

Guidelines for completing ethics waiver applications – Wits Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) Non-Medical

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What is an ethics waiver?

An ethics *waiver* is a formal document issued by an institution to indicate that the proposed research has been determined to be exempted from requiring full ethics review. Typically, this is for research that does not have any human participants, and which often involves utilising pre-existing data such as the existing literature, publicly available and anonymised datasets, and archives (documentary, film or museum).

If you are doing research that does not involve human participants, you *may* be eligible to receive an ethics waiver (see the *Risk Table* for explanation, available on the [ethics website](#)). Applicants should note that research using social media and other human-generated content may not necessarily be eligible for a waiver, because this will depend on the specific project and content. Please read the *Guidelines on Completing an Ethics Application* (on the same site, above) for more information.

Who needs an ethics waiver?

All *students* completing research for degree purposes will generally either require full ethics clearance or an ethics waiver in order to submit their research work for examination or assessment. This is to ensure that all student research has had some degree of ethical review before being conducted. *Staff* applications can also be considered for a waiver if these projects are not collecting primary data from human participants. Ethics waivers may also be required by academic journals and official publications before they will consider publishing scholarly work.

Some basic guidelines:

- All research is subject to ethical review.
- Research that does not involve human participants e.g. use of trade statistics, GDP figures, theoretical or conceptual studies, use of secondary non-human data, use of historical archives, studies involving design or creative output, and has no risk (see *Risk Table* for explanation, available on the [ethics website](#)) may qualify to receive an *Ethics Waiver*.
- Research involving social media posts should involve a full ethics application. The reason for this is that not all studies that do not directly involve human participants are always No Risk. There may indeed be risks – the Ethics Committee will assess this in line with national and international guidelines.
- All *Ethics Waiver* applications are recorded, reported and receive an individual ethics waiver number.

What form/s should I used to apply for a waiver?

If you are a student following a taught programme (Honours, 4th year professional degrees, Masters by Coursework and Research Report): You need to complete the *Ethics Waiver* application form (in Word format) that is then submitted to your School ethics committee alongside your full and finalized research proposal. Your postgraduate coordinator or programme coordinator will provide you with this application form.

If you are a student following a research programme (Masters by Dissertation, PhD): You need to apply for a waiver through the online ethics application system. Here, there is not a separate waiver application form, you simply have to answer all of the questions on the standard application form.

If you are a member of staff: You need to apply for a waiver through the online ethics application system. Here, there is not a separate waiver application form, you simply have to answer all of the questions on the standard application form.

For applicants who would normally submit an online application to the main university HREC (all Masters by Dissertation, PhD and higher risk student studies, and all staff research), **you must complete the full online application form using the online ethics portal.**

Although answers for many questions on the form will be No or N/A, we ask that you complete the form and provide the relevant information, particularly about your research method and data, so that the committee can assess whether or not a waiver can be granted.

Before you begin, please make sure you have read the Risk Table and Guidelines for Applicants on the [Wits Ethics Committees](#) website.

You must also supply evidence of research ethics training within the last 3 years. Information on acceptable training is also on the Wits Ethics website. Online and in-person training options are available.

Completing a waiver application form:

1. Question 1.1 Does this project involve human participants? You need to say NO here.
2. Please mark YES that you have read the Risk Table (question 1.2) and ensure you have read the table before completing the form.
3. Please read and answer ALL sections on the form. For sections asking for information on human participants, you may mark NO or N/A (not applicable) if that is the case. Please do not leave any answer boxes blank. Forms with unanswered sections will be returned to the applicant for completion, leading to delays.
4. In section 5 (asking for your research methods or tools), please briefly describe your research including your data sources, so that the committee can clearly determine whether or not the application is appropriate for a waiver or should have a full review. To do this, you need to tick the final box on the list, labelled OTHER and please describe your research methods or datasets that you are using in your study in full. ALL data collection methods and datasets must be given here, which in the case of waivers may include museum or archive collections, newspapers/diaries, numerical or statistical datasets, census data, field observations, modelling/experimental methods and data, remote sensing methods etc. PLEASE NOTE: if you are using existing datasets, you need to state whether or not these are freely available in the public domain. If they aren't, you may need a permission letter to get access to these datasets (see question 4.2).
5. Where the form asks about confidentiality and anonymity (section 8), please use either NO or N/A depending on what is appropriate for your project and data.
6. Please indicate how/where/how long you will store your research data in section 9. Please note, this refers to ALL of the raw data/information you are using in your study, not just human-related data.

7. Question 10.2. Please note that certificated research ethics training is needed for all applications to the main committee (for research students and staff). If you are applying for a waiver to your School ethics committee (if you are a taught Masters student), you do not need to supply a certificate of research ethics training, you merely have to be exposed to or have attended some research ethics training. This may include a Research Methods course you have attended, or the online training offered at Wits.
8. Question 10.4: Where the form asks about previous research experience, please describe any experience you have using the same method or data that you have described in section 5, even if this does not involve human participants. We still need to know whether you have the background and experience to undertake your research successfully.
9. All applications including waiver applications that are made through the online application system (if you are a research student or staff member) must show evidence of research ethics training within the last three years by providing a valid ethics training certificate. Please note: this is a requirement, even for waiver applications.
10. When making your ethics waiver application, alongside the completed relevant application form you need to supply (i) your final research proposal, (ii) your research ethics training certificate (if you are applying to the main university ethics committee), and (iii) the correct and signed signature page.