

23/3/2020

Dear colleagues,

We are writing today with important information from the SSIS Ethics Committee regarding the global COVID-19 pandemic and research.

1) As you may have seen, the University has suspended all travel and all face-to-face and on site research. This directive means that you cannot travel for research and that you cannot conduct any research where you are in close physical proximity with your subjects. This requirement will last until the University deems otherwise. (Here is a simple test — if you cannot do the research from your desk at home, then it probably is not allowed at the moment.) Internet based research — online surveys, interviews via Skype, or web-scraping are examples of what is allowed at the moment. As far as the College Ethics Committee knows, there are no exceptions. However, we are happy to forward any particular cases to the University Ethics Committee if you feel there is a compelling case for an exception.

2) If you are supervising students (at either UG or PG) who have had an Ethics application approved, please review it to see if it affects their research. If it affects their research (there is either travel or in person contact of any kind), please ask them to suspend their research.

3) A consequence of the two points above is that a lot of existing approved research applications will need to be amended to continue while we are under COVID-19 rules. (For all approved applications scheduled to end between now and the end of June, we simply are granting an automatic 4 month extension. We will continue to monitor and extend this as necessary.) We have recently created a new form to simplify the amendment process. If you need to make a change to an approved Ethics application, please fill out this new form indicating what you are changing. (We think this new form will be easiest for most people. However, if you find it easier to amend what was submitted and approved using track changes or highlighting, that is also acceptable. In these difficult circumstances, do what is best for you. Research has to be compliant with current University guidelines, and our goal is to facilitate that. At the moment, we want to focus Ethics Committee efforts on reviewing amendments and new applications that consistent with COVID-19 guidelines. For the time being, please do not submit applications for research that is not compliant these current guidelines.

We expect in most cases where a change is required that it will be moving in-person interviews and focus groups (or similar) to a virtual alternative like Skype, Zoom, or Teams. The University is developing additional guidance here, and we'll update as appropriate. When using these online alternatives for interviews and focus groups, please provide as much detail as you can about whether and how you may be recording, where those recordings are stored, and whether the recordings are transitory.

We will process these amendments as quickly as we can. As an Ethics Committee, we are concerned about the same things as always — how are subjects being recruited to research, what information are they being given so they can properly consent, how is this informed consent being documented, what data is being collected, and how is this data being stored. Helpful time saving tip: Don't forget to include updated consent forms, information sheets, and recruiting/advertising documents as appropriate (again using track changes or highlighting to identify changes). We want to help you get your research restarted as quickly as possible in a way that is compliant with University requirements during this difficult time.

4) We believe that social science research will play an essential role in helping overcome the global COVID-19 pandemic. If you are starting new time-sensitive research on this topic, we will review on an extremely fast timeline. All such applications will go under “interim” review, and we will try to return a decision as quickly as we possibly can. All research will, of course, need to comply with University policy. Our expectation is that online surveys and experiments, interviews via Skype or similar, or scraping web content (Tweets) will be things that can be approved particularly quickly.

And please stay safe!

Sincerely,
Susan Kelly
Jason Reifler

Co-Chairs, CSSIS Research Ethics Committee