

Policy Name: Lone Researcher Guidelines

Policy Title:	Lone Researcher Guidelines
Description:	In this policy, Marino Institute of Education recognises its responsibility to ensure that reasonable preventative measures are in place to safeguard the health and safety of all employees, students and visitors.
Author (Position):	Director of Research
Version:	1.1
Approved By:	MIE Governing Body
Policy Approval Date:	June 2023
Date of Next Policy Review:	June 2027 (or as necessary)

Lone Researcher Guidelines

1. Context

The following document provides guidelines for researchers (staff and students) who are working alone or in small teams. They are intended to provide guidance to researchers ‘in the field’, irrespective of whether they are working on independent research projects or externally funded ones.

The onus is on you, the researcher, to ensure that a colleague is aware of the details of your visit and has agreed to monitor during the visit and when the visit is completed. Ensure that your nominated colleague is available by phone and contactable by you for the duration of your visit. Researchers should follow these guidelines and to use their professional judgement and common sense at all times.

2. Purpose

In its lone worker policy, Marino Institute of Education (MIE) recognises its responsibility to ensure that reasonable preventative measures are in place to safeguard the health and safety of all employees, students and visitors¹. The policy emphasises the task of line managers and supervisors to enact proper procedures in line with a risk assessment of the nature of the lone working under consideration. The purpose of this paper is to suggest appropriate procedures for research staff and research students where instances of lone working may occur. Your own personal responsibilities and a risk assessment will need to be considered as any policy or guidance can only outline the issues and potential solutions. In all lone working situations, do consider your own personal safety.

The key risk in lone working, whether that is in people’s homes or undertaking natural environment sampling, is that there is potentially no one to help you should you get into trouble. The keyways to mitigate against the risks of lone working are:

- Design the research to minimise lone working by working in small teams (though this is not always possible or indeed desirable for some types of research).
- Have a plan of activities, share that plan with a key contact (co-workers, members of the research team, partners etc.) and have a clear escalation route should you not be heard from within a certain time frame.

¹ See [Safety Statement Policy](#)

- Try and conduct the research in public spaces. Although the risk of something untoward happening may be the same, there will be people to help if anything does happen.
- Be contactable: Carry a fully charged mobile.
- Be prepared and be mindful. Look out for potential risks, continuously assess them, and have a plan to deal with them or extricate yourself from any potential danger.

The above guidance applies equally to a researcher working in the field and to a researcher conducting ethnographic interviews in people's homes. Risks are rarely so severe that they prevent or curtail research activities from taking place but good preparation is key.

3. Principles

- Maintain a schedule of visits as well as a personal diary recording fieldwork. If you are a student, provide your supervisor with this schedule in advance of site visits. For members of staff, ensure a colleague knows where you are working.
- Talk through how to conduct home visits with your research supervisor (for students) or a more experienced member of staff (for academics). Ask a colleague to accompany you if you feel at all uneasy about conducting a home visit on your own.
- Obtain information about where you are visiting before the visit. For instance, ask how many people will be at the visit and where you can park your car/find the nearest public transport.
- If awkward or potentially threatening situation arises, this should be reported to the Head of Department as soon as possible. On return from the visit, provide all relevant information, e.g. if you felt at risk or if there was an incident. This should be formally recorded and reviewed with the Head of Department to ensure appropriate follow-up action is taken and to minimise any risk in subsequent visits.
- Make (and keep) pre-arranged appointments. Notify the participant if you cannot keep them. Share this schedule with your supervisor/a colleague.
- Consider the purpose of the visit. Does it pose a higher than usual potential of bringing about a dangerous response e.g. an interview in connection with emotional matters? If so, consider asking a colleague to accompany you or arrange to interview the person in a public place such as a coffee shop.

- If, for any reason, you are concerned for your personal safety² once you arrive at your appointment venue, then do simply cancel your appointment and leave the research site. On return to the office, make alternative arrangements – for instance having a member of staff experienced in working on their own accompany you.

4. General Guidelines

- Ensure that you have your mobile phone with you at all times. Make sure it is fully charged when you are doing fieldwork.
- Save relevant security and emergency numbers in your phone.
- Alert a named colleague when your work involves you working alone, in vulnerable situations or undertaking home visits, so that an effective process is put in place to ensure your safety.
- When conducting research away from the Institute, carry your identity card (with photograph).
- Ensure you have a map of the area you are working in, plan your route in advance.
- Avoid travelling by foot if feeling vulnerable. Use public transport, private car or travel by registered taxi.
- Let research participants know that you have a schedule and that others know where you are. This may involve arranging for a colleague or taxi to collect you, or arranging for someone to call you at a designated time.
- Assess the layout and the quickest way out of a research site. If interviewing in a private dwelling, stay in the communal rooms.

4.1 When using your own Car for Travel

- With your nominated colleague share the make, model, colour and registration of the car you will be driving and the route you will be taking.
- Ensure you have adequate breakdown service.
- Ensure that car users have the appropriate level of insurance cover.
- Drivers should travel with doors locked and windows closed. If windows are open, handbags and briefcases should be kept out of sight.
- At night, the car should be parked in a well-lit and busy place. Multi-storey parks, or car parks where the car and the user will not be easily visible, should be avoided.

² See [Safety Statement Policy](#)

- If a driver thinks they are being followed, they should keep driving until they reach a busy area - Garda station or a garage, etc.
- Staff should avoid taking research participants as passengers.

4.2 During a Home Visit

- Your safety is the primary concern, which should be placed above completion of research tasks³.
- Do not enter someone's home if you don't feel comfortable or safe. If you feel uncomfortable while in a person's home, you should take steps to leave immediately.
- Do not enter a house if the person you have arranged to see is not there. Be aware of, and maintain, personal safety at all times during visits.
- Always explain your research role clearly and the conditions of confidentiality.
- If the participant is anxious, consider encouraging them to have a friend within sight/hearing.
- When visiting people's homes, try to let them lead the way. Avoid being the first to go into any room.
- You should always make sure that the exit from the room is clear.
- Do not give your personal telephone number or address to clients.
- You should not interview anyone who is under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- A professional and friendly attitude should be adopted but over-familiarity must be avoided.
- Remember that the interviewee may also feel anxious about the interview and your visit. You should bear this in mind whilst also ensuring your own safety.
- Be alert for signs of threatening behaviour and danger, e.g. raised voice, rapid speech and babbling indicate rising tension; Changes in voice or body language as the conversation progresses may suggest anger, frustration or impending violent behaviour.

4.3 Fieldwork

If fieldwork is to be undertaken alone, the researcher and supervisor should apply the procedures described below and those in the Health and Safety policy³. A risk assessment should be undertaken, and particular attention should be given to the researcher's own

³ See [Safety Statement Policy](#) and [Good Research Practice Policy](#)

health needs, and to issues of communication and security. Finally, the implications of [Data Protection Legislation, 2018](#) for the recording of health information should be taken into account⁴. All health details should be stored securely, (e.g. in a locked cabinet or on a password protected computer), should be shared only with those who need to know, and should be destroyed when no longer required. Once the researcher is ready to conduct fieldwork, the following procedures should be adopted:

1. The researcher should leave with the nominated contact (usually line manager) details such as; written summary, map, expected duration of the fieldwork, nominated contact person and phone number, of the proposed field area to be visited. For research students the nominated contact would be the main supervisor. They should also leave with the administrator/nominated contact a mobile phone number on which they can be contacted and the contact details of a family member who can be contacted in case of emergency.
2. The researcher should phone the administrator/nominated contact within one hour of the end of the proposed duration of the fieldwork (or a nominated contact number if the fieldwork goes beyond office hours).
3. If the researcher does not phone, the administrator or nominated contact (whichever is appropriate) will ring the researcher to check (where appropriate).
4. If the researcher is conducting fieldwork abroad, then working alone and remote from colleagues is to be discouraged as far as possible. Where it is not practicable to avoid it, lone working should only be sanctioned after a thorough assessment of the risks has been carried out. A safe system of work should be devised.
5. A lone researcher should keep others involved in and fully informed of the details of each journey and of the planned research programme. It is critical that a nominated contact person is appointed who can act upon any failure to make contact.
6. Emergency plans should be devised and these should be initiated should the worker fail to keep to the agreed schedule⁵. An effective means of communication should be available.

⁴ See [Data Protection Policy](#)

⁵ See [Fire Evacuation Procedure](#)

7. Communication should be maintained on a planned basis and appropriate action taken by the responsible contact person in the event of a failure to establish contact by the researcher.

5. Related Documents

- 5.1 [Safety Statement Policy](#)
- 5.2 [Good Research Practice Policy](#)
- 5.3 [Data Protection Policy](#)
- 5.4 [Fire Evacuation Procedure](#)