

Guidance on the use of permission letters

A letter granting permission from an organization allows you (the researcher) to do something and establishes communication and cooperation between you (the researcher) and a particular organization. Obtaining permission to conduct a study at or via an organization can be a time-consuming process and some organizations require applications for permission to be reviewed by an internal committee. Also, organizations are not obliged to give you permission to conduct research. Permission can be retracted by the organization at any time.

Altering, tampering with, falsifying, forging, or misrepresenting letters granting permission from organisations constitutes academic misconduct and will be referred to the Wits Legal Office for disciplinary action.

When a letter granting permission must be supplied:

- When the researcher needs access to a *restricted space* (e.g. a company's or organization's building, private land, library/archive, shopping mall). If a researcher wants to ask general questions based on a person's professional expertise (i.e. that person is speaking as an expert), then permission is not necessarily needed. Just getting access to a building to interview a single person speaking as an expert does not require a permission letter (see below). Getting access to that building for a longer period of time does require permission however (if you want to interview several people, or several times, or if you are doing an ethnographic or longitudinal study);
- When the researcher needs access to a *restricted database* (e.g. list of members, email list, contact details) or access to restricted information (e.g. company records or archives that are not in the public domain);
- When the researcher needs direct access to a particular population for sampling purposes (e.g. employees within a company, residents of a closed community, e.g. a retirement home);
- If the participant is speaking on behalf of the organization or is reflecting on the work of the organization. For example, if someone is speaking about what it is like being an HR manager, then a permission letter is not needed, and they can be recruited through social media or professional databases. If someone is speaking about what it is like being an HR manager within a specific organisation, or asking about particular operations and processes at a specific organisation, then a permission letter IS required.
- When you are working within the premises of a school. Please note that for government schools, provincial Department of Education permission is also needed as well as a permission letter from the principal of each school concerned. For private schools, only a permission letter from the principal of each school is needed;
- If you have been in an informal email conversation with someone and you want to quote them or to use some informal information as a line of evidence (permission by email is fine);

- Within the University, a letter of permission from the Registrar's Office is also required if you are including Wits staff (academic or support) or students as participants in your project. If this is needed, you should apply for ethics clearance FIRST; Deputy Registrar's permission can only be given AFTER ethics clearance is obtained. To communicate with the Deputy Registrar's Office, please contact Thato Chauke (thato.chauke@wits.ac.za);
- Individuals, publishers, or organizations who own the copyright to an instrument you intend to use for data collection must provide permission for you to use the existing survey or data collection tool;
- An organization that owns 'closed access' data you would like to use for your research must give you permission to use their data. Even if you work for the organization, when conducting research, you are acting as a Wits student, not as a member of the organization; therefore, you need to request permission to use data outside of your daily activities as an employee irrespective of whether or not you have access to the data in your work life;
- If you are accessing and using data from a 'closed' or private social media online forum or a WhatsApp group, where you will need permission from the forum administrator;
- If you are referring participants to certain professional services (e.g. counselling, legal assistance) that may require appointments or where payment is usually needed. In this instance, it is not acceptable for participants to have to pay, and you as the researcher must make private arrangements with these service providers for them to offer a free service to participants if needed. They must supply a permission letter agreeing to assist participants in your project. The terms and conditions agreed upon by you and the service provider must be made clear in their permission letters (which must be on business headed letter paper). A permission letter is not needed where you are referring participants to free helplines. However, if you are using a free centre, like a drop-in clinic or similar free facility, then a permission letter is required and an arrangement made with the facility. (see the guidelines on distress protocols on the HREC website)

NOTES: You will not be able to start data collection in any of these organizations or localities, or with any of these populations, until a letter granting permission from the organization has been supplied to the HREC. This is an NHREC requirement of ethics clearance.

When a letter granting permission is recommended:

- When a letter granting permission can help you get access to a certain population or location, e.g. permission from a traditional leader to help you get access to a rural community;
- When you are using local organizations/NGOs/key informants to introduce you in the community;
- When you want to go indirectly through an organization to recruit participants (e.g. you want them to put up a poster, forward an email);

- When you want to work within a specific School of the University, where your participants are staff/students of that specific School. In this instance, you must obtain a letter of permission from the Head of School/Department *in addition to* a letter of permission from the Deputy Registrar's Office.

NOTES: Often permission in these instances will not only help you get access to people/places, but will facilitate your data collection and also your potential safety, because then local people will know who you are and what you are doing there. You do not need these letters granting permission as a requirement of ethics clearance, however it is recommended that you obtain them anyway.

When a letter granting permission is not needed:

- When you want to do a one-off interview with an official/professional who is speaking in their official capacity as an individual expert on a topic. If you want to interview several people in that organization, or if a research activity will take a lot of time or will be conducted during their working hours, then a letter granting permission is needed.

NOTES: In some instances a letter granting permission may help you get access to the specific person you are looking for, rather than just a 'spokesperson'. Please be aware of the potential for power and coercion if the head of the company directs you to certain people.

When to request permission from an organization:

If you do not yet have any required permission letters from relevant organizations at the time you are applying for ethics clearance, you must supply the letters you have sent requesting this permission. Please note, an example of a letter requesting permission is provided on the HREC website, to help you with this process.

Some organizations may grant permission prior to your submission of an ethics application, in which case you should attach this letter granting permission with your ethics application. Please ensure the letter adheres to the HREC's requirements for letters granting permission, as stipulated below.

When an organization requires ethics clearance before granting permission:

Many organizations require an ethics clearance certificate prior to supplying a letter granting permission. In such instances:

- You need to apply FIRST for ethical clearance.
- You need to attach with your ethics application a letter addressed to the organization requesting permission from the organization (please see the template on the HREC NM website).
- After review of your application, the HREC will send you a *conditional* ethics clearance certificate, if everything else in your ethics application is okay apart from the missing permission letter.
- You can then use this *conditional* certificate to apply to the organization for permission.

- You need to ask them for a letter granting permission for you to conduct research at or via the organization (see guidelines below of what this letter should look like).
- Finally, supply a copy of the letter granting permission to the HREC in order to receive *final* ethical clearance. When you have this permission letter, this must be sent to the HREC. At this point, if this is the only outstanding document, the HREC will upgrade your conditional clearance to full clearance, and send you an updated clearance certificate.

What needs to be included in a letter granting permission:

A letter granting you permission to conduct research at or via an organization must: (1) be on a company/organization letterhead, (2) be signed/stamped and dated by a named person in that organization, (3) refer to you (the researcher) by name and/or refer to the title of your project, and (4) give you permission to do something specific (e.g. interview staff, make observations, send out a questionnaire, access contact details of organization members) and within a specific timeframe. A general “we give you permission to do research in our organization” is not sufficient. An informal email correspondence with an organization will not be accepted by the HREC.

The ethics application form and permission:

On the application form in Section A, DO NOT tick ‘relevant permission letters’ UNLESS you have received letters granting permission from relevant organizations.

In Section 4.2, tick YES if you have received letters granting permission from all of the relevant organizations. Tick SUBMITTED AND PENDING if you have requested permission from the organization but have not yet received a letter granting permission.

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