The Student Project Ethical Review (SPER) Form

Research is deemed to be the practice of collecting data about human participants or their behaviour to further knowledge. Data can be collected experimentally, by questionnaire, by interview, observationally, by computer, telephone, over the Internet, or by any means of recording human behaviour. Most research projects, including final year and postgraduate projects, are therefore deemed to require ethical approval.

Introduction

As computing professionals, we are bound by the general code of ethics of our professional body, the British Computer Society. When our research and development work involves human participants, it is also good practice to follow the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS). These guidelines cover informed consent, information provision and data protection.

Many professional bodies require a formal structure for giving ethical approval before research can begin. Most funding bodies (including Research Councils) now require proof of ethical approval. Foremost, however, this institution wishes to make clear that all of its members abide by the highest possible ethical and professional standards when carrying out research.

The SPER form has to be completed for every honours or masters project. For most computing projects, there will be no ethical issues to be resolved. However, you must read the form and its guidance notes carefully and complete the form appropriately. If you have any doubts or concerns then you should discuss them with your supervisor.

You need to print off a copy of the form, fill in the identifying information (your name, etc.) and parts 1 to 5 of the form. For any question to which you have answered 'YES', you need to give an explanation in the box provided. For questions for which you have answered 'NO' to every part, you may leave this box blank. When you have completed and signed the form, take it to your supervisor, who will complete their part and return it to you for submission

Informed Consent

All proposals for ethical approval will include procedures to gain informed consent. The signed informed consent forms should be retained as part of the project data.

Informed consent must be given by all participants capable of giving consent.

Obtaining consent from participants who have communication impairments:

Having a communication impairment does not necessarily preclude participants from giving informed consent. In such cases, it is good practice to confirm that participants understand the conditions of the study.

Obtaining consent from parents and guardians:

In some instances, informed consent has to be given by the legal guardian of a participant if the participant is legally unable to give informed consent. This could be the case, for example, if

- the participant has dementia and does not understand the conditions of the study.

- the participant is under 16 years of age.

In such cases, the consent form should be modified to reflect that consent is being given on behalf of someone else. Participants under 16 years of age: If participants are under 16 years of age, they should be involved in giving informed consent where possible, and special care should be given to explaining the conditions of the study to them.

On-Line Consent:

Informed consent also applies to on-line research. It is recommended that participants be invited to tick a box to indicate that they have understood the nature of the study (i.e. information about the study must be provided) and given consent to take part in the research. If participants are identified, this information must be treated in the same way as any other personal data.

Data Protection

All data collected during a study is subject to the Data Protection Act:

- Only data which is relevant to the study may be collected.

- Data is confidential.

- Data must be held in a secure place.

- Data must not be kept longer than is necessary.

Some projects do not involve human participants, but do use 3rd party data. In such cases, permission must be sought from the relevant data manager to use this data.

User Evaluation Studies

Although most computing projects will involve no significant ethical issues, there is one common activity that requires to be recorded on the SPER. Most of you will have your software evaluated by users. Most commonly, you will recruit a few of your colleagues to try out your software and fill in a questionnaire. In some cases, there will be a more specific user group. In any case, the participants in your study are 'subjects' for the purposes of ethical review.

Normally, the following will be true:

(A) The participants will not be exposed to risk or stress.

(B) No data that is private or personal to the user* will be collected.

(C) The participants will not be children or vulnerable adults.

In that case, you should answer 'YES' to question 1(a), but you can normally answer 'NO' to subsequent questions about participants/subjects. In the explanation box for question 1, you should write, 'User Study Only – No Ethical Implications'.