

Assessing the risk for PhD students carrying out data collection involving face to face contact with participants

SECTION 1: SUMMARY, PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The University of Essex has a responsibility to ensure that the health and safety and wellbeing of all staff at work is maintained. In this current pandemic the University is required to undertake a risk assessment of the workplace and to implement control measures to reduce COVID-19 related risks for transmission. COVID-19 transmission mainly arises from contact with contaminated surfaces or droplet spread.

This guidance specifically applies to all PhD students who are carrying out data collection research projects, which involve face to face contact with human participants. This is a supplementary document to the [Managers' Guide to Completing a Work Activity Risk Assessment](#) and [Managers' Guide to Completing an Individual Health Risk Assessment](#) and is to support Principal Investigators, Postgraduate Supervisors and PhD students.

Example projects which could involve face to face contact include:

- Conducting interviews and surveys
- Ethnographic fieldwork
- Invasive and non-invasive research methods
- Visiting refugee camps
- Use of Electroencephalography (EEG)
- Working with mental health patients
- Practice as Research projects
- Observation and assessment of activities

This guidance applies to both UK and international research projects. It must be read in conjunction with the requirements for ethical approval:

<https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/research-governance/covid-19-contingency-plans-for-ethics-review-and-research-involving-human-participants>

<https://www.essex.ac.uk/-/media/documents/directories/reo/decision-tree-for-the-ethical-approval-of-face-to-face-research.pdf>

SECTION 2: RESPONSIBILITIES

The University of Essex as an employer has significant responsibilities under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. It also has a duty of care to non-employees. For post-graduate research projects, the Academic Supervisor is responsible for ensuring that a suitable and sufficient risk assessment has been carried out. The PhD student is responsible for following the safe working practices defined in the risk assessment. There is an additional requirement that all risk assessments addressing the COVID-19 risk must also have authorisation by the Head of Department.

The Graduate Director will need to give final approval for each project before the research can commence.

SECTION 3: WORKPLACE TRANSMISSION RISK ASSESSMENT AND CONTROL FOR FACE TO FACE RESEARCH PROJECTS

A risk assessment must be carried out for the project, taking into account the additional risk from COVID-19. The process involves:

- Identifying risks for COVID-19 virus transmission
- Considering and implementing control measures
- Applying a risk judgement after control measures have been implemented.

The hierarchy of control must be used to identify the control measures, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Hierarchy of Control Model for Covid-19 transmission risk for face to face data collection – example control measures to be considered.

ELIMINATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elimination of COVID-19 risk in the country where the research is being carried out.
SUBSTITUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry out the research remotely where possible. Face to face data collection should only be carried out where it is impossible to do the research remotely.
ENGINEERING CONTROLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual workspaces. • Restructure of work environment layout, such as relocating the task to a larger space or reducing the number of participants in the location, to maintain a level of social distancing. Clear screens between the researcher and participant where a level of social distancing is not possible to achieve. • One way flow of movement of individuals, a safe 'box' parameter for each person, dedicated entrance and exit points to the area. • Adequate ventilation.
ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider travel to and from the research location, i.e. parking space provision, alternatives if no car/cannot drive. • For international travel, consult current FCO travel advice and UoE travel policy before travelling. • Online/remote meetings (e.g. Microsoft teams, Skype business, Zoom) where possible. • Staggered arrival times and shifts/staggered breaks and lunch. • Clear guidance for researchers and participants who have COVID-19 symptoms not to present in person for the research, until they have had a negative COVID-19 test. • Guidance on self- isolation and contact tracing accessed on the UoE COVID-19 web pages as well as who to contact (NHS 111/Occupational Health/Manager). • Procedures for recording participant details for contact tracing. • Procedures for identifying participants who may be in vulnerable groups for Covid-19. • Social distancing in break out spaces, kitchen and toilet areas. • Social distancing compliance supervisor – for monitoring the research - to oversee compliance with COVID-19 control measures (i.e. maintenance of social distancing and effective use of PPE) • Increasing COVID-19 safety precaution signage. • Hand hygiene measures and frequent disinfection of common surfaces. Clear cleaning/disinfection procedures for equipment used in the research. e.g. hand washing, equipment cleaning e.g. iPads, before and after each participant. How will all surfaces/equipment/data collection aids be cleaned? How will each piece of equipment be handled? e.g. by researcher and the person wearing the device during a visit. How will 'contaminated' equipment be segregated from clean equipment including during transit to and from research location? • Minimise duration of face to face contact and reduce number of participants and experimental sessions. • Medical and emergency planning for potential infections during extended study visits by participants and researchers, particularly at international locations. • Can one-way systems be utilised? • Allowance of time between participants' arrivals and departure with gaps before and after sessions, to avoid a build-up of people. • Allowance of time between scheduled activities to promote ventilation
PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PPE (e.g. masks, visors, gloves, aprons) must be worn where the researcher is required to touch the participant, such as when applying electrodes to the skin. • FFP2/3 or suitable alternative mask, if close working proximity required for specific tasks.

	<p>Face fit training will be required for all students/staff wearing FFP2 and FFP3 masks.</p> <p>Important note – face coverings are not classified as PPE, however may be required to be worn in the environment where the research is taking place, and may assist in reducing the risk of transmission of Covid-19 as well as providing reassurance to both the researcher and participant.</p>
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If, after applying the hierarchy of control, the research is still required to be carried out with face to face contact, staff and PhD students with underlying health conditions will need individual risk assessments on their vulnerability risk of suffering from a severe COVID-19 infection. A COVID-19 self-assessment to identify their individual medical vulnerability should be carried out <https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/covid-19/how-to-come-onto-our-campus/> / [\(https://alama.shinyapps.io/Covid_Age/\)](https://alama.shinyapps.io/Covid_Age/). The student must be authorised to go on the trip by their Head of Department (or Occupational Health where applicable).

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