

HSSREC

Guidelines for an application for research ethics certification

(2024)

The purpose

- For the purposes of an ethics application the task of HSSREC is to:
 - o Consider research proposals (within its area of jurisdiction) on behalf of Senate, for ethical compliance and scientific validity in accordance with approved Standard Operating Procedures;
 - o Ensure that researchers and supervisors are suitably qualified to undertake the proposed research;
 - o Monitor the progress, ethics and safety of research in the field of humanities and social sciences and ensure that ethical standards are maintained.
 - o Ethical clearance for a project will expire after a year unless a satisfactory progress report (on the approved template) is submitted via the supervisor or Head of Department/School/Unit in the case of non-degree projects. The renewal of research ethics must include the progress report and must be submitted ten months from the date of the approval letter;
 - o Recertify ethical approval for research in cases where substantive changes are made to the project (e.g., methodology and sample size);
 - o Issue certificates of ethical approval to Principal Investigators.¹
- HSSREC places the emphasis on ensuring and promoting ethical research, and relies largely, but not exclusively, on Faculties to approve the scientific merits of the proposed research.

The process

- HSSREC meets monthly and will review the applications received in time for that month's meeting as per the annual meeting schedule published. If all is in order, the applicant will receive feed-back within 14 days of the HSSREC meeting where the application was dealt with.
- Once the application is received, it is reviewed by two members of HSSREC using a standard reviewer form to ensure consistency.
- The reviewers will submit their recommendations to the full committee whose decision may include any of the following:
 - o *Accept as is*
 - o *Accept with minor amendments (Chair)*
 - o *Accept with major amendments (Chair and reviewer(s))*
 - o *Accept with major amendments AND meeting with Chair and reviewer(s)*
 - o *Revise and resubmit*
 - o *Decline*
- The Committee may accept or amend the recommendations from the reviewers.
- The Committee may also request a meeting with the applicant (and supervisor).
- The Committee may also require an active monitoring process, which would be more than the annual progress report. This is a measure that will be implemented in cases where there are particular issues requiring attention and may be for the full project, or a part thereof (e.g., during the pilot phase). It may require measures such as additional reports, follow-up meetings or field visits.

What drives social research ethics risks?

- *Autonomy* means, according to the *Oxford Dictionary* "the ability to act and make decisions without being controlled by anyone else". Different disciplines, such as sociology or law, have particular interpretations and applications of autonomy, be that at an institutional or individual level. For the purposes of ethical research, the minimum standard would be that a prospective research participant (e.g., a person to be interviewed) must be able to make an informed decision

¹ HSSREC Standing Operating Procedures, paras 14-17.

freely on their participation in the research. Emphasis must be placed on an 'informed decision', meaning that expectations and possible risks must be clearly articulated to prospective participants and they must understand it.

- *While social research* may have valid scientific aims, *harm can be done* to the (prospective) research participant directly or indirectly. For example, a prisoner being interviewed by a researcher may be victimised afterwards by the staff because the prisoner is disclosing, or is suspected of disclosing, information about wrongs in the prison. In free society there may be other examples where a research participant may be victimised because he or she is participating in a research project, such as an employment situation where questions are asked about sensitive topics like sexual harassment in the workplace for example. The potential for harm must be carefully thought through, especially where sensitive issues may be raised and/or the prospective participants' autonomy may not be assured.
- *Information leaks* about research can be extremely damaging especially if personal information and identities are disclosed. Even if identities are not disclosed, it may still be possible to identify individuals based on contextual data. In a situation of unequal power relations such as a prison or an employment situation, this is a real risk and measures must therefore be taken to ensure that individuals are protected in the raw data as well as in the final reports.
- *Risks to researchers and fieldworkers* are ever-present, but it needs to be determined if it is at an acceptable level, if there are appropriate assessment processes in place, and if mitigation measures are contextually and situationally appropriate. For example, an on-line survey with UWC students about study habits will most likely carry a low risk to the researchers, but researching, for example, the unlicensed firearm trade on the Cape Flats through in-person interviews with gang members is inherently a high-risk endeavour for the researcher. Fieldworkers are sometimes used in larger project to collect data. Please ensure that their safety concerns are addressed. The same applies to interpreters used in the field, especially if they are from the community being studied.
- The *reputation* of research itself, of UWC and of the researcher may be at risk if research is engaged in, in a careless or perfunctory manner. A well-planned and appropriately consulted project that is well-managed should anticipate and reduce if not eliminate reputational risks. Nonetheless, careful attention needs to be paid to what the potential reputational risks may be if 'things go wrong' and how this will be managed.

The principle of proactive disclosure

- The aim with the application is not to create the impression that there are no risks in order to secure ethics approval by subterfuge. An application that is transparent about possible risks, even if they are minor or unlikely, demonstrates that the applicant has applied his or her mind to the project. Once a risk is identified it is important to explain what steps in mitigation will be put in place. Disclosing risks proactively is more likely to meet with approval than an approach that ignores risks. Undisclosed risks or unaddressed issues is more likely to result in the reviewer requesting clarification and thus resulting in delays.

What do the reviewers look for?

- It is important to submit a complete application that complies with technical requirements, such as using the correct forms, ensuring the documentation is properly signed off, the appendices are included, the final version of the research proposal is included and so forth. Missing documentation, an incomplete application and unsigned documents will result in delays.
- Apply the principle of proactive disclosure (*see above*).
- The reviewers need to understand what the project wants to achieve and how it wants to achieve this. If this is explained in a clear and logical manner, it is easier to assess if the ethical risks are correctly identified and appropriate mitigating measures proposed.
- It is the primary task of the reviewer to assess if an acceptable balance is struck between the merits of the research, the possible ethical risks and the plan to deal with such risks if they occur.
- In describing the ethical issues of the project, it will be helpful for the applicant to place him or herself in the shoes of the prospective research participant and imagine how he or she would

have reacted if they were faced with this request to participate in a research project. In some instances, it may be useful to place oneself in the situation of a particular person in order to test what possible reactions could be, such as a victim of crime, or elderly person, or a child, if these are the typical profiles of the targeted participant group.

What to make sure of?

- Comply with technical requirements, including grammar and spelling.
- Make sure that the planned work schedule is realistic and current. Make sure that you reflect due dates for progress reports to HSSREC.
- A project may have more than one participant type (e.g., teachers and learners) and it may also use different data collection methods (e.g., interviews and focus groups discussions). For each participant type and each data collection method, there needs to be an information sheet, a consent form and a copy of the data collection tool.

What to avoid?

- Don't copy and paste answers to questions from previous questions. Each question on the assessment forms is looking for specific information. Please respond to the question.
- Being vague or unclear about your sampling and methods, as far as possible HSSREC will need to see how you plan to undertake your studies.
- Inadequate or generic reflection on the ethics that will apply to your study. We want to see that you have considered your context and more importantly, have reflected on the benefits and disadvantages for your participants.

Some tips on the information sheet

- The purpose is to secure informed consent, and that means that as much information as possible need to be disclosed.
- The consent form must be specific to the participant type from whom consent is being sought from. It needs to inform that person what the research is about and what is expected of them in practical terms. For example, participation will require two interviews of an hour each during work hours roughly six months apart using a list of ten questions to guide the interview.
- Some research methods utilise questionnaires with high numbers of closed-ended and open-ended questions. If the project is planning to use this method it should be properly explained in the information sheet and how the load can be handled. The duty is to be transparent with prospective participants. For example: "You will be asked to complete an extended questionnaire and for this reason, you may be asked to participate in three sessions of 40 minutes each."
- If the project requires a counter-performance from the participants, such as collecting and/or recording something (e.g., collecting household waste and keeping records thereof), please ensure that this is properly explained.
- Will the person whose consent you are seeking understand the language used in the consent form? This refers to the language itself as well as the style and vocabulary. If uncertain, use a [readability index](#) to assess the ease of reading, or trial your document with the target group beforehand. In addition, you can also verbally explain the document to ensure that the participants have all the information required to give informed consent and participate in the study.
- The information and the consent forms need to speak to each other: what consent is being sought for, need to be explained in the information sheet.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Providing anonymity of information collected from research participants means that either the project does not collect identifying information of individual persons (e.g., name, address, email address, etc.), or the project cannot link individual responses with participants' identities. A study should not collect identifying information of research participants unless it is essential to the study protocol. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed if any personally identifiable information will be

collected.

Maintaining confidentiality of information collected from research participants means that only the investigator(s) can identify the responses of individual participants. Regardless, the researchers must make every effort to prevent anyone outside of the project from connecting individual subjects with their responses.

Whether anonymity can and should be offered or guaranteed depend very much on the research project. In some fields of research, such as history, participants may indeed request to be identified because they want to be acknowledged for their role in an important event, for example. Another example is an elected public official who is asked about how they are fulfilling their public mandate. In such cases it may be important to know who the participant was.

For how long is the ethics certification valid?

Ethics certification is granted on an annual basis and subject to an annual progress report being submitted and continuation approved. If the annual progress report is not submitted, the certification will lapse. This will require re-application.

- As long as work continues on the project, HSSREC must receive annual progress reports and if need be, extension requested of the re-certification if this is needed.
- The remining of data previously collected with ethics clearance, will in all likelihood not require re-application for certification. If unsure, please contact HSSREC.

Important documents to consult

- All HSSREC forms are available on the Intranet, <https://uwcacza.sharepoint.com/sites/ResearchDevelopment> and Ikamva at <https://ikamva.uwc.ac.za/portal/site/1eb9a2d0-d076-47c0-aca5-036aa250bfcb/tool/30cabd43-666a-474e-9fb5-35ae5f0c7c25>
- The UWC Research Policy can be found on the Intranet and Ikamva
- DoH 2015 Guidelines can be found on the intranet and Ikamva
- Other sources on doing ethical research are the following:
 - Montreal Statement on Research Integrity
 - Singapore Statement on Research Integrity
 - Cape Town Statement on fostering research integrity through fairness and Equity
 - Doing research with children <https://childethics.com/ethical-guidance/>
 - Using social media: *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics* by Townsend, L and Wallace, C. https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_487729_smxx.pdf

Disclosing a major event

- A major event is something that is of such a nature that it calls into question or alters the fundamentals of the research project and could hold reputational risk for the University. This may include mental and or physical harms of the researcher(s), fieldworker, prospective participants and participants.

Questions

If you have any critical questions in developing your application, please contact HSSREC, at research-ethics@uwc.ac.za

Being contactable

Please ensure that you are contactable in the event that the reviewer seeks clarification on something prior to the review being submitted to the full committee.

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