

MACS – Ethics Clearance Applications

FAQ (Version 3.0)

Questions:

1. I will have participants evaluating a game, which information I should include in the ethics form?
2. I am recruiting participants online, so do the questions about ‘vulnerable’ participants apply?
3. I am only recruiting participants within Heriot-Watt, so they cannot be ‘vulnerable’, right?
4. If participants are ‘vulnerable’ does that mean I cannot involve them?
5. How much information do I need to provide about a study involving human participants?
6. How do I establish whether my study domain is ethically tricky?
7. What is the difference between true anonymisation and pseudo anonymisation? Why does it matter?
8. Are there particular problems with participants interacting with conversational agents?
9. What do I need to tell participants about the data I am collecting?
10. Do my participants need to write their names, date and sign a “Consent Form”? If yes, how can I do this if my recruitment is online?
11. What if my study involves an essential element of deception of participants?
12. Are mobile devices – phones, tablets – ‘standard’ or not?

Questions and Answers:

1. I will have participants evaluating a game, which information I should include in the ethics form?

If participants will play a game, then they will have to engage with the content, which may have ethical implications, depending on what the game content is. So you should explain what the content is and what participants will actually have to do when asking for ethics clearance.

2. I am recruiting participants online, so do the questions about 'vulnerable' participants apply?

Yes, they do. You MUST include screening questions in your sign-up/consent form that ask participants to declare they are age 18 or over and are not suffering from any significant mental or physical disabilities.

3. I am only recruiting participants within Heriot-Watt, so they cannot be 'vulnerable', right?

Some first-year Heriot-Watt students may be only 17 and thus require parental permission. Others may be registered as needing additional support for a variety of physical or mental conditions that would make them 'vulnerable'. For example, they could be hearing impaired or have a learning disability. So you MUST still include appropriate screening questions in your sign-up/consent form.

4. If participants are 'vulnerable' does that mean I cannot involve them?

If participants are 'vulnerable' then you must take account of this in a number of ways.

- A. They must only be involved if this is absolutely necessary to the research being carried out
- B. There must be some potential benefit to them of the research being carried out
- C. You must take account of their specific vulnerability in the design of your study and in the content of your consent form.
- D. Depending on the type of vulnerability, you may need Disclosure Scotland clearance to carry out the study.

- E. Depending on the type of vulnerability, they may not be able to give personal informed consent. Participants under 18 must have parental consent, participants with cognitive impairments such as dementia may need consent from a Guardian.

Note that many types of sensory or cognitive impairments may make participants much more liable to stress and it is mandatory for your study design to take this into account. For example, you may provide a STOP card a participant can raise if they feel over-stressed.

5. How much information do I need to provide about a study involving human participants?

The content of studies with human participants must be specified: if it involves documents, what are the documents about? If a game, what is the game about? Exactly how the study will be carried out must also be specified. What does a participant actually have to do? Exactly what data is being collected from them and how?

6. How do I establish whether my study domain is ethically tricky?

You must think about what could go wrong and what the consequences would be in that case. So, some topics are inherently ethically tricky: for example, those relating to health or emotional state. You need to demonstrate that you have considered the possibility that the study has a negative effect on your participants and will counteract that: e.g. the study could cause people to panic about their health, make them more stressed/miserable not less. Be especially aware that any disease related study may involve participants who have been bereaved or whose families have been or are suffering from the disease.

7. What is the difference between true anonymisation and pseudo anonymisation? Why does it matter?

This distinction came in with GDPR, and yes, it does matter! ‘True’ anonymisation means there is absolutely no way to get back from the data to the participant it comes from. So, if you have a participant number, to avoid storing personal data like names, you are NOT truly anonymising, since you can use the number to pull out the participant’s raw data. This is called ‘pseudo anonymisation’.

Unless data is TRULY anonymised, all participants have the right to access or remove the data they gave you if it is stored electronically. You must explain how they can do this on their information sheet. So that is why the distinction is important.

NOTE that video data is very, very hard to truly anonymise, and that may be true of audio recordings too. Be aware that conversational data may include volunteered identifying information about the user you were not expecting.

8. Are there particular problems with participants interacting with conversational agents?

Conversational agents are rather fallible in the current state-of-the-art and may not behave as you expected. This is a specific risk in sensitive domains where they could behave insensitively or inappropriately. Your submission must address these risks. In addition, the behaviour of the participant is somewhat unpredictable too and apart from rudeness or inappropriate utterances might also involve revealing sensitive, confidential or self-identifying information you were not expecting. Your submission must address these risks.

9. What do I need to tell participants about the data I am collecting?

Information sheets must tell participants what data is being collected, how it will be used, how it will be stored, and how the participant can access it. If a participant halts participation - and they must be told they can - it must be clear that their data will be removed.

10. Do my participants need to write their names, date and sign a "Consent Form"? If yes, how can I do this if my recruitment is online?

Consent forms are used for the participant to give consent. Consent forms must have the name of the participant and signature. The consent form could be electronically signed. For instance, you could have a text with a tick box, where the participant must TYPE their full name, DATE and a statement that they give consent or not. A consent form can NEVER be anonymous.

Please understand that if someone makes a complaint later, we will need to access their consent form.

Again, the collected data from the participants can be pseudo-anonymised (e.g., using a participant number) or truly anonymised (cannot in any way be traced back to the participant). If pseudo-anonymised participants must be told how they can access their data or remove it if they so choose.

11. What if my study involves an essential element of deception of participants?

Some studies cannot collect the necessary data if participants are aware of its purpose upfront. For example, a Wizard of Oz evaluation, where a system that will later be autonomous is tested with an experimenter driving it themselves, relies on the user believing the system is autonomous.

Any deception must be solidly justified by the needs of the research – there must be NO non-deceiving way to collect the data - and participants MUST be undeceived at the end of the study, including if they leave the study without finishing.

12. Are mobile devices – phones, tablets – ‘standard’ or not?

The difference between these devices and a desktop machine is that you usually cannot predict under what circumstances a participant will be using them. With a desktop machine, you know the participant will be sitting in front of it, but with a mobile device, they may in principle be pretty much anywhere and not necessarily motionless. Therefore, you must take this into account, especially the possibility that a participant may be moving around with the device during the study.