

## **ETH Ethics Approval process – Guideline for Bachelor's or Master's theses at SPUR**

Human research projects of students of ETH Zurich for which they or other members of ETH Zurich are responsible (PI at ETH) are subject to approval and must be submitted to the ETH Zurich Ethics Commission for full review to ensure ethical standards. This includes all **planned interactions with both experts and laymen**. **Ethics approval for student theses is only required if it is a Bachelor- or Master thesis**. Other course work (incl. Seminar theses) is generally exempt from ethics approval, except for research on sensitive topics (please consult with your supervisor).

If the principal investigator (PI) of the research project is not affiliated with ETH Zurich, it is their responsibility to obtain ethics approval. In consultation with the supervising person at ETH Zurich, a review by the ETH Zurich Ethics Commission may be considered. Please contact the secretariat of the ETH Zurich Ethics Commission to verify what kind of Ethics approvals are needed.

**You may not start a study before it has been approved.** Therefore, it is best to start planning early and reserve enough time for the ethics evaluation.

**How long does it take?** Human subject research for Bachelor's or Master's theses can be reviewed quicker than applications for regular research projects. It should thus take approx. 2- 3 weeks until the first decision. Therefore, it is important to refer to this being a Bachelor's or Master's theses in the application and to confirm that the supervisor has reviewed the proposal with regards to content and completeness.

### **Internal SPUR process – it is the responsibility of the student to make sure this process is followed**

- Arrange a meeting with your supervisor early in the process to plan the thesis project and the ETH Ethics Approval Application.
- Check the template for the application: [here](#)
  - o Important to know: Section 2 of the application form requires the most work, as this is specifically about the thesis project. However, the ethics committee is interested in a general overview of the study and not the details.
  - o The application must already contain the data collection tool (questionnaire, interview schedule, etc.). It does not have to be the final version, but should give a good idea what kind of data will be collected. It is however recommended that all questions on demographics are already quite specific.
  - o For guidance, you can ask the thesis supervisor for an example of a previous ethics approval application at SPUR.
- Before submitting the application, send the application to your supervisors for feedback. Once you get the approval from your supervisor at SPUR, you can submit it via Etappo (see process below).
- In order to submit the application, you will also need the CV and publication list of your supervisor.

## Application step-by-step

To propose a new project, follow these steps:

- Make sure the ETH Ethics Commission is [responsible](#) for your project.
- Prepare and read up on the [required documents](#).
  - o Application form (template: [here](#))
  - o Information sheet(s) and consent forms (in the format in which you will distribute them)
  - o Surveys, questionnaires, interview questions, stimuli, etc.
  - o Contracts and approval / waiver by local authorities / IRB (if applicable)
  - o Contracts with panelist (if applicable)
  - o Publication list of the PI/Supervisor (this is not required for the other project members)
  - o CVs of all mainly responsible research collaborators
  - o Grant proposals or reports addressed to funding agencies should not be submitted
- Start a new proposal in the web platform [Etappo](#).
- Enter all required information, upload the documents and submit.

## Informed consent

Before participants enroll in a research project, they must be informed in writing and sometimes additionally orally about the research project (objective, method, procedure), the expected risks and their rights during their participation. The information sheet and consent form should be written in an inclusive language that is easy to understand.

Be aware that if the consent form is handed out just before the interview, then an interaction has already begun that is oriented towards an interview. This sets up a higher hurdle for non-participation than for participation, provided it is true that it is usually easier to continue a non-conflictual interaction than to break it off. Therefore, the information sheet with the details of the consent form should be made available in advance, even if the declaration will only be signed on site. If the aforementioned prerequisite demonstrably does not seem plausible or if advance delivery is not technically feasible, then that should be explained.

Whenever possible, the information sheet and consent form should be handed out in paper form (one copy each for the participant and the researcher). If informed consent is obtained digitally (mail/web/app), the application to the Ethics Commission must indicate how the study information is shown to participants directly (no links), and how consent is obtained (e.g. via consent button).

Signed consent forms or other records of consent should be kept separately and securely from other data by the principal investigator (PI) for at least 5 years beyond the completion of the study. Clarify in your data management plan, how sensible data will be stored (where, who has access, etc.). Also clarify who will be responsible for archiving and the destruction of the consent forms in the event of a change of personnel.

## **The Commission's decision and further procedure**

As soon as the commission have made their decision, you will receive a formal notification. Further steps depend on the commission's decision:

- *Approval without reservation:* You may immediately start your project.
- *Approval with reservation:* You may start those parts of the project that are not subject to reservations by the Ethics Commission. You will need to meet these reservations in order to obtain the full approval of your project.
- *Revise:* There are serious reservations concerning your project that make it impossible to start it yet. You may be required to implement comprehensive revisions ("revise and reply") or to resubmit the complete proposal ("revise and resubmit").
- *Rejection:* The project cannot be approved for ethical or procedural reasons.
- *Not evaluated:* The commission has not evaluated your proposal, e.g., because an evaluation is not necessary based on the commission's statutes or because the project lies in the competence of the Cantonal Ethics Committee.

In case your proposal is approved with reservations or rejected, you must reply to the comments of the Ethics Commission. The most basic reply consists of two documents:

- revised proposal form with edits marked in yellow
- separate pdf where you answer the Commission's reservations (numbered as in the decision letter)

Reply packages are to be submitted via Etappo.

## **Amendments**

If you modify your project by changing or adding contents after it has been approved, it must be approved anew. The procedure is simplified in this case - only the following documents are required:

- a summary of the changes including an explanation why they have become necessary
- the revised research protocol (changes marked)
- if applicable: changed documents such as questionnaires or additional CVs

Amendments are to be submitted via Etappo.

The submitted changes must not change the approved study design and the resulting risks in fundamental ways. The following changes are typically unproblematic:

- small-scale changes in the size of the sample
- additional project collaborators
- changes in project duration

If you are planning greater changes, please consult the office of the Ethics Commission to discuss possible solutions.

## **Additional information:**

- It is important to explain in details how your data is managed. If available, include your detailed data management plan. In any case, make sure to explain how data is anonymised/pseudonymised, how it is stored, who has access to it, etc.

- Already include in your ethics proposal, if you are planning to use any AI assistants in your research. Specify which tools and for what purpose. State that you will make transparent, which tools you have used (e.g. in the form of a table of tools, a working protocol, or a statement which specify your contribution). Potentially also reflect on ethical questions that arise from using AI tools.
- The American Political Science Association has a Principles and Guidance document, which touches important ethical questions in social science research. Their human subjects research principles can provide guidance for points that should be included in your ethics proposal. [Here](#)
- Always when in doubt, reach out to your supervisor and / or the [ETH research ethics office](#) and ask for their advice.