UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE: GUIDANCE ON OBTAINING, RECORDING AND TRANSPORTING CONSENT AND DATA

1 Introduction

This guidance aims to help you obtain, record and transport consent and data in line with best ethical practice. If after reading this guidance, you have any queries or concerns that it may be an obstacle to your research, please seek advice from the chair of your Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) or the University Research Ethics Sub-Committee (RESC) (contact details below) and we will do our best to help you find a workable solution.

Traditionally qualitative research has been done face-to-face (e.g. in interviews or focus groups) and quantitative research, in particular surveys, have included some postal returns of data. Return of confidential data by post is problematic as post can be lost, intercepted or misdirected. More recently, UWE students and staff have conducted surveys online through the secure Qualtrics platform. This has enabled informed consent to be sought and obtained securely at the beginning of the research and for data to be collected and managed securely.

Increasingly staff and students are also conducting qualitative research online or by telephone rather than in-person. This raises issues about the best way to securely obtain and record informed consent, and to securely record and transcribe interview and focus group data. Like post, email can be intercepted or misdirected and so should be avoided for the transportation of confidential information. UWE IT Services provide a number of secure technologies that can support secure online research including OneDrive for storage, Microsoft Teams for communication, recording and transcription and Qualtrics for data collection. Microsoft Teams is particularly useful as it provides direct transfer to secure storage and a number of other benefits (e.g. notification of recording to participants).

One limitation of Microsoft Teams in terms of confidentiality and data protection is that for internal UWE research (i.e. research with staff and/or students), all participants in Teams will initially have access to the recording. The researcher/originator can change permissions but in the short time taken to do this other participants could access the recording. This is not a concern in internal one-to-one interviews (as no ethical or data protection reason for participants not to access their own data). However, for internal focus groups/group interviews, there is a risk other participants could obtain a recording of each other's data, an ethical and data protection concern particularly in sensitive research. UWE staff can also use Blackboard Collaborate to record focus groups, and here the permissions can be set so that only the researcher has access to the recording.

For external research, Microsoft Teams is secure, as only UWE researchers (staff or student) will have access to the recording. Participants do not need a Teams account to access it.

2   Scope and Definitions

This guidance is for all University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) researchers including (but not restricted to) staff, postgraduate research students and taught students at all levels of study. Project managers are particularly responsible for ensuring it is known and followed by members of their research teams. It relates to any research whether conducted in person, online or by telephone.

3   General Principles

Any research conducted online must be GDPR compliant, respect UWE data protection, research governance and ethics policy and guidance in the same way as research conducted in person.

The use of non-secure technologies (e.g. personal mobile phones or other platforms not approved by the University such as Google) raises the ethical risk of breaches of participant confidentiality and should be avoided.

Safeguards around managing data need to comply with data protection requirements, but also be proportionate to the degree of ethical risk to individuals, in particular greater care is needed where the potential risk to participants' confidentiality is higher (e.g. HIV status, domestic violence).

4   Guidance

4.1 Recording consent

The recommended best practice for recording consent is with Qualtrics. For surveys, the consent form can form the first page of the survey instrument. For qualitative research, a hyperlink can be included in the invitation email and/or participant information sheet to a one page/one item Qualtrics consent form.

It is recognised that there may be some contexts in which other approaches to recording consent may be appropriate. For some busy professionals clicking through to another technology may be a disincentive to participate in the research. In such cases where the consent form itself does not contain information about the individual (e.g. where the title of the research does not in itself suggest the participant shares a confidential characteristic), a case may be made for allowing the use of email to convey consent.

The more sensitive the data, the greater the need for secure transport and the stronger imperative to avoid sending such sensitive information by post or email. It is important to note that researchers are accountable for the security of research data, and should

therefore carefully evaluate the risks, in the light of legislation and UWE policies and guidance, before coming to a decision about what is necessary and appropriate, and setting in place appropriate safeguards.

In some cases, e.g. participants with visual impairment, participants in telephone interviews who do not have internet access, verbal oral consent may be appropriate. In these cases, it is important to keep a log of oral consents and to include the oral consent in the transcript of the interview, as the original recording will usually be deleted once the research is complete.

4.2 Recording, storing and transcribing data

Online

Qualtrics is the UWE approved platform for conducting quantitative research online. Qualtrics is freely available to all UWE staff and students UWE single-sign on from https://uwe.eu.qualtrics.com/. Regular training courses are available to staff and training is included in many research module teaching programmes.

Microsoft Teams and Blackboard Collaborate are the only approved UWE platforms for conducting qualitative research online. The platform is available to all staff and students, and the recording function is available on application via the Intranet for staff and via https://go.uwe.ac.uk/teamsrecording for students . Student requests need to include notification to and approval by an appropriate named member of staff, usually the research supervisor.

All UWE staff have been given access to a Zoom at UWE Bristol account, but Zoom at UWE Bristol is not currently available to UWE students. Staff must follow the UWE Bristol Zoom Terms of Use, and are required to be a licensed user for any recording purposes.

Interviews and focus groups with external non-UWE participants can be conducted and recorded securely via Microsoft Teams. One-to-one interviews with UWE staff or students can also be conducted and recorded securely via Microsoft Teams, though in these cases the participants as well as the researcher will have access to the recording (until that access is removed by the researcher – advice on how to remove access is available from IT services).

Focus groups with internal UWE participants can be conducted and recorded securely by UWE staff via Blackboard Collaborate. This method is not available to UWE students.

Group interviews and focus groups with UWE staff or students recorded via Microsoft Teams are ethically problematic, as participants will have access to each other's recorded data, and so confidentiality may be breached. Thus, this method will be high risk and should be avoided. If group interviews or focus groups with UWE staff or students via Microsoft Teams are required, then an alternative is to record separately (e.g. with a hand-held recording device placed next to the computer, then immediately upload the recording to OneDrive and delete from the recording device). We will continue to review this and may be in a position to revise this guidance if alternative capabilities become available.

OneDrive is the only UWE-approved GDPR compliant and secure Cloud location for the storage of data. Do not use Google Drive, Drop-Box or other software to store research data, as these are not secure. You may also use a secure area of the S drive with clear access controls.

By telephone

If using Teams is not practical (for example the participant is only available on their mobile phone which does not have the Teams app), then staff can use Skype for Business to make and record telephone calls. As students do not have access to Skype for Business, personal mobile phones may be the only practical alternative, but recordings should be uploaded to OneDrive as soon as possible and files on the phone or other recording device immediately deleted. Staff and students should be aware that mobile phones are not secure devices so should only be used for low risk research and not be used for any highly sensitive/highly confidential data.

In person

Where consent and data are recorded on paper and in person, this information should be transported securely by the researcher to be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Such confidential information should not be transported by external or internal post.

If audio or video recording is undertaken in person, then the files should be uploaded to OneDrive as soon as possible and deleted from the recording device.

Transcription

Transcription may be done in one of three ways. First, the researcher can themselves transcribe the recording. Second, UWE-approved software including Microsoft Teams and Word can provide automated transcription, although researchers need to be aware that the quality of such transcription will be variable and need careful checking and correcting. Third, UWE approved transcription services can be used – advice is available from the Research Ethics Admin Team. Transcripts should be stored securely either directly in Microsoft Teams or in OneDrive.

New platforms or software

We appreciate that new platforms and software you may wish to use are becoming available all the time, but unless the platform or software has been approved by the University, it creates ethical and data protection risks. Please seek advice from the Research Ethics Admin Team and/or IT before planning to use any non-approved platform for research.

5 Further guidance and support

UWE Research Data Management resources can be found [here](#). This includes Research Data Security Guidance, and guidance about completing the required UWE Research Data Management Plan, and the Data Protection Standard for research.

The research ethics team including your FREC Chair or the RESC Chair can be contacted at researchethics@uwe.ac.uk.

The UWE IT Security Toolkit can be found [here](#).

https://intranet.uwe.ac.uk/tasks-guides/guide/information-security-toolkit#part1

https://intranet.uwe.ac.uk/tasks-guides/Guide/online-forms-and-survey-tools

https://intranet.uwe.ac.uk/tasks-guides/Guide/manage-your-research-data

Information and guidance on using Microsoft Teams is available at:
https://intranet.uwe.ac.uk/tasks-guides/guide/using-microsoft-teams

6 Ownership and Oversight

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7 Version history

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