HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC): important information regarding the management of current research projects involving face-to-face participant interaction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of the current exceptional circumstances relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, HREC has produced the following guidance for researchers to outline how high quality research should be conducted whilst maintaining stringent ethics standards that reduce potential risks to research participants and researchers.

Researchers managing ongoing research projects that have been granted a favourable opinion by HREC should take the following actions:

a) where it is possible and appropriate, adapt the research to use procedures to conduct participant interactions remotely (such as moving to telephone or online interviews, e.g. using Skype, or using an online survey, utilising software such as Qualtrics or Jisc Online surveys);

b) if the above is not possible, pause the research and halt all face-to-face contact with participants until further notice.

Either of these actions must be taken with immediate effect.

Where it is feasible to move to remote interactions with participants, HREC does not require further review for modifications that relate to moving from face-to-face to remote interaction, unless there is a substantial change to the protocol (see note below) as a result of the change. Please note that such changes would normally require assessment as a project amendment and will again when this situation has passed.

Students - If you are unsure if it will be appropriate to change to remote interaction you should discuss this with your supervisor as soon as possible. Once the appropriate way forward has been agreed, please follow the guidance below to adapt your research.

Note: A substantial change to protocol would be a change that would raise the level of risk to participants, such as remote interaction reducing the ability of the researcher to detect distress of participants who may be particularly vulnerable or at risk, or enhanced data leakage risks online where research involves sensitive and/or personal topics.

Guidance for those who need to pause their research:

You must inform your participants that the research has been paused following guidance from HREC in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

You must explain in your communication how any actively engaged participants will be managed, particularly concerning any safety monitoring/follow-up, etc. where applicable.

Unless the changes made to pause the study result in a substantial change to protocol, this action will not need assessment by HREC as a project amendment.

Guidance for those who will conduct their research remotely:

A. If you have not yet begun data collection but have ethical clearance to do so and plan to amend procedures to recruit and interact with participants remotely.
If the changes made do not involve a substantial change to protocol, you will not need to submit a project amendment request. Simply update your recruitment documents as appropriate then proceed. Updated documents should be forwarded to HREC for our records, including copies of any online survey questions if the modification involves adding this as a new method. Make sure that you include the original HREC reference in your communication.

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

If the changes made do not involve a substantial change to protocol, you will not need to submit a project amendment request. Simply send a communication to participants to explain how interactions will be adjusted to involve remote procedures, rather than face-to-face interaction. It is important that you include a statement (e.g. at the start of an online survey, or to start an online interview exchange) that asks participants to consent to the new data collection mode, and also make it 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.

*New submissions for ethical clearance*

Researchers may continue to submit applications and checklists to HREC and reviews will continue to be conducted. However, as will be made clear on your outcome email you are not permitted to begin data collection which requires any face-to-face interactions with participants until further notice.

Researchers submitting new applications have the following options:

A. If you wish to commence data collection immediately you must amend any planned face-to-face interactions so that these interactions are conducted remotely as outlined above.

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

Please send any queries relating to these guidance notes to the HREC email address: research-rec-review@open.ac.uk and include where possible any HREC reference.