

SSIS Ethics — Top Tips and Common Problems

Top Tips

General note and advice:

The Ethics Committee is there to support research and will endeavour to work with you to achieve ethical approval. If in doubt, seek further guidance from your departmental ethics officer before applying. Remember that you will be close to your research project and will probably know your field intimately, but the Ethics Committee cannot read your mind, so ensure that all the information in your application is clear, succinct, precise and sufficiently detailed for the Committee to understand what you want to do and why, and how you propose to do so. If you are aware of discipline-specific practices, or local conditions requiring a particular approach, try to be as clear as possible about them in your application.

Deadlines and turn-around times:

The Ethics Committee has a set timetable for submission of applications, committee meetings and decisions. Due to the large numbers of applications received, and the fact that Committee members like all colleagues must also attend to a range of other duties, the timetable is necessary to facilitate workload management. The Committee endeavours to read applications and provide responses rapidly, but it is important to be aware that this can take four to six weeks, or even up to six months if an application raises specific issues needing specialist advice. It is important to plan ahead when making an application in order to allow sufficient time for your application to be processed.

In some situations, it is possible to request expedited review. This may be possible due to exceptional personal circumstances, unavoidably short periods of notice due to funding council decisions, or unforeseen changes in the circumstances of, or possibility to undertake, the research project. Leaving an application to the last minute or missing the application deadline are not grounds for requesting expedited review.

Postgraduate researchers:

It is essential that you discuss your research aims with your supervisor and seek their support with your application. Your supervisor should assist you in ensuring that your application is as clear and robust as possible.

Postgraduate supervisors:

As you will be required to sign off on a student's application for ethical approval, you are strongly advised to work closely with any supervisees to ensure that their application is clear and robust.

Undergraduates:

The design of undergraduate research should first be discussed and determined in close collaboration with the supervisor. All research involving human subjects or human-animal interactions needs to be carefully planned and managed, and this is especially so at the undergraduate level. Low risk work can be approved by the supervisor together with the departmental ethics officer. Higher risk projects might need approval from the College Ethics Committee. Please read the [CSSIS Ethics Guidance](#) on the website for further information.

Common Problems:

Certification on the application form:

Be sure to enter your name and click on the box to confirm.

International research:

Applicants should specify in the application form that they undertake to consult and comply with Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel safety advice, to carry out a risk assessment where relevant (subject to the destination country), and to take out University of Exeter travel insurance.

Assessment of possible harm:

Most applicants indicate possible risks to participants or others, but many forget that their own safety is also important. Researcher safety is a key research ethics question and the Ethics Committee, representing the university, has a duty of care to ensure that researcher safety, i.e. the safety of the applicant and all other researchers involved in a project, is adequately covered. This is especially important if a researcher is working alone. Applicants must consider all potential risks and undertake to put in place specific and robust measures to protect their own and any co-researcher's safety. A common problem in applications is being too vague about safety when conducting interviews: these should ideally be in an appropriate public place or professional office (where possible), and if it is necessary to conduct them in a private place or home then careful consideration of safety implications must be made evident in the application. A suitable safety protocol should be established, whereby the researcher informs a reliable contact person of her/his safe arrival at a location to carry out an interview and her/his safe departure afterwards, with an agreed set of steps if the researcher does not get in touch or cannot be contacted within an agreed time period, such as calling the police or other relevant local authority. The Ethics Committee sometimes refers to this protocol as a 'check in/ check out' process.

Some useful general guidance on working abroad and personal safety reminders for researchers can be found on this University of Oxford [fieldwork website](#).

The risk of involvement in/ becoming aware of illegal or harmful activity:

Please refer to the separate guidance note on the Ethics website about [Reporting Illegal or Harmful Activity Encountered during Research](#).

A common problem in this respect is where applications indicate that this might be a risk in a project, but don't then follow through in providing evidence about how a researcher will seek to avoid or mitigate it, or whether it might raise any legal obligations on the researcher. NB as the separate guidance document indicates, such obligations vary from country to country.

Data protection and storage:

Pay attention to the guidance in the template application form.

The preferred data storage location is the University of Exeter U: drive or OneDrive.

Look carefully at relevant GDPR requirements for dealing with personal data – it is the researcher’s responsibility to comply with these (see the further guidance on the ethics website and this [guidance on personal data](#)).

Think carefully about how long you need to keep any data, when it will be destroyed or deleted, and who is responsible for doing so.

If using a laptop, USB storage device or a voice recorder note the [guidance about data security](#) on the [University IT webpages](#).

Anonymisation and pseudonymisation:

Pay attention to the difference between anonymisation and pseudonymisation (see the guidance on the application form template). ‘Anonymisation’ means that data cannot be connected with a participant at all; ‘pseudonymisation’ means that data is identified with a code number or invented alias but can be connected with a participant by the researcher using a codebook or name key. It is important to make it clear which method is being used and to explain it to participants accordingly. Data gathered and stored using either method can be kept indefinitely if required, but pseudonymised data needs to have a retention review and disposal plan in place. The main advantage of anonymisation is that it falls outside the scope of [the GDPR](#).

Online survey apps:

Due to GDPR requirements, only UK or European survey apps should be used. Any app transferring data outside a GDPR based data jurisdiction (such as the United States) does not provide participants with rights enforceable through GDPR and therefore should not be used. Suitable apps include:

[Online Surveys](#) available via People Development team: peopledevelopment@exeter.ac.uk. Those requesting access will need to agree to the terms of use.

[Lime Survey](#)

[Smart Survey](#)

[Qualtrics](#)

Contact SID for advice on how to access the three above.

Participant information sheet (PIS):

Remember that the information sheet is a working document that you will give to potential participants so that they can understand the project and give informed consent to participate. You need to think about who will read it, what they need to know, and how best you can convey the essential information. The information sheet must be clear, concise and understandable to a non-expert.

Participant withdrawal:

It is common to tell participants that they can withdraw from a study at any time. However, if data is anonymised, it cannot be withdrawn after anonymisation has taken place. Also, if you are preparing a thesis or publication, withdrawal during the final submission phase could be problematic for your work, and after submission or publication withdrawal would not be possible. It is therefore advisable to indicate a cut-off date for withdrawal – this can be an indicative, anticipated date, but should be clear and feasible. You could for example specify a

set period by the end of which you anticipate that anonymisation will have occurred, or the date of publication of data. If pseudonymising data, withdrawal is technically possible at any point, but the same issue of managing your own research or publication arises, so a cut-off date is advisable.

Consent form:

As with the information sheet, the consent form needs to be clear, concise, and understandable to a non-expert and fit for the purpose of your project. The template consent form should be adapted by you to fit your requirements, so don't leave in any default template text if it is not relevant – take time to read and reflect on the contents of your form and ensure everything is relevant. Proofread the form carefully and ensure the numbering is correct.

Oral/ verbal/ implied consent:

In some situations a signed consent form might not be feasible or safe to use. If you want to opt for implied consent (i.e. taking part in an interview is taken as consent for data to be recorded) or verbal consent (i.e. key information is read to the participant who tells you that she/he consents), you need to make a case for this in the application. You need to specify how you will record/ make a note of the consent given.

System-specific assumptions:

The ethics process is based on a number of assumptions about inter alia openness, transparency, legality, good faith, non-oppressive practices and the rule of law. If you are planning to undertake research in a place where such assumptions might not apply, you might need to adapt your working practices accordingly. If so, your application for ethical approval will need to include relevant background and contextual information to explain your approach and reasoning so that your project and method can be considered accordingly.