**University of Sheffield School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR)**

**Risk Assessment Form for Dissertation Projects**

Any Masters student completing a dissertation must complete this risk assessment form in consultation with their academic supervisor before starting their dissertation. The form should be signed by the student and supervisor. Students are advised to keep an electronic copy (preferably a scanned copy of the signed form) for future reference and to include a copy of the risk assessment form as an appendix in their final dissertation. **The risk assessment should be revisited if any changes are made to the proposed research or any circumstances change.**

Please complete the requested details and/or mark the answer(s) that apply to your particular dissertation project.

## Q1. Overview of Your Research Project

Your name:       Your academic supervisor:

Does your project involve any or all of the following?

* primary data collection (e.g. interviewing, surveying or observation in unfamiliar and/or private settings);
* a work-based research placement;
* overseas activities;
* working in an unfamiliar environment in general (i.e. a place that is not known to you, where you have spent little, or no time, previously).

*Yes*  (If Yes, complete the rest of the form)

*No*  (If No, there is no need to complete the rest of the form, just sign the form - Q5 - and seek your academic supervisor's signature - Q6)

If Yes, please give brief details of your project here (i.e. topic area, details of planned research methods, details of work-based placement, details of any overseas activities, any unfamiliar environments):

Intended site(s) for the project (e.g. details of organisational setting, town, country if not to be completed in the UK):

Over which months will the project will be completed? (approximate start and end dates to the nearest month, e.g. June 2012- August 2012):

Will you be working on your own?

All of the time  Some of the time  Never

**Q2. Potential security devices**

Will you have a personal alarm? Yes  No

Will you have a mobile phone? Yes  No

## Q3. Health

Should we be aware of any medical information concerning your health and fitness, which is relevant to carrying out the project? Please enter ‘NONE’ if there are no foreseeable health/fitness problems.

## Q4. Potential hazards inherent in project site(s) and/or research methods to be used

Are there any hazards associated with the sites at which you will be conducting your project and/or the research methods you will use? For example, will you be working on your own in private spaces (e.g. people’s homes), travelling through potentially unsafe areas to reach your project site, or conducting interviews in politically volatile or potentially hazardous environments (e.g. around dirty water, at night, busy urban markets)?

If so, what are these hazards and what arrangements will you make to manage and reduce these?

**Please use the space/table below to record identified risks, who might be affected and how you will manage the risks.**

**The risk assessment should be revisited if any changes are made to the proposed research or any circumstances change.**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **SIGNIFICANT HAZARD** | **POTENTIAL COONSEQUENCES OF HAZARD** | **INITIAL RISK RATING**  **(High/Medium/Low/No risk)** | **EXISTING CONTROL/PROPOSED CONTROL MEASURES** | **FINAL RISK RATING**  **(High/Medium/Low/No risk)** |
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**Q5. Student’s declaration**

I have reviewed safety considerations for my project with my supervisor. I have read and understood the **Dissertation Research Safety Guidelines** in the **Dissertation Module Handbook** and I agree to abide by the recommendations made therein.

I understand that I am responsible for my own safety during this project and will take any necessary steps to minimise the risks the project poses to me and/or other people. I will not undertake the project if circumstances increase the risk of accident or injury (e.g. the presence of suspicious individuals).

**Student’s signature**

**Date**

**Q6. Supervisor's approval**

I have read this risk assessment and discussed it with him/her. I think it identifies all readily foreseeable risks in the project as planned at this date. If the appropriate precautions are taken by the student the project should be permitted.

**Supervisor’s signature**

**Date**

**Dissertation Research Safety Guidelines [extract from Dissertation Handbook pages \*\*]**

These dissertation research safety guidelines apply to any student studying for their Masters in Public Health dissertation, but, in particular, to those who are conducting primary research, a work-based research placement and/or a project that involves any overseas activities or work in an unfamiliar environment in general.

***General***

Each student must behave responsibly during the conduct of their dissertation project work in order to reduce the risk of accidents.

* You must discuss your project and any potential risks with your academic supervisor.
* No project that has an undue safety risk will be sanctioned.
* You are responsible for your own safety.
* A written risk assessment for dissertations (Form HAR1) must be completed and approved by your academic supervisor before any dissertation project work is undertaken.

***Dimensions of Risk***

There are a number of dimensions to the potential risks that students may face when involved in a dissertation project (including work-based research placement activities); particularly if it involves social interaction of any sort.

There is potentially risk of:

* physical threat or abuse;
* psychological trauma, as a result of actual or threatened violence or the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction (e.g. during interviews);
* being in a comprising situation, in which there might be accusations of improper behaviour;
* increased exposure to risks of everyday life and social interaction, such as road accidents and infectious illness; and/or
* causing psychological or physical harm to others.

It is important that you consider the potential dimensions of risk associated with your particular dissertation project.

#### Assessing Risk: Project Site(s)

In selecting and appraising the project site(s) and before starting any project work, it is important that you consider any potential risks associated with the particular location in which you will be working. Some relevant questions to ask may include:

* How safe is travel to/from the project site(s)?
  + Is there reliable local public transport?
  + Are reputable taxis firms easy to access?
  + Is it safe to use private cars and leave them in the area?
* Is there a local contact person for you at the project site and are you clear about how you can contact them when you are there? (details of where they are based, a contact telephone number etc.)?
* If you are staying away from home, is there appropriately priced, comfortable and safe accommodation within easy reach if this is needed?
* Are there any local tensions to be aware of, such as strong cultural, religious, political or racial divisions?
* What do local sources, such as the police, say about risks in the project site(s)?
* Would it be useful to prepare for the project work locally by, for example:
  + Meeting with local leaders to explain the project and seek their involvement and/or endorsement;
  + Informing other significant local actors about the project and seeking local contact details;
  + Notifying the local police in writing about the purpose and conduct of the project and asking for a contact telephone number.

### *Insurance*

* Students who engage in overseas activities as part of their dissertation project should ensure that they have adequate insurance for accidents, illness and personal belongings for the duration of their overseas visit.
* Students travelling abroad or within the UK and staying overnight may purchase University insurance. Students should contact Emma Earle in the Teaching and Support Unit to arrange this.
* Students travelling in the UK but not staying overnight are advised to check that they have adequate insurance to cover their personal belongings while away from home.
* Please refer to <http://www.shef.ac.uk/finance/staff-information/help/insurance> for more information about the University’s insurance as it relates to postgraduate students.

***Travelling to project or data collection sites***

If you are carrying out project work, such as interviews or observations in unfamiliar areas, pay attention to the following:

* Study a map of the area or existing information sources for clues as to its character. Look for schools, offices (post offices), railway stations, markets and other hubs of activity. Think about escape routes from any dense housing areas. Use the Internet, Google Maps etc. to thoroughly research the area.
* If doubts about safety are indicated, make enquiries about the vicinity in advance of any practical work, to assess the need for accompanied visits, shadowing or pre-arranged pick-ups.

* If your project involves travelling to remote areas, ensure that you have adequate survival gear and supplies with you in case you have difficulty returning for some reason.
* Avoid travelling to a project site by foot if you are feeling vulnerable. Use convenient public transport, a private car or a reputable taxi firm. Plan your route in advance and always take a map. Input local taxi numbers into your mobile phone in advance.
* Try to avoid appearing out of place: dress inconspicuously and non-provocatively, taking account of cultural norms.
* Equipment and valuable items should be kept out of sight where possible.
* Carry a personal alarm or other device to attract attention in an emergency.

***Dealing with People***

Wherever possible, you should try to obtain prior information about the characteristics of the people you will come into contact with during the project and/or and possible project participants. The following general guidance should be taken into account, as relevant to your particular project:

* The topics for discussion in some projects relating to health and social issues - for example, poverty, unemployment, social isolation, bereavement and ill-health - may provoke strong feelings in some participants and also angry reactions.
* Some respondents may present a greater possibility of risk than others. For instance when conducting research with people who have a history of psychological disturbance or violent behaviour. If such characteristics are known in advance, the researcher and supervisor should be as fully briefed as possible on the risks involved and understand the precautions they need to undertake to manage the situation.
* To avoid engaging in inappropriate or provocative behaviour with people you come into contact with during the project, make sure that you are:
  + fully aware of any professional, social or cultural norms;
  + aware of the potential gender dynamics of interactions; and
  + aware of ways in which you can establish the right ‘social distance’ - neither over-familiar nor too detached.
* Issues of race, culture and gender can impact significantly on your safety when carrying out a project in certain situations (see Cardiff report listed under further information and resources). For example, lone female researchers may be more vulnerable than lone males. You should identify the factors that may contribute to any risk situation in your project working, and identify strategies to try and mitigate these.
* Always obtain permission before entering private land/property.
* Always carry identification, for example, your university card or a letter authenticated by your academic supervisor, giving the School of Health and Related Research’s address and your contact details. Research participants should be given an opportunity to check you are who you say you are, and to review your documents/ identification.
* In relation to face-to-face interviews conducted in participants’ homes:

Unscheduled interviews:

* + If the study design requires you to make opportunistic door-to-door visits to complete short interviews, try where possible to conduct these briefly at the door and without entering the property.
  + If you are 'cold calling' in this manner, assess the situation before beginning the interview and if in doubt re-arrange the interview for when a colleague can be present.

Scheduled interviews:

* + However, many projects involved arranging interviews in advance and it is not always practical to speak with people briefly and without entering their homes. If you are required to conduct interviews in a participant’s home, contact them in advance of the interview (by telephone) to assess how comfortable you feel about them, and to enquire whether any other members of the household will be at home. If you have the choice, try and arrange for the interview to take place in a room where you can see the door (to exit) and always keep your belongings with you (so you have your phone, money and car keys to hand if you need to leave quickly).
  + If after speaking with a participant, you do not feel comfortable to visit their home, arrange an alternative venue for the interview that has already been assessed for safety (for instance bookable interview rooms at the University or a public venue such as a library).
  + Let the participant’s know that you have a schedule and that other people (a family member, your supervisor) know where you are if you are carrying out face-to-face interviews. You can tell them this directly as you arrive by mentioning it in general conversation. Or you can do this more subtly by stating you need to quickly make a phone call to tell someone where you are. You can also arrange for calls to be made to you – for instance ask a friend to call you mid-way through the interview as a way to ‘check in’. Remember leave your mobile phone switched on.

For all types of interview and fieldwork activity:

* + This is very important: be sure to let another person know that you plan to be interviewing or carrying out fieldwork on a particular day and agree a time by which you should have contacted them. If you are working in the UK this person could be a member of your family, a fellow student or your supervisor. If you are working outside of the UK you could arrange to contact a local, trusted person and your supervisor in the UK. If for some reason you do fail to make contact by the agreed time, these people can try to contact you. If they are unable to make contact with you and become worried, they can sound the alarm (see below).

#### Maintaining Contact and Communication

Following on from the last point in the previous section, it is essential to establish reliable lines of communication during your project, both with your family/friends, and also your academic supervisor. You should consider the following guidelines during the conduct of your project.

* Use a mobile telephone (check the battery is fully charged before setting out) when and where available. Remember to give your mobile telephone number to family/friends/your academic supervisor to enable return contact. Make sure the mobile is switched on, but don’t rely on it as a safety device as you may find you are in an area without signal.
* If you are undertaking primary research or project work make sure that you provide your academic supervisor (and/or family and friends) with the following in advance of carrying out project activities (observation, interviews etc.):
  + Details of your itinerary (if relevant)
  + Possible activities / appointment times - including names, addresses and telephone numbers of people being interviewed or called (explain that these details should remain *confidential* unless in the event of an emergency when they should be provided to the police (and other appropriate services) to ascertain your safety).
  + Travel routes and accommodation details (if relevant)
* If you are travelling overseas:
  + Do all 3 things in the previous section
  + Give a family member or friend a copy of your passport details, and also personal accident /injury insurance details in case of any emergency.
  + Also make sure that you have your insurance details (specifically your policy number and emergency telephone contact) easily to hand at all times when you are overseas.
  + You should arrange to communicate with your academic supervisor at pre-arranged times and that you have agreed a procedure to follow in the event of your non-communication.
  + In foreign environments, ensure that you have at least a basic competence in the relevant local language for emergency use.
  + If you are conducting research in very remote areas, emergency signals are: Six signals within one minute (whistle blast, torch flashes, shouts, waves of cloth); One minute pause; Repeat six signals. Reply is: Three signals; One minute pause.
* **Golden Rule for Everyone**
  + During your project, always inform someone of your departure, route, activity(s) and return time (friend, parent, academic supervisor etc), and always inform the same person(s) of your return. It is essential that the person(s) you have informed of your whereabouts and likely return time knows exactly what procedure to follow in the event of your non-return.

**Further Reading and Resources**

Bloor, M., Fincham, B. and Sampson, H. (2007) Qualiti (NCRM) commissioned inquiry into the risk to well-being of researchers in qualitative research. Available at: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/CIReport.pdf>

Social Research Association, A Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers. Available at: <http://www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/word/safety_code_of_practice.doc>

The University of Sheffield, Health and Safety Tips for Working Overseas. Available at: http://safety.dept.shef.ac.uk/guidance/overseasmar07.pdf

UCEA/USA (1998) Health and Safety Guidance when Working Overseas. Available at: <http://www.ucea.ac.uk/objects_store/UCEA%20H&S%20Guidelines%20for%20Working%20Overseas.pdf>