



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

## COVID-19 advice

### General guidance for researchers during COVID-19

Ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone who engages with research processes is a crucial aspect of ethical research conduct. Researchers, sponsors of research and partners in research should review, and where necessary, revise their research plans to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in general have a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 due to high prevalence of pre-existing, underlying health conditions. Communities have expressed particular concern about the risk of COVID-19 to Elders and knowledge holders and consequently to the continued survival and transmission of language and cultures.

Therefore, research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must consider the unique circumstances that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are confronting in containing and controlling the spread of COVID-19. This may include changes in the risk profile of research, changing priorities of research partners and their ability to participate, and/or changes to modes of engagement which may include inability to access targeted research populations due to necessary restrictions.

For these reasons, governments and local and regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bodies have imposed restrictions on travel to and from remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These restrictions may be in place long after border and travel restrictions have been lifted. Even as restrictions are lessened or lifted as risk of transmission declines, it should not be assumed that relevant risks are gone or have reduced to 'normal' levels. Keep monitoring each state and territory government, [Department of health](#) and the [National Indigenous Australian's Agency](#) websites for current information.

While official advice may inform the overall picture, researchers may be required to undertake more rigorous measures to embody ethical research conduct, importantly, researchers must be conscious that the priorities and capacity of individuals, organisations and communities to partner and participate in research may have changed. Research agreements and consents may need to be reviewed and re-

negotiated. Methods and timelines will need to be adapted particularly where the research design requires face to face or in person meetings and gatherings.

Any research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the pandemic must appropriately manage risks and changing circumstances arising from the factors outlined above. In some cases this may not be possible, and it may be necessary to postpone proposed research to a time when the risks and circumstances allow.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities must have the opportunity to genuinely contribute to and engage with any decisions to change or postpone research in which they are involved.

Please be aware any necessary variations to research projects already approved by the Committee must be submitted to the Committee for review. Further information about project variations can be found below.

## **AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee**

### **Meetings, secretariat and inquiries**

The AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee (the Committee) will continue meeting (via teleconference) in accordance with its existing schedule (available [here](#)). As usual, the Committee may be available for out-of-session meetings to review urgent applications which cannot wait for review at the next scheduled meeting. There is no guarantee that a request for out-of-session review will be granted, and, if granted, dates will be at the discretion of the Committee.

Please be aware that both the members of the Committee and AIATSIS staff who support the Committee are also adjusting to changes to our work systems and processes. As such, we ask for your understanding if usual timeframes for providing responses to applicants or for responding to inquiries are impacted. If significant delays are expected we will communicate this as soon as we can.

### **Existing approvals and variations**

All current research which has already been approved should be reviewed by the researcher and necessary variations made as soon as possible to take into account the new risk environment in which the research is being conducted. Some examples of variations that may be necessary include:

- elimination or significant reduction of required instances of physical contact and close proximity
- elimination or reduction and management of other risks to participants arising from or exacerbated by the pandemic (particularly risk of causing distress or psychological harm)
- cancellation or postponement of non-essential travel to at risk communities
- extension of project timeframes
- alternate modes of consent

Such variations will need to be agreed by project partners before the Committee is able to review and approve them. This agreement and the ensuing changes should be formally documented and shared with all parties. If researchers reasonably believe this applies to their project, they should not wait to make the required changes, but must notify the Committee as soon as practicable. Depending on the stage and nature of current research there may be greater or lesser need for variation.

Variations can be submitted via email to the Research Ethics Committee Secretariat, [ethics@aiatsis.gov.au](mailto:ethics@aiatsis.gov.au)

A variation must be submitted with:

- Variation letter addressed to the Committee Chair ([available here](#))
- Revised ethics approval form, with tracked changes
- Any relevant supporting documents

The Committee recognises that the need to implement variations to approved research in response to COVID-19 is beyond the control of researchers and could not reasonably have been foreseen prior to the declaration of a pandemic. **AIATSIS will waive fees for variations to projects as a result of COVID-19 until further notice.**

## **New applications**

The Committee is still accepting new applications for review. Currently there are not any additional restrictions on what types of applications can be made to the Committee.

The Committee must, however, review the ethical appropriateness of proposed research in the context of the current and possible future circumstances. The significant and compounded risks to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people posed by the pandemic and the impacts of responses to it mean that the Committee must be able to see clear strategies for eliminating, minimising or managing risks related to the Covid-19 pandemic before approving research. Applicants should clearly articulate whether postponing research has been considered and provide clear rationale for the proposed timing, including up to date community support.

As always, the Committee may choose to provide conditional approval to research. The Committee reserves the right to make approval conditional on a change in the prevailing circumstances if it considers this prudent. The AIATSIS Ethics Committee maintains its responsibility to ensure that all research is ethically justifiable and that any risk to research participants is identified, reduced and effectively managed. This remains of critical importance in the intra and post COVID-19 pandemic environment.

## **Ethics workshops and coaching sessions**

All AIATSIS ethics workshops and coaching sessions will be delivered remotely via teleconference until further notice. AIATSIS is currently set up to use Zoom for

teleconferencing. If your organisation uses a different platform please let us know and we may be able to accommodate your preference, especially if there are technical or security reasons.

We are currently unable to accept new requests for workshops or coaching sessions scheduled to take place prior to 1 September 2020.

### **Closing remarks from the Chair of the AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee**

We must all work together during these difficult times and adapt as necessary to changing circumstances. The AIATSIS Research Ethics Committee will continue to provide a professional service to all parties in HREC matters until all restrictions are lifted.