ANU Humanities and Social Sciences

Guide to Fieldwork Strategies
in
Response to COVID-19

Prepared by the Australian National University

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I. OVERVIEW

FIELDWORK is a key component of research for disciplines in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Fieldwork practices are diverse, from individuals conducting archival research off-campus, through to fully co-designed collective projects where community partnerships require group meetings, face-to-face interviewing facilitated by support groups, and oral histories, or large-scale surveys that are sometimes run over multiple years. Fieldwork is undertaken within Australia and internationally.[1]

There are differences in definitions to fieldwork by discipline. Ethnographic researchers have defined fieldwork as a form of inquiry in which "one immerses oneself personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or group for the purposes of research".[2] Political scientists have defined fieldwork as "leaving one's home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one's research."[3]

A common feature of definitions of fieldwork carried out in order to collect data is the requirement for travel. Even where travel is not involved, person-to-person, or people-to-people interaction occurs. As such, fieldwork commonly includes risks and requirements relating to travel, stakeholder collaboration and management, with guidance provided by ethics approval processes, community-based advisers and experts, and disciplinary norms.

COVID-19 has increased the constraints on, and risks of, fieldwork – for participants, researchers, and the broader communities in which research is conducted. Federal and state/territory governments have imposed limits on the ability to travel. Universities and other organisations have imposed limits on access to buildings, environmental sites, and other locations that are accessed via fieldwork for the purposes of research, and have also placed limits in the ability of students, employees, and others, to travel for work or study purposes. Some places and social cohorts/communities have closed or restricted access to non-residents or essential workers. The relaxation of these restrictions is dependent on reassessments of risks associated with COVID-19. In the case of international fieldwork, restrictions are likely to be in place for an extended time.

This handbook presents information for ANU researchers who intend to conduct fieldwork through COVID-19 restrictions. It will assist researchers – defined as academics and higher degree research students – to navigate the changed fieldwork environment where it is possible

[1] This document was developed by the College of Arts and Social Sciences, College of Asia and the Pacific, and College of Law, with support by the Research Services Division. The working group that developed the document thank Dimity Phillips for her work in drafting the document. Information was obtained from the Research Services Division (Research Funding and Development, Research Ethics, Research Integrity and Research Contracts), Human Resources (Work Environment Group), Graduate Research Office, Coronavirus COVID-19 Response Office, CAP Human Resources, CASS Human Resources and Research Office, and College of Law Research Office. This document integrates feedback provided through University Research Committee consultations.

[2] Wolcott, Harry F. *The art of fieldwork*. Rowman Altamira, 2005.

[3] Kapiszewski, D., MacLean, L.M. and Read, B.L., 2015. *Field research in political science: Practices and principles*. Cambridge University Press.

and appropriate for their research. Fieldwork activities involving human subjects require approval of the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), and changes to fieldwork approved under HREC procedures require amending existing protocols. The risks related to Covid–19 are dynamic and restrictions and regulations are in a state of flux. Researchers must ensure continual compliance and may need to apply for a variation in ethics protocol more than once. A changed regulation will result in an original approval no longer being valid. Researchers must also make important decisions about transferring in person modes of data collection to using online technologies, or whether it is appropriate or possible to utilise the services of research partners to carry out fieldwork on behalf of the researcher.

The information in this handbook should be read alongside, and does not replace the ANU Fieldwork Protocol. Staff wishing to undertake fieldwork must still complete the ANU Travel eform, and comply with the university's Work, Health and Safety policies and guidelines, including WHS Management System requirements.

Beyond current practices, COVID-19 has long-term implications for fieldwork. These include issues such as the norms governing co-authorship that differ between, but also traverse, disciplinary boundaries. Translational research as well as research dissemination and public outreach will also be impacted. Some forms of fieldwork, such as participant observation, archaeological excavations, or knowledge exchange, will not easily be transferred to alternative modes of data generation. Future discussions should explore ways in which existing practices may need to be adjusted to support a flourishing research environment amongst the "new normal" presented by COVID-19, whilst respecting disciplinary standards of research quality and integrity.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

COVID-19 has led to widespread disruption of all kinds of external activities, from data collation and knowledge sharing, through to the dissemination of results. These issues affect all ANU academics, affiliated researchers, HDR and Honours students conducting fieldwork.

OBSTACLES to implementing fieldwork include, but are not limited, to:

- Bans and restrictions on some regional and interstate travel;
- Bans and restrictions on international travel;
- Social distancing rules;
- Closure of and/or restricted access to places (including 'hotspots', aged care facilities, some Indigenous communities),
- Recommended isolation of vulnerable cohorts identified as being at increased risk (such as, those aged over 70 years, those with medical conditions or disability, some Aboriginal and Islander communities);
- Community imposed self-isolation measures;

- Closures of international labs/archives/collections/research sites (materials, samples, data cannot be accessed or transferred, particularly if those institutions are affected by staff cuts);
- Restrictions to HREC approvals processes;
- Compounding challenges due to difficulties for those whose fieldwork was previously suspended because of bushfires; and
- COVID-19 transmission and re-infection risks globally.

RISKS of continued limits to fieldwork include:

- Being unable to meet obligations to research participants, communities and beneficiaries;
- Not being able to deliver outcomes or acquit Category 1, 2 and 3 funded grants and consultancies;
- Facing barriers to disseminating research findings to the public and relevant communities;
- Constraints on outreach and communication plans;
- Needing to rescope research projects (for example, by replacing face-to-face interviews with online technologies), with implications for methodology and research outcomes. For example, rescoping may lead to potentially less effective research practices, such as using more text-based research, and a reliance on existing materials, rather than the creation or collection of novel data. Additional in-person, relationship-building may also be a pre-requisite for re-scoping, but be constrained;
- Implications for teaching obligations and school budgets arising from suspended fieldwork by academics on fellowships (e.g. what if a DECRA holder has to cancel fieldwork and suspend fellowship to return to teaching for a period during Fellowship because their teaching relief has already been committed? If their fellowship gets extended to accommodate delayed fieldwork, who funds the additional teaching relief that may be required?).
- Timely expenditure/acquittal may be a problem in the case of further delays and if payment for travel, lab or facility access/work cannot be made in advance.

OPPORTUNITIES arising from the present situation may include:

- Considering ways that we can engage with research participants and their communities in new innovative ways, and assessing community resources, technology and skills;
- Exploring what is possible in terms of community engagement and ways to mitigate risks to community health in real terms;
- Asking if there are others in the field with whom we can work to facilitate communication. For example, community-located researchers – sometimes called field-based liaison officers – could facilitate or conduct in- and on-country research (such as, conducting interviews, site surveys and meetings; research documents; undertake archive/library-based tasks; or other fieldwork tasks).

ADVICE for researchers:

- Returning to fieldwork activities remains regulated by government regulations, ethics protocols, and community agency and consent. Information regarding Indigenous research, ANU's Human Research Ethics committee, and animal experimentation, is regularly updated here.
- Keep abreast of advice coming from the Ethics and Research Services Division and COVID-19 Advice page, and revise protocols where required.
- Maintain communication with your research partners and participants.
- Consider risk management processes for research including – but not restricted to – interviews and other fieldwork that involves direct contact with cohorts that may be at heightened risk during the pandemic.
- Revise your research design that allow you to meet your research objectives while ameliorating risks of transmission of Covid–19. For example, consider: relocating field sites, rescoping communication methods (from face-to-face to online meetings), or modifying team composition to ensure the project can continue if you are unable to access your normal field sites for some time (e.g. employing community-located researchers). Consider what innovative options might emerge for co-designed research as a result of the crisis.
- Consider renegotiating milestones and deliverables with teams, partners, participants, and funders as required.
- Retain detailed records of changes made to existing research designs in response to the changed research environment, enabling timely and accurate reporting to funding bodies.

ADVICE for HDR candidates:

- In addition to the above, maintain contact with your supervisory panel at all times.
- Consider revision of your research design in order to enable your project to be completed within the period of your candidature. The thesis you planned may not be the one you end up submitting.
- Ensure that changes to research design and fieldwork plans are fully documented in annual report milestones.

II. ETHICS AND RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Outline

Ethics approval processes are central to fieldwork involving human subjects. Consistent with normal practice, all projects must be undertaken with appropriate acknowledgement and management of the risks involved. Any new protocol or variation must clearly consider and set out the risks associated with the work prior to approval through HREC, including the likelihood that risks will escalate over the course of the work.

HREC continue to receive and assess applications from researchers, but the issues that ethics committees are required to consider are made more complex by the emergence of COVID-19. There are important questions about duty of care, for example, when recruiting research partners for remote data collection. Researchers undertaking fieldwork also face more uncertain risk environments in the field. Consult with the ethics office as early as possible once it is clear that a variation to fieldwork plans is required. As the COVID-19 situation may change unexpectedly, carefully consider contingency plans for research activities. The ANU Ethics team are available to provide advice and guidance as required.

Effective strategies must be developed to minimise harm to participants, and the research must be demonstrated to have realistic benefits that significantly outweigh any potential harms. Failure to acknowledge, address and manage the risks appropriately will result in an application being returned for modification. In turn, this delays the turnaround time for all applicants.

Project leaders must vigilantly monitoring their research and promptly report if adverse events occur. The Human Research Ethics Committee (and delegated committees) will hold both new protocols and variations to existing protocols to the usual high standard expected from the ANU.

A key issue for ethics and research integrity is ensuring fieldwork does not place research participants and researchers under pressure to risk their safety or that of others, whether partners are contractors, organisations, vulnerable communities, researchers or research students. While this risk is always present and needs to be accounted for in ethics approval processes, risks are heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. There may be a risk of psychological harm, for example in asking participants questions related to COVID-19. Financial pressures on potential collaborators may increase due to the effect of the pandemic on incomes. As the COVID-19 situation evolves rapidly, the risks associated with the research may also escalate, requiring researchers to invoke stronger mitigation strategies, including suspending the research if the risks become unmanageable. Any COVID-19 elements that are at risk of no longer being aligned with the original ethics approval must be submitted as a new application.

We ask researchers to be respectful and patient during the submission and review process. ANU Research Services is working in support the committees and will make every effort to inform the researcher directly about any delays. Keep in mind that committee members, whether they are fellow colleagues or non-technical/specialist members, are volunteers.

Indigenous research

Australian Indigenous communities have been identified as being at greater risk of the effects of the current crisis to a markedly higher degree that many other social cohorts. To limit the spread of COVID-19, the university advises researchers who are conducting engagement or approved research with Indigenous people – especially in remote communities and other communities identified as vulnerable – to confirm that research participants as well as their communities are still willing to participate. From an ethical perspective, the immediate needs of participants are paramount. Ensure that your participants are informed of the changing circumstances, and consent to the research/engagement continuing under the new circumstances that apply in the relevant jurisdiction. This process is consistent with the researcher's requisite commitment to continual compliance with the principle of free, prior and informed consent. This must be maintained despite a work environment that is currently characterized by changing advice at federal and state/territory levels.

If you are undertaking ongoing engagement or research in remote communities, be mindful that the present situation may make research less of a priority for your research participants. It is the responsibility of the researcher to anticipate, acknowledge, and respect the possibility of changes in the capacity or willingness of participants. If participants remain willing, then the University supports research activities being conducted remotely, particularly for research that communities determine is beneficial.

Researchers should consider a risk analysis of all data gathering methods that involve direct contact with Indigenous people, such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Such an analysis will assess the capacity, skills, resources, willingness to participate of partners and participants, as well as consent. People living in rural and remote areas may not have conference call facilities of a similar capacity to those in urban areas to support 'remote' research arrangements. On the other hand, participant's capacity to participate should not be underestimated. Consult with participants regarding what, if any, communication method is most suitable for them.

It is your responsibility as a researcher to ensure that consent is ongoing and withdrawal is possible. Respect the sensitivity and agency of these communities to determine how, when and to what extent people within them wish to engage with the research project. ANU staff and researchers must also ensure that they are complying with all relevant laws and policies as they apply in the states and territories in which research is conducted. This may require multiple ethical variations in the case of changing regulatory frameworks and advice.

Planning Planning an Ethics Application or Variation

When planning an ethics variation, or a new submission, refer to the ANU COVID-19 ethics advice, and check the COVID-19 news page for updates. For questions related to specific research activities, contact the Research Ethics Team.

As part of restarting face-to-face research, it is a requirement that all relevant COVID-19 related social distancing and hygiene practices are adhered to. Regulatory requirements must also be

met in regards to ethics protocols, and any changes in government restrictions will immediately override any protocols in place around resumed research. Any new work proposed would need to provide a strong argument as to why face-to-face methods are integral to the research as opposed to other approaches, which would minimise in-person interactions.

All researchers looking to resume face-to-face research must develop contingency plans should restrictions tighten again. Careful consideration and planning is required to avoid placing participants at risk for little or no benefit – if the situation changes and data collection methods have to be modified partway through a project, this could potentially render early collection with differing methods unusable. Contingency plans should also allow for immunocompromised individuals to participate, and/or those potential participants who would be uncomfortable with face-to-face methods but would like to be involved.

Variations that cover more than one existing protocol

Consideration may be given to variations that can be applied to more than one protocol in a school or centre. This requires coordinating the development of COVID-19 protocols detailing the changed research processes, with a high level of support and oversight from local area research directors and other senior managers.

General guidance for schools and centres considering a blanket approach to variations is:

1. the need for face-to-face contact would need to be justified - that is, if the research could be carried out using remote means like Zoom/Skype then that should be the first option given that this minimises risks to participants and research staff;

2. if face-to-face techniques are needed, strict protocols need to be developed by the local area that ensure restrictions around gatherings, distancing and hygiene are followed and researchers would need to sign on that these measures would be adopted;

3. all contact details must be retained in case of infection requiring contact tracing, participants must be informed and consent prior to attending in person, where consent cannot be obtained the face-to-face interaction cannot go ahead;

4. research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will not be considered as part of any blanket arrangement; evidence of agreement from the participants that the change is wanted by them must be considered on a case by case basis

Student Projects

Applications from Masters, Honours and HDR candidates must be fully reviewed by the supervisor prior to submission, and must be consistent with the university's communications concerning that student group. An email from the supervisor indicating the review is complete should be uploaded to the documents section of the application in ARIES.

Note that in addition to standard processes, there are specific policies and guidelines that you should consider when writing an ethics application for some research topics and participant groups. Section 4 of the National Statement outlines additional ethical considerations that apply to certain populations. If one of these chapters applies to you, ensure you read it in full and take into consideration the recommendations and requirements when designing or redesigning your research project.

See the following for ethics information on:

- Research into COVID-19
- Human research
    - Restarting face-to-face research
    - Blanket variations
    - Student projects
    - Indigenous research
- Animal research
- Research with genetically modified organisms (GMOs)
    - Information from OGTR
    - Facility information
    - DNIR licence holders
- ARC & NHMRC projects

Resources and Information

Further advice and information regarding the impact of COVID-19 on research activities can be found on the websites listed below. For funds provider-specific information, talk to your College Research Office.

- ARC guidance: Responding to the impact of COVID-19
- NHMRC - COVID-19 impacts
- National COVID-19 Health and Research Advisory Committee report - ethical issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic
- NHMRC - COVID-19: Guidance on clinical trials for institutions, HRECs, researchers and sponsors (PDF, 139.78 KB)
- NSW Health Guidance Document COVID-19 and Clinical Trials 25 Mar 2020 (PDF, 210.69 KB)

Current Travel Advice

The below resources have the latest COVID-19 travel advice and restrictions. Please be aware your funder may have additional requirements – please discuss with your College Research Office.

- ANU Travel Advice
- Smartraveller Updates

- Department of Home Affairs: COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and the Australian Border
- ACT Government Quarantine and Isolation Requirements
- Remote Community Entry Requirements under the Biosecurity Act 2015

Services, Training, Events

- ARIES Human Ethics Training
- Monthly Ethics Drop-in Sessions
- Online Seminar: Evaluating alternatives to in-depth face-to-face interviews
- Research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Human Research Ethics Seminar: Thinking about your participants
- Join the mailing list for updates.

General Resources

- Doing fieldwork in a pandemic - social research methods online (Crowd-sourced Google Document)

III. DIGITAL AND REMOTE FIELDWORK

ANU Advice and resources

- ANU COVID-19 Advice: Funding, Ethics and Regulations
- Ethical Guidelines for Online Research (for further Ethics Guidance see II. Ethics and Research Integrity)
- ANU COVID-19 Response: Research Continuity Checklist
- RegNet: 12 Pro Tips for Digital Interviews and Interactions
- ANU IT: Software Available for Home Use
- Virtual Observatory for the Study of Online Networks (VOSON) Lab - http://vosonlab.net: Open source R tools for collection and analysis of social media network and text data, and associated training.
- MetoDHology: A purpose-built ANU resource that provides free and unlimited access to videos, bibliographies, tutorials, and research-orientated blog posts on digital methodologies.

ANU Technical Support

Fieldwork equipment and editing suites

- MacPro video editing suite with Final Cut Pro 7 and Adobe CS4 Master Collection.
- Scanning edit suite with Epson V700 flatbed/film scanner and Nikon Coolscan 4000ED 35mm slide/negative scanner. Bookings here.

General Resources

- Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research Incorporated (ACSPRI) - https://www.acspri.org.au/: a not-for-profit organisation (ANU is a member) with the aim of promoting and enhancing social science research and methods in Australia, via short courses (currently online) and survey research services.
- Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Guidelines for Ethical Internet Research - https://aoir.org/ethics/
- Sheffield Hallam University: Guide to Remote Research and Research Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research
- Useful sources for online or remote data collection

Webinars:

- Breaking Methods Webinar Series
    - NVIVO: Ethnographic Fieldwork Across Online Spaces
    - NVIVO: When the Field is Online: Qualitative Data Collection
    - NVIVO: COVID19 and Virtual Fieldwork
- Field research in lockdown: revisiting slow science in the time of COVID-19

Scientific exchange:

- Importing specimens for scientific research purposes
- International Chamber of Commerce: COVID-19: Lessons for international research collaboration and information exchange

Community-engaged Research

- Harvard University: Community-Engaged Research 101
- Scripps: Toolbox for conducting community-engaged research
- University of Melbourne: Community Engaged Research – examples of CEnR projects
- Articles of academic-community partnerships in research

Research Resources During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- ANU Library: Publishers offering free access to scholarly materials during COVID-19
- ANU Library services during remote work and study period - Frequently Asked Questions
- ANU Library: E-resources related to COVID-19
- ANU Poll Dataverse
- Public Books Database
- University of Maryland compilation of free publications

IV. RECRUITMENT FOR REMOTE DATA COLLECTION

Restrictions on the ability to travel in person for the purposes of fieldwork may be overcome through collaboration with researchers or collaborators located at the site of the planned fieldwork activities. The ANU has protocols governing the engagement of research and fieldwork assistants, cultural advisors, translators and guides working in-country overseas.

There are four options available for engaging and paying these consultants, depending on the amounts of the payment and the circumstances of each project. ANU policy and procedures, summarised below, must be followed when engaging and paying overseas consultants. Consult your college research office and finance team, as well as Head of School/Director and School Administrator, about which option, is best suited to meet your needs.

In addition to selecting the appropriate contract structure when engaging researchers or collaborators, a second and crucial consideration is the duty of care towards that person. There are important ethical issues you must take into account when making a decision to carry out fieldwork-related activities by working with someone remotely. In reference to international fieldwork, for example, data about COVID-19 infection rates in the location where the data collection occurs may not be available, making it difficult to assess risk. The financial challenges being faced by people in many locations both inside Australia and internationally, could increase the incentive for potential partners to undertake work on your behalf, even if it that work may increase health risks.

Given these issues, it is important that you clearly address risks and how they are managed in your application for ethics approval. The ANU Ethics team are available to provide advice and guidance as required.

Recruitment Options for Fieldwork

- **OPTION 1: Engage a Partner Organisation**

The first option is to engage a partner organisation, such as an overseas university or other research or government entity involved with the project, to employ the personnel necessary for the project. Here, a key requirement is for an agreement to be in place through the ANU Research Contracts Office with the partner organisation. In this case, recruitment and payment processes are governed by the terms of the agreement.

- **OPTION 2: Engage the Service Provider as a Consultant - Cost is Likely to be Greater than $5,000 per Annum**

The second option is to create a contract between the ANU and the consultant, to deliver the agreed-upon services for a fixed price. These contracts are for a result, and not for research at an hourly rate. Given this, the contract needs to clearly state the milestones to be achieved, and have a payment schedule related to the achievement of the milestones.

- **OPTION 3: Engage the Service Provider as a Consultant - Cost is Likely to be Less than $5,000 per Annum**

The third option is to engage a service provider as a consultant, where the cost is likely to be less than $5000 per annum. In this case, a formal agreement is not required, although is still important to ensure the protection of intellectual property, insurance, and other issues. Note that duty of care concerns towards research partners described above remain relevant, even in the absence of such a formal agreement.

- **OPTION 4: In-country Direct Payment Made by the Chief Investigator**

The fourth option may be possible if the Chief Investigator will be overseas carrying out fieldwork and able to hire the necessary staff in country. The Chief Investigator can make an in-country direct payment, which they will need to acquit upon completion of the fieldwork when they return to Australia. This can be suitable for small amounts of money such as cultural guides, and interview/survey payments. It is not an appropriate option for large amounts of money due to risks to personal safety. Note the availability of this option is constrained by university and government guidelines restricting travel internationally.

In this case, an advance is paid into the Chief Investigators bank account which they can convert to the local currency and use to make payments. Payments need to be acquitted. This can be done by taking a receipt book and obtaining signatures from recipients, or keeping a record of payments and making a statutory declaration.

Resources and Information:

- Policy: Individual Contractors
- Procedure: Sole Traders
- Guideline: Payment methods for employees and contractors/sole traders procedure
- Employee versus Contractor Checklist
- Request for Advances

Resources and guides:

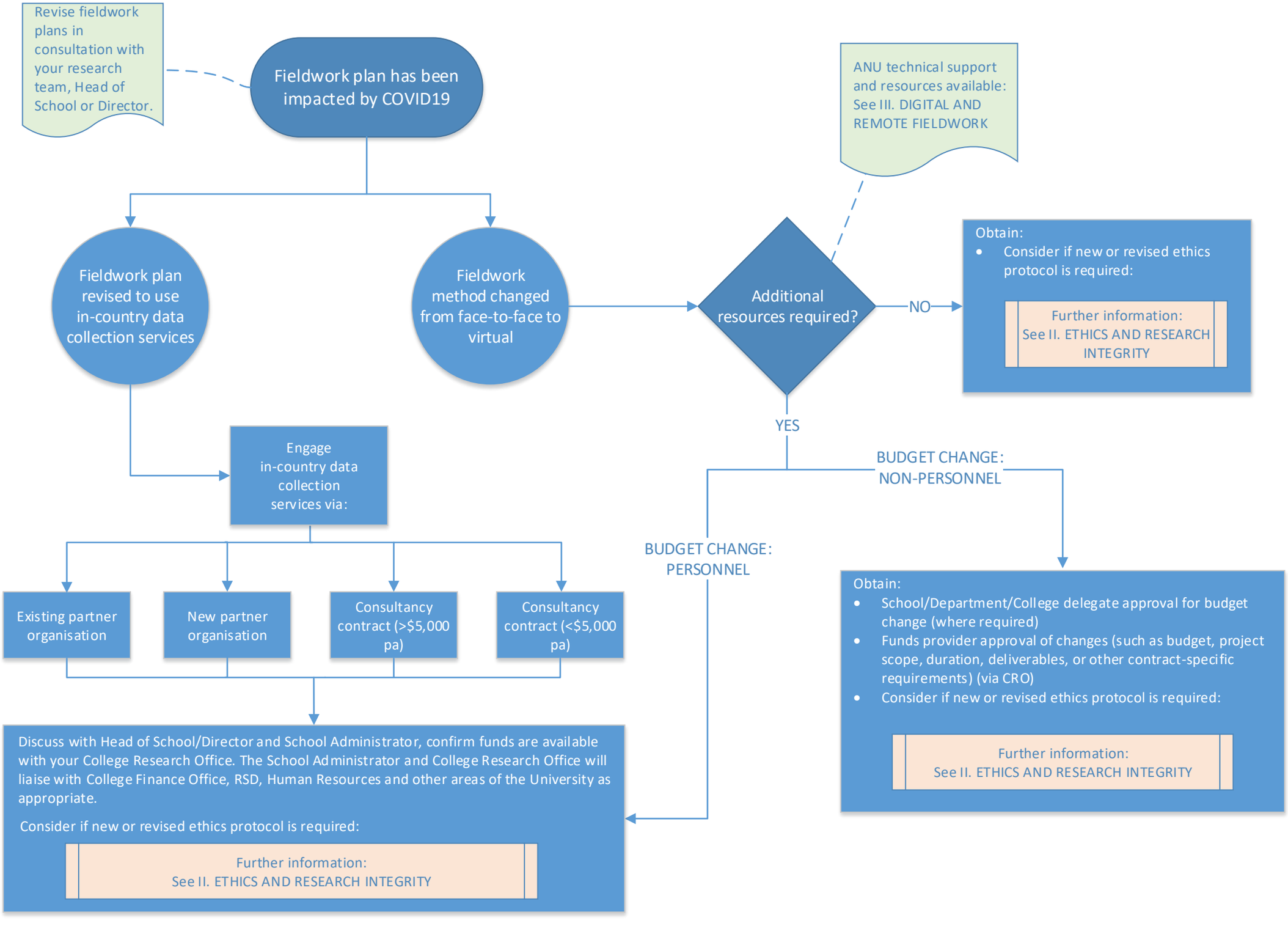
- Sheffield Hallam University: Guide to Remote Research
- ANU Recruit
- ANU Policy: Individual Contractors
- ANU Procedure: Sole Traders
- ANU Policy: Costing and Pricing of Externally Funded Research Projects, University Consultancies and Commercial Services
- ANU Procedure: Costing and pricing of externally funded research projects, University consultancies and commercial services
- ANU Guideline: Payment methods for employees and contractors/sole traders procedure
- ANU Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander employment strategy (link broken)
- ANU Employee versus Contractor Checklist

- ANU Request for Advances

Using country expertise to recruit data collection services:

- ANU experts directory for journalists
- ANU Researchers
- ANU Research Publications

Fieldwork impacted by COVID19 – revision process



Engage remote research data collection services via:

- An agreement with existing partner organisation
- An agreement with a new partner organisation
- Consultancy contract (>$5,000 pa)
- Consultancy contract (<$5,000 pa)

Inform your College Research Office, who will work with you, liaising with College Finance Office, Human Resources, School/Department administrators, ANU Contracts, ANU Legal Office and appropriate delegates to ensure contractual obligations are met or formally varied.

Considerations will include:

- Budget changes (such as hiring in-country consultants, purchasing equipment/ software)
- Changes in timing of project activities or project scope/deliverables
- Additional personnel/organisations
- IP, authorship, confidentiality
- Context-specific legal requirements
- Additional local/College resourcing
- Fellowship/Award/contract-specific restrictions
- Restrictions on supported budget items
- On-cost implications
- Risk assessment and insurance