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

27 March 2020; updated 7 May 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 and remains active until further notice, with a provisional review date of 1st July 2020. We are mindful that the procedure may be subject to change following further government guidance and COVID-19 developments. This procedure applies to all research previously given QMERC approval and being conducted under the auspices of Queen Mary.

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 involving face-to-face interaction with participants be halted until further notice.

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 this criteria. Principal Investigators should contact the Research Ethics team (research-ethics@qmul.ac.uk) to make a case for this exception.

Interaction with participants 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 Government guidance. Whenever possible human participant research should be performed remotely (for example, online survey, interview by telephone or other means).

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- Research that has no potential for direct benefit to a participant’s health and/or well-being; or cannot be conducted remotely should be suspended. If the research is supported by external funders, researchers should discuss with their School Research Managers or Institute Managers along with the JRMO prior to suspension.

- 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.

- 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 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 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. If these criteria apply, face-to-face human participant research can start or re-commence. It is expected that a risk assessment addressing any anticipated risks to the researchers’ health and wellbeing is signed off by the Head of Department.

**Amendments to approved Queen Mary research studies**

As per the University’s research ethics application and approval procedure, amendments to approved research protocols require review and approval by the Queen Mary Ethics of Research Committee before implementation.

Amendments arising as a direct result of the COVID-19, which require timely action in order to safeguard the health and safety of the researchers and the research participants, will be processed via an expedited review process to the extent possible. Researchers should include “COVID-19 Amendment” in the subject title of their email.

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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.

Service operation

The Queen Mary Research Ethics team operates at normal capacity. That said, due to a need to transition to remote working practices and an increased number of queries, new applications and amendments relating to COVID-19 research, Research Ethics Facilitators are prioritising these submissions. As a result, investigators submitting all other research ethics applications at this time should be prepared for a slower turnaround time than normal.

Researchers may continue to submit new research ethics applications for review, and these will be reviewed and approved by QMERC. However, restrictions on face-to-face interactions with participants will be made explicit in the approval letter, and researchers will be requested to follow national and international (if applicable) restrictions and guidance regarding when to start participant recruitment and data collection.

Contacts

We 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/

Review Date: 1st July 2020

Subject to change as per governmental guidance and additional restrictions.

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