

Research in controversial and dangerous topics and settings: political, legal and cultural contexts presenting particular risks to the researched and the researcher

RISK ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

This guidance supplements the College's Health & Safety policy and procedures (<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/admin/safety/internal>) and is applicable to all staff and students conducting research in potentially controversial or dangerous fields.

Risk Assessment

All departments are expected to manage the potential risks arising from research activities undertaken by staff and students. In many cases these will be minimal and can be adequately addressed through reference to the College's *Guidelines on Good Practice in Academic Research*¹. Some research activities will, however, give rise to particular risks and it is expected that adequate risk assessment is undertaken and measures put in place to address this. Examples include: research in conflict zones; participant groups who may be engaged in illegal activities; topics of a particularly controversial nature; research activities which may be construed as suspicious by local authorities.

Heads of Department are responsible for making a judgement concerning the relative benefits of the research and risks to the researcher - including whether such risks are ethically acceptable. When making such decisions, Heads of Department should bear in mind that staff undertaking the research (and particularly junior members of a team) may be asked to put themselves at risk and there should be no unreasonable inducements or pressures brought to bear upon them to do so.

Departments may wish to create a 'code of practice' if it is anticipated that a significant amount of research will be conducted in a particular field - the *Social Research Association Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers*² may form a good basis for codes of practice (but does not specifically address controversial or dangerous research). In all other cases a risk assessment designed to identify and address issues arising should be undertaken. Issues which should be addressed, where applicable, within codes of practice/risk assessment designed to manage research being conducted in controversial and/or dangerous fields include:

1. Physical risk to researchers

This may include risks arising directly from the research topic (e.g. risk of violence from research participants, gatekeepers or other involved/interested parties) or from the research setting (e.g. in a conflict zone, other dangerous location, or with a particular participant group).

2. Emotional risk to researchers

This may include risk of significant distress or trauma resulting from the research topic or setting.

3. Particular risks and hazards associated with the local research setting

- I. Research conducted *overseas* must comply with local legal requirements and researchers should seek and act in accordance with the advice of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.³ Researchers should also refer to the specific guidance on working abroad supplied by the College's Health & Safety Office.⁴

¹ http://www.kcl.ac.uk/college/policyzone/attachments/good_practice_May_08_FINAL.pdf

² http://www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/word/safety_code_of_practice.doc

³ <http://www.fco.gov.uk>

⁴ <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/admin/safety/internal/policies/review.html>

The Finance Department must always be notified when individuals are travelling abroad on College business.⁵ Student researchers should not travel to countries (or parts of countries) listed by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office as being unsafe for travel.⁶ For staff researchers travelling to areas deemed unsafe the risk assessment will need to specifically address this and the permission of the Finance Department must also be sought (to ensure there is insurance cover).

II. Research involving the *disclosure of, or potential for, involvement in illegal activities* requires careful management. Researchers must consider:

- legal and professional obligations regarding disclosure of information to third parties (e.g. potential harm to a child, intent to commit a crime).
- the need for notification and/or consultation with local authorities and the local community where research may lead to the researcher becoming implicated in illegal activities
- the potential for research activities to arouse distrust/suspicion from the local community or authorities (and whether deception would ever be legitimate or warranted).

Researchers must notify the Legal Compliance Team⁷ of research where the researcher may become implicated in (or be perceived to be implicated in), illegal activities – this ensures that there is a central record of planned activities and the team will also be able to provide advice and guidance.

Many researchers, and particularly student researchers and staff on joint contracts, will have other professional obligations and experience stemming from their professional roles (e.g. social workers, nurses, doctors, journalists) which will need to be considered in relation to obligations concerning disclosure. Any conflicts between the role of researcher and an individual's professional role should be clarified before the research commences and it should be recognised that the College is responsible for students' activities when conducting research and may take a different view of acceptable risk from employers.

III. Research involving *collaborating organisations* (e.g. funders, gatekeepers, facilitators) can sometimes raise issues concerning the disclosure of research findings (both general and about individual participants). Intellectual property and the non-disclosure rights of the researcher should be covered as part of risk assessment (for the latter, arrangements should be outlined in the ethics application in relation to participant confidentiality).

4. **Potential vulnerability of inexperienced researchers**

Research undertaken by inexperienced researchers such as students or those new to a particular field will require the provision of adequate training and supervision prior to, during and after fieldwork has been carried out. Training and supervision may be the responsibility of the student supervisor or principal investigator but may also require the input of other experienced individuals (such as an experienced liaison in a host country). Risk assessment should include information concerning supervision, support and training provided to inexperienced researchers.

5. **Lone workers**

⁵ <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/admin/finance/staff/insurance/travel.html> Contact: Herman Codner

⁶ <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/travel-advice-by-country/>

⁷ <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/iss/legalc/compliance/>

Conducting research alone presents particular issues and may heighten risks presented in items 1-4 above. Sensible precautions such as informing colleagues of whereabouts, carrying a mobile telephone and consulting with those familiar with a particular research setting could form part of a departmental code of practice.

Risk assessment and management should include consideration of the necessity for such risks to be undertaken, what measures can be taken to mitigate risk, how incidents arising would be handled and reported and in what circumstances research would need to be suspended, modified or terminated. It is expected that arrangements for managing risks will include adequate training provision and clarity concerning accountability and reporting of specific risk management arrangements and incidents.

Insurance

As long as appropriate risk assessment has been undertaken and the researcher has been given permission from the relevant bodies to undertake research, then the College's insurance will apply.

There are certain instances when the Finance Department requires notification or needs to give express permission before research can be carried out. These relate to travel overseas (see above) and particular exemptions largely related to intrusive research.⁸

Ethical review

Risk to participants will be covered during ethical review (although departments are free to include this in risk assessment if they so wish). Ethical review will not normally require detailed information about risk assessment in relation to researcher safety, although reviewers are able to request a copy of the risk assessment arrangements if they consider this will inform the ethical review (this applies to ethical review conducted by the College – external ethics committees will have their own requirements).

All research with human participants must be submitted for ethical review (including research conducted by taught students). Taught module components involving data collection activities with human participants (e.g. physical procedures, administration of questionnaires) also require ethical review. There are cases where activities are not research, do not involve data collection from human participants, and do not require ethical approval as part of programme and module approval, but may benefit from ethical review – in such cases review may be arranged upon request.

⁸ <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/admin/finance/staff/insurance/trials.html> 'Intrusive' research in this context means research where the researcher will need to touch the participant. Contact: Herman Codner.