VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui

January 10, 2000

Prof. Graeme Kennedy,
Human Ethics Committee,
Victoria University of Wellington

Dear Professor Kennedy,

Thanks for making the time to discuss our "software usability testing" work last week. As you suggested, I will outline in this letter why I feel usability testing might be treated as a special case, and the arrangements I suggest. I attach the completed HEC application form, information sheet, and consent form. Thanks for your suggestions on improving the drafts I showed you last week.

By "software usability testing", we simply mean testing the user-interface of a computer system to learn about how easy it is to use; I expand on this in the application form. The practice of having "test users" assist in determining usability is increasingly regarded an essential part of software development.

Because the practice does involve people as test users, it does seem that HEC approval is required. Moreover, we agree that clear information to test users, and obtaining their informed consent, and so on, are reasonable and sensible procedures.

So far, so good. The difficulty is that it is very likely that software usability testing will and should become a very common practice here in the Computer Science group in the School of Mathematical and Computing Sciences. We are involved in software development all the time, in undergraduate and graduate courses, in staff and student research, and in various support work. Not every piece of software requires usability testing, but much of it does. We really would like to make this practice commonplace.

What I propose is that you approve a general procedure that we can use widely in teaching, research, and general software development. I have written the application form, information sheet, and consent form, to reflect this general case. It may be that, from time to time, we will require a different procedure to be followed, and in that case we will apply using the ordinary HEC procedures.

I hope you will consider this request as a way of doing the right thing, efficiently.

Yours faithfully,

Robert Biddle,
Computer Science Group,
School of Mathematical and
Computing Sciences,
Victoria University of Wellington