



ST. FRANCIS XAVIER
UNIVERSITY

Return to Research.

Framework for Restarting On-Campus
Research & Fieldwork

Background

On March 20, 2020, StFX suspended on-campus research and scholarly activities in labs and research spaces across campus due to the COVID-19 health crisis. Additionally, all research fieldwork was suspended and any research requiring face-to-face (in-person) interactions (e.g., surveys or focus groups with research participants) was deferred or required to be carried out remotely using tele-/video-conferencing tools. These actions have been informed by the Province of Nova Scotia, which declared a State of Emergency on March 22, 2020, to help contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus: (<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/alerts-notice/>).

A small number of exceptions to these restrictions have been made for COVID-19 related research or particularly time sensitive research activities that can be carried out while respecting public health provisions in place. This Framework serves as a guide and establishes a process for receiving and reviewing requests to re-start or initiate research efforts at StFX. It provides for a gradual approach to be implemented in line with gradual lifting of activity restrictions in Nova Scotia. The approach and process outlined here is designed to be sufficiently general that it can be followed throughout the coming months, in tandem with the expected easing of restrictions announced by the Province of Nova Scotia and the Provincial Chief Medical Officer of Health.

Guiding Principles

As an over-riding principle, for the immediate future, any research that can be carried out remotely should continue in this manner wherever possible. Researchers must follow this guide to request access to on-campus research spaces, restart fieldwork, or begin face-to-face interactions with research participants as allowed under public health directives. Our top priority remains ensuring the health and safety of StFX students, staff, faculty, research participants, and collaborators, as well as the broader community we are part of.

We will strive to enable as much research activity as possible, while respecting the necessary limits required by the evolving COVID-19 situation in Nova Scotia and understanding the potential need to re-impose tighter restrictions if required. We will also ensure that the process for approving restarting of on-campus research activity, fieldwork and face-to-face interactions with research participants is informed, fair, reasonable and transparent.

Given the restrictions currently in place by the province, which are expected to be loosened very gradually, permission to resume any on-campus or field research activity will only be granted through the approval process outlined in this Framework. For all applications to restart or initiate research, the principles which will guide decisions regarding resumption of research activities are as follows:

- 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 – including students and staff – must not feel compelled to work on campus or in the field during this period of restricted activities if they feel it presents risks to their health and safety.
 - b. Research involving, or partnering with, community members must be conducted in a manner to ensure these people similarly do not feel compelled to be part of the research; vulnerable communities should not be involved during a time of risk.

- Any approved research activities must adhere to all relevant public health directives from the Province of Nova Scotia's Chief Medical Officer of Health 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. As Provincial guidelines change during the various stages, researchers will be expected to similarly adapt to the current requirement at any given time.
 - c. NS public health directives are outlined at these websites:
<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/>
<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/working-during-covid-19/>

- As a principle, StFX will use a prioritized and coordinated approach to approving research activities under this Framework. Priorities are outlined in the following section. The restarting of research activities will be coordinated with broader efforts and protocols aimed at allowing increased faculty, staff, student and community access to campus facilities.

- Routine daily screening has been mandated by the University for all individuals working on campus. All faculty, staff, and students must continue to complete the self-screening assessment for symptoms daily before coming to campus or undertaking fieldwork. Individuals who have symptoms such as a cold, flu, coughing or sneezing are not permitted onto campus. Any researcher must be sent home should they start experiencing symptoms of COVID-19; if any researcher shows one or more symptoms of COVID-19, all research activities should stop immediately and medical help sought for the affected individual(s) – within Nova Scotia, call 811 for further assessment (<https://when-to-call-about-covid19.novascotia.ca/en>).

- Research activities must adhere to all relevant University policies in relation to buildings, facility access and fieldwork. These include:
 - a. Required use of building and facility sign in/out registers or directives posted within buildings (e.g. directions for flow of movement) if applicable.
 - b. Ensuring appropriate cleaning of surfaces touched within laboratory workspaces. This is the responsibility of the researcher(s), not the custodians.
 - c. Occupational health and safety protocols for individuals working alone in labs and other facilities.
 - d. Occupational health and safety protocols for fieldwork activities.

- All approved researchers will be required to receive and review a brief COVID-19 related safety training document prior to recommencing or initiating on-campus research or fieldwork.

Priorities

The need to set priorities for access to campus research facilities in the near term is driven by the need to respect physical distancing measures (minimizing the numbers of individuals in close proximity to each other), the need to have sufficient custodial staff to cover required cleaning efforts in campus facilities etc. It is also necessary to take into consideration various building requirements and limitations (i.e. it may not be possible to let everyone who wants to do research into one building, or within specific laboratories if there are physical space limitations or it creates situations where individuals are forced into close contact etc.). Therefore, it may be the case that not all research activities, particularly those that need to happen on campus or in campus laboratories, will immediately be permitted. The Director of Risk Management and the Occupational Health and Safety Officer will be available to consult with researchers on specific scenarios and advise appropriately. Listed below are the priorities that will be considered in order of relative importance for resumption of research activities on campus or in the field:

1. Research related directly to the COVID-19 pandemic;

2. Research that is directly related to a student's program of study for which delay or disruption will cause high probability of incompleteness or personal hardship;

3. Time-sensitive research continuity activities that cannot be paused for a number of months due to the potential of losing or disrupting sample protocols, data sequences etc.;

4. Research and fieldwork that can be undertaken in isolation, which requires a minimum of interaction with other individuals, and research activity that cannot be adapted or carried out remotely;

5. Research undertaken by faculty members experiencing significant burdens of care and less access to resources in line with equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) considerations;
6. Research undertaken by postdoctoral fellows and tenure-track faculty members;
7. Research which involves external partners or funding bodies that have not indicated flexibility under the COVID-19 circumstances; and
8. Research which has an end dates that is within 12-months of the request being made.

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

Process

All researchers proposing to re-start or initiate research through access to on-campus facilities, fieldwork, or face-to face activities will be required to prepare an Application to Resume Research. Details of what should be included in the Application are outlined below.

Applications will be accepted and reviewed weekly. Applications received by the end of business each Monday will be reviewed that week, with the goal of decisions being made and communicated before the end of same week. The review process will take into account previous decisions and the cumulative impacts of proposed research activities (particularly with respect to use of indoor campus spaces).

All applications will require a brief plan (outlining proposed activities, participating team members etc.) and will be reviewed weekly by a committee comprised of the Associate Vice President, Research and Graduate Studies and the four faculty Deans together with the Director of Risk Management. Recommendations will be made to the Academic Vice President and Provost for approval. Applications to resume or initiate research can be prepared on behalf of a single faculty researcher, or a research team comprised of a faculty researcher and any students or staff involved in related research activities. A proposed template that may be used for applications is appended to this framework. The Director of Risk Management and the Occupational Health and Safety Officer can be consulted on short notice for specific input on the development of plans, particularly where research efforts may require close proximity work by two or more individuals.

Applications must include the following components:

- A list of the primary faculty researcher(s) submitting the application, and all research team members to be involved in the research activities; include each individual's position at StFX (faculty, graduate or undergraduate student, postdoctoral research fellow, research assistant etc.).

- A brief description of the requested research activities to be resumed or initiated. The description, while brief, must:
 - a. be sufficient to outline the nature of the research to be undertaken;
 - b. be clear in the reasons why it cannot be done remotely (that is, that it either requires access to campus, or be done in the field, or require physical face-to-face interactions with research participants);
 - c. be clear in how the research connects to one or more of the listed priorities; and
 - d. outline how the proposed research is aligned with the governing principles of this framework.

- A Plan outlining how the proposed research activities will be conducted in a manner that complies with all provincial COVID-19 requirements as directed by the Chief Medical Officer of Health for the Province of NS (please note: these requirements will likely change with time; significant changes may necessitate resubmission of updated Plans for previously approved research activities). The Plan should also include a discussion of how the approved activity could be relatively quickly paused/stopped if the Province of NS were to increase restrictions due to COVID-19 back to a level to require re-suspending previously approved activities.

StFX shall set high expectations for these Plans of how research activities will be conducted to comply with COVID-19 related safety requirements (e.g. minimizing the number of people in shared spaces, meeting physical distancing requirements, undertaking enhanced cleaning protocols wherever necessary, use of masks or other personal protective equipment (PPE) when necessary etc.). Researchers must be prepared to modify, scale back, or suspend any 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 their Plans, researchers should consider how the proposed research (either on-campus, or in the field) 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 need of being together in a lab/room);

- Demonstrating how all reasonable measures will be taken to ensure minimal interaction of people within two metres of each other, including at field sites and limiting number of persons who travel in a single field vehicle to one;
- Discussing if, or under what circumstances, masks or other PPE for COVID-19 purposes are planned to be utilized (and whether such PPE is available);
- Demonstrating how every reasonable step will be taken to prevent persons who exhibit symptoms of COVID-19 from entering the workplace, including vehicles for fieldwork activities;
- Specifying and implementing cleaning and/or disinfecting protocols in research workspaces;
- Limiting interactions with others as much as possible, including limiting interactions with the general public to essential businesses only (e.g. gas stations);
- Taking every reasonable step required to prevent persons from entering workplaces (including vehicles) who have travelled outside Nova Scotia 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 self-isolate as required for 14 days;
- Preventing gatherings of persons involved in the proposed research activities; and
- Specifying if library resources or services will be required and if so, if access to the library's print collection will be required.

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 Plan; the relevant web-link is: <http://www.worksafeforlife.ca/COVID19>.