

Checklist for research with humans

Commented version

Version 4.1 from 26 June 2025

Introduction

This commented version of the checklist is meant to help researchers prepare their application to the Ethics Committee by providing you with some background information on the questions included in the [checklist](#). Please keep in mind that not all issues addressed in this document will be relevant to your project, and similarly your project may have ethical issues not raised here. Note also, that this commented version is also not intended to provide an overview of research ethics which is a much broader field than could possibly be covered here.

The Ethics Committee is aware that research involving humans is conducted in a range of settings, builds on a broad range of theoretical foundations, uses different qualitative and quantitative research methods, different sampling techniques, different options to ensure anonymity of participants, and different forms of interaction with research participants. This being the case, it is not really possible, nor appropriate, to prescribe a single set of ethical ‘rules’ to be followed when conducting research. There certainly are general ethical principles¹, but each researcher must decide what to do in each particular context.

Each researcher is individually responsible to ensure that their research is conducted ethically, from the planning of a research, its implementation, to publication and data management. As such, each researcher must make carefully considered ethical choices, addressing the dilemmas and trade-offs involved, and be able to justify their choices based on ethical principles. Based on the documents submitted, the Ethics Commission assesses whether the ethical implications of the choices made have been reflected upon. The aim of this assessment is thus to ensure that researchers have anticipated ethical issues that might arise in their research with humans, that they have given them deliberate and thoughtful attention, and that they have addressed them in a way that is appropriate for their particular research endeavour. The Ethics Committee thus does not evaluate the relevance of your research topic for the scientific discourse, nor the appropriateness of your study design or of your methods. This all falls under academic freedom, which is a fundamental right in Austria. The task of the Ethics Committee is solely to assess the ethical implications of your chosen design and methods based on the documents you submit.

Note that research ethics is closely linked to many issues related to scientific responsibility and integrity, as well as to legal obligations. This includes data protection (esp. the [GDPR](#)), contribution to professional development, transparency, fairness and respect when interacting with others, empowerment and inclusion, as well as equal opportunity and diversity agenda (see the [BOKU Ethics Charter](#) and the [Best practice guide for research integrity and ethics](#) of the BMBWF).

In your application, please avoid repeating information. If you feel that the answer has already been provided in a previous question, then in all likelihood you have misunderstood either the current or the previous question and/or provided information that went beyond what needed to be addressed in a question. Indeed, each question addresses a specific and distinct issue, please focus your answer to address each ethical issue.

¹ See e.g. EC (2021) ‘[Ethics in Social Science and Humanities](#)’

1. General information about the research project

Please provide a short factual information about the research described in the application, which enables the Ethics Committee to have a general idea of the context of the application, as well as the contact persons.

Please ensure that the title of the application is closely aligned with and accurately reflects the research described in the application (rather than e.g. using the title of the broader research project), as this title will figure in the final ethics statement.

2. Research plan

Please provide a concise overview of the project (i.e. max. 600 words). This short description should give an overview of the project, focusing on the issues that are important to understand the overall design of the research for which ethical approval is being sought. Please include the most relevant literature references for the 'state of knowledge'.

3. The general ethical aspects of the research project

This section addresses general ethical issues that are linked to the project as a whole. All ethical issues linked directly to the participants are addressed in section 4.

3.1. What is the expected societal impact of the research project? How will it benefit society at large or a specific group?

While research results usually enrich the scientific discourse, and benefits the researchers and their careers, ideally it would also have a broader societal impact. Please briefly describe how your research addresses a broader societal concern or the needs of a specific societal group, and how your research may benefit them.

3.2. Will research findings be made available to stakeholders, policy makers or relevant organisations? If yes, what format will this take?

In the past research data was almost only used for scientific publications, thus contributing to scientific knowledge and benefiting the academic advancement of researchers. However, if your research is to have a societal impact, it is necessary to provide research findings directly to the group(s) who are expected to benefit from the research (see question 3.1).

Thus, researchers should provide research findings or other products arising from the research to institutions or organisations that are best suited to act as disseminators. Researchers should ensure that groups and/or communities are informed how to access the results of the research. Research findings should be made available to them in a culturally appropriate and meaningful form, i.e. should be written in plain language and focus on the results relevant to them (which is rarely the case of scientific papers, as their target audience is the scientific community). Of course, if the funding agreement includes confidentiality provisions, these may limit which results can be shared.

Making research findings available may take many forms, e.g.: a summary report may be written for specific stakeholders; a blog post may be published on the website of an organisation working on behalf of the community; an article may be published in a magazine for a broad audience or in a trade journal; various information may be offered on the project website.

3.3. What possible risks are associated with the projects? How will they be mitigated? Do the expected benefits outweigh the foreseeable risks associated with the research project?

Assessment of risks and benefits is central to determining whether a research study is ethically acceptable. For a study to be ethical, the (projected) benefits to society (e.g. knowledge gain), or to a specific group (e.g. developers or users of a technology or a product) should outweigh the (projected) net burden to society or to a specific group. Clearly, assessing harms and benefits is associated with a high degree of uncertainty, and the balance point cannot usually be determined accurately. Yet, researchers should ensure that the balance tips in favour of societal benefit. When considering risks and benefits, you should also take into account the principle of justice and fairness: who will receive the benefits of research and who bears the risks and burden of the research?

Thus, briefly state what potential risks may be linked to the project. Note that the risk of harm is multidimensional, and includes physical, mental, social, financial, and/or ecological dimensions. In particular, reflect on whether a group of people risks being portrayed in a way that is to their detriment or reproduces stigmas or stereotypes, i.e. whether the research risks reinforcing harmful narratives about a specific group. Indeed, social scientists are often interested in linking a specific behaviour or reasoning with e.g. gender, age or income group. While such research can make a valuable contribution to a more just and equal society, it may also reproduce and reinforce such stereotypes.

Please justify why these risks are necessary, and explain how you will minimise them.

3.4. Are there conflicts of interest (COI) on the part of the researchers involved? If yes: which?

There are various forms of conflict of interest that might arise in a research project.

On the one hand, there is a conflict of interest if research objectivity is compromised, esp. in return for financial or non-financial benefits to any of the researchers involved, to their relatives or to their friends.

But there are many other examples of COIs, e.g. using students to perform services for a company in which a researcher has a financial interest; accepting a research contract with a restrictive publication clause; imposing restrictions on disclosure of research findings, at the request of a sponsor or financially interested company or association that might be a partner in the research project (see [Univ. of Pittsburg](#)). Such potential conflicts of interest should always be disclosed to ensure transparency.

On the other hand, there can also be a potential conflict of interest within the research team. This may include the nature and degree of collaboration, the roles, rights and obligations of team members, the division of labour, access to and rights in data and field notes, the contributions to publications, and how authorship will be assigned (e.g. see the [Committee On Publication Ethics - COPE](#)). Thus, please reflect on whether expectations (esp. regarding authorship) have been openly discussed and clarified between all relevant research partners, stakeholders, supervisors, and whether they have been recorded in writing. Please also indicate whether these expectations and agreements will be reviewed regularly during the research project.

3.5. How will ethical aspects be reviewed during the project? What procedures are in place to deal with unforeseen events that have an ethical dimension?

Not all ethical issues can be anticipated at the start of a research project. Indeed, ethical tensions are part of the practice of doing research. It is important to consider that unforeseen events are likely to arise, and to know how to handle 'ethically important moments', not least as a part of the process of strengthening ethical competence. Ethical competence is about the willingness to acknowledge the ethical dimension of research, the ability to recognize the ethical dimension in a situation during data collection or processing, and the ability to respond appropriately.

For example, during an interview, a seemingly anodyne question may trigger painful memory causing emotional distress in the participant. The researcher then needs to find a balance between maintaining a human connection and a non-exploitative stance, while at the same time being mindful of one's role as a researcher. The researcher thus faces a difficult choice: should they continue the interview as if nothing had happened, or should the researcher respond in some way? These are difficult, often subtle, usually unpredictable situations that may arise while doing research.

Unforeseen events may also include more practical questions, such as a participant not wanting to be assigned a pseudonym but wanting their real name used when results are reported. Or the first few interviews revealing a flaw in the study design, which should be corrected before proceeding.

It may also be necessary to review aspects pertaining to maintaining the health, safety and well-being of the researchers themselves during the data collection period. BOKU University has the duty to care, i.e. to ensure the safety and welfare of its employees, and employees are responsible to take reasonable care of their own safety. If researchers are visiting a rural or isolated area for their field work and/or if researchers are collecting data in the participant's home, it is important to review potential risks to the researchers. For example, if a researcher works alone in the field they may be confronted with unexpected situations or be involved in an accident. It is important that someone knows where the researcher is, and what to do should they not return or check in at the expected time. Researchers need to know that they should walk away from any situation that they consider uncomfortable or threatening, e.g. because an interviewee seems to become angry, makes derogatory or inappropriate remarks towards the researchers. Even if such incidents are unlikely, it is better to have thought about potential situations, and about options to handle them in advance, so that they can be recalled quickly should the need arise.

Thus, please reflect whether there are regular team meetings reviewing ethical aspects and risks? Should there have been an incident during data collection (e.g. an emotionally charged situation), is it clear with whom the researcher can discuss the issues and where they can get support and counselling (see e.g. ['trusted advisors'](#) or [occupational psychological consulting](#) offered by the BOKU)? Will researchers document incidents in research notes? Will reflective review sessions be set up within the research team to discuss issues that have arisen and decide how to address them? Will these be documented in writing?

3.6. If students participate in a research project: how is the principle of voluntary participation implemented?

In some research projects it may be purposeful for students to participate in data collection or analysis. It is important to acknowledge that the principle of voluntary participation applies to everyone, including students. Thus, participating in a research project should not be a precondition to complete a course. Especially if it is a compulsory course, a meaningful alternative to complete the course must be offered.

3.7. Will the project contribute to Open Data? If yes: which data? When? In which repository? If not, please briefly state why not.

To make the most of the data you have collected, it is desirable that the anonymized raw data be made available to other researchers. For more information on the open data policy, a framework to promote the broadest reuse of research data, see the Open Access Infrastructure for Research in Europe ([OpenAIRE](#)), the guidelines for [FAIR data](#), and repositories such as [Zenodo](#), where BOKU University has an own ['community'](#) (see also the [relevant website regarding Research Data Management](#) at BOKU University).

4. Documentation of the ethical aspects specific to the participants

4.1. How are diversity, equal opportunity, and inclusion taken into account? Which groups of people are included, which are excluded from the research project? Could the study design contribute to marginalizing the excluded groups?

The principle of justice and equal opportunity to participate demands that participant selection be guided by inclusiveness, non-discrimination, and equitable treatment. Unjustified exclusions based on characteristics such as gender, culture, language, ethnicity, age, migration status, or disability should be avoided.

Marginalized groups – such as individuals affected by poverty, discrimination (e.g., based on gender, disability, or migration status), or other social inequities – often lack access to representation and voice in many societal domains, including research. When such groups are excluded or portrayed reductively in research, it can reinforce their invisibility, sustain biased narratives, and perpetuate power imbalances. This can result in social inequalities being reproduced, dominant perspectives being amplified, and policy recommendations being skewed.

Historically, groups like women have been inappropriately excluded from research, leading to both harm and missed benefits when findings from studies that were based primarily on the opinions voiced by men were generalized. Inclusivity is therefore not only an ethical obligation but also essential for producing generalizable and meaningful results.

Thus, ideally, research would include a broad and diverse range of participants from the group being studied. In practice, however, this is often not feasible. Certain study formats may unintentionally exclude specific groups. For example, oral interviews may miss people with limited time availability; online surveys may exclude those with low digital literacy or people using assistive technologies if accessibility is not ensured. The timing of workshops might disadvantage those with care responsibilities or jobs, while language barriers can marginalize non-native speakers.

Researchers should therefore reflect critically on how the design of their study might (explicitly or implicitly) exclude certain groups – whether due to demographic characteristics, social position, lack of access, or language. Such reflection should also consider the potential consequences of these exclusions: might they reinforce structural inequalities, silence certain perspectives, or skew the interpretation of results? If certain groups cannot be included, researchers should transparently acknowledge their absence and its implications when analysing and reporting findings.

Engaging with diverse populations – particularly under-represented or hard-to-reach groups – may require adapting your methodology, which may or may not be feasible in your study. Examples of such adaptations: are the timing and location of your workshops accessible for people with disabilities or caring responsibilities? Do you reimburse participants to avoid excluding those from lower-income backgrounds? Are you accounting for gender diversity – for example, by including response options such as “non-binary,” “gender-diverse,” or “prefer not to disclose,” in line with legal recognition of gender diversity in Austria since 2020?

Ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion strengthens research quality and enhances its ethical integrity. The principle of justice also means ensuring that no group bears an unfair burden of participation, nor is unfairly excluded from the potential benefits of research. Thus, briefly reflect on how your research design might lead to some groups (e.g. certain demographics, identities, professions, social positions, lack of access, language barrier) to be excluded from participating in the study. This exclusion might be explicit (they are not the target of the research) or implicit (through the study design, which is also guided by pragmatic considerations). The aim is to avoid unconscious bias and inadvertently excluding certain groups.

4.2. What criteria are used to select participants? How big is the sample size and how was it determined?

As not everyone from the target group can be included in a study, researchers must make deliberate and transparent choices about inclusion criteria. This requires awareness of potential biases and a clear rationale for participant selection. If participant screening is used, or a specific quota for specific sub-groups set, the criteria should be explained.

Thus, please explain what criteria you use to select participants, and how you will identify and make the final selection of participants. Please also explain how many participants will be involved overall, as well as whether there are categories (e.g. for educational background, gender, age, region...) and whether fixed sample sizes have been set for each category.

In quantitative studies sample size is often set based on methodological concerns (e.g. conceptual models, numerical guidelines derived from empirical studies, statistical formulae, rules of thumb) as well as practical concerns (availability of time and funds). However, there is also an ethical dimension to choosing sample size, especially in studies with a large number of respondents. The question is the balance between the burden/inconvenience/ discomfort put on participants and the scientific value that a study can be expected to produce. Thus, especially in studies with large sample sizes, there is a trade-off between avoiding to burden more participants than necessary, and ensuring a large enough sample to ensure sound statistical analysis (e.g. reaching $p < 0.05$). Thus, please briefly state how the sample size has been set and the burden on participants considered.

In some qualitative approaches, the sample size cannot be set a priori, as it is determined in the course of the study, e.g. by saturation, and participants might be a convenience sample. If so, please ensure that under 4.1 you include a reflection on who might be excluded.

4.3. How will participants be recruited?

Participants may be recruited using a variety of measures, e.g. adverts, personal contacts, email, a third party (e.g. employer), snowball, a search on the internet, an existing mailing list, or an online panel provider.

What is important in the recruitment process, is that the provisions of the GDPR are considered, e.g. if you use an existing mailing list, have those on the list consented to have their address used for this purpose? If you get support from an employer, please provide the approval letter. If recruitment is conducted by a third party (e.g. association), do you have a letter requesting their assistance and/or a letter confirming their willingness to assist?

4.4. Will participants be informed of the research results? If yes: how and when? Are they informed of this?

In the past social science research had a tendency to be extractive, characterised by the one-way flow of information (i.e. the researcher arrives, extracts relevant information, and leaves without any further contact). An ethical approach to research requires a more reciprocal and respectful engagement with participants. As such it has become good practice, and there is often a moral obligation, to provide research results to research participants.

Making research findings available may take many forms, e.g.: interviewed experts may be given the opportunity to comment on a draft publication or the thesis is sent to them, key insights might be sent by email to all participants, or they may be informed by email that the research results can be downloaded from the project website.

If you provide the research results to participants, make sure to inform them when and how they will be able to access the results of the research (e.g. as part of the Information Sheet for Participants).

4.5. What benefits will participants gain from participating in the research project?

Participating in your research will put a burden on the participants, not least because they need to take time to participate in the interview, complete the survey, or will incur costs to travel to a workshop. It should not be taken as granted that people take time and disrupt their day to take part in a research project. From an ethical perspective, you might want to consider how participants may benefit from participating in the research, to outweigh the burden they incur.

Benefits from research participation can be direct, e.g. when an individual participant learns new information about social issues or enjoy meeting others with similar interests as a result of participation in a research focus group; they may learn new information, the questions addressed may increase their self-reflection or awareness on a topic, and they may feel heard and valued by sharing their perspective (esp. if they belong to a marginalized group). Or benefits may be indirect, if the research serves to advance knowledge that may lead to improved conditions for a group to which the participant belongs. It is important to be clear with prospective participants about the (indirect) benefits of participating in your research, to avoid raising unfounded expectations. This should thus be included in the Information Sheet for Participants.

You may also choose to offer a token of appreciation to acknowledge their participation in the research project. Incentives and monetary compensation can be an important aspect of enabling participation and increase representation in a study, esp. if you want to include hard-to-reach groups.

If you offer direct financial benefits, you will need to consider whether the payment is appropriate to the local context; and you need to consider whether the payment/material benefit can become an inappropriate inducement to participate, which may interfere with the free consent of participants. Note that if payment is offered and if a participant decides to withdraw at any time, the payment/material benefit still needs to be paid, or the compensation would in effect be coercive. Should payments be offered, please also include information on how the personal data you may collect as part of the payment process will be handled to comply with the GDPR.

4.6. Are there topics addressed during data collection that may be personal or sensitive for participants? If so, which topics? If so, what measures are taken to minimize the risk of causing emotional or psychological discomfort?

Generally, information about physical or mental health, political and religious views, and sexual orientation are perceived as personal and sensitive. However, researchers should be aware that there are variations in what people regard as sensitive and private, thus it is not possible to know in advance which questions individual participants might perceive as intrusive. Emotional discomfort can be caused by issues that are personally relevant, self-doubt can be triggered by introspective questions, and issues addressed may lead to feelings of shame or guilt, or concern about social judgement. This may be triggered by questions about past experiences that carry an emotional load, e.g. questions about the impact of Covid-19, the impact of climate change, economic hardships, or possibly illegal behaviour related to the use of protected resources. If you address issues sensitive to participants, there may be a possibility to resurfacing difficult or painful memories or expected futures, e.g. by asking them to talk about events they may have found difficult or emotionally challenging (e.g. people from conflict areas, witnesses of extreme weather events, victims of accidents, crime and/or violence). Emotional discomfort may also be caused by participants not being used to be in a research setting, interviewing people in a language they are not fluent in, presenting written information to someone who has difficulty reading and/or comprehending printed material.

Thus, while taking part in research can be a positive experience, it can also be disturbing. Participants might perceive it as an intrusion into their private lives, find themselves uncomfortable due to introspection and increased self-knowledge, or build false hopes and expectations. Researchers thus need to consider whether their research (or individual questions) could be unsettling or induce emotional discomfort and prepare appropriate measures to

mitigate them. Indeed, researchers need to be able to handle difficult, emotionally charged situations during interactions with participants, e.g. interviews or workshops. Appropriate awareness training might be needed, especially if students or field assistants (such as guides, translators) are involved in the data collection.

Generally, researchers need to be sensitive during an interview, and should avoid asking questions that might be perceived as stressful, especially if they are only incidental to the research project. This also requires researchers to be aware of the cultural norms and local social practices so that they can avoid violating them inadvertently.

If questions will be asked that can be perceived as intrusive, stressful or may resurface painful memories, they need to be identified and justified. If sensitive issues are a core part of the research topic, consider mentioning it in the Participant Information Sheet. It may also be purposeful to remind participants during the interview, that they do not have to answer all questions.

4.7. Is there a risk to the physical well-being of participants? If so: what measures are taken to minimize the risk?

When conducting research involving human participants, particular attention must be paid to potential risks to their physical well-being. Even in non-clinical studies, participants may be exposed to procedures or environments that pose physical challenges. For example, allergies or intolerances may be triggered during sensory testing involving food or fragrances. Dizziness, nausea, or disorientation may occur during (virtual) test drives or immersive simulations. Studies that involve close-to-body measurements or the collection of biometric data (e.g., heart rate, skin conductance, EEG) may induce stress responses or discomfort. Additionally, the use of technical equipment such as VR headsets or skin sensors may cause irritation or unease, particularly for individuals with sensory sensitivities.

Researchers must therefore carefully assess these risks in advance, clearly inform participants, and implement appropriate mitigation strategies – such as offering opt-outs, providing breaks, or excluding individuals with relevant health conditions. Ensuring the physical safety and comfort of participants is a fundamental ethical obligation throughout all phases of the research.

4.8. What risks to participants may result from how the research data is stored, analysed, disseminated, used and archived? What measures are taken to minimize these risks?

Even after data collection has concluded, participants may face risks stemming from how their data are analyzed, published, used, or archived.

In social sciences the most common risks are those tied to privacy violations, i.e. the risk of being identified as someone who participated in a research project. These risks can include potential breaches of confidentiality or unintended identifiability, particularly when dealing with small samples, unique personal narratives, or sensitive topics. If participants are publicly associated with certain views or experiences – intentionally or inadvertently – this may lead to reputational harm, social exclusion, or strained personal or professional relationships.

In cases where illegal or stigmatized behavior is disclosed, there is a risk of self-incrimination or legal consequences, especially if data are not properly anonymized. Researchers also need to be aware that data given to them in confidence does not enjoy legal privilege and may be liable to subpoena by a court. Thus, consider whether participants might be put at risk, e.g. if there are questions about illegal activity, where retribution might be anticipated.

Furthermore, financial or institutional disadvantages could arise, for example if research findings influence funding decisions, public perceptions, or access to services.

To mitigate these risks, researchers must apply strict data protection measures, ensure transparency about potential data use, and clearly communicate limits to anonymity to

participants. Ethical use of research data requires continuous attention to participant privacy, dignity, and autonomy, even beyond the period of active data collection.

4.9. Is intentional deception of participants planned? If yes, how do you justify it? Will participants be informed about this after data collection or analysis? If yes, how?

Using deceptive techniques is usually understood as incompatible with the standard of informed consent. Since it can be seen as an instrumentalization of human beings, it not only violates the rights of persons involved in research, it is also considered as incompatible with the autonomy principle, i.e. the right of individuals to make their own decisions. Moreover, it can undermine social trust in research.

However, in some cases, it can be justified to intentionally withhold essential information during the informed consent process, e.g. to avoid bias in an experimental setting (as e.g. in the case of the classical bystander apathy experiment), or to obtain more accurate information by minimizing responses biased by social desirability. However, the use of deception, misleading information, or misrepresentation needs to be justified.

If you use deception, it is usually required that, at the latest when the study is completed, there is a debriefing by the researcher to explain any deception or incomplete disclosure. This debriefing should also help the participants to deal with any distress or discomfort they might have experienced during the research.

4.10. Is the participation of people from vulnerable groups planned? (e.g., children, refugees, the elderly, those in need of care, or who are cognitively impaired) What steps are taken to address their specific needs and interests, protect them from exploitation or stigmatisation and uphold their dignity?

When involving children in research, it is essential to consider their specific needs, capacities, and interests. As a particularly vulnerable group, children require special ethical safeguards to ensure their safety, well-being, and dignity. This includes using age-appropriate language, obtaining informed consent from guardians as well as assent from the children, and creating a supportive, respectful environment. Research methods and settings should be child-friendly, and care must be taken to avoid any form of coercion, distress, or misunderstanding, including clarifying that participation will not impact their grades. Importantly, participation should not interfere with their free time, play, or rest periods, as these are crucial for their development and well-being. Addressing these considerations not only protects the children involved but also enhances the quality and reliability of the research.

When involving refugees or elderly participants in research, it is crucial to protect them from exploitation, stigmatization, and any harm that could arise from their participation. These groups often face vulnerabilities due to factors such as displacement, social isolation, or health challenges, which require researchers to handle their involvement with heightened sensitivity and respect. Upholding their dignity means ensuring informed and voluntary participation, being mindful of power imbalances that could pressure or marginalize them, and avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes. Protecting vulnerable groups not only honors their rights but also fosters trust and improves the ethical quality and validity of the research.

You need to be aware that protecting vulnerable groups is a complicated and evolving area, so make sure you get the appropriate legal and ethical provisions to ensure that children and vulnerable people have a safe and positive research experience, as well as protecting them and yourself from harm, including accusation of inappropriate behaviour.

5. Documentation of informed, free and voluntary participation

5.1. How will the participants be informed about the aspects of the research project that is relevant to them? Is this information written in appropriate, clear, and easily understood language?

The principle of autonomy and self-determination acknowledges the right of individuals to make their own decisions and serves to ensure that respondents participate voluntarily. Before being able to provide informed consent, prospective participants need to be informed what the study is about (see list below) and what is expected of them. The aim is to ensure that consent is truly informed and voluntary, i.e. participants are not misled or coerced into participating.

Briefly describe how you will provide the participant information sheet to the potential participants (e.g. will it be sent out beforehand (e.g. by email), will it be handed over at the beginning of the interaction, will it be read out. Please state whether the information sheet will remain with the participants, so that they can refer to it at any time (e.g. if they want to contact the researcher, if they want to revoke their consent). If data is collected in a face-to-face setting, clarify whether research participants will be given the opportunity to ask any questions prior to starting.

All participants should receive a verbal or written briefing before participating in research. What is essential, is that the information is easy to understand, i.e. provided in plain language, avoiding technical jargon and complicated sentence structure, so that it can be understood at first reading. Moreover, it must be provided in a language that the prospective participant is fluent in.

Researchers also need to exercise judgement how much details are provided, deciding what is most adequate in a particular context, carefully considering pros and cons, in particular the rights of the prospective participants. Indeed, informed consent can never be complete, as it would be unethical to burden the potential participant with too much irrelevant information (e.g. the background scientific discourse, theoretical concepts, or technical details of the data analysis). Also, it is practical to avoid spending too much time on the information and consent part of the interaction with participants. So, while on the one hand researchers need to provide all relevant information, on the other hand it is generally useful to be concise and to focus on the information that it is most relevant to the potential participants.

Note that if you have different categories of participants (e.g. experts and general public), you might need several different participant information sheets and/or consent forms.

The information sheet for participants (which needs to be included in your submission to the Ethics Committee) should include following information:

- Affiliation: Institution (BOKU), department, institute / research unit
- Details of the researcher and how to contact them (email, possibly phone number)
- Project title
- The source of funding
- Purpose and objectives of the research
- Intended use of the research findings and information on how research findings may be accessed
- Details of what the participation might require (interview, questionnaire, audio/film recording, photographs), the estimated time commitment and risks involved (if any)
- Information on anonymity, as well as potential limitations
- Information that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw consent at any time (which will not affect the payment of any compensation, if any)
- The arrangements made to protect the confidentiality of data, and its limitations (i.e. how any data will be recorded, managed, and stored)
- Their rights regarding their personal data (see section 7, GDPR)
- Information about whether/what data will be destroyed and when

- Whom the participant might contact if they have any concern or complaint about the conduct of the interview or the research in general

If you use secondary data, you should ensure that informed consent was given to the original data collector, that they have provided consent for the scientific use of their data and included the right to share data with third parties.

If you use data collected from the internet, note that in this context, privacy issues are an open topic of debate, not least because personal data is proliferating on the web, in a way that challenges traditional assumptions about privacy. Thus, if your research uses Big Data, i.e. collects and analyses data on individuals from the web, you need to make a thorough assessment of issues tied to privacy and gaining informed consent (for additional information see e.g. EC (2021) '[Ethics in Social Science and Humanities](#)').

5.2. How will you document that informed consent was obtained before data collection?

After you have informed prospective participants, you must ask for their consent to participate in the research. This consent might be given in oral or written form. If oral consent is sought, please include the text that will be read to participants, and explain why and how consent will be documented. If written consent is sought from participants, please include the written consent form in the application to the Ethics Committee. Indicate if you have considered whether participants might have any difficulty in reading and/or understanding printed material that you might give them? Usually, the signed consent form is collected and archived by the researcher. Will the participants get a copy of the signed consent form?

If the project involves children, please describe how will you request consent from the parents/guardians/proxies, as well as assent from the children themselves.

On the consent form, the will of the participant must be clearly visible. It is thus necessary to offer two boxes to tick ('yes, I agree' and 'no, I do not agree'), especially if participants can choose whether or not to participate in some activities (e.g. yes for the interview, but no for the photographs). The consent form should include:

- Affiliation: Institution (BOKU), department, institute / research unit
- Project title
- Confirmation for various aspects of the research (you might want to seek separate consent for each confirmation item), e.g.:
 - Confirmation that the involvement is voluntary and that the participant is free to withdraw at any time
 - Confirmation that they have been made aware of any potential risks associated with the research (if applicable)
 - Confirmation that the participant has been provided with the participant information sheet, and that the participant has had the opportunity to ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily
 - Confirmation to consenting that the interview will be recorded
 - Consenting to having the data being stored and analysed, that it will be used for research purposes, and that it may be used by the larger research team (as applicable)
- Printed full name of the participant, date and signature

5.3. How will free and voluntary participation be ensured during data collection?

This ethical principle is crucial because it respects the autonomy and dignity of individuals, prevents coercion or undue pressure, and fosters trust in the research process. Ensuring voluntary participation helps protect participants' rights and well-being throughout the study.

Free and voluntary participation during data collection can be ensured by creating a supportive environment where participants feel comfortable asking questions and expressing concerns. It is

also crucial to clearly inform participants that their involvement is completely optional and that they may withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. It is important that this message is communicated not only at the beginning but also reiterated throughout the data collection process. For example, during interviews, if participants show signs of being uncomfortable with a topic, they should be reminded that they can skip any question they do not wish to answer. Similarly, in (online) surveys should have the option to skip a question or to select responses such as 'do not know' or 'prefer not to say'.

6. Documentation of aspects related to anonymity of participants

6.1. Do you collect data anonymously? If yes, please briefly describe how you ensure anonymity

If research data can be collected anonymously, the biggest risk in social sciences, i.e. the risk of privacy violation (being identified as someone who participated in a research project) is avoided, and the GDPR does not apply.

Anonymous data collection may for example be the case if you collect data via an on-line survey which is distributed through a market research agency, as you will have no information as to the identity of the people who have completed the survey (even if you collect demographic data).

If you are unsure whether your data is anonymous (or whether it does include personal data), please refer to the information sheet that provides [guidance on the distinction between 'personal data' and 'research data'](#) available on the [website of the Ethics Committee](#).

6.2 Should the data not be collected anonymously: will the research data be anonymised/pseudonymised? If yes: how and when?

When engaging in research with humans, they entrust you with information and it is the ethical duty of researchers to protect this data and ensure – as far as possible – that participants are protected from any negative fallout from the information they have given us in confidence, by protecting their identity. This is why the anonymisation process is a crucial aspect of ethics in research with humans.

Please briefly describe how and when you will anonymise (or in many cases pseudonymise, as defined in [Art. 4 \(5\) GDPR](#)) your research data, i.e. remove identifying information (e.g. names of people or places mentioned in interviews)?

Please also briefly explain how you will maintain the anonymity of the participants when reporting your research results. How will you identify participants: will you use pseudonyms? Will you identify people's role or organisation? Will you identify the specific place where the interviews/research took place? You need to keep in mind that in a small-area geographic context, it may be possible to identify an individual even if you use pseudonyms, e.g. through a combination of postcode, small-scale geography data, age and gender.

6.3 Should data not be collected anonymously, and anonymity has been assured to participants for the publication of results, what measures will you implement to ensure this anonymity?

While anonymisation of research data might be straightforward in some research setting, it can be very challenging in others. In practice, there is a continuum from anonymous to fully identifiable data. In particular, when people belong to a fairly small group or when well-known experts are interviewed, acquaintances or colleagues may be able infer who made certain quoted statements, even without any name (or affiliation) being given in the published document. Thus, even if you anonymise or pseudonymise transcripts, there is always a residual risk for re-identification.

Researchers need to be aware – and make participants aware – that full anonymity is often not achievable in qualitative research. The whole point of qualitative research is to generate rich descriptions of people’s experiences and views, so that this data will always contain information that might be attributable to a person, even if the names, addresses, etc. are withheld. Thus, if participants belong to a small community, neighbours or other members of the community or organisation are likely to be able to identify a respondent based on quotes from the interview. As such, just using a pseudonym may not be sufficient protect the anonymity of your respondents.

The same applies when inviting participants to workshops or group discussions: consider carefully whether and how anonymity can realistically be maintained in such settings.

While some limits to anonymity may be unavoidable, it is essential that these are clearly identified and transparently communicated to participants in the consent process.

7. Documentation regarding the protection of personal data: implementation of the GDPR

7.1. Which personal data will be processed? For what purpose is this personal data collected and processed?

The [General Data Protection Regulation](#) (GDPR) establishes the main principles in relation to the processing (i.e. collection and management) of personal data. Generally, personal data refers to that through which the research participant is identifiable, i.e. it includes names, address(es), personal email addresses, location data (e.g. on mobile phones), IP address (however, see definition of ‘personal data’ in [GDPR Art 4\(1\)](#)).

If you have audio files, film footage, or photographs these are likely to include personal data also (e.g. names of people or places, people can be recognized on photographs, people can be recognized by their voices).

If you are unsure whether e.g. demographic data is personal data, please refer to the guideline on how to [distinguish between ‘personal data’ and ‘anonymised research data’](#), which is downloadable from the [website of the Ethics Committee](#).

In your application, please be specific in which personal data you collect and for what purpose you need it.

Note that following the principle of ‘data minimisation’ ([GDPR Art 5\(1\)\(c\)](#)), you should limit collection of personal data to what is directly relevant and necessary to accomplish the specified purpose of your research.

7.2. How will personal data be protected against unauthorized access?

Personal data must be kept confidential. Thus, please provide a brief outline of your data management plan (DMP), which allows you to clarify how you handle the data in such a way as to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of your participants. This should cover all the media that are generated in the course of the research and which might carry the names of the participants, i.e. consent sheets should be kept under lock and key; digital files with the list of names of your participants, photographs of people, video or audio recording of the interviews (starting e.g. on your mobile phone, external hard drive, laptop, BOKUdrive) must be stored in a secure system to protect personal data from access by unauthorized persons at all times (i.e. while in the field and back at BOKU). All computer hard drives, memory sticks should be password protected, or better, encrypted. You need to specify how you will control access to the data (e.g. when it will be stored on BOKUdrive), and who has access to it (usually at least yourself and your supervisor/the project leader).

Please note that to document the integrity of your research (e.g. that interviews with participants were actually conducted, that they really signed the consent form) it might be purposeful to keep the original signed consent forms under lock and key for three years (or longer if required by the funding organization). If you only keep the unsorted signed consent form in a folder (not scanned files), these do not fall under the remit of the GDPR and thus can be kept longer than personal data.

7.3. When will personal data be erased? By whom?

As noted above it is likely that various files (excel, word, audio, video, photographs, etc.) which contain personal information will be generated during the course of the research project. The personal data should be stored “no longer than is necessary” given the purposes for which it was collected ([DSGVO Art. 5 \(1e\)](#)). In Point 7.1 you state for what purpose the data is collected, allowing to assess when that purpose has been fulfilled. Thus, please state the date (month, year) when the data will be destroyed and who will do it (as this may be after the end of the contract of e.g. PhD students).

Please note that e.g. pseudonymized transcripts of audio recordings and other anonymised research data do not fall under the GDPR, since they do not contain personal data (see the information sheet on the [distinction between ‘personal data’ and ‘anonymised research data’](#)). This pseudonymised research data should be archived, not least to maintain scientific integrity and enable the verification of the research process (i.e. prove that you have not invented/falsified data). Following the [FOG §2f\(3\)](#) the minimum archive duration for research data and records is 10 years after original publication. Moreover, these transcripts might be used in other research projects at the BOKU. You may also consider making pseudonymised transcript available open access to other researchers (e.g. on platforms such as the Austrian Social Science Data Archive ([AUSSDA](#) or [Zenodo](#)) thus contributing to [Open Science](#) (see question 3.7).

7.4. Are the participants informed of the implementation of the GDPR and of their rights in easy-to-read, plain language?

[Art. 13 GDPR](#) lists the rights that participants need to be informed about. This includes in particular: contact of the project leader and the data protection officer, purposes of the processing of personal data, period for which the data will be stored, right to lodge a complaint with a supervisory authority.

While providing the rights in detailed legal language would fulfill the provisions of the GDPR, it is not conducive for an ethical engagement with participants. It is thus useful to ensure that participants are informed of their rights in plain language. [Plain language](#) is about writing in a clear, concise and well-organised way, so that your intended audience can understand it the first time they read or hear it.

This information should be included in the Information Sheet for Participants.

8. Ethical aspects in case of interventions in an ecosystem

This topic only applies if your research involves environmental field work, e.g. work that involves sampling or directly monitoring a site, or involves movement in an environmentally sensitive area.

If so, please clarify if you have taken appropriate steps to gain permission to access field sites. Do you have permission to access privately held land? Have you made arrangements with the landowner/responsible bodies? Does the fieldwork involve sampling rare/endorsed or harmful taxa/species? If yes, have you acquired the appropriate permits?

8.1. What are the expected impacts on animals covered by the Animal Protection Act?

If the fieldwork will be carried out on agricultural land or farmland, could it cause distress to livestock? Is there sensitive, rare or endangered insects, birdlife or wildlife in the area? If so, how might your work impact these animals?

8.2. Which measures are being taken to minimise suffering of vertebrates?

Will the fieldwork significantly disrupt the site and/or its environment and/or rare/endangered species? How will you minimise the impact of your work on vertebrates?

How will you keep sample/specimen collection to a minimum?

8.3. What are the expected impacts on the ecosystem?

If the field work will be carried out in an environmentally sensitive area, are there sensitive, rare or endangered flora in the area? Will your fieldwork involve sampling rare/endangered species? If so, how might your work impact these rare/endangered species?

If you collect samples, will you remove sufficient quantities to have a negative physical / environmental impact on the site or the ecosystem? Will your field work significantly disrupt the site and/or its environment?

9. For research projects that (partially) take place in the Global South²

When doing research in countries of the Global South, you need to take into account a range of international guidelines (esp. the [‘Global code of conduct for research in resource-poor settings’](#)), conventions (e.g. the [Nagoya protocol](#)), European Directives (e.g. [Regulation \(EU\) 511/2014](#)), as well as the national laws and guidelines of the country in which the research takes place.

9.1. Does the research project meet the needs of the country where the data will be collected?

To ensure the principle of fairness, local relevance of research is essential and should be determined in collaboration with local partners. Indeed, research that is not relevant in the location where it is undertaken imposes burdens without benefits (Global code of conduct, Art. 1). Thus please explain how the proposed research gives due consideration to the social, cultural, political, economic, ecological and technical needs and situation of the local stakeholders?

To achieve the aims of having an impact locally, it is necessary to ensure that the research findings are available on-site. Thus briefly explain how the research findings, associated publications and reports will be made available in the country where the research took place. Will the research findings be made available in the local language? What format will this take (leaflet, radio broadcast, oral debrief)?

9.2. Will local researchers be involved in the research project? Will the results be provided to local researchers? If yes: in what form and when?

Please state how you take into account the relevant provisions in the global code of conduct, especially:

- Art. 4: Local researchers should be included, wherever possible, through the research process, including the study design, its implementation, data ownership, intellectual property and authorship of publications.
- Art. 7: It is essential to compensate local research support systems, for instance translators, interpreters or local coordinators, fairly for their contribution to research projects.

- Art. 20: A clear understanding should be reached among collaborators with regard to their roles, responsibilities and conduct throughout the research.

If you work with field assistants and/or translators: how were they recruited? Was the process transparent and non-discriminatory? Are they known and trusted by the local community, so as to ensure effective communication? Will they receive adequate training to further strengthen their skills and to be able to do their tasks effectively and responsibly?

9.3. How do you take into account local customs and social norms (e.g. how has it influenced the study design, access to the field, selection of participants)?

To comply with the principle of respect, potential cultural sensitivities should be explored in advance of the research with local communities, to avoid violating customary practices (Global code of conduct, Art. 8).

Please explain how your study design and field access takes into account the relevant local customs and social norms. How will relevant traditional, local and indigenous knowledge be considered?

9.4. How do you ensure informed consent if participants are illiterate or come from educationally poor backgrounds or belong to vulnerable groups? Is a written consent culturally appropriate? If not, how will you ensure oral consent? Do you also have to receive consent from a local authority? If yes: which?

In some contexts the provision of written participant information and consent sheet might be inappropriate or not meaningful; if so explain why it is inappropriate or problematic. Nonetheless such an information sheet should be provided with your application to the Ethics Committee, as it will form the basis of any verbal communication.

Informed consent procedures should be tailored to local requirements to achieve genuine understanding and well-founded decision-making (Global code of conduct, Art. 12). This includes a clear procedure for feedback, complaints and allegations of misconduct (Art. 13).

Note that lower educational standards, illiteracy or language barriers can never be an excuse for hiding information or providing it incompletely. Plain language and a non-patronizing style in the appropriate local languages should be adopted (see Global code of conduct, Art. 21). In some contexts it may also be appropriate to supplement verbal communication with an illustrated/visual equivalent of the Plain Language Statement (PLS).

In some cultures (e.g. hierarchical societies) you may need to obtain consent from a community leader or a senior family member before approaching a prospective participant. This does not substitute for individual consent, which must still be obtained from each prospective participant (see Global code of conduct, Art. 9). Please explain how informed consent will be implemented in your research.

In some contexts a written consent might not be appropriate. If verbal consent is sought, explain how it will be recorded or if you use a witness.

9.5. Have you followed the provisions of the BOKU Emergency Plan for Travel Abroad?

The BOKU has the duty to care, i.e. to ensure the safety and welfare of its employees, and employees are responsible to take reasonable care of their own safety. The BOKU provides information for researchers travelling abroad (see [emergency checklist website](#)). Please briefly indicate if you are aware the emergency checklist and state whatever other provisions are taken to ensure your health and safety.

Additionally, the BOKU offers relevant courses and trainings, e.g. ‘Security training for studying and field research abroad – raising awareness for critical emergency situations’. It might be advisable to take part in such a course.

9.6. If your research (partly) takes place in a non-EU country, have you taken into account the relevant provisions of the European Commission (e.g. material transfer agreement, export authorization, benefit sharing).

In case your research involves the collection of biological material, there are a number of legal provisions to take into account. In particular this applies to the compliance with rules on access and benefit-sharing arising from the use of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge ([Regulation \(EU\) 511/2014](#)). If you intend to transfer specimens and samples, please briefly state whether you have established written material transfer agreement, to allow legal certainty on the transfer of ownership and custodianship (see Art. 4 [Regulation \(EU\) no 511/2014](#) and the [Nagoya protocol](#)).

For further information

Website of the Ethics Committee: <https://short.boku.ac.at/ethics>

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