Using virtual interviews in your project

With face-to-face data collection off limits while New Zealand is in Covid-19 Alert Level 4, and likely in Alert Level 3, many researchers are planning to pivot their project to conduct interviews/focus groups through virtual means rather than in person. This document lays out some of the considerations that the Human Ethics Committee will apply to applications that propose these methods.

Consent issues

Projects that use face-to-face data collection usually provide information to participants in person and collect hard copy consent forms which are signed by the participant. When video is used, this will have to be reconsidered. HEC members have suggested some options:

- Participants can print the consent form, sign it, scan it and email it back to the researcher.
    - While the most faithful to the hard copy process, and rigorous, this method can be difficult for participants as many people don't have the ability to print at home, and shouldn't have to be excluded from the research for this reason.
    - It's acceptable, but there should be a justification as to why it's necessary.

- Participants can send an email to confirm their consent to participate.
    - They can be provided with the information sheet and consent form via email, and return an email stating they consent.
    - We suggest that the participant could send the email at the start of the session – that way, the researcher has the chance to talk over the information sheet and consent form with them, and they can ask any questions freely, just like they would in a face-to-face interview.
    - An email from a person's address with a clear statement of consent is pretty rigorous.
    - Some people might find it more difficult to use this method – while those comfortable with computers would find it relatively easy to send an email while in a video call, those less comfortable with technology, or possibly using their phone rather than a computer for the call, could find it burdensome.
    - This can be a good way to proceed but researchers should think through carefully how it would work for their specific participant group.
    - A similar option could be assembling a brief 'consent form' as a survey in Qualtrics. This could be good as it would collect participant responses in one place, rather than dealing with multiple emails.

- Researchers can switch to verbal consent processes, which they can record.
    - Generally, we expect researchers to document the consent that they receive – so, record the participant granting verbal consent.
    - Like the above method, it allows researchers to discuss the research face-to-face and answer questions before gaining consent.
    - However, researchers need to be aware of their intentions around deidentification of data. In general, if data is claimed to be deidentified, the consent forms

(identifiable data) should be stored separately from the research contribution. If the participant provides consent during the research recording, this isn't possible.

- To avoid this issue, researchers can specify that they will create two recordings – one with the verbal consent process, and another of the research interview itself. These can then be stored in separate places.

Another aspect that researchers should think through is how to provide koha or hospitality to people who have participated in the research. This might involve posting vouchers, and it should be clear on the application form.

Recording issues

The HEC generally expects that Zoom will be the software used for virtual interviews, as it is supported by the University and available to all staff and students. Research participants should be able to join Zoom meetings once they are provided with a link. We recommend researchers familiarise themselves with the program and the various options before using it live for the first time! See this Zoom help page for recordings: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362473-Local-Recording#h_38beb95a-9273-4aa9-a667-23e73b9cd551

- Type of recording:
    - Because face-to-face interviews are generally audio and not video recorded, the HEC considers it appropriate that interviews conducted virtually are also audio and not video recorded.
    - It is possible to keep audio only in Zoom – under normal circumstances (unless you have changed settings) an audio only file will be produced as well as the video file. The audio file can be saved while the video deleted.
    - Some researchers may to record the call by using a physical voice recorder in the room that they are in.

- Storage of recordings:
    - Zoom allows you to select where you want to save your recording when you click the 'record' button – either the cloud or local computer.
    - In line with what we would expect of researchers recording face-to-face interviews, we would expect researchers to save locally/to the university drive.

Privacy and security

- In person privacy:
    - As part of your amendment the HEC will consider whether there is any harm posed by the research to your participants, including whether they might be under additional emotional stress at this time.
    - One thing you will need to consider, particularly for some kinds of sensitive topics or vulnerable participant groups, is whether participants are able to keep their participation in the research confidential from the other people they might be living/isolating with at this time, and whether this lack of privacy could place them at risk of harm.

- Online security:
  - You may want to consider password protecting the meeting you have set up for your research so that other uninvited guests can't attend. This is called 'zoom bombing' and it is mainly a problem for large events, but for added security password protection is something you may want to explore. See the help page -- https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360033559832-Meeting-and-Webinar-Passwords-
  - There are other kinds of protections offered by Zoom's settings, more on which can be found here: https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/03/20/keep-uninvited-guests-out-of-your-zoom-event/