

GUIDANCE ON ANONYMISATION AND PSEUDONYMISATION IN RESEARCH

This document contains guidance specifically for the purposes of anonymisation of participants and subjects in research projects.

*All Leeds Arts University researchers must abide by the [Data Protection Act 1998](#) and the [Leeds Arts University Data Protection Policy](#) - it is the responsibility of the researcher to familiarise themselves with both documents. Please ensure that you have filled out an Ethics Form and have obtained ethical approval from the research office **before initiating any research project**.*

What is personal data?

As stated in LAU's Data Protection Policy, "personal data" is any information about individuals which could be used to identify them (directly or indirectly) from that data alone or in combination with other identifiers that can be reasonably accessed. Personal data can be factual (eg. a name, personal identifier, email address, location, or date of birth). An individual could be also recognised by our opinions about their actions or behaviour.

A data subject is an identifiable person from whom we have collected personal data. If you intend to process personal information as part of any research project, informed consent must be obtained. Consent must be specific to how the data gathered will be used, and needs to be renewed if you intend to process personal data for a different and incompatible purpose which was not disclosed when the data subject first consented.

It is anticipated that researchers should not be collecting and storing personal data as this information is not usually necessary for analysis and should definitely not be disseminated. If it becomes necessary to collect and store personal data then the University's Data Protection Policy, Guidance and procedures should be followed: <https://portal.leeds-art.ac.uk/dataprotection>

Data protection laws refer to living people. However, from an ethical standpoint, researchers may need to anonymise and/or pseudonymise deceased people.

What is the difference between anonymisation and pseudonymisation?

Anonymisation is the complete and irreversible removal of any personal information that could lead to a participant being identified (directly or indirectly).

Anonymisation can also be applied to organisations, communities and geographical places to protect reputation and the people living and working in those areas.

Pseudonymisation is the act of replacing information that directly or indirectly identifies a participant with one or more artificial identifiers (pseudonyms) so that they cannot be identified without additional contextual information (which may or may not be present elsewhere in the research data). It is important to note that pseudonymised data is only considered as being partially anonymised, as data subjects can often be re-identified.

Pseudonymisation can also be applied to organisations, communities and geographical places to protect reputation and the people living and working in those areas.

How can I anonymise participant personal information in my research?

When completing the ethics form for your project, you need to consider how you will:

- Maintain security for any personal data you have collected.
- Separate any links between participant details and the research data presented as part of the study.
- Anonymise publicly accessible elements of the research data where participants or subjects can be identified.
- Anonymise in any research dissemination.

Examples of protective measures you could take include:

- Limiting the number of people that have access to the personal data.
- If quantitative data can identify an individual, use percentages instead of raw figures (this is particularly an issue in small sample groups).
- Where appropriate, use pseudonyms to replace information in the research data where participants or subjects can be identified.
- Ensure individuals cannot be identified from research narratives, descriptions, analysis and participant profiles.

Images

This is a difficult area within the creative arts context. As with all research people should give consent and understand why they are being photographed and how their images are to be used. They must be made aware that their image may be made openly accessible when the research is disseminated. Approaches to anonymising images could include:

- Blurring out faces and identifiable features.
- Taking pictures of people that do not show their faces and identifiable features.
- Using shadows, using close-ups on hands.
- Using drawings rather than photographs.

The researcher should consider creative solutions to protect people's identities in their visual research.

When do I not need to anonymise someone's identity?

There are certain situations where it could be unethical to not name a person - such as when citing their work. If the person being cited is a participant in your research informed consent must be obtained before citing their work, as this could lead to their personal information being identified in other stages in the research. In these cases, pseudonymisation is often an effective protective measure.

If you have any questions about personal data and anonymisation in research, please contact the research office: research@leeds-art.ac.uk