

Position statement and REC guidelines on Research in the time of COVID-19

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Dear Colleagues and Students

We anticipate widespread and rapid community spread of COVID-19 in South Africa. In line with recommendations to practice social distancing, we want to minimise the risk of transmission in research offices and laboratories, at research sites and in the context of studies where research participants, research staff, students, or other personnel are brought together for research purposes.

All precautions to prevent transmission and reduce risk need to be urgently implemented and we encourage researchers to act within the spirit of an 'ethics of responsibility'. Limiting COVID-19 infections and protecting the welfare of research participants, research staff, students, and other personnel should be the priority.

Research activities where people are brought together for research purposes may pose COVID-19 transmission risk to research participants, research staff, students, or other personnel present in research environments, for example, by virtue of the nature of data collection, requiring research participants, research staff, students or other personnel to work in the same office or laboratory, to travel on public transport or where specimen collection poses transmission risk.

We recommend that each research study or study site:

- Urgently assess the risk of COVID-19 transmission for research participants, research staff and students;
- Reduce, postpone or suspend all research which can be reduced, postponed or suspended and all research with higher than normal COVID-19 transmission risk, until such time that this instruction is recalled by the Vice-Rector: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies;
- Any contractual implications and amendments required should be discussed as soon as possible with project leaders, project partners and the Division for Research Development's Research Contracts team;
- If it is not possible to reduce, postpone or suspend a specific study, develop a plan to continue with minimum participant contact, preferably only those study activities or study visits where participant welfare and/or the prospect of direct participant benefit outweighs the potential harm of COVID-19 (e.g. safety visits, dispensing of medication);
- In the case of continued research as mentioned under point 4, the project leaders will be required to keep a register of contacts with the required information of contacts (name, ID, contact details, alternative contact details, date and time of contact);
- No staff member/student/etc. can be compelled to engage in a research project if such a member does not want to participate due to concerns about his or her health or safety related to the pandemic;
- Any amendments to protocols of REC-approved research would require additional approval and needs to be submitted to the relevant REC. Kindly peruse the attached guidelines for specific instructions from the Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Educational Research (REC: SBE).

- The prospect of direct participant benefit applies primarily to certain types of clinical research and is less likely to apply to laboratory-based research, and research in the social, behavioural or educational research context. Research without anticipated direct benefits should be suspended or postponed, wherever possible, until further notice unless there are very exceptional reasons to not do so;
- Research studies with the prospect of direct participant benefit (e.g. where treatment is provided) should also attempt to limit their study participants' contact with, and burden on, clinics and hospitals so as to avoid further exposure and burden on public services and facilities;
- If at all possible and in the best interest of all parties, pause enrolment and refrain from recruiting new study participants until such time that this instruction is recalled by the Vice-Rector: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies;
- Potential exceptions to this recommendation may be discussed with the respective research ethics committee (REC);
- Immediately implement recommendations for hand hygiene, cough etiquette, facial touching and social distancing at all study sites with continuing study activities.

These recommendations are made with the current situation in mind. The current threat of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa is likely to change/escalate, including the possibility or eventuality of a lockdown in the Western Cape. In the case of a lockdown, a revised communication will be issued by the Vice Rector: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies.

Please see the attached documents (or click on the URL below) for more detailed guidance and requirements from Stellenbosch University's:

- [Health Research Ethics Committee \(HREC\) and](#)
- [Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Educational Research \(REC: SBE\).](#)

We realise that there might be numerous additional uncertainties related to your research at the present moment – in particular as international collaboration and human interaction form the basis of a large number of our institution's research projects. We sincerely appreciate all the measures already put in place or prepared by the research community.

Kindly note that it is each research project leader's responsibility to pro-actively maintain contact with their funders, research partners and collaborators, postgraduate students, postdocs, research participants, institutional gatekeepers and other stakeholders to put project-specific contingency measures in place, and to ensure that in the spirit of what we aim to achieve, in other words stopping spread of the virus, we keep people as far away from each other as possible. Where assistance, advice or facilitation is required, you will be supported by my office and the staff of the Division for Research Development.

We actively encourage research that can help address the COVID-19 pandemic (category of "emergency research") and will endeavour to provide accelerated administration and approval of such research, based on scientific and public health benefit, consistent with other institutions.

We would furthermore like to remind you of your continued obligation to the Postgraduate students and Postdocs in your research group. Kindly encourage everyone to remain productive and engaged with you and their research topics – possibly using the time to analyse existing data, do literature reviews, and write thesis chapters and articles.

We would furthermore like to request that you kindly contact the Senior Director: Research and Innovation, Dr Therina Theron, directly (ttheron@sun.ac.za) to highlight any broad research-related concerns that you feel should be put on the agenda of the Research Contingency Committee that is currently active under the auspices of the Institutional Committee for Business Continuity (ICBC). This will

help us with the early identification and mitigation of risks and challenges that we may not yet be aware of.

Should any research participants, research staff or students develop signs or symptoms suggestive of COVID-19, please follow the recommended institutional protocol and contact:

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) hotline: 0800 029 999 (number operational Monday to Friday from 08:00 until 16:00)

Campus Health Services:

- Stellenbosch Campus 021 808 3496/3494
- Tygerberg Campus 021 938 959
- After hours emergency number: 076 431 0305
- Provincial Hotline: 021 928 4102

Where this pertains to REC-approved research studies, the relevant REC must also be informed. Please visit [SU's COVID-19 webpage](#) regularly for institutional updates as well as information on the health protocols and guidelines relating to the pandemic.

Staff and students are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the following documents:

- [HREC: FMHS Position statement on Research Ethics in the time of COVID-19](#)
- [REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research: Position statement on responsible research conduct during COVID-19](#)

Sincerely,
Prof Eugene Cloete
Vice-Rector: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies