

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

*27 March 2020; last updated 14
August 2020*

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.

Key points

- In an effort to minimise the risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19 in human participant research interactions, Queen Mary University of London requires that human participant research is conducted online or remotely where possible.
- New or restarting in-person face-to-face research or research involving travel can only start in exceptional circumstances and only if all conditions outlined in this procedure are fully met. If this is not possible, the research must be postponed.
- Studies which provide an immediate benefit to the health and/or well-being of participants; or studies where halting procedures would cause harm to the research participants may continue, although given the remit of the QMERC we do not foresee many studies eligible to fit these criteria. Principal Investigators should contact the Research Ethics team (research-ethics@qmul.ac.uk) to make a case for this exception.

In-person face-to-face research within the UK and researchers' responsibilities

- Principal Investigators and educational supervisors of studies should reflect upon their protocol and methodology in light of the rapidly evolving circumstances to protect participants and staff, while being mindful of the most up to date [University guidelines](#) and guidance issued by the government. Whenever possible human

participant research should be performed remotely (for example, online survey, interview by telephone or other means).

- Researchers may opt to completely close down their studies where enough data has been generated to address their research questions.
- If the research is supported by external funders, researchers should first discuss with their School Research Managers or Institute Managers along with the JRMO on whether their project is viable before applying to start or continue their project. This means that researchers should check if funding is still in place, if it is sufficient to cover the remaining research activities, and if the funder has granted approval for the study to continue.
- 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.
- 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.
- New or restarting in-person face-to-face research within the UK must meet all the following conditions before they start:
 - The research must abide by any social distancing and travel restrictions arising from: guidance issued by the UK government; the devolved administrations; as well as restrictions imposed at local level, and must also be conducted in accordance with the University's guidance: [QMUL Coronavirus advice and updates](#); [QMUL JRMO COVID-19 information for researchers](#); [QMUL guidance on safe return to University premises](#); [QMUL COVID-19 guidance on 'Travel'](#).
 - The research must demonstrate that in-person face-to-face encounters between researcher and participants will not increase their risk of exposure to COVID-19.
 - Before a new research ethics application or a new amendment to continue a project is submitted, researchers must first obtain or update risk assessments for their project in line with the guidance produced by the Health and Safety Directorate. For more information, please see:
[Health and Safety Directorate - COVID-19 Secure Procedures](#)
[Health and Safety Directorate - Risk Assessment](#)
 - It is expected that a risk assessment demonstrating amongst other that encounters between the researcher and participants will not increase the risk of transmitting or contracting COVID-19 and that social distancing will not be breached will be signed off by the Head of School or Institute before applying for ethical approval.

- If the research study will be conducted at a location or organisation outside the remit of QMUL, researchers should determine if they are requested to complete any further 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 spreading COVID-19 in human participant research interactions.
- If the above conditions cannot be met, research must be postponed.
- 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.

In person face-to-face research outside the UK and researchers' responsibilities

- 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. Queen Mary Ethics of Research Committee still requests that researchers consider approaches to conduct their research work without in-person interaction where possible. This request can only be relaxed if all 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 social distancing is not a current government recommendation.
 - Researchers must abide by the most stringent of local 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 further 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 spreading 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.

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.
- Researchers should discuss in their proposed amendment letter or email any ethical considerations that might arise from the change in methods (for example, the ethical considerations for in-person face-to-face methods may 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

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought uncertainty and disruption to our everyday lives. Given the exceptional nature of the situation arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, research topics and activities that were considered non-controversial before may now require researchers to think more carefully about ethical issues. Researchers who would like to start or continue research with human participants during this period are strongly encouraged to consider the following issues:

- 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 - DG14 – Storage of Information](#)
 - [QMUL Information/Data Governance Policy - DG16 – Disposal of Information - Policy](#)
 - [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.

For these reasons, researchers are strongly encouraged to familiarise themselves with relevant literature before submitting their research proposal for review, and to enclose in their application a protocol describing how ethical issues and risks to participants and themselves will be mitigated and how participants will be kept supported if needed.

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.

Time-sensitive studies relating to COVID-19

Researchers should continue submitting their applications to Research Ethics Facilitators (research-ethics@qmul.ac.uk) who, depending on their available resource, will expedite the review process for COVID-19 related studies led by staff or research postgraduate students (i.e. PhD) which demonstrate that have strong proven public health grounds to commence. Researchers should include “COVID-19 new study” in the subject title of their email.

QMERC is currently receiving a high volume of queries and research ethics applications, and therefore it will not be possible to offer expedited review for projects led by undergraduate or taught postgraduate students.

Service operation

The Queen Mary Research Ethics team is currently prioritising time sensitive applications and amendments relating to COVID-19 research. As a result, investigators submitting all other research ethics applications at this time should be prepared for a slower turnaround time than normal.

Undergraduate and taught postgraduate students with time constraints around conducting their research are recommended to change their research so that this can be conducted online or remotely; or to involve secondary data analysis only so that no primary data collection is required.

Contacts

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

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: <http://www.jrmo.org.uk/>
- Queen Mary University of London Coronavirus advice and updates: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/coronavirus/>
- Doctoral College: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/doctoralcollege/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.