Applying for Ethics Approval (Guidance: Participant Information Sheet)

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The following slides will detail guidance on how to create a participant information sheet, to be submitted as part of an ethics review application. Any examples provided have been taken from an accepted ethics application. The guidance will be tailored to humanities PGRs but is also applicable to social sciences' students doing qualitative research.

Fill in the following details according to the specifications of your project. If you need to create different sheets for different groups of participants, ensure you label them accurately (start with version 1.0 and move on)

Participant Information Sheet

(Insert participant group here, where relevant and if more than one participant group is involved)

Title of Project:

Researcher name:

Invitation and Brief Summary

The template indicates that you should "Give brief information about your study/project – this is just to allow potential participants to decide if they want to read any further and to thank them for their interest. Include a statement such as 'Please take time to consider the information carefully and to discuss it with family or friends if you wish, or to ask the researcher questions.' There may be also be specific issues to address here when you are inviting someone else to give consent on behalf of another (e.g. parental consent for a child)."

- Use your PhD abstract to outline a brief summary, but ensure that the language is devoid of technical jargon in order to ensure that your participants are fully capable of understanding what you are asking of them.
- Include alongside the summary a brief statement of invitation. This should include a brief overview of the kinds of questions you would expect your participants to answer (you do not have to provide exact questions at this stage but a gist is important as that may help sway their decision of whether or not to speak to you).

Invitation and Brief Summary

For example: if you are an English PGR and would like to interview the descendants of the writers you are focusing on in your thesis, here is how you may invite them for interviews:

"Thank you for taking the time to consider this proposal. Please take time to consider the following information carefully and feel free to ask questions regarding your participation at any stage. Your participation will primarily involve interviews regarding your experiences with [name of writer] and their role in the literary landscape of [insert name of country/location]."

Purpose of Research

The template indicates that you should answer the following questions: "What is the nature of the research? Why are you doing this research? What is already known?"

"This research is for a PhD thesis at the University of Exeter, based in the Department of English and Creative Writing. The researcher is an English Studies student who is working on [insert name of writer] and their impact on the literary landscape of [insert location] across the 20th century. The researcher is also striving to [summarise research questions here]."

Why have I been approached?

The template indicates that you should "Explain here why you have approached this particular participant group and how you have obtained their information -this may be via a third party. Or you may highlight here where the study has been brought to the attention of a particular participant group type, or where advertised. This section should also explain how many groups, or different types of participants are involved in the project and how many participants in each group you hope to recruit, adding a total that you hope to recruit for the project overall."

- If you anticipate having varying reasons for approaching different people to be part of your study, list each individual reason and indicate who each information sheet will be aimed at.
- For example: "You have been approached for this study due to [insert nature of relationship with writer]. Since this study aims to not only look at the literature of the the writer but their lives, political activism and ideologies as well, it is important for the researcher to take a broader approach than others have done in order to engage with the subject matter in a unique way. Your information was obtained via [insert personal connection: this can be via family members, friends of friends etc. or through a formal third-party such as an arts organisation, an NGO, etc.]"

What would taking part involve?

The template indicates that you should "Give a clear and detailed description of what the participants will be asked to do. Explain what will happen and in what order, a step-by-step guide. For example, how many visits and/or approximate time taken for each step? Describe how and what data will be collected and used during the project; distinguish clearly between personal, identifiable or pseudonymised data and anonymised research data and provide more detail if sensitive personal data is being collected and used."

- In the case of interviews, the steps are fairly straightforward:
  - What will be your preferred method of contact? (Zoom; Teams; Skype; in-person?)
  - How many sessions, and how long will each session take? (Suggested: 2 sessions maximum, 1 hour each)
  - In the case of interviews, data can be collected via audio recordings which will later be transcribed by the researcher. If you plan to employ someone else to do your transcribing for you, please mention it here as well as in your proposal form.
  - All participants' information will be anonymised, unless you have given sufficient reason as to why this is not possible and has been accepted by the committee.

What would taking part involve?

The template indicates that "It sometimes helps to create a flow chart of what happens and when –this can sometimes be easier to understand depending on the participant group and the complexity of the project. You could also add pictures, diagrams or photographs if this helps to explain the process."

- Your participant information sheet can be in any form you choose – please remember, however, that your participants may be busy and will therefore not have time to go through pages of information. To ensure you have the best chance of securing their participation, keep your answers to this question brief, whether by text or diagram.

What would taking part involve?

For example: if you are an English PGR and would like to interview the descendants of the writers you are focusing on in your thesis, here is how you may answer this question:

"By taking part in this research, participants will be asked to consent to at least 1 interview with the researcher. If available, participants may be asked for another interview, or to further communicate with the researcher via email or Skype if the researcher has further questions or details to clarify – however, this is at the discretion of the participant. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher themselves and verbal consent will be taken before recording can begin. Each interview would approximately last 1 hour at the minimum, though can carry on if the participant is willing. The researcher will primarily ask questions pertaining to the lives and writings of the [writer], as well as the participant's role in the literary landscape of the time (if any."

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The template indicates that "It is unlikely that you can promise any specific benefits, and this should be made clear. Research does deliver wider benefits to society and some indirect benefits might be foreseeable for participants."

- For humanities projects, this question has a generic answer, if there is no monetary incentive:
- "There is no monetary incentive for this project, however the aim is to allow for wider research material to be accessed and engaged with by society, as well as the opportunity to participate in a project that aims to bring into the spotlight many locally popular but internationally unknown writers and activists who deserve recognition."

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The template indicates that "As relevant for your research, you should include details of all potential risks of physical/psychological harm, risks to confidentiality/anonymity and any mitigation measures that are in place (or say that you do not believe that taking part in the research has any foreseeable risks to participants). Risks should be described in terms of likelihood as well as severity and should be described in language that participants will understand."

- At this point, if anonymisation of participants is not possible, this should be identified as a potential risk. In addition, mitigation measures involving this risk should also be stated here (adequate data storage methods are usually an appropriate enough answer to ensure participants' information will be kept secure)

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The template indicates that You could consider:

1. Are any questions/discussions/parts of an interview likely to be upsetting? What support will be available to participants? Will you direct them to other support mechanisms?
2. Potential risks of any procedures or interventions involved (e.g. blood/saliva/urine samples, biopsy) both during and after procedures, making sure that each type of procedure is explained.
3. Is there a possibility of discovering health related/secondary findings? If so what would you do and would they be directed back to their healthcare professional e.g. GP?
4. What will happen if something goes wrong?

- Points 2 and 3 are particularly relevant for non-humanities and social sciences' projects, especially those relating to medical sciences such as biology, psychology, etc.
- In the case of humanities projects, however, procedures are not a possible risk and neither are health-related findings (should findings arise relating to participants' mental health and well-being, however, they should be identified and mentioned in the risk assessment).

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

For example: if you are an English PGR and would like to interview the descendants of the writers you are focusing on in your thesis, here is how you may answer this question:

(please note that in the case of this project, anonymisation is not possible due to the nature of the research conducted – however, it is essential to mention and ensure that the option of anonymising their identities is offered to participants, should they choose to do so)

"There are unlikely to be any risks associated with this research as it is primarily a discussion of the literature and writing of the writer and their connections to past and present-day ideas. However, participants will have the option of asking to pseudonymise their names and other defining details if they should choose. Anonymisation is not possible due to the nature of this project, so participants are free to refuse to be interviewed if anonymisation is what they are seeking."

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

The template indicates that you should "Reassure participants that they can stop taking part at any time without having to give a reason and describe how participants can ask to withdraw and confirm that their data can be destroyed. However, if the data collection method means that a certain amount of data will have been collected up to the point at which they wish to withdraw and cannot be destroyed (e.g. focus group or data that has already been anonymised with no link to individual participants remaining), then describe the process that will be followed and specify which data will be kept."

"Participants may withdraw consent and ask to stop taking part in the project up until the time of thesis submission which is currently scheduled for [date] (though this may be extended). The researcher will provide contact information including email, telephone numbers etc. that can be used to contact them at any time to withdraw consent, which will include their data being destroyed. If participants choose to withdraw after the submission of the thesis, the researcher will destroy their data and not use it again in the future."

How will my information be kept confidential?

The template indicates that you should always include the following statement: "The University of Exeter processes personal data for the purposes of carrying out research in the public interest. The University will endeavour to be transparent about its processing of your personal data and this information sheet should provide a clear explanation of this. If you do have any queries about the University's processing of your personal data that cannot be resolved by the research team, further information may be obtained from the University's Data Protection Officer by emailing dataprotection@exeter.ac.uk or at www.exeter.ac.uk/dataprotection."

- In addition to this statement, data storage methods (as mentioned in the ethics proposal form) should be discussed in more detail. Cloud storage (such as OneDrive) is always preferable rather than personal external hard-drives etc., due to the University's safeguarding policy which takes the pressure off the researcher should data be compromised.

How will my information be kept confidential?

The template indicates that you should "Be clear about how long the data will be kept and how it will be destroyed. Distinguish clearly between personal, identifiable or pseudonymised data and anonymised research data. Would you like to be able to use the data in future research or to be able to share anonymised research data with other researchers in future? If so, explain the process here and remember that this will need to be included in the accompanying consent form."

"Data will be collected by the researcher on a recording device such as a smartphone and then be stored securely in the University of Exeter's OneDrive system. The estimated submission date of this project is [date] and data will be stored until that date. The aim is to also use this data in future research in case of publication, submission to academic journals and other outputs such as books and articles aimed at general audiences etc. which participants can choose to opt out of in the consent form if they wish."

How will my information be kept confidential?

The template indicates that you should clarify "Are there any circumstances where confidentiality might need to be broken, for example if the participant discloses a risk to themselves or others? If so, explain here."

- It is unlikely that confidentiality would need to be broken unless it was a case of potential dangers to mental health/well-being/physical health, disclosure of illegal activities, or intention to harm others. In these cases, it is important to refer to the disclosure agreement/consent form signed by the participant that makes it clear under what conditions this data can be shared.

How will my information be kept confidential?

The template indicates that you should clarify "If relevant to the project you can explain the process for participants to opt for their contact details to be kept to be informed about the outcomes of the project or about future research. Again you will need to ensure you obtain consent to do so on the accompanying consent form and explain how their contact details will be kept securely during this period. It is good practice to provide a brief report about any study that they have participated in although this is not reason enough on its own to retain their contact details. Any news/outcomes of the study can be made available via a neutral point (e.g. project website) and participants should be informed of where the details will be available."

"Unprocessed recordings and their transcripts will be kept until the time of submission, but anonymised or pseudonymised recordings may be kept for longer depending on consent."

It is rare for humanities research to compensate participants, particularly for personal interviews that are specific to the nature of their research. In this case, answering "no" is perfectly acceptable – it is more important to be upfront and honest rather than procure participants' agreement under false pretences.

Will I receive any payment for taking part?

With some research there will be insufficient funding available to offer any vouchers or payments. However, you do need to explain whether participants will be reimbursed for their expenses or given any payments/vouchers If a participant is expected to make an additional visit or travel outside of their normal routine then it is fair to offer to reimburse travel expenses and these types of cost will need to be planned for in a project. Vouchers or payments should be suitable in type, of low value to prevent a feeling of coercion to take part and should follow the University's guidelines.

(If appropriate) **What will happen to the samples I give?**
Describe how any sample(s) collected will be used and whether they will be transferred to any other organisation or facility as part of the study process. If you would like permission to keep and use any remaining tissue for future research/transfer to a tissue bank, please describe and Confirm when the samples will be destroyed.

N/A for the majority of humanities/social sciences' research. If you are dealing with tissue samples, please get in touch with the ethics committee to discuss your options.

What will happen to the results of this study?

The template indicates that you should clarify "How and where (in summary) do you intend to disseminate the results e.g. academic publications, conferences, meetings with service providers or community groups, depositing data in an archive? Will you be making information on the outcomes of the project available to participants at the end of the project via a neutral point, if so where and when will they be accessible (Newsletter, bulletins, website)?"

"Interviews given by participants will be used in the researcher's PhD thesis primarily, though they may also be used for academic publications and conferences. Participants can ask to have access to these materials and the researcher will provide them if requested."

Who is organising and funding this study?
Provide a brief summary of the research team and funders (if applicable)

Who has reviewed this study?
This project has been reviewed by the College of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter (Reference Number….), *or give details of any other relevant review or approval by a regulatory authority where this applies.*

Further information and contact details
Describe how participants can contact the research team for further information and/or to take part. Please also include contact details for someone that the participant can contact if they are not happy with any aspect of the project and wish to complain – this could be a project supervisor, department Ethics Officer or Ethics Committee Co-Chair, i.e.:

College of Humanities Research Ethics Committee humanities-ethics@exeter.ac.uk

You can also give the following contact details:
Research Ethics & Governance Office, University of Exeter Compliance, Governance and Risk
cgr-reg@exeter.ac.uk,

Fill in the following details according to the specifications of your project.

Good Luck!