

QUEEN MARY ETHICS OF RESEARCH COMMITTEE
TEMPORARY PROCEDURE IN LIGHT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

27 March 2020; updated 14 August 2020; updated 17 May 2021

The continued health and safety of Queen Mary students, staff and research participants remains paramount for the Queen Mary Ethics of Research Committee (QMERC) and our institution. In response to the global pandemic of COVID-19, Queen Mary University of London is issuing the present procedure related to research involving human participants. The procedure applies from 27th March 2020 to all research previously given QMERC approval and being conducted under the auspices of Queen Mary. This temporary procedure will remain in place until the restrictions and additional considerations for research involving humans due to the COVID-19 are no longer required.

This guidance is issued in accordance with the Government's latest easing of restrictions on 17th May 2021.

Key points

The Prime Minister confirmed that the 'roadmap' for coming out of lockdown is on track and planned Step 3 easements will go ahead on 17 May 2021. This includes the resumption of in-person education at Universities, greater public access to the use of indoor facilities, increased numbers of people meeting outdoors and the relaxing of social distancing between family members and friends. However the Government has also urged all of us to exercise caution.

In interpreting the next stage of the lifting of restrictions, QMERC urge researchers to:

- Minimise the risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19 in human participant research interactions, by ensuring that wherever possible, human participant research is conducted online or remotely, where there is no detriment to the study or its' participants by doing so.
- Carefully consider the requirement for in-person face-to-face research or research that requires non-essential travel, either within the UK or abroad.

- Research that does not involve face-to-face interactions with participants, such as studies conducted electronically or via telephone or involving secondary data analysis, can and should continue.
- Abide by the localised COVID-secure restrictions in place in Queen Mary buildings including hand-washing guidance, the use of sanitisers and one-way systems.

Researcher Responsibilities

In-person face-to-face research within the UK

- Where face-to-face research is recommencing at Queen Mary premises, it should be conducted in a COVID-secure setting wherever possible. Ensure that the research procedures fits within the COVID risk assessment for that premises.
- Where research is supported by external funders, researchers should discuss with their School Research Managers or Institute Managers along with the JRMO with regard to applying to restart or continuing their project.
- When the proposed research project will be undertaken by students, it is the responsibility of the supervisor or module leader to ensure that the above steps have been taken.

In person face-to-face research outside the UK

- International travel for the purpose of work is legally permitted by certain professions ([Government guidance](#)). QMUL will support international travel for the purpose of work, further to the researcher's School or department receiving evidence of:
 - Completion of a QMUL COVID risk assessment
 - Assessment of the individual's personal safety in the proposed destination country
 - Abiding by QMUL and the recipient country's COVID guidelines
 - Head of School approval
 - Anyone travelling abroad from England must [complete a form to declare their legally permitted reason for overseas travel](#).
- It is acknowledged that not all countries are progressing through the COVID-19 pandemic at the same rate, and that local government guidance in other countries may be different from that in the UK. The Queen Mary Ethics of Research Committee's position remains that researchers consider alternative approaches to conduct their research work without in-person interaction wherever possible. This request can only be relaxed if the following apply:
 - Queen Mary staff or students are already based outside of the UK and are conducting human participant research in countries where COVID-19 is

controlled, and a local or national lockdown forbidding non-essential work is not a current government recommendation in that country.

- Researchers must abide by local COVID guidance, and also follow the FCO advice referring to restrictions on movement in each country.
- It is expected that a risk assessment addressing any anticipated risks to the researchers' health and wellbeing will be signed off by the Head of School or Institute before applying for ethical approval.
- As the research study will be conducted at a location or organisation outside the remit of QMUL, researchers should ascertain if they should complete any local risk assessments.
- It is expected that participant information sheets and consent forms will be updated to record information about the precautions that will be taken to minimise the risk of contracting or transmitting COVID-19 in human participant research interactions.
- It is the responsibility of researchers to monitor any changes to local government guidance. If the circumstances that allow the research to take place change, then in-person face-to-face human participant research must be suspended. If it is practically feasible to continue the research using online or remote methods, researchers should submit an amendment detailing modifications to the research design for approval.

It is the responsibility of the researcher (and ultimately the educational supervisor for student projects), to always keep abreast of current Foreign Office and UK Governmental guidance in relation to local and international travel.

QMERC retain the right to upgrade the risk of an ordinarily low-risk study to one requiring review by QMERC Panel should a face-to-face research study be submitted involving participants outside of the UK and requiring researcher international travel.

Amendments

The guidance in this document applies with equal force to both ethical review applications and amendment applications. However, there are some additional items to note regarding the review process for amendments:

- If a researcher needs to amend their study procedures immediately in order to protect themselves and/or their participants, they may implement modifications prior to securing Queen Mary research ethics approval but must report such action within 5 working days of the modification. Researchers should include "COVID-19 Urgent amendment" in the subject title of their email [to research-ethics@qmul.ac.uk].
- Researchers should discuss in their proposed amendment notification any ethical

considerations that might arise from the change in methods (for example, the ethical considerations for in-person face-to-face methods will be different to those for online methods).

- Researchers should discuss the ethical considerations resulting from the current circumstances, as detailed in this document, if these were not accounted for in the original approved application.

Ethical issues to consider about any human participant research at this time

- Due to the more frequent use of remote or online data gathering methods, it is important to carefully consider how data will be transferred and stored securely to maintain data and participants' confidentiality. For more information, please see:
 - [QMUL Research Data Access and Management Policy](#)
 - [QMUL Information/Data Governance Policy – Storage of Information](#)
 - [QMUL Information/Data Governance Policy – Disposal of Information](#)
 - [QMUL Academic Registry and Council Secretariat – Data Protection](#)
- Under the current unprecedented times due to COVID-19 pandemic, people may be experiencing an increase in stress and anxiety; or facing personal, emotional or health issues; or going through exceptional financial challenges. To that end, individuals that were vulnerable may have become even more vulnerable, and individuals that were not previously considered vulnerable may have now become vulnerable.
- Participants may not have access to support (for example, GPs and counselling services) as before.

The [Nuffield Council](#) and the [Hastings Center](#) have assembled a list of resources which focus on ethical aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The [World Health Organisation](#) has published a document listing key universal ethical standards researchers should adhere to during public health emergencies. [UNICEF](#) identifies key ethical considerations when undertaking evidence generation involving children during the pandemic. The [British Psychological Society](#) provides ethics guidance for internet mediated research.

Contacts

QMERC will continue to closely monitor the developments and may re-evaluate this procedure as new information becomes available.

Any comments regarding the present procedure should be sent to the Queen Mary Research Ethics team (research-ethics@qmul.ac.uk).

Additional useful resources

- Joint Research Management Office (JRMO) COVID-19 information for researchers:
<http://www.jrmo.org.uk/news-and-training/covid-19/>
- Queen Mary Coronavirus advice and updates:
<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/coronavirus/>
- Doctoral College: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/doctorscollege/covid-19-faqs---pgr/>
- Research Degrees Office: <http://www.arcs.qmul.ac.uk/research-degrees/>
- National Institute of Health Research - Restart Framework:
<https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/restart-framework/24886>

Review Date

Subject to change as per governmental guidance and additional restrictions.