Ethical issues to consider when carrying out research with human participants remotely.

Please note that this has been updated following a panel discussion in HEMS regarding ethical issues associated with carrying out research remotely, convened by Liberty Gibson, HEMS Research and Innovation Funding Manager.

Thank you to Professor Jeffrey Grierson, Professor Andy MicVicar, Dr Pauline Lane, Dr Sarah Burch, and all other HEMS colleagues for all their input into the panel discussion.

Due to COVID-19, all research in the UK involving direct contact with human participants must be either suspended or carried out remotely until further notice. The following are some issues to consider regarding the latter.

This applies to research which was approved by an ethics committee at ARU. If you had ethical approval from an external body e.g. the NHS, you must comply with their requirements as well as those from ARU.

There are some types of research it would not be appropriate to carry out remotely, for example in some sensitive areas or with groups of people who may be regarded as vulnerable. You must consider this carefully. Please also ensure that you have read **ARU's Covid-19 Contingency plans for research,** available on HERON at:

https://myaru.sharepoint.com/sites/i-rido/SitePages/Research-Ethics.aspx

1. You must adhere to ARU's guidance to use Microsoft Teams as the primary tool for online meetings and webinars. For further information, please refer to the guidance for staff, **Online Meeting Tools and Security Guidance, An introduction to Microsoft Teams and Zoom Security Guidance, Anglia Learning and Teaching, April 2020.**
2. It is, as always, essential to be inclusive within the parameters of your inclusion and exclusion criteria. Not all participants may have access to or be familiar with technology and you may like to consider an alternative way

to interview them, such as by phone. Care must be taken not to exclude participants who may have wanted to take part. You also need to consider, however, whether using a combination of communication methods with different participants will affect the reliability of your study.

3. How participants feel about the research being carried out via a video call is likely to depend on how familiar they are with technology. For some participants, it will not present any difficulty, whereas others may feel less comfortable. If you are meeting participants for the first time, it may be harder to build up a rapport than it would have been face-to-face.

4. An advantage of video calls is that they present an opportunity to move the research from a geographical-centric focus.

5. Participants may feel more comfortable being in their own homes, rather than having to travel for an interview. Conversely, they may feel less comfortable because they are letting you into their private space or have other people living with them. It may not always be possible for participants to have the privacy they may have done otherwise. You should stop the interview if there are any signs of a participant looking anxious or agitated.

6. It is often harder to read people's expressions remotely, know when they would like to speak and to be aware of other non-verbal cues than it is face-to-face.

7. You as a researcher may also be party to more contextual information about participants than you may have been if not interviewing them in their homes. It is very important that you do not use any information relating to people that you have not obtained consent for.

8. People who previously said they would be happy to take part in your research may no longer wish to do so. This could be because they are worried about the pandemic or they could be ill themselves or caring for others who are. People may be experiencing mental health problems resulting from the pandemic or a worsening of previous conditions.

9. You must ensure that you have checked that all your equipment works prior to carrying out video calls with participants.

10. Given the potential increased difficulty with reading participants' expressions during a video call, you must be particularly careful when taking consent. You must do this in the same way you would if you were face-to-face, discussing your research with people who may be interested, providing them with information regarding it and letting them go away and think about it in their own time.

11. Written consent should ideally be obtained using an online consent form. An electronic signature from the participant should be obtained. If this is not possible, consent can be audio recorded but you must ensure that a) the method of obtaining consent verbally and the files relating to it are secure and b) you maintain records of consent for all participants. You must detail your method of obtaining consent in detail in your application to the ethics

committee or, if your project was ongoing prior to lockdown, check with your FREP Chair if you have any queries.

12. As is the same for face-to-face research, the standard way of obtaining consent will not be appropriate for all participants, e.g. for cultural reasons or when researching illegal areas such as drug use. You must ensure that you still obtain voluntary informed consent, but in a manner that the participants feel comfortable with. You should detail the process that you are proposing to use in your ethics application and clarify why it is appropriate to obtain consent in this way for the intended participants.

13. If you obtained consent prior to lockdown, if you will now be doing anything additional e.g. recording the interviews, you must obtain further consent from participants for this.

14. As you would during face-to-face research, you must be explicit about how you will be collecting data, for example if you will be recording the interview, and describe how data will be stored securely. This information should be on your participant information and consent form and you must discuss it with people interested in taking part. You must also ensure that you comply with data protection legislation with regards to collecting and storing data; in the UK this is the GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018).

15. You should agree in advance how and when you will follow up with a participant should you be unable to connect due to technology issues, or what you will do if you lose the connection.

16. Some people may find it more tiring engaging in interviews remotely rather than face-to-face. As would always be the case, participants should be made aware that they can stop at any time, but you need to be particularly vigilant to possible signs of fatigue. Other people, however, may feel more confident engaging online than face to face.

17. You must be aware of participants' privacy and ready to stop the interview should other members of a person's family come into the room. In addition, you must be flexible, if participants need to stop the interview to attend to their children, for example.

18. It is not advisable to carry out any more than small focus groups remotely, given the difficulty in ensuring everyone has a voice with a larger number of people. Even with small groups, you need to discuss the measures you will take to help enable everyone to participate effectively, for example switching microphones off and taking turns in speaking.

19. If your research involves larger focus groups you must set up rules from the beginning about turn taking to help ensure that all voices are heard. As the researcher, you must be vigilant to anyone who has not had the opportunity to speak and bring them into the conversation.

20. Given the large impact of the pandemic, you must take into account that participants' responses in interviews may be skewed by COVID-19, even when this does not relate to the research topic. If your research was ongoing, there may be notable differences between responses given pre and

post lockdown. You must consider how this will impact on your research before commencing with it.

Contact details for Faculty Research Ethics Panel (FREP) Chairs

AHSS – Kofi Boakye at kofi.boakye@aru.ac.uk

B&L- Stefan Mandelbaum at stefan.mandelbaum@aru.ac.uk

FSE -Peter Bright at peter.bright@aru.ac.uk

HEMS – Sarah Burch at sarah.burch@aru.ac.uk

General queries

Julie Scott, Research Ethics and Integrity Manager, RIDO at julie.scott@aru.ac.uk

Data protection queries

David Humphreys, Data Protection Officer, Secretary and Clerk's Office at dpo@aru.ac.uk

Research ethics website

www.anglia.ac.uk/researchethics

Julie Scott

Research Ethics and Integrity Manager

Updated: 25.6.20

Version 1.2