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GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT THROUGH E-COMMUNICATION

PREAMBLE

It is accepted that, when data or information is to be sought from members of staff or students from the Vaal University of Technology (VUT), recruiting such participants can be difficult, yet the information that they would provide should be invaluable not only for the researcher but also for the nation. In an attempt to assist in this process an arrangement has been made with the “E-Communication” (E-COMM) department of VUT to facilitate this recruitment process, *under very strict protocol conditions*.

The purpose of this document, therefore, is to lay out those conditions and the procedures that need to be followed to make use of this opportunity. It must be emphasised that this document deals only with the use of questionnaires¹ to gather data – recruitment of interviewees or focus group participants using a public platform such as E-COMM for the recruitment presents too much of a risk for the researcher.

The process is divided into two parts. Firstly, full research ethical clearance has to be obtained, following the standard application processes (these will be summarised first, below, so that cross-referencing can take place). Secondly, the engagement with E-COMM will be outlined, including the expected documentation that is to be presented to them for inclusion in all calls for potential recruits.

PART 1: THE RESEARCH ETHICS PROCESS

The VUT Research Ethics Webpage offers guidelines on the development of the Information Leaflet to recruit questionnaire participants, as well as a suggested template for this Information Leaflet.

The standard process for obtaining research ethics clearance should be followed first:

¹ Questionnaires and Surveys are considered to be the same thing, for purposes of this document. The word “questionnaire” will be used throughout.

1. The science of the project needs to be confirmed by the relevant committee, and this would include the acceptability of the research instrument (the questionnaire);
2. The research ethics application needs to be completed, submitted and approved by the relevant research ethics committee before data can be gathered. Following the accepted process, this application would contain the (1) the application form, (2) the proposal, (3) the proof of science approval, (4) if the application is from outside the university the declaration that the project has received ethical approval from that outside institution, (5) the Information leaflet, (6) the gatekeeper's letter (if appropriate) and (7) the research instrument (questionnaire) itself.

However, there is one extra document that will need to be supplied (See Step One, below). This moves one to part 2.

PART 2: THE E-COMM RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The unequivocal point of departure is that the use of E-COMM is only for recruitment of participants and NOT for the distribution of the questionnaire. To preserve anonymity and confidentiality, *the distribution of the questionnaire must be undertaken through an independent source (as is the standard research ethical practice).* As such, those that wish to take part in the research need to be able to access such an outside source by clicking on a dedicated link in the E-COMM invitation. Under no conditions will personal email addresses be included in the call that will appear on the E-COMM invitation.

Thus, the process is a two-step process, presented here in reverse:

Step one: The researcher needs to develop the invitation material that will be placed on the E-COMM invitation. This is the extra document referred to, above, *that needs also to be approved by the relevant research ethics committee.*

It is accepted that this invitation needs to be catchy, short and to the point. It is not a legal document, but draws potential respondents to the actual legal document, which is the Information Leaflet on the independent service provider's site. Nevertheless, it needs to contain the following information:

1. What is the research about?
2. Who will benefit from the research?
3. Who is being targeted? (It is important to be very specific about inclusion and exclusion criteria. There will be a large number of these invitations and one does not want to waste potential participant's time by being vague, as it will hamper willingness to participate in the next project).

4. A declaration that the research has received research ethical clearance (The Reference number from VUT, and from any other institution, should this be relevant, need to be presented).
5. A declaration that the potential participant is under no obligation to complete the questionnaire if, after reading the detailed Information Leaflet on the independent service provider website they wish to exit.
6. Instructions on how to access the questionnaire website.
7. A note of gratitude that the potential participant has considered contributing to the research.

Step Two: the researcher will need to negotiate with the questionnaire/survey service provider to allow access to and administer the questionnaire. It is important to remember that when the participant accesses the questionnaire site they need to find the following:

1. The complete Information Leaflet, as per the research ethics application approval. This is essential because the potential participant needs to have the opportunity to gain more detail before committing to answering the questionnaire. Furthermore, the potential participant also needs to have the opportunity to decide NOT to answer the questionnaire and exit the site with no potential repercussions.
2. Only after the potential participant is satisfied should they be encouraged to enter the questionnaire and proceed. It may be that this happens simply by 'scrolling down' or it may be that the potential participant clicks a box to indicate that the terms and conditions are accepted. That is a matter between the researcher and the service provider.

In essence then, once the potential participant has entered the independent site, the process is similar to filling in a normal research questionnaire, but in this case it is done digitally.

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