

Implications of the COVID-19 outbreak for non-clinical research at Queen Mary University of London

Guidance for our investigators and researchers

Introduction

COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus first identified in Wuhan City, China in December 2019. You will be aware of the rapid spread of the virus which this month has been associated with deaths in the UK. Current estimates suggest the outbreak will peak in May and subside by the end of June. This guidance is subject to change at short notice and will be updated on a regular basis as the pandemic and UK Government response evolves. Where guidance from external organisations proves inconsistent, instructions from the Trust and University should take precedence. There is separate guidance for those involved in clinical trials.

General advice for research staff

- Should research staff wish to consider remote working, this should be discussed with the line manager or supervisor and in line with Queen Mary University of London (Queen Mary) guidance. Research teams should think about contingency planning to enable their research to continue if government enforce travel restrictions. If a trip is imminent, then our advice is not to travel. If you are overseas on an extended research trip, then you have the option to stay and continue your work or to return to the UK. A decision has already been taken on Queen Mary field trips.
- We will apply a no-cost extension to the grant to allow staff to attend and, as an exception, we will allow the cost of attending this activity to be drawn from the grant even if it is beyond the relevant funded period.
- Where researchers are unable to conduct their research due to international travel restrictions this should be communicated with the JRMO who will be happy to liaise with the funding body in respect to project suspension and any extension requests.
- As the UKRI delivers a very wide variety of research, it is not appropriate to issue blanket rules about which studies or projects should continue and which should be suspended. People should carry on with projects for the time being but it may be appropriate to think before starting a particularly long experiment and consider if there are alternative pieces of short-term work they could better undertake. Teams responsible for the BSU and laboratory facilities/ equipment are developing contingency plans and will look to maintain their ability to support the continuation of research as much as possible. More information will be made available on this in due course.
- Decisions concerning the suspension of activities should be made by the principal investigator of the study or project concerned, liaising with their Dean for Research, Faculty Research Manager and Head of School. Any decisions should be communicated to both the project funder and to the Joint Research Management Office (JRMO) including the rationale for the decision. It might help the PI to consider the following principles in deciding what action they wish to take.

- It is likely that research funders will expect additional costs arising due to the pandemic to be absorbed into study budgets. Therefore, when making decisions around suspending activities, please consider whether any work could continue on a remote working or travel restricted basis. Remote working should be encouraged, but staff should recognise the responsibility this places on them. Some teams are making use of this period to catch up on routine tasks such as file management and updating policies. Just because staff cannot be at work on site does not necessarily mean that a study needs to be suspended.
- If the researcher holds internally obtained research funding, where the funding must be spent by the 31st of July 2020, and overseas travel or field trip is required, please speak to the relevant funding holders (Central teams, Faculties and Institutes) in order to decide whether the planned research should continue.
- The JRMO will look to prioritise pre-award activities as we recognise that the amount of grant writing and submissions might increase, should people need to work from home.

UKRI EPSRC student-specific advice

- Where an activity, such as a conference or training course, is due to be attended before the training grant end date and will be postponed until after the grant end date, please request a grant extension in the usual way. That is, of course, providing that the student can and wishes to attend.
- In some cases the individual student's funded period will be breached by a postponement, but not the training grant end date. In these cases, EPSRC will not apply a grant extension as this is unnecessary. However, we will allow the cost of attending this activity to be drawn from the grant even though it is beyond the student's funded period. We will not cover any other costs outside the funding period in accordance with UKRI usual T&Cs.
- Where students are not ill, but self-isolating, the studentship should not be suspended.
- In many cases students will be able to work from home, even if the activities undertaken change. For short periods of self-isolation, even if they cannot work, many students will have sufficient time left that they can make this up over the remainder of their doctorate. In these cases, extensions to funded periods should not be applied.

Contracting and finance

- It is possible that the temporary suspension of research may make it difficult to meet contractual obligations. This is a particular concern for commercial research.
- Analysis of contracts for commercial and non-commercial research suggests that Queen Mary University of London could rely on Force Majeure clauses in research contracts in the event of temporary suspension due to COVID-19. The main litigation threats likely lie with small commercial partners.

- If a decision is taken to suspend any study or project activities at Queen Mary University of London, we would need to issue legal notices to other parties to this effect in order to avoid a breach of contract. Such decisions must therefore be made together with Joint Research Management Office staff to ensure such notices are issued promptly.
- UKRI has confirmed that they will take a pragmatic approach, no financial penalties will be enforced if a project is suspended and, if costs cannot be absorbed by any overall underspend on the grant, then 'small additions' may be covered (see the [UKRI website here](#)). The Wellcome Trust has also issued guidance available [here](#). It is anticipated that AMRC registered charities will fall in line with the main UKRI guidelines. However, the requirement remains to notify funding bodies on a project by project basis. The JRMO will work with the project teams to assess any financial impact which cannot be absorbed within the awarded budget.
- Recent guidance from UKRI EPSRC in respect of Studentships relating to self-isolation says that in many cases students will be able to work from home even if the activities undertaken change. For short periods of self-isolation, even if they cannot work, many students will have sufficient time left that they can make this up over the remainder of their doctorate. In these cases extensions to funded periods should not be applied. However, where self-isolating undermines a student's ability to finish their doctorate an extension should be considered. These would need to be costed by the JRMO, but there will be an expectation that these would be funded from any underspend on the grant. Where there is no underspend this will be reconciled at FES stage. Examples would include where there is a significant period of self-isolation or postponement of critical activities, or where alternatives are not available such as an experiment at a national or international facility.
- We should anticipate a reduction in our financial activity and cash flow as a result of the above. The JRMO will work with finance and PS colleagues to review this situation.

EU Horizon 2020 funded projects

- The European Commission and Research Executive Agency has indicated it will adopt a flexible approach towards EU Horizon 2020 projects, which fail to meet grant agreement obligations due to the COVID-19 containment measures, and may apply the rules on Article 51 *force majeure*, or extend the duration of projects.
- Projects will be assessed on a case-by-case basis and grantees should speak to their Project Officer (via their project coordinator if not the lead organisation) if they require support. For more information see the Europa website [here](#) and the EC Funding and Tenders Portal FAQ [here](#). Please also see UKRO website guidance [here](#).
- To summarise, where a project's implementation is affected by Covid-19, grant holders should first contact their EC project officer (or via the project coordinator where Queen Mary or Barts Health is not the lead organisation) and also flag this to the JRMO EU Unit for support.
- Grant holders should take all the necessary steps to limit any damage due to force majeure, for example by cancelling flight tickets or claiming the reimbursement from the cancellation insurance (if applicable).

The above points are subject to regular change as the incidence develops. Please monitor the JRMO website for regular updates: www.jrmo.org.uk.

Joint Research Management Office staff and directors will be available to advise staff on any grant related decisions during the outbreak.

In order to facilitate prompt communication, we ask that you channel related queries to Nick Good, Projects and Communications Manager in the JRMO - nicholas.good@nhs.net - to ensure these promptly reach the most appropriate available staff member.

JRMO
23rd March 2020