audio or video record. Some online platforms (e.g. Zoom) allow one to download the audio recording only. The Participant Information Sheet must state the request to record.
- Other modes of group interviewing also exist in the literature such as World Café, yarning and sharing circles. Some of these may fall under 'community-based methods' of data collection, so please think carefully what you want to do in these group sessions, is it just talking or are other activities involved?

If you are using both interviews and focus groups in your study, or a questionnaire and interviews, or a questionnaire and focus groups, the questions used in each activity should differ and must be tailored to the method of data collection and the participant group. Each activity should have its own Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (except that formal consent to participation in a self-administered questionnaire is not required).

Please be aware of the differences between questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, and do not get them confused. If used correctly, they will bring richness and depth to your study. If used incorrectly, your ethics application may be delayed as reviewers may struggle to understand

your intentions, and you will end up with very poor and very confusing data at the end of your study.

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. Please remember that when engaging in auto-ethnographic research, *you* are the participant. It is not necessary however to include a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form for your own signature, but these documents must be included if there are other participants involved in the study.

Consider the specific ethical challenges involved in autoethnographic research on one's own or one's family's experiences. The ethics application should reflect thorough consideration of these issues.

In cases where the research may involve the 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:

> Tullis, J.A. (2014). Self and others. In: S. Holman Jones, T. Adams and C. Ellis (Eds.), *The Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 244-259). London: Routledge.
> Lapadat, J.C. (2017). Ethics in autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(8), 589-603.

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 and/or non-disclosure agreements should be drawn up for the performers. It would be prudent to submit these documents with your ethics application.

- 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. Where necessary, arrangements for support that would be accessible and freely available to participants must be made and conveyed accordingly in the PIS.
- In the case of an exhibition of work and/or creation of a film 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 and/or film, 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.
- Consider issues related to copyright and intellectual property when embarking on this type of research project.

Social Media and Online Research

Social Media Websites (SMW) such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, 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.

There are different iterations of social media research that researchers might be engaging in (e.g. analysing public Twitter posts vs analysing posts in a private FB group), each with specific issues related to anonymity/confidentiality and permissions. Thus, **these types of studies should not be submitted as waivers but rather as full applications.** The reason for this is that not all studies that do not directly involve human participants are always No Risk, there may indeed be risks. There may also be implications related to POPIA.

'Data mining' of SMW and online forums is subject to ethical procedures which include:

- Abiding by the privacy and user terms and conditions, and license agreements of the data platform. Here the researcher is required to familiarise themselves with these according to the online platform they wish to use, and consider the implications of disclosing user(s) identity particularly when the content of the data may be controversial, defamatory or libelous;
- 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;
- In some instances (e.g. accessing data from private chat groups, online groups or forums), principles of informed consent must be applied to social media and online research where necessary, including: (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 (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* available on the ethics website. The same applies to research on sensitive topics;
- In terms of POPIA, the researcher must take reasonable steps to address issues of anonymity and confidentiality of the posts in the write up of their research, even for posts in the public domain.

For more information please see:

Franzke, A.S., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & the Association of Internet Researchers (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. Available from: https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf

Barbosa, S., & Milan, S. (2019). Do not harm in private chat apps: Ethical issues for research on and with WhatsApp. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, *14*(1), 49-65. Available from: https://www.westminsterpapers.org/article/id/274/

Use of AI, Transcription Software and Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) with AI
While the abovementioned tools may be helpful to researchers at various stages of their research project, please exercise caution when using these tools. Because it is not always clear where documents and files are being sent, saved, or viewed, who might have access to them, or how they might be used in the future to train AI models, researchers should be very cautious about uploading any raw data or research-related manuscripts into a generative AI tool. Doing so could violate participant confidentiality and anonymity and there may be intellectual property implications.

If transcription or similar research activities are taking place online, applicants should state in their ethics application whether the audio files are uploaded to a password-secure site, whether the files have been de-identified, whether humans (as opposed to software) can gain access to the original files, and whether the audio files are automatically deleted/removed after a certain time period. Please also state the name of the software used in your application.

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.

Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPIA)
Please be aware of the POPIA which has implications for the types of personal data that researchers may collect, how these data should be stored and protected (including issues of anonymity and confidentiality) and who has access to personal data from third parties. Under most circumstances for non-medical research, the procedures we recommend for obtaining consent etc. are consistent with POPIA, but please make yourselves aware of the guidelines under POPIA for managing personal data. There are specific regulations for sharing personal information from participants with international collaborators. POPIA guidelines for researchers will be available soon.

Use of incentives and reimbursements
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 include 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. Please only include students in your research if the research question is directly related to students. i.e. do not involve Wits students merely for convenience.
- 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 a performance, you may contractually 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 or reimbursement of costs 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.
- Consider the impact of offering incentives on the quality of responses, as bots may be used to respond to an open online survey (the HREC advises against incentivizing survey participation, e.g. via a lucky draw).

Electronic Signatures

The *Ethics Application Form* must be signed by the applicant and the supervisor. The signature page for these signatures is available for download on the online application system. Electronic signatures are acceptable where applicants are applying to the School ethics committees. The *Ethics Application Form* must be signed by the researcher (and the supervisor if the applicant is a student; please note that postdoctoral researchers do not require a supervisor / host signature). If the supervisor is not available, the application form can be signed by proxy by a senior academic from the student's department/School. Please do not submit a jpeg or photo of your signature – the HREC needs to see a completed and signed signature page.

Data storage

Applicants need to consider how best to store their data following the completion of the project. Points to consider:

- Whether the data should be preserved (e.g. in an archive or for secondary analysis)
- The sensitivity of the topic and/or vulnerability of participants (in some cases, data destruction may be the most ethical option)
- Whether the data may be made available in anonymized format via an open access forum (this is a requirement by some funders; the specific requirements of POPIA should be considered however)
- Where the data will be stored and safeguarded
- In the case of student projects, whether the student and/or supervisor will store the data
- Whether recordings and transcripts will be stored, or just the transcripts, where they will be stored and who will have access to them.

Ethics training

The ethics 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.

Applicants are required to provide evidence of ethics training in order to receive an ethics clearance certificate. This is a compulsory NHREC requirement. Please provide details of ethics training completed within the past 3 years.

For main committee applications, applicants may complete one of the suggested courses detailed below, or some other training course. A certificate must be provided however.

For school level applications, students may complete one of the suggested courses detailed below or else provide details of ethical input as part of a research methodology course (but please indicate the course code, dates of attendance and give some detail about the course).

Note that applicants applying for a waiver application at main committee level must also provide evidence of training.

Ethics training at Wits

The ethics application form (question 10.2) 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.

An ethics training workshop entitled: ETHICS IN RESEARCH AND APPLYING FOR ETHICS CLEARANCE, is run throughout the year through the Postgraduate Affairs Office of the University (see https://www.wits.ac.za/postgraduate-research-and-development/research-support/). This workshop has two components. PART 1 (3 hours) comprises formal training on research ethics, with a particular emphasis on social science research. This training is content based. There is a formal written assignment following this workshop. Successful completion of this assignment will allow for a *Certificate of Competence in Research Ethics* to be issued, which is valid for 3 years. PART 2 (1 hour) describes how to apply for ethics clearance to the main university or to school ethics committees. This ethics training is suitable for both staff and students. For more information contact Mokgaetsi.madubanya@wits.ac.za

TRREE (Training and Resources in Research Ethics Evaluation)

- This is an online ethics training resource.
- Ethics training can be completed free of charge on the TRREE website - 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/
- You will need to register on the system to complete the course.
- It takes an estimated 2-3 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

Southern Africa specific resources on research ethics

The ***Human Sciences Research Council*** **(HSRC)**, based in Pretoria, is one of South Africa's leading research organisations. Their Code of Research Ethics is a useful guide. The HSRC also provides **Informed Consent Guidelines re Minors** (including orphans and vulnerable children) and Parental Substitutes at http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/182/Guidelines%20for%20research%20with%20minors%202012.pdf

The South African Medical Research Council

The South African Medical Research Council 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 conduction social science-type research may also find these materials useful. Find them at: http://www.mrc.ac.za/research/ethics/guideline-documents

A locally produced book entitled ***Research Ethics in Africa*** provides some useful contextual considerations: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264693791_Research_Ethics_in_Africa_A_Resource_for_Research_Ethics_Committees

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 the ethics website) (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 amendments 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 (see the Guidelines for Amendment document on the website). 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 serious adverse events during or after data collection must be reported immediately to the Secretariat.

Your ethics certificate is valid for three years (if issued by the main HREC). You may obtain an extension of two years on request. The ethics certificate must cover the period of data collection.

Progress reports

A condition of receiving a protocol number from the HREC (Non-Medical) is that a progress report is supplied at regular intervals for the duration of the ethics clearance certificate (3 years duration or until the project is completed and/or submitted). For Minimal and Low Risk studies, this report is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this report is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December. PLEASE BE AWARE OF THIS REQUIREMENT. If progress reports are not received, the project will be considered to be in violation of its ethics clearance, and the clearance will be suspended. A progress report form template is available on the ethics website.

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:
Mmatshepo Taunyane, mmatshepo.taunyane@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-1788)

Main University HREC Non-Medical Chair and Co-Chairs:

Prof Jennifer Watermeyer (Chair), Jennifer.watermeyer@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-4578)

Prof Jasper Knight (Co-Chair), jasper.knight@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-6508)

Prof Karin Joubert (Co-Chair), karin.joubert@wits.ac.za (tel 011 717-4561)

Updated February 2025