

ePARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR ONLINE INTERVIEWS

Form #: **ICF 02b**

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY: Robotic Process Automation in Research Ethics Administration: Preserving Human Moral Agency while Optimizing Workflow Efficiency

PROJECT ID: ING-2026-36075

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/RESEARCHER: Albè van Niekerk

1. INTRODUCTION

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Please take some time to read the information below which will explain the details of this research study

2. WHO IS CONDUCTING THIS STUDY?

This research is conducted by Albè van Niekerk, a Master's student in Engineering Management at the Department of Industrial Engineering, Stellenbosch University, under the supervision of Prof Calie Pistorius.

3. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to decline without any negative consequences.

You may withdraw at any time before or during the interview and for up to two weeks after the interview. If you withdraw within this period, all your data (recordings, transcripts and notes) will be deleted and excluded from analysis. After two weeks, once data has been anonymised and integrated into the analysis, it may not be possible to remove your individual contribution, but reasonable efforts will be made where feasible.

Your decision to participate or not, or to withdraw at any point, will have absolutely no effect on your employment, job evaluation, promotion opportunities, or your professional or working relationship with the researcher or with Stellenbosch University. Your manager or supervisor will not be informed of whether you chose to participate.

Although the researcher is employed at Stellenbosch University, she has no managerial authority over any potential participants. Your participation is sought solely based on your individual professional expertise and any collegial relationship with the researcher will in no way influence the voluntariness of your decision.

Please feel free to contact the researcher about any part of this study that you do not fully understand. It is important that you are completely satisfied that you clearly understand what this research is about and how you could be involved.

4. WHY DO WE INVITE YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

You are being invited to take part in this research because you possess direct professional experience with research ethics clearance processes within the South African higher education sector. Specifically, this study seeks insights from individuals who serve as Research Ethics Committee (REC) members, research ethics administrators, or academics and researchers who have navigated the ethics application process within the past two years. Your invitation is based on your individual expertise and personal professional capacity rather than as an official representative of your institution. Your lived experience is essential for identifying administrative bottlenecks and determining which specific tasks are most suitable for automation while ensuring essential human oversight is preserved

5. WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT?

This study explores how we can use **Robotic Process Automation (RPA)**, (essentially smart software "bots") to handle the repetitive, time-consuming administrative tasks that often slow down research ethics clearance at South African universities. I want to understand how automation could possibly take over routine work like checking if an application is complete, routing forms, or tracking their status.

The goal is to free up valuable time for ethics administrators and committee members so they can focus on the complex ethical dilemmas that require human judgment, empathy, and moral agency. By identifying which tasks are better suited for a machine and which must stay with a human, this research aims to ultimately create a roadmap for making ethics processes faster and more efficient without compromising the high standards of ethical oversight. I am conducting this study to help universities balance the need for rigorous review with the practical need to get research projects started sooner.

6. WHAT WILL BE ASKED OF ME?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in a single semi-structured interview of approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview will consist of open-ended questions, meaning you are free to answer in your own words and expand on any topic you feel is relevant. There are no right or wrong answers. Your professional experience and perspective are what matter and what we are interested in.

The interview will be conducted online via Microsoft Teams, or in person at your workplace or a mutually agreed location, if you prefer. It will be scheduled at a time convenient to you, at least one week in advance, preferably during normal working hours.

During the interview you will be asked to share your professional experiences and views on the following topics:

- The administrative steps involved in research ethics clearance at your institution, from application submission to approval
- Administrative tasks that you experience as time-consuming or inefficient
- Which tasks you believe could potentially be automated and which require human judgment and ethical reasoning
- Your views on the benefits, risks, and concerns related to automating parts of the ethics review process
- Organisational, technical, and human factors that you believe would affect the success of automation in this context

The following types of personal information will be collected:

- **Background information:** This includes your highest academic qualification, your specific professional role (such as "administrator" or "committee member"), and how many years you have worked with research ethics.
- **Contact details:** I will use your email or phone number solely to schedule our meeting.
- **Personal opinions:** I will collect your views on current workflows, perceived bottlenecks, and any concerns or opportunities you see regarding automation, including its impact on job security.
- **Anonymized Institutional context:** I will note the general type of university you work at and a rough estimate of the volume of applications your office handles.

Please note that I will **not** collect sensitive information such as your ID number, employee number, financial details, or biometric data. You are also free to skip any questions you are uncomfortable answering. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. If you prefer not to be recorded, you can still participate and I will only use written notes. Recordings will be transcribed verbatim and deleted as soon as the transcript has been verified.

All transcripts will be anonymised before analysis, with your name replaced by a code (e.g. P01) and your institution similarly anonymised (e.g. UnivA).

All data will be stored securely on the password-protected Stellenbosch University OneDrive, accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Data will be used solely for research purposes

7. ARE THERE ANY RISKS IN MY TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

This study is classified as medium risk (risk level 3). Interviews involve direct interaction between the participant and the Principal Investigator (PI) and are therefore not anonymous. The PI will be aware of the identity of each participant during the interview. Although data will be anonymised prior to analysis and reporting, the PI acknowledges that the interview process itself does not afford anonymity to participants. There are no physical risks associated with participation and the interview topics relate to professional experiences and opinions rather than sensitive personal matters.

The following minor risks have been identified and will be managed as described:

- **Reputational concern:** There is a small risk that your comments could be traced back to you or your institution. This risk is minimised through strict anonymisation as your name and institutional affiliation will be replaced with codes before any data is analysed. No identifying details will appear in any research output.
- **Non-anonymity of interview process:** Because interviews involve direct face-to-face or online interaction with the PI, participants are not anonymous to the researcher during the interview itself. The PI will know your identity. To mitigate this, all data will be anonymised before analysis and no identifying information will appear in any research output. You are free to withdraw at any time without providing a reason, and your decision will have no professional consequences.
- **Professional relationship concern:** You may feel uncertain about whether your responses could affect your professional relationships or standing. Please be assured that your participation is entirely voluntary, your responses will be anonymised, and declining to participate or withdrawing from the study will have absolutely no professional consequences of any kind.
- **Time concern:** Participation requires approximately 45–60 minutes of your time. The researcher will respect the agreed time allocation and will not extend the interview beyond what was agreed without explicit consent.

There are no costs associated with participation and no reimbursement is applicable.

If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable, you are free to skip any question or stop the interview entirely without having to provide a reason.

8. CONFIDENTIALITY

Your name will not be recorded anywhere in the research data. No one will be able to connect your identity to the answers you give. You will be assigned a unique participant code (e.g. P01) and your institution will be similarly anonymised (e.g. UnivA). All data, publications, reports, and any other research outputs will refer to you only by this code.

All records from this study will be treated as strictly confidential. If used, results will be published in research journals or presented at academic conferences in such a way that individual participants and their institutions cannot be identified.

Your contact details and institutional affiliation will be collected for communication and scheduling purposes only. This information will be stored separately from your interview data and will not form part of the research record. It will be deleted once the study is complete.

The data from your participation may be reviewed by the people responsible for ensuring that research is conducted properly, including the researcher's supervisor and the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee. All these individuals are required to maintain your confidentiality. No other person will have access to records that could identify you, unless you explicitly give permission for this.

All electronic data, including anonymised transcripts and analysis files, will be stored in a password-protected folder on the Stellenbosch University OneDrive for a minimum of five years after project submission, in accordance with Stellenbosch University's data retention policy. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to this information. Audio recordings will be deleted as soon as the verbatim transcript has been verified. No hard copy records containing identifying information will be retained beyond the duration of the study.

After the five-year retention period, all data will be permanently deleted from OneDrive and any other backups.

9. WILL I BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

While there are no direct personal or financial benefits for participating in this study, your involvement contributes to the broader academic and professional community in the following ways:

- **Process Improvement:** The findings aim to provide a roadmap for universities to improve research governance, which may eventually lead to reduced ethics clearance timelines and administrative burdens for researchers and administrators.
- **Strategic Focus:** Insights from the study explore how automation can free up valuable time for ethics committee members and staff, allowing them to focus on complex ethical assessments that require human expertise.
- **Contribution to Knowledge:** Your participation provides critical empirical data on how to balance administrative efficiency with rigorous ethical oversight in resource-constrained contexts, specifically within South African Higher Education Institutions.
- **Future Innovation:** The study contributes to the fields of Industrial and Systems Engineering by demonstrating how technologies like RPA can be adapted for knowledge-intensive workflows that require human moral agency.

10. WILL I BE PAID TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY AND ARE THERE ANY COSTS INVOLVED?

There is no payment or financial compensation for participating in this research study. Participation is entirely voluntary and no reimbursement for time or inconvenience will be provided.

There are also **no costs involved** for you as a participant. Because the interviews are conducted primarily online via Microsoft Teams, you will not incur travel or transport expenses. If you prefer an in-person interview, it will be scheduled at your workplace or a neutral, private location to ensure no financial burden is placed on you.

11. WHO WILL HAVE ACCESS TO MY INFORMATION?

Any information you share during this study will be protected through strict security and anonymization protocols.

- **Storage and Security:** All electronic data, including anonymized transcripts and analysis files, will be stored in a password-protected folder on the **Stellenbosch University MS OneDrive**.
- **Access:** Only the researcher and the study supervisor, Prof Calie Pistorius, will have access to the data for the purpose of oversight and analysis.
- **Identification:** Neither participants nor their organizations will be identified in the research report, publications, or presentations. All participants will be assigned a unique code (e.g., P01) and institutions will be assigned a generic code (e.g., UnivA).
- **Third-Party Sharing:** Raw or identifiable data will not be released to or shared with any third party. Fully anonymised and de-identified data may be used for future academically approved research, subject to REC approval.
- **International Sharing:** No personal information or raw data will be shared outside the borders of South Africa.
- **Future Use:** The information collected will be used for the completion of a Master of Engineering Management degree and may be used for future academic publications or conference presentations.
- **Audio Recordings:** Interviews will be audio-recorded only with your explicit permission. Access to these recordings is restricted to the researcher and supervisor, and they will be deleted as soon as the verbatim transcript has been verified.
- **Publication Confidentiality:** In any publication, results will be reported as aggregated themes or via anonymized codes, ensuring that individual participants and their institutions cannot be identified.

12. HOW DO I CONTACT THE RESEARCHERS?

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact the researcher, Albè van Niekerk at albe@sun.ac.za and/or the study supervisor Prof Calie Pistorius at caliepistorius@sun.ac.za.

13. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), you have the right to be informed about the collection and use of your personal information. This includes the right to access the information you have provided and to request corrections if any of it is inaccurate or incomplete.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints regarding your rights as a research participant, or if you wish to exercise your rights under the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), please contact the Research Ethics Committee at [applyethics@sun.ac.za; 021 808 9183].

14. RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has been approved by the **Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research at Stellenbosch University [Project ID # ING-2026--36075]**. The study will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of South Africa's Department of Health- South African Ethics in Health Research Guidelines: Principles, Processes and Studies (NDoH 2024)

15. OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

Before you sign this form, please ask any questions on any aspect of this study that is unclear to you. You may take as much time as necessary to think it over.

Please carefully read the statements below (or have them read to you) and think about your choice. No matter what you decide, it will not affect whether you can be in the research study.

PERMISSION TO HAVE ALL ANONYMOUS DATA SHARED WITH JOURNALS

When this study is completed, we would like to publish the results in academic journals. Some journals may request access to anonymised data before publication. If this occurs, only fully anonymised and non-identifiable data will be shared. Your decision about this will not affect your participation in the study. In line with the POPI Act, the researchers will ensure that no personal information is linked to the data shared. Therefore, we kindly request your permission to share your anonymised data with journals.

PERMISSION FOR SHARING INFORMATION WITH OTHER INVESTIGATORS

The anonymised and de-identified data from this study may be used for future academically approved research related to process automation, research governance, or higher education administration. Any future use will require approval from the Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research at Stellenbosch University and will comply with POPIA. No raw data, audio recordings, or identifiable information will be shared with any third party or outside South Africa.

For each statement, please choose YES or NO by inserting your initials in the relevant box)

Statement	YES	NO
1. I agree to being audio recorded for study purposes.		
2. I agree to have my anonymous data shared with journals during publication of results of this study.		
3. I agree that my anonymised and de-identified information (data) may be stored for future research.		

DECLARATION OF CONSENT BY THE PARTICIPANT

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION ON WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE, HAVE HAD ALL YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED, AND HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE.

As the participant, I declare that:

- I have read this information and consent form, or it was read to me and it is written in a language in which I am fluent and with which I am comfortable.
- I have had a chance to ask questions, and I am satisfied that all my questions have been answered
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary, and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and nothing bad will come of it. I will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.

By placing an X inside this box, I hereby declare on _____ [date] that I, _____ [name of the participant], agree to take part in this research study, as conducted by _____ [name of principal investigator].

DECLARATION BY THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

By placing an X inside this box, I hereby declare on _____ [date] that I, _____ [name of the principal investigator], explained the information in this document to _____ [name of participant]. I encouraged him/her to ask questions and took adequate time to answer them. I am satisfied that he/she adequately understands all aspects of the research, as discussed above.