**SAMPLE ANSWERS TO ETHICS APPLICATION: INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

**Application forms for research students at CDU**

For projects that include human participants or animals, CDU research students will need to submit an ethics application. This application is designed to assess the extent to which the benefits of your research outweigh the risks.

* For projects that include human participants, visit www.cdu.edu.au/research/ori/human-ethics and read *submission of new proposals*
* For projects that include animals, visit www.cdu.edu.au/research/ori/animal-ethics and read *all forms and documents*

**Application forms for research students at Menzies**

For projects that include human participants or animals, Menzies research students complete a slightly different ethics application. For more information, visit

* www.menzies.edu.au/page/Research/Ethics\_approval/

**Sample answers**

The CDU ethics application includes 14 main sections. This document illustrates some typical answers whenever the research entails interviews, focus groups, or both. These answers could help you formulate your own responses to the various questions. Nevertheless, you still need to think carefully about your answers, because every project raises distinct ethical challenges.

The Menzies ethics application is slightly different. Nevertheless, many of the answers in this document are relevant to research students at Menzies as well.

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| **Preliminary questions and Question 1** |

**Question 1d. Approval of project**

* This project was presented at a College seminar. A panel was organized after the seminar to discuss potential amendments and improvements
* This project was approved during my confirmation of candidature
* The project was reviewed and commended by the panel of reviewers who evaluate ARC grants.

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| **Question 2: Research categories** |

For many interviews and focus groups, tick

* 2a Healthy members of the community, university students, employers or officers of a specific company or organization.
* 2b Adults
* 2c Interviews; individual or case qualitative analysis

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| **Question 4: Description of the project** |

Practices that are designed to support international research students tend to overlook the unique challenges and opportunities at CDU—such as the isolation, humidity, but diversity in the population. This study explores the lived experience of international research students at CDU. Furthermore, this study investigates the attitudes of these students to some recent initiatives at CDU, such as the community wall.

To explore this topic, investigators will conduct approximately 12 interviews and 2 to 4 focus groups, each comprising between 3 and 10 members. The interviews will be semi-structured, but include questions that are designed to enable participants to recount their stories or narratives. Typical questions include “What were some unexpected events that transpired after you arrived at this university?”, “What provisions or support did you expect but was unavailable?”, and “How do you feel about some recent initiatives, such as the community wall”. The responses will be transcribed, coded, and then subjected to constructivist grounded theory.

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| **Question 5: Aims and significance of the project** |

**Limitations of past research**

Universities have introduced a raft of practices that are designed to enhance the productivity, innovation, and wellbeing of international research students. Unfortunately, many of these practices dismiss some of the unique challenges and opportunities at CDU—such as the isolation, humidity, but diversity in the population.

**Aims and hypotheses**

The aim of this study is to explore the lived experience of international research students at CDU. Furthermore, this study will collate the attitudes of these students to some recent and unique innovations, designed to support these students, such as the community wall. Ultimately, these insights could inform better initiatives and provisions to support international research students at CDU.

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| **Question 6: Locations** |

Participants will be interviewed at a location of their choice. For example, the researcher could suggest various alternatives, such as a hotel lobby, an office, an appropriate café, and so forth. The participants would then be prompted to choose one of these alternatives or to suggest another option. Alternatively, the interview might not be conducted in person. Instead, the participant could be located in any location they choose. In contrast, focus groups will tend to be convened in small conference rooms, organized by the researcher, usually at CDU.

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| **Question 7: Research methods** |

**Question 7a: Overall research method**

The interviews might be conducted in person, over the telephone, or online. If conducted online, Zoom, Skype, or a range of other applications could be utilized.

The interviews will tend to be semi-structured. That is, the researcher will plan a series of questions—but the prompts and probes will depend on the answers of participants. Furthermore, questions that no longer seem relevant to a specific participant will be abandoned. In addition, the questions will be designed to help participants share their story, called a narrative interview.

Approximately 10 to 15 individuals will participate in interviews. However, the precise number will depend on the availability of participants as well as saturation—defined at the time at which the responses are merely confirming rather than extending previous insights. Interviews will last between 30 minutes and 120 minutes, but usually end before 90 minutes.

Furthermore, between 2 and 4 focus groups will be organized as well, depending on logistics and availability of participants. Each focus group will typically comprise between 3 and 10 participants. These focus groups will be organized in a small conference room in Darwin. Each focus group will last between 30 minutes and 120 minutes, but usually around 90 minutes. Furthermore, each focus group will comprise individuals from one relevant classification, such as only students or only staff. The questions during the focus groups will resemble the questions during the interviews—except participants will be prompted to contemplate and extend the answers of other participants.

The interviews and focus groups will be transcribed and analysed using appropriate qualitative analysis methods. For example, consistent with the tenets of thematic analysis and grounded theory, the data will be coded, and the codes will be integrated to generate broader themes and categories.

**Question 7b: Indicative questions**

A representative sample of questions include

* Why did you choose to enrol in a PhD? And why did you enrol in this nation and in this university?
* What were some of your concerns or doubts about this decision?
* What were some unexpected events that transpired after you arrived at this university?
* How did you feel after these events transpired? How did you cope with these feelings?
* What provisions or support could have prevented these challenges?
* What provisions or support did you expect but was unavailable?
* How have your feelings about your degree changed over time?
* How do you feel about some recent initiatives, such as the community wall.

**Question 7c: Qualifications of individual members**

Dr Adam Adams, the primary investigator, has accrued many years of experience in this discipline: sociology. He has worked in academia for 5 years, and has worked in a range of organizations, including Red Cross.

Dr Betty Betts, one of the associate investigators, has utilized similar methods in other research projects, such as conducting interviews and applying grounded theory.

**Question 7d. External service providers**

We will not utilize any external service providers.

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| **Question 8: Research methods** |

**8a. Describe the potential participants**

For the interviews, the participants will comprise approximately 10 to 15 individuals. For the focus groups, the participants will include between 10 and 30 individuals, dispersed across several focus groups. All participants will be 18 years or over and need to be able to speak English fluently. Many of these participants will be international research students at CDU or other universities.

Depending on how the project evolves, some participants might be supervisors of international research students or individuals who offer support to international research students—such as relevant members of the CDU Student Association or International Office. These individuals will be prompted to express their personal opinions and not necessarily the opinions of their association or community.

**8a.1. Rationale for the selection of participants**

A purposive sampling method will be applied. That is, these individuals are selected because they are most likely to have considered the topic—the benefits and drawbacks of remote locations and various initiatives for international research students—in depth and can thus express useful insights.

**8a.2. Recruitment**

To identify suitable individuals, we will develop several invitations, as presented in Attachment A, and we will email these invitations to the relevant individuals. Specifically,

* We will email the HDR convenors in each college; these convenors will then be encouraged to email an invitation to participate to the international research students in their college
* We will email relevant managers in the CDU student association and International Office

We will extract these email addresses from public websites, such as the CDU website. If individuals are interested in participating in this study, they will be prompted to contact the primary investigator. The investigator will then email these individuals a plain language statement and a consent form. The email will then summarize the study—such as the aim and duration—as well as prompt the participants to read the plain language statement and consent form. Furthermore, the email will ask individuals whether they would like to attend an interview, a focus group, or neither.

The primary investigator will then arrange a time and location to meet. During this meeting, the primary investigator will ask the participants to sign the consent form. Once the participants sign, the interview or focus group will start.

**8b to 8h.** NA

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| **Question 9: Benefits and potential risks** |

**9a. Anticipated benefits of the research**

This research is designed to clarify the determinants of wellbeing and productivity in international research students. Consequently, this research could unearth initiatives that could be implemented to enhance wellbeing and productivity in international research students and, potentially, other individuals as well.

**9b. To whom will the benefits flow**

International research students will experience greater wellbeing and complete their work more efficiently. Their supervisors will be able to assist these students more expeditiously. Their universities will enjoy the benefits of higher completion rates and satisfaction of students.

**9c. 9d. Explain the potential risks**

* Because participants merely need to answer questions in a location of their choice, or in a small air-conditioned conference room, this study entails no physical risks.
* Because the questions do not revolve around crime, misconduct, or malfeasance, the study entails no legal risks
* However, social risks are possible in the focus groups. Participants might be prompted to discuss personal challenges in the focus groups. They may disclose information, such as personal problems, or demonstrate emotions that could later regret. This regret might be especially pronounced if they are familiar with other participants in the focus group.
* Psychological risks are possible as well, because some of the questions revolve around personal matters, such as mood and wellbeing. Individuals who feel depressed, helpless, or resigned might become attuned to their despair while answering these questions. Nevertheless, these questions typically normalize feelings of futility or despair, and this normalization tends to temper, rather than amplify, unpleasant emotions.

**9e. To whom do the risks apply**

The risks apply to all participants, especially individuals who experience mental health issues.

**9f. Strategies to negate risks**

To manage social risks, several provisions will be introduced. First, the investigators will attempt to normalize the challenges that international research students experience. Consequently, the problems that participants will disclose will be perceived as understandable and common, hopefully diminishing shame and embarrassment. Second, early in the focus group, the investigators will encourage every participant to transcribe, and later disclose, challenges and problems they experienced during their candidature. This procedure is designed to encourage all participants to express problems, again diminishing the likelihood of personal shame.

To manage psychological risks, the investigators will also monitor participants to seek signs of distress. In response to distress, they will encourage the participant to discontinue or pause the interview or focus group. If appropriate, investigators will offer a brochure that specifies the telephone number of relevant services, such as equity services or the employment assistance program at CDU.

To provide a safe space for participants to withdraw from focus groups, 20 to 30 minutes after these sessions begin, the facilitator will organize a coffee break. At this time, participants can withdraw inconspicuously.

**9d. Do the benefits outweigh the risks**

The risks are negligible: Participants are unlikely to experience levels of shame or distress that exceed the levels they would endure most days. The benefits, however, are potentially pronounced: the study could enhance the wellbeing and productivity of many individuals over time.

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| **Questions 10 to 12: Informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, data storage** |

**10a.** Affirm opting in by signed consent

Participants will receive a plain language statement and consent form. Both forms will appear with CDU letterhead. On the consent form, participants

* agree to participate in the study voluntarily and understand the purpose and nature of the study
* declare they understand their right to withdraw from the study at any time
* approve the investigators preference to record and to transcribe their responses
* agree that, if their answers are quoted in publications, they will be anonymous but designated with a pseudonym

They will then be asked to sign this consent form and write their name, location, and date.

**10b, 10c.** No

**10d, 10e.** NA.

**11a.** No

**11b.** Identifiable information

**11c.** Re-identifiable information

**11d.** Non-identifiable information

**11e. Procedures to ensure confidentiality**

Typically, the investigators will record the audio of each interview and focus group. Participants of interviews can indicate whether and how they want the sessions to be recorded. If participants do not want the sessions to be recorded, the investigator will write field notes during the sessions.

Participants will be asked to provide a pseudonym, and this pseudonym can be used in all data records and publications. Interview participants will be informed that, if the interviews are conducted in a public space, anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Participants of focus groups must sign confidentiality statements before the session begins.

The recordings will be transcribed and both the recordings and transcripts will be stored on hard drives that are protected by passwords. Any identifiable information in the transcripts will be removed. Typically, the recordings and transcripts will be assigned pseudonyms the participants can assign.

Occasionally, the investigators may construct written field notes or journals. This information will be stored in a locked cabinet at home or at university.

A separate file will match the pseudonyms to the name and contact details of participants. This approach enables the researchers to contact the participants to check the transcripts or fieldnotes and the findings to ensure that their experiences, interpretations, and interactions have been represented accurately. This approach also enables the researchers to present the findings of this study to the participants. Only the investigators will be able to access these recordings, transcripts, and files with pseudonyms. That is, this information will be stored on hard drives that are protected by passwords. Whenever the findings are reported, the publications will not refer to particular individuals or to the specific associations or communities in which individuals belong, unless approval is received by the participant. Personal information that could identify the participants will be removed from the transcripts and quotes.

**11f. Limited confidentiality in focus groups**

In the invitation to focus groups, as well as at the beginning of focus groups, participants will be informed they will obviously hear the responses of one another. To be able to participate, they will need to sign a confidentiality form and will be instructed not to disseminate the comments of specific individuals. Nevertheless, they will be informed that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. In addition, participants will be informed that, after 20 to 30 minutes, a short break will be organized. This break enables individuals to withdraw inconspicuously if they choose. Participants will also be informed they can contact the researcher later if they would like to withdraw specific comments.

**11g.** NA

**11h. The purposes of recording**

The participants will be informed that recording the interviews and focus groups will ensure accuracy and completeness of data because the interviewer cannot easily conduct the interview or focus groups and develop rapport while also recording all responses comprehensively. The participants will be informed of the intent to record prior to the interviews. If participants do not want their interview to be recorded, their choice will be respected.

**11i. Will recordings be retained**

Audio recordings will be retained until the project ends to check responses and interpretations of the data during analysis. Once the project is completed, these recordings will be erased immediately. The recordings will be transcribed and both the recordings and transcripts will be stored on hard drives that are protected by passwords.

Typically, the interview recordings and transcripts will be assigned pseudonyms the participants can assign. A separate file will match the pseudonyms to the name and contact details of participants.

Only the researchers will be able to access these recordings, transcripts, and files with pseudonyms. That is, this information will be stored on hard drives that are protected by passwords. Whenever the findings are reported, the publications will not refer to particular individuals or to the specific associations or communities in which individuals belong, unless approval is received by the participant.

**11j.** No.

**12a.** Yes

**12b. Storage of identifiable information**

As mentioned in response to 11e, the collected data will be stored in a locked cabinet at a home or at university. The recordings will be transcribed and both the recordings and transcripts will stored on hard drives that are protected by passwords. Any identifiable information in the transcripts will be removed. Typically, the interview recordings and transcripts will be assigned pseudonyms the participants can assign. A separate file will match the pseudonyms to the name and contact details of participants.

Only the researchers will be able to access these recordings, transcripts, and files with pseudonym. That is, this information will be stored on hard drives that are protected by passwords. Whenever the findings are reported, the publications will not refer to particular individuals or to the specific associations or communities in which individuals belong, unless approval is received by the participant.

**12c**. **Publication of identifiable information**

Publications will present the analysis of the data and never refer to specific individuals. If direct quotes are used in publications, pseudonyms will be used to attribute the quotes to the participant.

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| **Questions 13: Indigenous research** |

**13a.** No

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| **Questions 14: Other ethical issues** |

**14a. Debriefing**. Yes

At the end of each interview or focus group, the investigators will reiterate that such discussions can initially evoke some upsetting memories. Typically, these memories, and the concomitant emotions, will subside over the next few hours or days. Otherwise, participants could write about these memories or discuss these memories with a health practitioner; these activities tend to diminish the emotional impact of upsetting memories. Investigators will offer a brochure that specifies the telephone number of relevant services, such as equity services or the employment assistance program at CDU. Finally, participants will be informed that, if they would like more information, such as a summary of these results, please contact Adam Adams on [adam.adams@cdu.edu.au](mailto:adam.adams@cdu.edu.au).

**14b Feedback to participants**

As indicated in Question 14a, at the end of this interview or focus group, participants will be prompted to email the primary investigator to request a summary of these results.

**14c to 14g**. No