

Aberystwyth University

Enabling Fieldwork in Difficult Environments

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The background of the cover is an abstract composition of overlapping circles and numerous small, iridescent bubbles. The color palette transitions from deep purple on the left to bright blue on the right. A large, semi-transparent purple circle is prominent in the upper center, and another large blue circle is on the right. The bubbles are scattered throughout, reflecting light in various colors.

Enabling Fieldwork in Difficult Environments¹

Due to a number of recent high-profile incidents of researchers suffering harassment, arrest, detention and even death while on fieldwork, increased attention has rightly been given to protecting UK-affiliated staff and doctoral researchers when conducting research abroad. While these incidents thankfully remain rare, the risks are real.

But the challenge for UK universities is much broader than protecting their researchers. A more positive framing is that of enabling good fieldwork practice under difficult circumstances.

Especially in fields of the social sciences and humanities – Area Studies, Conflict Studies, Development Studies, etc. – that are unthinkable without fieldwork-based study, heightened risk should not automatically lead to a retreat of researchers from certain areas or topics.

Fieldwork contexts are so diverse that they defy any generic framework of assessment. Travel advisories, political risk databases and standardised ethical procedures are poor instruments at capturing actual fieldwork risks. There are three reasons for this. First, the researcher's duty of care extends beyond their colleagues and themselves to a network of research participants, aides and wider local communities, whose specific context may not fit generic assessment frameworks. Second, practices such as consent forms or working in local-expatriate teams, which limit risk in one context, may increase risk in another. Finally, as risk varies depending on the identity of researchers (including gender, race, citizenship, sexuality, age, experience, religion), one person may be at risk in a given context while another

is not. Given these considerations, fieldwork unavoidably presents a series of questions and dilemmas which must be tackled first and foremost by the fieldworker, supervisor and/or principal investigator. An approach which is standard and universal may appear appropriate to governing bodies, but is not properly responsible, and is bound to lack trust and frustrate rather than enable researchers engaged in fieldwork abroad. A bottom-up approach is both more ethical and more effective.

The university's duty of care for the safety of their students and staff is accompanied by their duty to support academic freedom and ethical research. Academic freedom is a professional right, while good fieldwork practice is a vocational and ethical duty. An excessively top-down and regulatory approach to fieldwork risks eroding academic freedom and prevents the researcher from taking primary responsibility for their research ethics. Therefore, the university's approach to fieldwork support should be based on and tailored to the specific risk in each case rather than command-and-control. This means light-touch, flexible administration and the principle of subsidiarity. The role of the university is to support and resource the work of colleagues, rather than manage fieldwork.

BROADER INSTITUTIONAL MEASURES

In order to assess whether and under what conditions to approve fieldwork, universities should consider the following:

- a. **Ethics committees should seek external advice regarding high-risk projects**, including information on the specific political risks and academic freedom limitations for a given context, subject or participating persons. This should be both internal and external advice, including publicly available data, such as the Academic Freedom Index and SAR's Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, area expertise within, and, if necessary, beyond the institution (e.g. NGOs, private consultants), and all other relevant information which would inform the

adopted risk-mitigating measures.

- b. Risk assessment procedures for travel should be light-touch and fully integrated with ethics processes.** They should direct researchers towards the support networks, insurance provision, training and colloquia mentioned below. In that sense, both ethics and risk assessment are not merely audits but catalysts for action and a resource to support fieldwork.
- c. Supervisors of student and early-career researchers should take professional responsibility for preparing and supporting the fieldwork of their students and staff** in the form of close oversight of fieldwork plans and ethics approval processes. This will require support in the form of mentoring, training and allocating time for this in workload models. The university's role is to ensure that supervisors carry out this professional duty.

SPECIFIC MEASURES

In order to enable fieldwork both before and after approval universities should:

- a. Encourage researchers to create support pairs or networks for their fieldwork**, which in the case of individual projects, may extend beyond their immediate colleagues and institution to experienced fieldworkers in the subject area and region. Check-in procedures with these transnational groups via secure (encrypted) instant messaging may be an effective and appropriate supplement to the usual register-with-the embassy instruction given by ethics committees.
- b. Make available enhanced travel insurance**, including kidnap and ransom insurance which may also cover politically motivated or arbitrary detention by state authorities, to members of the academic community engaging in fieldwork in places where threats to academic freedom have been identified. This insurance process should be integrated

with internal ethics review processes.

- c. Allocate resources for the hardware and software needed for safe fieldwork.** Just as universities have budgets for Open Access to research findings, they should also allocate specific budgets to support open fieldwork, funding the aforementioned activities as well as a fund for laptops, phones, tablets and security software. This may also require developing in-house capacity on digital communication security and data security (e.g. in IT department) and having a focal point for researchers that are worried about surveillance or data theft in relation to fieldwork.
- d. For student and early-career researchers, resource pre-departure training courses and interdisciplinary fieldwork colloquia**, focusing on soft skills and the practice of research, talks by experienced fieldworkers in close subject areas, and discussion of the different understandings and limitations of academic freedom in certain contexts. General training (e.g. HEAT [courses](#), language training, etc.) will also need to be supplemented for specific subjects; the university may need to commit resources for national and international groups including disciplinary associations to develop and undertake such training.²

References

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of academic freedom measures in the context of internationalisation of the UK HE sector, please see AFIWG's [Draft Model Code of Conduct \(2020\)](#).

² This policy primer was authored by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Professor at the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University; John Heathershaw, Associate Professor of International Relations, University of Exeter; and Ilyas Saliba, Research Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi)



About the Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group

[The Academic Freedom and Internationalisation Working Group \(AFIWG\)](#) brings together academics from UK higher education institutions, who are supported by relevant civil society representatives and the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG), to work on the protection of academic freedom and engage in advocacy for members of the academic community at risk across the world. The group began meeting in September 2019, with the aim of highlighting the importance of upholding academic freedom in the context of internationalisation of UK higher education and promoting a collective and organised response by academic communities and HE institutions in the UK.

As supporters of international academic cooperation and academic freedom, the AFIWG has been concerned about growing challenges that members of the academic community face globally in the process of learning, teaching and conducting research, including physical attacks, prosecution, dismissals, censorship and travel restrictions.

Find us on Twitter: [@AcFreeWorldUK](#)

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