# Research Ethics Guidance During COVID-19

## **Background**

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented strain on public services and seen the introduction of social distancing measures. Inevitably these changes have had an impact of research activity at GCU. This ethics guidance is aimed at students and staff involved with research activity during the pandemic and/or people wanting to know about how to conduct research whilst working remotely.

General COVID-19 guidance from GCU is available here: <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/student/coronavirusuptodateinformation/>

## **Considerations during COVID-19**

Unless clinically essential for treatment purposes, all (staff, PhD, MSc) current and planned data collection involving direct face-to-face contact between researcher and participant should be suspended and re-organised when the coronavirus outbreak is under control. Where relevant, NHS research guidance should also be followed.

Do not enter into participants’ homes, whilst social distancing measures are in place and check the latest guidance (e.g. GCU and Scottish Government) about when it is appropriate (or not) to do so. Older participants and those with health conditions might be voluntarily self-isolating. You might still phone them to check on them and to explain. Some data collection might be done remotely – so, again, talk to your research team. Principal Investigators (PIs)s and Directors of Studies (DoSs) should consider whether such alternative approaches to data collection, e.g. telephone/Microsoft Teams interviews are appropriate and feasible (see below).

PIs should notify funding bodies of any changes in circumstances and copy in your Associate Dean Research and Mark Anderson, Director of the Research and Innovation Office. For health projects based in the School of Health and Life Sciences (SHLS), the Centre for Living and elsewhere, please copy in Lyndsay McDade, Senior Clinical Research Governance Manager. Lyndsay will offer support and advice regarding any required NHS approval amendments. Any impact on fixed-term contract researchers should be discussed with the funding body and if necessary, People Services, with outcomes notified to your ADR and HoD.

DoSs and research students should discuss reorganising work activities to be productive during any suspensions of data collection or lab access, such as drafting chapters, but seek advice from ADRs/PGRTs in the event of potential inability to produce the thesis as originally planned.

Indeed, any issues with regard to risk or resource should be raised with the ADR and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

## **Study design during COVID-19**

Social distancing measures and restrictions on travel mean students/researchers have to be creative in how they (re)design their studies. It is essential all students/researchers follow the latest health guidance and ensure social distancing measures are followed. In practice this is likely to mean no face-to-face contact during the study and remote working for all those involved. It is also important to avoid burdening the NHS and making sure data security measures can be maintained when working remotely. These changes might involve changing to a different type of study (e.g. systematic review), using a different research approach (e.g. autoethnography), and/or possibly delaying the start of the study until social distancing measures have been lifted.

Before designing a study it is important to check the latest guidance on COVID-19 (available: <https://www.gcu.ac.uk/student/coronavirusuptodateinformation/>) and to ask yourself the relevant questions below:

* Can my module learning outcomes (or study aims) be achieved by completing another element of work as part of the study/module, e.g. a literature review?
* Does my study have to start during COVID-19 or can I work on other things at the moment?
* Can the study be completed whilst working remotely and social distancing?
* Can the study be completed without adding additional burden to the NHS and/or other essential care services?
* Can the study be carried out without adding additional stress and excessive burden to participants?
* Can appropriate support be made available to participants who may require it (e.g. following incidental findings)?
* Can data security be maintained whilst working remotely?
* Can proper academic support and student/researcher supervision be maintained whilst working remotely?

It is worth spending time thinking about these questions and seeking advice from a supervisor, colleague, and/or ethics chair about the feasibility of the study.