

NOTE TO RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEES

15th April, 2020

Colleagues

We live in difficult and challenging times, with the COVID-19 lockdown regulations in place, and our university operating under mostly online processes. I trust you are working safely from wherever you are working and that you are 'ethically' obeying the rules!

The research domain of the university needs to continue and we need to play our part. I have been reaching out to colleagues at other universities to see how their Research Ethics Committees (RECs) are functioning. I want to suggest that we implement the following procedures:

1. As per usual, all research from within VUT needs to be scrutinized by a relevant FRIC and approval granted. We cannot compromise on this, as the separation between science and ethics should be maintained as best possible.
2. (We will be developing suggested guidelines for FRICs for the scrutiny of research for Non-Degree Purposes, soon, for their input).
3. Once the FRIC approval is granted to the research project the applicant can then proceed, as usual, to submit all the documentation to the Faculty's research ethics administrator, and/or the Chair, depending on what your FREC finds the most useful.
4. I want to suggest that your FREC sets up the usual meeting schedule for the year, as well as submission deadlines, and circulate these to your relevant FRICs, Research Professors, and Deans. (And please let Deborah know). You may want to dovetail your meetings with the FRIC meetings of your Faculty.

We come now to the tricky part and that is the conducting of the meetings "online". We are attempting to find out how VUT is doing their online meetings, and it appears that Zoom is what many are using. We are pursuing this, and will make suggestions as this arise. But whatever way we go, the paramount concern is CONFIDENTIALITY. (We acknowledge that you are also going to be using your own data, unless there are systems in place for this, and we are trying to find this out. Perhaps it is one way that we can 'give back ethically,' though.)

1. In applications that request or require a waiver, there are no problems, as, in the past, this was done electronically, anyway.
2. In matters that request or require an expedited review, there are some problems but most of this can be done using a kind of "round robin" approach. I would encourage this, but it is important that the agreed upon comments be kept in some way so that they can be reflected in the minutes of the meeting (more on this, below) and of course they will be reflected in the Approval Letter.
3. We come now to the 'virtual meeting' online (let us assume that it is Zoom, for now)
4. The agenda for the meeting should be circulated, as per usual, at least 5 working days before the Zoom conference. Each department's reps should decide who is going to 'attend' the meeting and let the FREC administrator know (or the CREC administrator, for CREC meetings). The agenda should contain the decisions from waiver and expedited review processes.

5. On the day and time allocated, the chair, with the FREC (or CREC – the process will be similar) administrator, ‘invites’ the members to the meeting and the meeting continues.
6. All meetings are audio recorded. At the beginning of the meeting the chair reads the confidentiality agreement to the meeting and then asks each member present to acknowledge, verbally, that he or she will obey the confidentiality agreement. (This verbal declaration is captured in the minutes of the meeting) (One does not have to “raise your right hand and repeat after me . . . So help me G-d” and all that, but it comes down to that!)
7. It is important for each member to decide for themselves whether the environment in which they are ‘attending’ the meeting is safe, confidentiality-wise, from outside engagement.
8. The meeting proceeds as usual. The approval of the previous minutes is signed off on by the chair, with the verbal acknowledgement of the proposer and seconder. (Remember that this is recorded acoustically and saved).
9. The meeting then proceeds as usual. (In the beginning it is a strange situation, but it gets easier as one learns how to work the programme. Zoom has the option of turning the microphone off, and the camera off – the latter is useful for data saving – but I want to strongly recommend that you keep your cameras on.)
10. Zoom has the option of being able to access the documents that are under scrutiny, so I would want to suggest that you have the documents readily available, and that the chair allow time to access the documents where necessary.
11. Here is the major change in normal procedure. I want to recommend that, once the letters to the applicants have been generated, they be circulated to all present at the meeting so that each member can declare, via email, that they agree with the letter. This change comes about because we need to be wary, I think, of the reliability of the technology.
12. Once all have agreed to the letter to the applicant it can be sent out, and, with the application documents, prepared for submission to the CREC.

Colleagues, please let us keep in contact as we try to figure out how all of this works, and where the problem areas are. All suggestions are really welcome – we are in this together.

The COVID-19 regulations and lockdown will also impact greatly on the way that research is going to be conducted and what our research ethics responsibilities and parameters are. Prof Munro and myself are developing some guidelines today which we will share for your input, so that we can get this guidelines to the FRICs and researchers as quickly as possible.

Thank you for your hard work and please stay safe!

Sincerely

Prof Thiri Padayachee (Interim Chair: CREC)

and Prof Allan Munro (Interim Deputy Chair)