

# Common issues in HREC applications

We discuss the most commonly encountered issues by the Human Research Ethics Committee that require going back to the applicants for further clarification and thus delay approval of the project. In this document, we follow the section headings as for the 2024 HREC application template.

## General

To support HREC in its review process, please read the notes that are sprinkled through the template, as those will give you a good idea of what HREC is looking for. Please do not use AI to answer the questions in the Application Form - you need to demonstrate you have personally considered the questions and tailor the answers specifically for your project.

Also, please do not make travel arrangements or arrange to meet (potential) participants prior to receiving ethical approval/submitting your ethics application, as response and approval times cannot be guaranteed and it is not always possible to expedite reviews.

## Section 2.1

Please make the summary of the project clear enough for a lay person to understand (avoid jargon where possible), and please stick to the word limit of 300 words. Some people copy and paste an entire research proposal, which is not necessary. It is helpful in this section to also explain the overall methodology, such as the broad design and how the different data collection methods fit together. This helps the reviewer to get a good high-level picture of your project.

## Section 3.1

The role of HREC is to think about the potential for risks in its evaluation of your proposal. It is better to err on the side of caution and select a box than to ignore risks that might be present. The key is that any of the boxes you select 'yes' for must be mentioned in the information sheet and must have a mitigation step. For example: Reminder about voluntary nature of participation or provision of independent support agencies participants can contact. Please note that selecting any of the boxes does **not** automatically make your project high risk.

In cases where research participants are friends and/or colleagues and/or your students, it is important to consider pressure they might feel to volunteer, and that you maintain a clear distinction between your personal hat and your researcher hat. This could be both a social risk and/or a conflict of interest risk, depending on the relationship.

A professional risk that is often missed in this section is a case where employers are helping the researcher with recruitment.

In terms of social risk, there is sometimes confusion between what is confidential, and what is anonymous. This typically surfaces in section 9.1. Anonymity is the situation in which as the researcher you don't know who the participants are. This would typically be in the form of anonymous surveys where people from all over the place could respond to if they have the link. Confidential is where you have the **potential** to know the participants (or do in fact know the participants). An example would be surveying the students in your course. While you may not know who responded, you do know the sample / population. In cases where personal identifiable data is collected, or personal identifiable elements are traceable, a case is sometimes made that such

data will be deidentified and should thus be treated as anonymous. From an ethics point of view though, as participants were identifiable at some point in the data collection, the data is considered confidential, not anonymous. If there is an intention for (anonymised) data to be used for other research projects, participants should be informed about this, and consent to the use of their data for secondary purposes (see also section 5.3).

In terms of inducements, acceptable items are koha (e.g., a voucher or small gift - a token of appreciation) and reimbursing participants for costs incurred (e.g., travel and parking). These should be comparable across participant groups. Any inducements over the nominal amount should not be stated on recruitment adverts. Providing funds for participants' "time" is problematic on two counts. This may be considered income for tax purposes by IRD and draw into question the voluntary nature of participation. However, the use of third parties that offer access to a participant pool, such as for example Prolific, is not considered an issue. These third parties have a degree of separation between the researcher and the participant and notify the participants of their tax obligations. Details regarding inducements are to be supplied in section 4.13.

## **Section 4**

### *4.3: Number of participants*

The numbers provided here need to be justifiable. As the note states, a power analysis is often appropriate for quantitative projects. For qualitative projects, the number of participants has to be reasonable for the type of project (e.g. fifty 1-hour interviews for an honours project would not be reasonable). Note that no more participants should be recruited than you need to answer your research questions, to minimise the total impact of your project on participants.

### *4.6/7: Identification and recruitment of participants*

These two sections sometimes get muddled. Section 4.6 is about the identification of your participants group, how you will find the people that meet the inclusion criteria for your study. Section 4.7 is about the process of how you will contact, inform and persuade the people identified in section 4.6 to participate in your study.

### *4.8: Media used to contact participants*

In cases where you wish to contact potential participants by email, it is important to consider whether they have given permission for their email address to be used to be contacted for research purposes. If email addresses are publicly available this is not an issue. In case of wishing to contact e.g. students in your course, a (forum) announcement on AKO|LEARN is perfectly fine as well (which is then sent to students' email addresses). For the use of other entities' social media / email facilities (e.g. a company's internal mailing list), authorisation is needed from that entity. "Cold calling" participants is discouraged.

Snowball sampling is permissible with restrictions. You are allowed to ask participants to e.g. forward your recruitment email or link to a survey on to other potentially interested parties. What is not allowed is for participants to give you contact information for other potential participants. The latter method violates the New Zealand Privacy Act.

### *4.10: Over and under participation*

This section is sometimes ignored by applications. However, it is important to have a plan B in case of too many or too few participants.

## **Section 5**

### *5.1: Informed consent*

In the experience of HREC, people often ignore the note in this section. If you do research in schools, students aged 16 and up can provide consent, and parents must be notified that the research is going on. If the child is 15 or younger, the parents provide informed consent, and the child provides informed assent. Consent and assent forms must be separate. Age-appropriate information sheets or another method of providing information to students should be developed.

### *5.3: Retention of data.*

If there is an intention for (anonymised) data to be shared with other researchers, including in online data repositories, for other research purposes / projects, participants should be informed about this, and consent to the use of their data for secondary purposes (see also section 3.1).

## **Section 6**

Recruitment of participants in Aotearoa New Zealand means that there is a potential for Māori participants to be part of the study. This does not necessarily mean that you need to engage in Māori consultation. However, if you answer 'yes' to any of the boxes in section 6, it is expected that you engage with your Faculty's kaiārahi and complete and submit a Māori consultation form. When you are collecting demographic information and intend to report ethnicity data, please seek advice from your kaiārahi regarding whether Māori consultation is necessary. When collecting demographic information (e.g. gender, sex, ethnicity), please follow the conventions of Stats NZ.

## **Section 8.2**

In cases where you recruit participants overseas, it is important to consider whether there are any organisations or local ethics committees that need to be consulted or give approval in a local context. In cases where the local ethics regulations are more stringent than in Aotearoa New Zealand, the local ethics regulations must be followed.

## **Section 9.3**

See the comments about the difference between anonymous and confidential research in section 3.1.

## **Sections 10.2 and 11.2**

Please provide a rationale for recording video data as well as audio. Oftentimes, audio is sufficient for transcription purposes. For online data collection, UC prefers the use of MS Teams.

## **Sections 10.4 and 11.3**

If AI is used for the generation of transcripts, please make sure that the participants are made aware of this in the information sheet. UC prefers MS Word or MS Teams in first instance. Transcripts should not be generated by an AI software that then ends up using the transcripts to train the AI.

## **Section 14.1**

Data should be stored on UC devices and backed up to a secure UC server. Please consider whether interview audio can be deleted once transcripts are finalised.

## **Section 14.2**

If possible, the preference is to electronically scan and store physical data.

### **Section 14.3**

If you wish to use quotes from participants, this should be included in the information sheet, and specific consent should be sought by adding a box to the consent form.

#### **Information sheet**

It is important that the language used is adapted / appropriate to be understandable by the target audience. In some cases HREC has encountered, the language was considered too academic for the target audience. In other cases, translating the information (and consent) forms into another language would be appropriate. Please provide copies of any participant documentation that will be provided in languages other than English as these will be held with your application.

It is also important, following section 3.1, to be explicit about the potential risks and the mitigation strategies put in place.

Another commonly seen issue is inconsistencies between the HREC application form, the information sheet, the consent form and the research advertisements / recruitment. Please make sure the details are consistent across the application, and that the template information provided accurately reflects what you plan to do for your project.

#### **Consent form**

Please add and remove tick boxes as appropriate for your study. It is more common now to ask for separate consent for audio and video recording.