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An accessible system for ethics approval

Leeds Arts University (a small specialist arts institution) asked "how do we make ethical approval and reflection on research integrity open and accessible for all researchers?" This is their account of how their small research team used new technology to design a user-friendly process which supports research integrity, leading to the launch of the Leeds Arts University Ethics App.

Research at Leeds Arts University is strongly rooted in practitioner and arts-based methods that provide insights into a diverse range of fields including visual art and design, popular music, photography, film, the digital arts, and creative writing. The small research team supports researchers who produce outputs such as monographs and articles, as well as researchers who create practice-based outputs such as artefacts, exhibitions, and performances.

Dyslexia is often associated with creative people[1], and some arts-based researchers including the Head of Research are dyslexic. One key issue identified by the research team was that the existing ethics form seemed particularly difficult for dyslexic people to navigate, even though it complied with the University's accessibility guidelines. It was also acknowledged that ethical approval should be user-friendly and accommodate different needs in addition to dyslexia. Therefore, how could an ethics approval process that also supported research integrity be created that was accessible to everybody?

The Leeds Arts University Research Strategy 2023-30 states that we will "set clear expectations for those who are supported to undertake research, that they act with openness, honesty, care, respect and are accountable for their actions". These ideals have been embedded in the University's Ethics Policy and Open Research Policy, which cascade down throughout the University's various research processes and procedures.

The values of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity are reflected throughout the training the University's research team deliver -- aiming to ensure that researchers are equipped to undertake research with honesty, rigour, transparency, and respect.

Research integrity is something that Leeds Arts University researchers grapple with throughout the course of their various projects. Some of the many challenges related to arts research include intellectual property and reuse issues, authorship/contribution issues, and barriers for researchers working with arts-based methodologies.

These issues cause anxiety due to researchers not being sure that they are 'doing it correctly', and that they are 'being judged'. Without providing a solution, this issue presents a barrier to ethical practice and researchers being able to reflect on integrity issues. It was important to produce an accessible ethics process that also allows researchers to reflect on their own research integrity, be rigorous in their methods and be accountable for their actions..

The ethics form was originally a Word document, which was written as a collaborative effort between research managers and researchers. It was felt that although the form was thorough, it was very long and could be a daunting task to complete. Recognising the need for improvement, the research team decided to build their own app using Microsoft Power Apps and Power Automate to make ethical approval user-focussed, user-friendly, and accessible (figure 1).

Figure 1

[1] *https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08856257.2012.742748*

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Co design

The app was co-designed with Leeds Arts University researchers through an iterative process of collaboration and conversation. The development was led by a research enabling member of staff with experience in software writing. Throughout the design process, the research enabler worked with arts researchers operating in different fields and different visual languages for testing and feedback. This group included a sculptor, a photographer, a fine artist, a sociologist, and a curator. By engaging with these researchers, a diverse range of access needs were identified. These included dyslexia, having English as a second language, and new technology as a barrier. .

Accessibility changes made following this collaboration:

- dividing the application into separate screens which display only a few questions at a time, so that researchers can progress through the application in manageable "chunks"
- adding a progress bar so that users know how far they are through their application at any given time
- using plain language and providing links to useful resources throughout the app
- making sections which are not relevant to all research projects (such as working with animals or participants) optional through a simple one-time "Yes/No" button press.

I found the process of accessing the relevant documents and responding to the questions straightforward and useful

It prompted me to consider ethics holistically

It helped me organise my thoughts

Researcher feedback

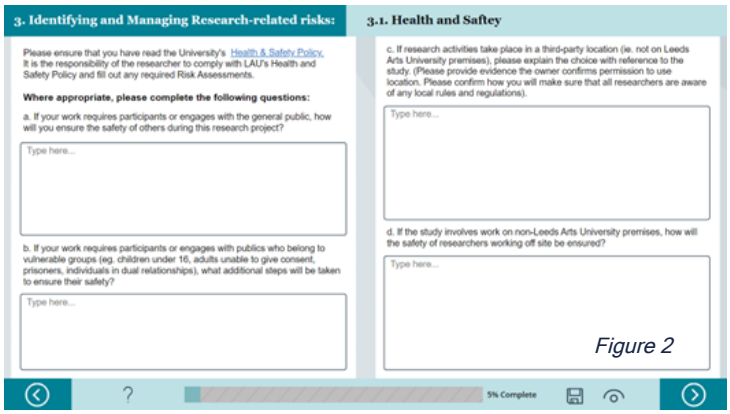

Figure 2

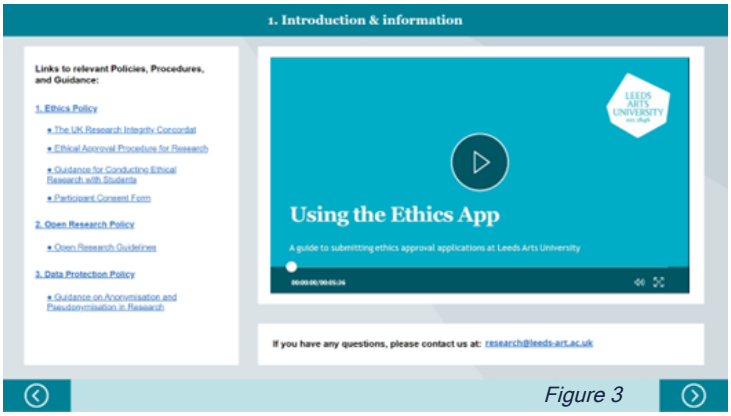

Figure 3

Continuous Improvement

Version 2 of the app is now complete, with improved functionality based on feedback from researchers:

- as *"it would be useful to have a menu of all the questions that are going to be asked"* a view button was created to allow the user to view their progress on one screen, and to scroll and preview the questions they will be asked later. They can also save their progress, to return and complete their application at a later date (figure 2).
- an information button was added to each screen of the app, linking to a page containing all the links to relevant policies, procedures, and participant consent forms so that *"everything is accessible from one place".*
- Several other improvements including: word count checkers, enhanced navigation, improvements to the output for approvers, use of a colour-blind friendly palette, and use of dyslexia friendly fonts throughout (as recommended by the British Dyslexia Association)
- Finally, the research team have created a video introduction to the app with subtitles to foreground the process. The video is presented on the openingapp screen and help page alongside links to relevant internal and external policies and procedures (figure 3)

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