

## COVID-19 Protocols

# Guide for Return to Research During COVID-19 Restrictions



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## Background

On March 22, 2020, Nova Scotia declared a Provincial State of Emergency to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus (<http://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/alerts-notices/>). In anticipation of this action, Acadia ceased in-class teaching delivery on March 13 and, on March 20, suspended research activities in labs and research spaces (including field stations) and all research travel and fieldwork. A small number of exemptions have been made for critical COVID-19 Task Force support activities, animal care and equipment maintenance needs, and critical time-sensitive research activities that could be carried out while respecting public health provisions in place.

With the relaxing of provincial State of Emergency restrictions, Acadia is allowing a return to essential on-campus research, fieldwork, and in-person interactions with research participants. This guidance document has been established to provide governing principles, research activity priorities, and a process for receiving and reviewing requests to resume research efforts, both on-campus and in the field. The procedures outlined here are designed to be sufficiently general that they can be followed throughout the coming weeks and months, within the expected stages of reducing COVID-19 restrictions in the province.

## Governing Principles

Acadia's top priority remains to ensure the health and safety of students, staff, faculty, research participants, collaborators, and the broader community. We are asking that researchers respect all public health requirements that remain in place within Nova Scotia.

**Research that can be carried out remotely should continue in this manner wherever possible. Researchers who need to commence or re-start essential on-campus or in-field research activities, or face-to-face physical interactions with research participants, must apply for approval using this guide and the *Application to Resume Research* form.**

Acadia will strive to enable as much research activity as possible. While this guide provides the framework for attaining approval to resume certain research activities, it may be necessary to re-impose restrictions on research once again should the situation require this.

Permission to resume research will be granted through the **Request-Review-Approval Process** outlined in this guidance document, and will be based on the following **Governing Principles**:

1. Any approved research activities must protect the physical, mental, and emotional health and safety of our students, staff, faculty, research participants and collaborators.
  - a. Researchers – faculty, students, and staff – must not feel compelled to work on campus or in the field during this period of restricted activities.
  - b. Research faculty with industry and/or community partners must ensure that their external research partners do not feel compelled to take part in research activities.
  - c. Any researcher who feels uncomfortable about a return to on-campus or field research activity, or in-person interactions with research participants, can confidentially report their concerns to the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies.
2. Any approved research activities must adhere to all public health directives from the Province of Nova Scotia's Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMOH) with respect to actions required to limit the spread of COVID-19.
  - a. The details of these directives will change over time, with a planned gradual, staged easing of restrictions according to specified criteria to be established by the province.
  - b. NS public health directives are outlined at these websites:
    - <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/>
    - <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/working-during-covid-19/>
    - <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/outdoor-activities/>
  - c. As provincial guidelines change during the various stages, researchers will be expected to adapt to the current requirement at any given time similarly.

- d. For fieldwork taking place out-of-province, measures must be taken to ensure that all personnel comply with relevant public health directives.
3. Any approved research activities must adhere to Acadia University plans and guidelines, including those related to daily self-health assessments, campus access, building and facility use, travel, and fieldwork. Considerations include but are not limited to:
    - a. Directives associated with access and use of buildings, elevators, stairwells, offices, laboratories, and other facilities.
    - b. Traffic flow, physical distancing, hand washing, and use of PPE.
    - c. Appropriate disinfecting of surfaces in general use areas and in offices and laboratories/facilities.
    - d. Occupational health and safety protocols for working alone in buildings and laboratories/facilities.
    - e. Occupational health and safety protocols for travel and fieldwork activities.
  4. A prioritized and coordinated approach will be undertaken in approving on-campus research and will consider broader efforts and plans, including
    - a. Acadia's Reopening Plan: Campus Guidelines.
    - b. Acadia's Employee Return to Campus Plan.
    - c. Safety guidelines in place for buildings, laboratories, and other research facilities.
  5. Priority for the return to research activities that cannot be done remotely will be placed on graduate students, early career researchers, and disproportionately affected researchers in accordance with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles, noting that
    - a. Disruptions to research have had significant effects on many full-time, research-based graduate students.
    - b. Postdoctoral researchers and un-tenured faculty members will experience the greatest long-term career impacts.
    - c. Women, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour may have more significant burdens of care and less access to resources during this time.
  6. Efforts should continually strive to enable as much research activity as possible while respecting the directives of the CMOH, and understanding the potential to return to stricter limits should the situation require.

## Research Priorities

In association with the above Governing Principles, the following Priorities will be considered for the *initial phase* of resumption of research activities:

1. Research related directly to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Research for which data would be unduly difficult to replace or reproduce if the research activity is not able to be resumed as soon as it can be allowed. This includes access to equipment, time-sensitive research continuity and/or seasonal activities that cannot be paused for ongoing extended periods due to the potential of losing or disrupting sample protocols, data sequences, etc.
3. Research activity that cannot be adapted or carried out remotely, and which involves external partners (e.g. industry, government agencies) or funding bodies that have not indicated flexibility under the COVID-19 circumstances.
4. Research that is directly related to a student's program of study (senior undergraduate, postgraduate) for which a delay or disruption will cause a high probability of incompleteness or personal hardship.
5. Research undertaken by postdoctoral fellows and early-career faculty researchers.
6. Research undertaken by disproportionately affected researchers in accordance with EDI principles.
7. Research and fieldwork that can be undertaken in isolation and/or require a minimum of interaction with other individuals, and which respects the need for physical distancing.
8. Research that has significant economic development implications and/or provides direct support for essential businesses.

Research activities that do not fall into any of these priority areas will be considered collectively as the next equal-level priority.

## Request-Review-Approval Process

All researchers proposing to commence or re-start research through access to on-campus facilities, fieldwork, or face-to-face activities will be required to prepare an *Application to Resume Research* (see application form).

Applications are to be submitted by email to the Dean of Research & Graduate Studies (anna.redden@acadiau.ca). Details of what should be included in the form are outlined below.

Submissions shall be reviewed by a **Return-to-Research Review Committee** comprised of the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, one or more Faculty Deans, and at least one faculty member with relevant experience. The Committee may consult with the Executive Director of Facilities, the Director of Safety & Security, the Occupational Health and Safety Coordinator, Heads or Directors, and others, as needed. Proposals will be reviewed following the guidance of the Governing Principles, and according to the listed Priorities, both described above. In some cases, additional safe work practices beyond those identified in the application may need to be developed.

The Review Committee will conduct reviews of complete applications as soon as possible (generally within seven days of submission) and will forward recommendations to the Provost & Vice-President Academic, who will render final decisions.

## Application to Resume Research

Applications for resuming research activities that require access to on-campus facilities, fieldwork, or the engagement of face-to-face physical interactions with research participants, are to be prepared and submitted by the lead researcher(s).

Applications must include the following components:

1. A **list of personnel**, including the lead faculty researcher(s) submitting the application, and all research team members to be involved in the research activities. Include each individual's position at Acadia (faculty, graduate or undergraduate student, postdoctoral research fellow, research assistant, etc.) and their research role(s) or primary activities.

Confirmation of consent to the activities of all participants is required.

2. A **description** of the requested research activities. The description, while brief, must:
  - a. succinctly outline the nature of the research to be undertaken.
  - b. indicate funding sources (internal and/or external) for the project.
  - c. be clear in the reasons why it cannot be done remotely (e.g. requires access to campus, requires access to field sites, or requires face-to-face physical interactions with research participants).
  - d. be clear in how the research connects to one or more of the listed Priorities.
3. A list of the **sources of internal and/or external funding** for the proposed activities.
4. A brief **rationale** for research activities being deemed "essential" and the consequences or impact of the delayed activity.
5. A **safety plan** outlining how the proposed research activities will be conducted in a manner that complies with all provincial CMOH directives (noting that these may change), and with Acadia's campus and building/facility guidelines.

**Updates** to any approved research and safety plan should be added to the original application (Updates section) and submitted for review and approval. Note that changes in the provincial CMOH requirements or Acadia's guidelines may necessitate the submission of updated plans for previously approved activities.

Acadia University has high expectations for how research activities will be conducted to comply with COVID-19 safety requirements (e.g. minimizing the number of people in shared space, requiring/maintaining physical distancing requirements, enhanced cleaning protocols). Researchers must remain prepared to modify, scale back, or suspend approved research activities should external conditions require (e.g. re-introduction of stringent restrictions put in place by the province), or if provisions to protect public health are not being met.

When preparing research and safety plans during COVID-19 restrictions, researchers should consider how the proposed research will be conducted while meeting all key public health obligations. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Outlining work protocols that allow physical distancing between researchers and/or participants, and minimizes the number of people in a lab/room at any time (this may necessitate, for example, having research team members work in alternate shifts to avoid being together in a lab/room).
- Ensuring all individuals conducting research are comfortable with the plan and have formally consented to the activities and all safety protocols and related training.
- For on-campus work, a listing of the building(s)/room(s) and dates for which access is required. Principal researchers must ensure that all members of the team document their use of facilities.
- Demonstrating how all reasonable measures will be taken to ensure minimal interaction of people within two metres of each other, including limiting the number of persons who travel in a single vehicle for field activities to two. Exceptions may be made for individuals living in the same house/apartment.
- Discussing if, or under what circumstances, masks or other PPE for COVID-19 purposes are planned to be utilized, and if currently available.
- Implementing cleaning and/or disinfecting protocols in research workspaces.
- Limiting in-person interactions with others at Acadia as much as possible and limiting interactions with the general public to essential businesses (e.g. gas stations).
- Taking every reasonable step required to prevent persons from entering workplaces (including vehicles) who have travelled outside Atlantic Canada in the previous 14 days.
- Demonstrating, for field research taking place out-of-province (after such time that restrictions on such domestic travel has been lifted), how measures will be taken to ensure that all researchers comply with public health directives to quarantine (self-isolate) for 14 days.

- Preventing unnecessary gatherings of persons involved in the proposed research activities.
- Demonstrating how every reasonable step will be taken to prevent persons who exhibit symptoms of COVID-19 from entering the workplace or vehicles for field activities.
- Public Health provides criteria for when people should be tested for COVID-19. All students, faculty, and staff are asked to perform a daily self-assessment based on the <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/symptoms-and-testing/>. Follow <https://covid-self-assessment.novascotia.ca/en> online if you feel you have symptoms related to COVID-19, and follow the instructions you are given. If the Internet is unavailable, you can still call 811 to be assessed by a nurse. Information for the public has been posted online at <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/>. If you are a student and told to isolate by 811 and have a COVID-19 test performed, stay in your room and call Safety and Security to activate your resources and meal delivery. If transportation is required to the test site, a list of local companies specializing in transporting quarantined (self-isolated) individuals can be provided at this time. If you are faculty or staff, notify your immediate supervisor that you will not physically be on campus until you have a negative COVID-19 test. If you are feeling well enough, you can continue to teach virtually, otherwise you can discuss alternatives with your supervisor at this time.

It is recommended that researchers review the Workers Compensation Board of Nova Scotia website for information regarding keeping workplaces safe, and guidance on items that may be helpful in developing the proposed research plan; see <http://www.worksafeforlife.ca/COVID19>.

Researchers must also ensure that any required training (e.g. WHMIS), permits and approvals (e.g. Animal Care Committee, Research Ethics Board) are obtained **before** the start of research activity.