Ethical guidelines for research involving human participants

The Ethics Officer for the department is Professor Monika Schmid. The Dept. Administrative Assistant with responsibility for the process is Mrs. Caralyn Elmer. This document resides on the DLL webpage www.essex.ac.uk/langling/documents/current_students/ethical_guidelines_human_participants.pdf

This document provides information about current procedures regarding ethical approval for DLL research involving human participants. If the information provided here conflicts with the University’s ethical guidelines, the University guidelines take precedence.

Who should apply for ethical approval?

All students planning to undertake a research project involving human participants (e.g. a project involving tests, questionnaires, interviews, reaction time experiments, etc.) must obtain ethical approval before starting data collection. This includes Undergraduates performing research for coursework, MA and MPhil students, and PhD candidates. (All staff planning a research project with human participants undergo the same process, although they now use a different form. The information below is however aimed primarily at students.)

- How to apply for ethical approval
- The approval process
- Disclosure and Barring Service – DBS Checks (formerly CRB)
- Further information from the university

How to Apply for Ethical Approval

In order to apply for ethical approval, you should do the following:

1. Develop your data collection design well in advance of beginning data collection.
2. Consider the ethics of it carefully; consult relevant readings from your courses.
3. Attend one of the annual workshops given by the Ethics Officer. These may be offered through LG595 or LG592. This powerpoint records key points of the latest workshop.
4. Consult with course instructor/supervisor about your plans for ethical research. Your instructor/supervisor is the primary point of contact for information and advice on the ethical approval process. Please don’t consult the Ethics Officer before you speak to your course instructor/supervisor.
5. Research involving collecting data in the UK from children below age 18, or from adults who may be considered vulnerable, formerly required CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) clearance (now renamed DBS for the Disclosures and Barring Service). This is no longer true in most cases. Where it is, DBS clearance is done centrally by the University and adds extra time, measured in weeks, to your clearance process. DBS checks cost money which the researcher must pay. The Dept. Ethics Officer may recommend that you consider DBS approval, but it is a separate process. If you are recommended to get DBS clearance, it must be obtained from Registry after speaking with the Departmental Administrator. See below for more information.
6. Download and complete an application for ethical approval form
   - Staff and PhD student application form: (.docx).
   - Student application form for undergraduate or Masters research: (.docx)
   - An example form (in Word), based on the latter, is given with some suggestions and advice for answering the questions.
7. Prepare a Consent Form, and a Participant Information Sheet (PIS), appropriate to your project. (It can be acceptable to combine these into one.) Consult
www.essex.ac.uk/reo/governance/participants.aspx for guidance. Examples of such forms that can be modified are available as Word documents:

- **This example** combines both PIS and Consent Form in a single page. It should be printed on headed DLL paper, or information about the University and the Dept. must be added.
- **This example** combines both, but on separate pages. It is good practice to leave participants with a sheet that explains the project and gives contact information for the researcher. This example also covers video-recording.
- **This example** is a simple, plain-English consent form, with comments about how to use it. If used as in student research, as it was intended, the student must adapt it to make sure that it contains their own name and contact info, as well as that of their supervisor. You’ll also need to prepare a separate PIS form as this doesn’t have room for much detail.

DO NOT simply **copy** one of these existing consent forms – you MUST ensure that the form you develop complies with **all the principles** on the REO Participant Information & Consent webpage. You may **adapt** these sample forms, but a copied form is likely to prove inadequate or inappropriate and may cause your application to be rejected.

8. Discuss the completed application form, the consent form, and the participant information sheet with your supervisor (instructor, for undergraduate research). Their approval and signature is required before your application can be acted on.

9. Send your application form, PIS and consent form, signed by your supervisor, to Mrs. Caralyn Elmer, Administrative Assistant in the departmental office (4.305), in BOTH email AND signed hard-copy forms. Leave adequate time (e.g. **at least 2 weeks**) for the form to be processed, including possibly being returned to you for improvements and resubmission. Please do not submit applications at the last minute and request special treatment or turn-around times of a few days, as we are not likely to be able to help you.

10. The Dept. Ethics Coordinator will pass their decision to the Administrative Assistant.

11. You will receive notification of the decision by email from the Administrative Assistant. You may also receive information on revisions required before your application can be approved.

12. When it is signed off by the Dept. Ethics Coordinator and returned to you, **THEN** you may begin research. WARNING: **DO NOT** collect data **BEFORE** the date that your application is approved! There can be no retroactive approval of research involving human participants.

13. Instructors and supervisors, please further see **this memo** for the latest advice.

### The approval process

- On the application form, "Principal Investigator" refers to **you**, the student conducting the research for your module, MA or PhD.
- Try to avoid duplicating titles on successive applications, e.g. don’t use the same title for your MA and then (a year or two later) your PhD project; or for a course assignment, and then your MA project. The REO gets agitated when they see recurring titles.
- The REO says, "Informed consent must be given on a consent form. Consent forms must be signed by participants before the start of any project." This is NOT OPTIONAL. It applies to your friends, partners and family members, just as much as to strangers. Failure to provide an appropriate consent form is a common reason for rejection of applications.
- Linguists often record speech data; where appropriate, you may secure recordings of oral consent, but this does not replace the requirement for written consent. It is very rarely acceptable to collect only oral consent without some form of written consent. Forms submitted without a consent form, or with an inadequate one, will be returned for revision.
- It is rarely appropriate to have one person (e.g. a school head) sign on behalf of others (e.g. parents of schoolchildren). It is generally only acceptable when they are directly responsible for someone who cannot sign for themselves (e.g. the parents signing for their own
children). You must leave adequate time, and show you have made every effort, to gain consent from the appropriate persons, and not just the most convenient ones. However there will be contexts (e.g. some schools abroad) where responsibility is recognised to lie with a single responsible person. You should have already have investigated such situations before you submit your ethics form.

- The REO says, "It is also good practice to provide participants with a separate Participant Information Sheet in advance." This is now not just good practice, but a required element. You can however combine a PIS with a consent form in many cases.
- Some elements listed in the REO Guidance for a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form say you "must" do certain things, while others merely advise that you "should". Your supervisor will advise about whether your form meets the requirements and follows good practice.
- You must develop your own consent form, ensuring that it follows the principles of good scientific practice and the University's requirements. It is possible to base your own form on existing models, including those above, but the responsibility lies with you to consider in detail whether they meet the specific needs of your research, and make adaptations. Your supervisor will advise whether your form meets requirements and follows good practice.
- The REO materials do not adequately distinguish "anonymity" from "confidentiality", but you should understand the difference. "Anonymity" is when you the researcher do not know the name or identifying details of the subject; this is rare in linguistic research, and it is not a general requirement that you guarantee subjects' anonymity. "Confidentiality" is when you know identifying details, but strive to restrict access to them within reasonable limits. This is the general case for linguistic research. You must do your best to protect confidentiality, and explain carefully on your application how you will do so – simply promising that you will, without giving details, is not sufficient.

**Disclosure and Barring Service – DBS Checks (formerly CRB)**

As of autumn 2013, the government made significant changes to how DBS works. The effect is that most Linguistics students may no longer be eligible to apply for DBS. The University now has procedures to deal with this. Please consult with your supervisor regarding the question of whether you need or may be eligible to apply for DBS clearance. Research in schools outside the UK should not be affected by these changes, as DBS only applies in the UK (see below).

DBS queries should be directed to dbs@essex.ac.uk. Decisions on whether someone is eligible for DBS checks are made by Academic Section of the University of Essex for students, and by Human resources for those employed by the University. The Ethics Officer does not decide whether you are eligible for DBS screening. Please consult your supervisor.

Research involving collecting data inside the UK from children below age 18, or from adults who may be considered vulnerable, or even with your friends or members of your own family, may require separate measures in developing consent and practical measures to safeguard both you and the children, e.g. ensuring that you are not left alone with them; consult your supervisor. If working within a school, the school authorities should indicate whether they require DBS clearance. You must clearly indicate on your Ethical Approval form what the age and vulnerability status of your informants is, or else the application may be returned to you for clarification.

Obtaining DBS clearance is a separate process from applying for ethical approval. The current stage is only one opportunity to flag up the possible need for DBS clearance (or its equivalent). DBS clearance is done centrally by the University and adds extra time, measured in weeks, to your clearance process. DBS checks cost money which the student must pay. The Dept. Ethics Officer may recommend that you consider DBS approval, but it is a separate process. If you are recommended to get DBS clearance, it is obtained from Academic Section after approval by the Departmental Administrator.
It is now the University’s advice that if you will be working with children outside the UK, you do not need a DBS clearance. DBS clearance only applies in the UK. If you will be conducting your research outside the UK with children or vulnerable persons, you are strongly advised to research the equivalent permissions and checks, and the local norms and expectations, for your research site. There may be requirements of law or procedure there which do apply to you, or community expectations that differ from what you might anticipate. It is your responsibility as researcher to find out about this at an early stage of research planning, and discuss it with your supervisor. You should be able to document that you have done so. As far as the Ethical Approval process is concerned, you need only indicate on the form that you have investigated this, and provide appropriate information.

- Please read the current (Sept 2014) government statement on eligibility for DBS checks.
- A DBS check has no official expiry date. Any information included will be accurate at the time the check was carried out. It is up to an employer (e.g. in the common case for linguistics research, a school) to decide if they think a new check is needed. More info is here.
- The Academic Section formerly referred us to definitions of a ‘vulnerable adult’ and ‘child’. However, the definitions have now changed – they are no longer a matter of personal characteristics, but rather of the process (e.g. the research process) in which such persons are engaged. Here are the current definitions of “regulated activity for adults” and “regulated activity for children”.
- Here is the University policy on student CRB/DBS clearance. This policy is dated July 2010 and may be subject to revision (it does not appear to have been updated since the new DBS regime came into force).
- You may also consult the Criminal Records Bureau Code of Practice from April 2009; additional information can be found on the Home Office website. “Please note that following the merger of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and the Independent Safeguarding Authority to form the DBS, CRB-branded certificates should be treated the same as DBS-branded certificates.”
- Changes related to the policy and processes associated with Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks occurred in 2012-13. Please note that as the name has changed from CRB to DBS, these weblinks will probably change and will eventually be updated.

University of Essex and external webpages on research ethics

For more information on good scientific practice in conducting research, and on obtaining participant information and consent, you may consult the following University web pages. While many of them are aimed at staff research projects and processes, the main ones relevant to research by students are highlighted below. See the REO webpage on Policies on research integrity and good research conduct.

- **REO – Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice.** [http://www.essex.ac.uk/reo/documents/scientific-practice.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/reo/documents/scientific-practice.pdf). This document applies to you. When you hand in your approval form, your signature indicates that you understand and abide by it.
- **REO – Guidelines for Ethical Approval.** [http://www.essex.ac.uk/reo/documents/human-participants.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/reo/documents/human-participants.pdf). This source applies to you – please read it. When you hand in your approval form, your signature indicates that you understand and abide by it. While this webpage has links to ethics resources, none of them are related to linguistics; for such codes, please see "Ethics of Sociolinguistic Research" below.
You are required to know about the 1998 Data Protection Act (it applies whether you gather data in the UK or elsewhere). This link will inform you – please read it. When you hand in your approval form, you must tick a box stating that you have read it.

- REO – Participant Information & Consent.  
  [http://www.essex.ac.uk/reo/governance/participants.aspx](http://www.essex.ac.uk/reo/governance/participants.aspx). This source applies to you – please read it. You are expected to develop your own forms, which must follow these principles of good scientific practice and the University's requirements. (The REO formerly provided a sample Consent Form, but it is no longer adequate – you should not use it; see "Notes" below.)

- Ethics of Sociolinguistic Research, a webpage developed by Prof. Peter Patrick, links to online codes of ethics and practice from linguistic organizations and related disciplines, provides some background for clinical ethics sources and links for them, and offers a sample consent form, principles to guide you in developing your own, and a model form for sharing research data. The page’s remit is larger than just sociolinguistics.

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