Trinity College Dublin
School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences
Research Ethics Committee

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

DETAILS OF RESEARCH STUDY AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Q1. Dates and duration of the project?

A. The start date of the sampling and recruitment phases of your project should not precede the date of your research ethics application, unless prior approval from the research ethics committee has already been obtained.

Q2. What is a gatekeeper? Do I need a gatekeeper?

A. The role of a **gatekeeper** is to protect the interests of the participants and to ensure that they are not under any pressure to participate. Gatekeepers act as a buffer between the researcher and the participant. For example if a lecturer wanted to give a questionnaire to his or her students, the students might feel pressurised to take part. Therefore, in some contexts, it can be useful to have a third party (a gatekeeper) distribute the questionnaires, thus removing the direct link between the researcher and the participant and thereby eliminating the pressure to participate. Gatekeepers cannot give consent on behalf of participants; their role is simply to help you access a particular group of people.

Q3. I am conducting a study that involves the distribution of questionnaires for anonymous return. Do I need to obtain informed consent?

A. As long as the circumstances guarantee **anonymity** (and the questionnaire contains no identifying information linking it to the respondents such as signatures), completion and return of the questionnaire itself implies **consent** and no separate form needs to be used. No consent form is therefore required in the case of administering anonymous questionnaires.

Q4. What circumstances might undermine the anonymity of questionnaires and therefore require informed consent to be sought?

A. Anonymity can be compromised if the population surveyed and/or the natures of questions asked are such that certain respondents can be identified by their responses. For instance, a survey of a school or service provider may identify the institution's name; it may only employ 1-2 teachers or therapists, who would therefore be easily identifiable. It is important that questionnaires are designed in a way that avoids this sort of problem if you wish to guarantee anonymity.

Q5. When do I need a participant information leaflet (PIL)?

A. A participant information leaflet is designed to be a concise guide to your research project. This allows people to decide whether they want to be involved, and it provides them with information that they can keep for future consultation. Best practice involves reading through this leaflet with potential participants, rather than just simply giving them the information. Participant information leaflets should vary greatly in the type of language used to describe the project, depending on the intended readership (young children, non-native speakers of a language, professionals with similar training to the researcher).

If you are administering a questionnaire, it is not usually necessary to provide a separate participant information leaflet. Generally, a concise overview of your research can be included at the start of the questionnaire.

Q6. I intend to distribute a questionnaire to students in Trinity College. Are there specific guidelines about how to distribute and collect this questionnaire?

A. First, you should consider the time that it takes to complete the questionnaire and whether therefore it can be completed immediately it is distributed. Second, you must recognize that completion and return during a scheduled lecture slot is usually impossible because it interferes with the teaching programme. If this seems to be the only way to handle the survey, then you need to consult the lecturer involved well in advance. Finally, **anonymity** may be perceived to be endangered if completed questionnaires are handed directly to the investigator. It is preferable to provide a lodgement box or a collection envelope where individuals can leave their completed questionnaire without handing directly to the researcher. You might consider leaving a lodgement box at the exit to a lecture theatre, or, if possible, in an office in College.

CONSENT, CONFIDENTIALITY (INCLUDING DATA PROTECTION)

Q7. Can I obtain informed consent by e-mail?

A. No. Where written **consent** is given, it must be in hard copy with an original signature. However, in some types of research, audio/video-recorded oral consent may be acceptable.

Q8. I'm administering a questionnaire. Do I need to use a consent form?

A. If the only research instrument in your project is a questionnaire, then you do not need to use a consent form. You can state at the outset of the questionnaire that they are under no obligation to answer the questionnaire – in other words, you are giving them the option of opting out. In such cases,

completion and return of the questionnaire denotes consent, and a separate consent form is not necessary.

Q9. My study involves research on subjects younger than 18 years of age. If I have obtained consent from their parents or guardians, do I need to obtain consent also from the subjects?

A. You can obtain assent from minors under the age of 18, which must be corroborated by the **consent** of their parents or legal guardians. It is accepted by the Irish courts and international guidelines that minors (under 18s) have independent rights. All minors, regardless of age, should therefore be informed as fully as is practicable about the research and agree to be involved (this is known as '**assent')**. If they do not wish to do so, then this **assent** must take precedence over any consent given by a responsible adult.

Q10. For how long do I need to retain records of the participants and the data collected? What about destroying data?

A. International best practice in research requires that data should be stored for several years subsequent to any publication in order to allow for data verification. Legislation regarding data protection and access to personal information stored in the university also mean that secure retention of data the study is completed is recommended.

The definition of 'data' for these purposes encompasses the methodology used to obtain results, the actual research results and the analysis and interpretations by the researchers. Primary responsibility for observing good practice in the use, storage and retention of data sits with the individual researcher, who should bear in mind the principles below:

- Data should be recorded in a clear and accurate format. Particular attention should be paid to the completeness, integrity and security of these records.
- Data should be stored in secure and accessible form. A minimum period of five years from the date of publication is normally recommended.
- Data should be organised in a manner that allows ready verification either in paper or electronic format.
- Research data and records may be discoverable in the event of litigation. This means that the research data and records may be accessed by the university and its legal advisers, to determine their relevance to any litigation process.
- Any records that identify particular participants (e.g. coding key) should be retained only for as long as may be needed for cross-reference during the study.

In light of the above, the School recommends that hard and electronic copies of data should be maintained for **seven** years after the completion

of the relevant course (for students) or the completion of the relevant research project (for staff). This includes recordings and transcriptions.

Research supervisors take responsibility for destruction of hard copy records securely stored in the university after the five year period has elapsed.

It is vital that all raw data arising from student research projects be kept until examination boards confirm a student's results for a dissertation.

Q11. My data consist of video and audio recordings that allow participants to be identified. What do I do about this?

A. Wherever possible, data should be transcribed into some format that precludes identification of individuals. We recognize that occasionally this is impossible: in these cases, all that can be done is to guarantee storage under secure conditions and to ensure that access is restricted as much as is consistent with the analytic needs of the project. Where individuals can be identified from stored data, this must be mentioned in the **Participant Information Leaflet** and the **Informed Consent Form** (see templates of Participant Information Leaflet and Consent Form on the School Research Ethics webpage), and subjects should be offered the opportunity of removing any self-identifying information before storage. However, we also recognize that for some types of research projects (e.g. work with storytellers, performers), participants are happy to be identified and do not want to remain anonymous. In this case, you need to obtain **informed consent** from them reminding them that you intend to use their real names.

Sensitive topics and vulnerable populations warrant particular attention. Sensitive topics include those which might be considered personally intrusive. This includes such topics as illegal activities or experiences of abuse. It is also critical that potential research participants are fully apprised of the possible implications of sharing information (including that of a focus-group context), including the risk that formal notifications of suspected abuse or criminal acts may result.

Q12. What about data protection?

A. There are two questions related to protection of data. You should consider where data are stored (and therefore if they will be moved), and how they are stored.

The safest place to store electronic data is as close to 'home' as possible, i.e. in your own individual password-protected computer in a locked office or your own study. This avoids having to move data around, and the risk of losing

them. If you do need to transfer sensitive data, you can use an encrypted USB drive or encrypted external hard drive – these are now easy and cheap to purchase, or you can investigate free encryption software such as *True Crypt* (see School Research Ethics webpage for more information). Finally, ensure that documents which may link the identity of participants to the data are stored separately (not in the same device).

You should also consider how online survey instruments such as *Qualtrics* store data. In these online tools, you must configure your questionnaire to not collect IP addresses (or any other identifying information), if you state that you are administering an anonymous questionnaire.

Under the Freedom of Information Act 1997, the university is required to allow persons access to documents of the institution (documents which are in the institution's possession) under defined circumstances. Researchers must at all times be aware of the provisions of, and operate in accordance with, the Data Protection Act, 1988 and the Data Protection (Amendment) Act, 2003 which, amongst other things, restricts the usage of sensitive and personal data.

In order to ensure research integrity through compliance with Data Protection legislation, researchers should follow these guidelines (*www.dataprotection.ie*) when collecting and storing data:

- obtain and process personal data fairly;
- keep it only for specified and lawful purposes;
- process and disclose the data only in ways compatible with the purposes for which consent was initially given;
- keep data safe and secure;
- ensure it is adequate, relevant and not excessive
- retain no longer than is necessary for the specified purpose(s);
- provide a copy of an individual's personal data on request.

Q13. How do I ensure the confidentiality of data obtained from known individuals?

A. Each participant's identity can be safeguarded at the commencement of the study by allocation of a code number; this number can then be used in all subsequent stored data records. Only the researcher and supervisor (if applicable) should have access to the key which links code numbers to individual identities. This key and data should always be stored separately, never together (on the same computer or USB key, for example).

Q14. Other researchers in my department may wish to reanalyse the data from my project for use in other studies in the future, or use it in teaching. Do my participants need to know this?

A. **Informed consent** must be given for all use of acquired personal data, regardless of whether it has been coded (see above) after acquisition. Therefore, under the circumstances outlined above, the **Informed Consent Form** either must seek agreement for possible use of data in future studies as well as in the current one, OR must specify that additional consent would be sought if the data were to be re-used. Future access to stored data itself may require ethics committee approval.

Q15. In an interview-based study, do I need to supply interviewees with a record?

A: Yes, it is good practice to give each subject a transcript you have made of the interview, or to provide access to a copy of the recording, and, where appropriate, to provide them with the opportunity of deleting any wording that they may perceive as identifying them. This process is called 'member-checking'. Applications for research ethics approval should indicate that these procedures will be followed.

FUNDING & PAYMENT

Q16. Can I encourage enrolment in my study by offering participants payment?

A. It is a basic tenet of ethical research that people participate on a voluntary basis. Concerning payment, there is a diversity of practices that fit different requirements. Payment can sometimes be appropriate: for example, it can be sensible to offer a small payment in order to find enough subjects for an experiment, or to offer some sort of prize or raffle, and it is also fitting that researchers offer to reimburse any costs incurred by individuals through participation in a research project, such as travel costs (if they have to funding to do so). However, offering payment can create a sense of expectation or duty, leading participants to feel under pressure to 'perform', and may distort results. These issues should be carefully considered at the planning stage.

Q17: What is a conflict of interest in a research project?

A: A conflict of interest can occurs because of the different roles we play as an individual (perhaps as a teacher, therapist or interpreter) and also as a researcher. In other words, it occurs when there are different 'interests' at play, which can become an obstacle to conducting ethical research. A good example of a conflict of interest is a teacher or clinician asking students or clients to take place in a research study. Your responsibilities towards them as students or clients will necessarily change once they come participants in your research project, yet your responsibilities as a teacher or clinician remain. Some conflicts of interest are financial, but often, they are simply personal 'interests' (involvement) which lead to being pulled in different ways. All researchers should declare prior involvement, roles of responsibility and relationships with potential research participants during the process of

ethics approval. Often, such conflicts of interest can be easily resolved by using a gatekeeper, for instance, or by stressing that the research project is entirely unrelated to the other activities or interests you share with the participants.

ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTS

Q18. How should I organise the documents which will accompany my application?

A. An electronic version of your application, compiled as **a single PDF document**, must be submitted, by the advertised deadline (usually ten days or two weeks prior to a REC meeting), to the School of Linguistics Speech and Communication Sciences. The email address for the School is: REC_SLSCS@tcd.ie

B. Please note that Declaration (Section 7) of the application must be completed by the applicant and, if applicable, the applicant's supervisor. Research Supervisors are also required to send an email to the Research Ethics Committee confirming that they have reviewed the ethics application and that the proposed research project conforms to the School's Research Ethics Guidelines.

Q19. My research instruments and accompanying documents will be in a language other than English. Do I need to submit translations?

A. Yes. Please submit both the original documents, in the intended language(s), and English translations.

Q20. Should I modify the templates provided for consent forms and participant information leaflet?

A. Yes, we strongly encourage you to modify these templates for your own purposes. This may include using colour and a logo, as well as modifying their content. The templates provide ideas of what key information should be included, but you can change these around, simplify and edit.

For most projects, the participant information leaflet (PIL) should really be longer than the consent form. The PIL must contain information about how you will store data, use data, publish data and so on. The consent form can be briefer.

The information leaflet does not have to be a one-page A4 document, and can be presented as a folder leaflet or flyer. In the case of websites, it is good to provide information in a format that the user can store as a separate document to consult later (e.g. a pdf document). It should be addressed to potential participants from the researcher(s): 'I am

conducting a research project on…, I would like to invite you to participate…'. The information leaflet should be given to the participant to keep, and can include contact details, further information about the project, and so on.

The consent form should be administered in two copies, both signed by both participant and researcher. Each keeps a copy, like a contract. The consent form should be addressed from the potential participant to the researcher: 'I understand that X is conducting a research project on … and I agree to participate…'.