Important update in light of the COVID-19 pandemic relating to research projects and activity

Given the exceptional nature of the situation arising as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, there are a number of considerations that should be given to research activity. In the event of further concerns, please raise them with your HoD/School Director of Research, or Alicen Nickson, Director of R&I. Please note R&I services remain ‘open for business’.

1. Remote Working

At present (17 March 2020) we are being encouraged to work from home where possible. In some cases this will be possible for research projects, particularly those in the stages of writing up, or for many which use online sources.

2. Research Projects

For projects which depend on face-to-face interaction, or the use of College facilities such as laboratories, the following should be taken into account. Principal Investigators (PIs), in discussion with Heads of Department or appropriate line manager, should decide on the how best to proceed with their specific project bearing in mind:

i) The ease with which teams can work virtually.
ii) The point at which a project is at. For example, if there is one more week of a large data run to be undertaken consider whether you wish to complete this. If a new experiment is being undertaken which will require lab presence for the next month, you should consider delaying this. You should check with your funder to ensure an extension is possible.
iii) Where research has included face-to-face work interaction with participants, this should cease and please see the ethics guidance below.
iv) If research can only be done face-to-face consider the impact of suspending the project. For example, our early enquiries suggest a delay with a project is likely to be seen favourably by the Research Councils and extensions would be supported (see section 6 below). However, stopping some of our research at present might mean considerable research data is at risk (many months of work).
v) Overseas field work will need to be delayed, at this point we are not suggesting rebooking those trips. Staff should seek any possible refunds from travel suppliers and then seek further recourse with College Insurance Internal GCRF cluster leads have been given further information on mitigation plans for our internally funded projects. Hilary Lynch continues to be the contact for this information.
vi) UK research field work/archival visits – the government is advising against non-essential travel. Please consider whether your trip is essential and check that any facility is open before you travel. Please ensure that your line manager approves UK travel and that you undertake the usual H&S checks.
vii) There is increased chance that more staff will be working alone in buildings and they are advised to follow our lone working policies.

3. Campus Research Facilities

A research planning group has been meeting with the Technical Managers to set out contingency arrangements for campus research equipment. In many cases our facilities can be shut down without long-term affect, if we need to do that. Some will need periodic running and Technical Managers have been putting mitigation plans in place to support this.
We have some facilities that need to be maintained, such as greenhouses. ‘Christmas’ operation plans are already used and TOMS have put together similar support plans, including mitigation for staff unavailability.

4. **PhD Students**

A separate communication has been sent to all PhD supervisors and students outlining processes and procedure changes at this time. Further communication is being prepared to cover the new situation.

5. **Research Ethics**

The College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) requires all ongoing research to make changes to how participant interactions are conducted. Researchers must consider if they can adapt their research to conduct participant interactions remotely. If this isn’t possible the research must be paused, until the situation changes and College advice alters.

In addition, Ethics Committee has temporarily suspended the requirement for approval of modifications that relate only to changes to participant interactions from face-to-face to remote, unless there is a substantial change to the protocol as a result of the change.

5.1 **Research Ethics - Guidance for those who need to pause their research:**

You must inform your participants that the research has been paused. It will be key that in whatever communication you send to participants that you describe how any actively enrolled participants will be managed, particularly concerning any safety monitoring/follow-up etc where applicable.

2.2 **Research Ethics - Guidance for those who will conduct their research remotely**

A. I have not yet begun data collection but have ethical clearance to do so. I will amend my recruitment plan to recruit and interact remotely.

Unless the changes made to the way in which you interact with participants result in a substantial change to protocol, you will not need to submit a modification request. Simply update your recruitment documents to outline how you will remotely interact and then proceed.

B. I have already begun data collection and will now change to remote participant interaction.

Unless the changes made to the way in which you interact with participants result in a substantial change to protocol, you will not need to submit a modification request. Simply update your recruitment documents to outline how you will remotely interact with participants and use this version moving forward. Any already active participants must be informed of the switch to remote interaction and be provided with the updated participant information sheet. It is important that you make clear to participants that if they no longer wish to participate owing to this change, or for any other reason, that they are free to withdraw at any point.

2.3 **Research Ethics – Guidance for new submissions for ethical clearance**
Researchers may continue to submit applications for ethical review. However, you are not permitted to begin data collection which requires any face-to-face interactions with participants in person until further notice. The following options are possible/appropriate:

1. Obtain ethical clearance for a project involving face-to-face interactions with participants in person.

   i. If you wish to commence data collection immediately you must amend these interactions to be conducted remotely as outlined above.

   ii. If it is not possible to conduct your participant interactions remotely then you must then wait until you are advised by the College that face-to-face interactions can recommence before you begin any data collection in person.

If any further advice is required, please contact ethics@rhul.ac.uk

6. Funded Research

3.1 Impact on Grant Management

Most funders are taking a realistic approach to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on grant management. Please see Appendix 1 below outlining the positions of key funders. Web pages are in the process of being produced to host information and will be kept up-to-date as the situation progresses.

One of our main funding bodies, UKRI is taking a pragmatic approach. For instance, where travel is impacted, if researchers or students cannot travel due to government/official advice, or it poses a risk to the individual (due to an underlying medical condition etc), this can be charged to the grant in line with any other cost. If that cost cannot be absorbed by any overall underspend on the grant then UKRI will cover that small addition. In the same circumstances, no cost extension requests to grants would be allowed.

If PIs need further information at this stage, are aware of further funder updates, or would like a specific funded added to the list, please email researchservices@rhul.ac.uk

3.2 Partners and Contracts

PIs should ensure that they keep any project partners up to date with any issues, delays or changes to the project. In the event of delays or suspensions, we may need to agree alternative arrangements with partners.

PIs are also encouraged to review the contract terms, particularly if it is a ‘non-standard’ funder, of their award to identify any further risks which may arise as a result of the specific terms of their award and the impact of the current pandemic.

If you have any concerns or need further information with regards to your research contract, please email researchcontracts@rhul.ac.uk. Please note that you should expect to receive a response from this email account within 10 working days.