

Dissertation Risk Assessments Guidance

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THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
School of GeoSciences

Undergraduate and taught M.Sc. Students are expected to undertake independent research in support of their dissertations. For many students this may be the first experience of conducting self-directed research and could involve fieldwork in the UK and abroad.

The University of Edinburgh and the School of GeoSciences have a legal duty of care towards its students to ensure that, so far as is reasonably practicable, they are not exposed to risks to their health and safety in the course of their studies. That is not to say that all risk should be eliminated as this is clearly not possible, rather that the risks taken should be well considered and mitigated so far as is reasonably practicable.

In addition, students undertaking research projects have a duty to look after the health and safety of themselves and anyone else affected by their project as this is often outwith the control of the University. Cooperation between the Student, Supervisor and the School is required to safeguard all those involved in, or affected by dissertation research projects.

The underlying principles of health and safety are common with the good planning and consideration that are inherent to all successful endeavours. Furthermore, the University of Edinburgh has Public Liability and Travel Insurances in place to cover all authorised work performed on behalf of the University. This cover is extended, free of charge for most common locations, to all staff and students who have completed an adequate risk assessment of their work which has been authorised by their School and notified to the Insurance Office. Note: A small additional premium may be payable for more hazardous locations.

As such, it can be seen that, in addition to the legal duty, there is a significant benefit to be derived from engaging in the process of risk assessment.

Dissertation work falls into the following categories:

1. Desk-based research
2. Laboratory-based research
3. Fieldwork

1 Desk Based Research

Long periods in front of a computer can give rise to aches and pains from poor posture and repetitive movements. If your research involves long periods of computer use, you should consult the Workstation Risk Assessment Form provided by the Central Health and Safety Department for advice - <http://www.docs.csg.ed.ac.uk/Safety/ra/DSE.pdf>

Further advice, if required, is available from the School Health and Safety Manager however, the University Facilities generally conform to UK Health and Safety Requirements and the use of home computers and laptops by students are explicitly not the responsibility of the University although the Health and Safety Manager is happy to advise if required.

2 Laboratory Based Research

Laboratory based research will be covered by risk assessments covering the use of hazardous chemicals and specialist equipment. In this case, you should complete the appropriate risk assessments in cooperation with your dissertation Supervisors. Procedure specific training must also be given to students by a competent person.

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Please note: No lone working by taught undergraduates or M.Sc. students is permitted within University laboratory facilities. Appropriate supervision arrangements must be in place commensurate with the risk of the processes being undertaken. This may take the form of an appropriate individual being available in the area for lower risk activities or a member of staff or a PhD Student with appropriate experience being in the laboratory at all times for more hazardous work.

Risk assessment forms for laboratory work are available on the University Health and Safety Department web site: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/health-safety/risk-assessments-checklists/risk-assessments>

3 Fieldwork

Fieldwork includes everything from interviews with professionals and politicians in corporate offices to expeditions to remote areas where help could be hours or days away. In the case of fieldwork, it is worth spending the time to ensure that your field trip is well planned and that you have considered the risks to your health and safety while undertaking the fieldwork. Special attention must be paid to Personal Safety and Lone Working when undertaking the risk assessment.

Once this is complete and authorised by your Supervisor and the School Health and Safety Manager, you will be able to access the University Travel Insurance free of charge. Please note that, even if you have personal travel insurance, you should take out the University Insurance as this has minimal exclusions and worldwide cover for business use which is normally excluded from personal insurances.

The School Health and Safety Manager delivers short courses on Fieldwork planning and Risk Assessment. You should endeavour to attend one of these sessions if you are likely to undertake fieldwork. Details of such courses can be obtained from your Degree Programme Secretary. In addition, if you have any specific queries regarding your field location, the Health and Safety Manager can be consulted for case by case advice if required.

The Travel and Fieldwork Risk Assessment Forms are available on the School Health and Safety Intranet. The flowchart will guide you to the correct form:

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/geosciences/intranet/safety/travelandfieldwork>

Obtaining Authorisation

Once you have assessed the risks presented by your project, you should review the forms with your Supervisor and fill in the Dissertation Safety Declaration Form for submission to the School Health and Safety Manager as evidence of the review.

Should there be any queries relating to your forms such as obvious omissions or amendments you will be contacted directly. Only once such queries are resolved and the forms are countersigned by the School Health and Safety Manager will you be given final authorisation to proceed with your research. Once received, you will be able to apply for University Insurance if you are travelling abroad.

Students who proceed with their fieldwork without an authorised risk assessment are doing so without the authorisation of the School and will not be covered by the University Insurance.