

REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research: Position statement on responsible research conduct during COVID-19

20 March 2020

We anticipate widespread and rapid community spread of COVID-19 in South Africa. In line with recommendations to practice social distancing, the Research Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE) wants to minimise the risk of transmission at research sites and in the context of research studies. We urge all researchers to act within the spirit of an ‘ethics of responsibility’.

Taking into consideration the principle of *primum non nocere* or ‘*first do no harm*’, the REC: SBE carefully considered a reasonable ethical justification for social science, behavioural and education (SBE) research to continue, specifically research that involves **physical contact or being in undue physical proximity to research participants**¹, without the prospect direct benefit that could outweigh the potential harm of COVID-19 infection.

Note that the prospect of direct participant benefit applies primarily to certain types of clinical research and is unlikely to apply in a social, behavioural or educational research context.

Considering the state of national disaster and aligning itself with the call from national health authorities and experts to practice social distancing, the REC: SBE has made the following immediate decisions with respect to existing and new human research:

- 1) **All REC: SBE-approved research (low, medium and high risk), that involve physical contact or being in undue physical proximity to human participants, must be postponed until further notice unless there are very exceptional reasons to not postpone such research.** SBE research and visits at the following research sites must be suspended with immediate effect considering the social distancing protocols put in place by national authorities: Correctional Centres, Detention Facilities, Holding Cells, Military Detention Facilities, Department of Social Development facilities, healthcare facilities, universities, schools and early childhood development centres (EDCs).
- 2) **Research activities and studies that do not involve physical contact or being in undue physical proximity with participants or communities may continue** as these do not pose a potential risk of harm of COVID-19 infection. These activities include desktop research, literature reviews, secondary data analysis, online or virtual data collection activities, individual or group interviews conducted via online meeting or web conferencing tools, such as Skype or Microsoft Teams.
- 3) **Researchers who are unable to postpone their data collection activities (in the case of scenario 1) are encouraged to explore whether data collection can be done in a manner that does not require physical contact or being in undue physical proximity with participants i.e. interviews via Skype, WhatsApp, or other online or web-based platforms.** Researchers who can revise their data collection activities in this way must submit an urgent amendment to the REC: SBE for review and approval. Researchers can consult

¹ Herewith referring to face-to-face individual or group interviews or activities where physical contact is unavoidable.

the resources provided in the addendum for advice and guidance on online data collection tools and techniques.

- 4) **In the exceptional cases where physical contact or being in undue physical proximity with participants and communities are essential (as described in scenario 1), the researcher must notify the REC: SBE immediately and provide ethical justification for the research to continue.** The researcher will be required to submit a strategy for mitigation to ensure that risks of transmission are minimised and controlled. The REC: SBE will require those researchers to submit an amendment to the REC for urgent committee review and approval.
- 5) The REC: SBE would like to encourage researchers who are bound by funding or other contractual deadlines/requirements to **proactively engage** with their funders, sponsors and other relevant project stakeholders on the impact that COVID-19 and social distancing strategies will have on meeting project milestones and reporting deadlines. The suspension of human research that involve physical contact will have particular impact on existing contractual and service level agreements with research assistants, fieldworkers and other project staff. Where possible, researchers should engage with the funder/sponsor/relevant stakeholders regarding these timeframes and make the necessary arrangements.

Please note the following notices regarding the functioning of the REC: SBE during the COVID-19 pandemic:

The REC will continue to review new and continuing review submissions made to the REC. However, a moratorium will be placed on the approval of new submissions that involve physical contact or being in undue physical proximity with human participants (see scenario 1). This moratorium will be lifted after social distancing protocols are relaxed by national authorities. Researchers who have yet to apply for ethics clearance must prepare a statement on the strategies and mitigations that will be put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is considered a risk of harm for all research that involves physical contact or being in undue physical proximity human participants and must be considered and discussed in the research proposal for the foreseeable future.

This moratorium will not apply to research described in scenario 2 i.e. desktop research, literature reviews, secondary data analysis, online or virtual data collection activities, individual or group interviews conducted via online meeting or web conferencing tools, such as Skype or Microsoft Teams.

The REC: SBE (and by extension the DESCs) will prioritise the review of amendments (following the REC's decision made in points 3 and 4), unanticipated events, serious adverse events and protocol deviations.

The REC: SBE will provide a webpage where more detailed advice and guidelines will be shared on protocols that researchers should follow and useful resources to consult:

[http://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/Research-Development/integrity-ethics/human-research-\(humanities\)-ethics](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/Research-Development/integrity-ethics/human-research-(humanities)-ethics)

Vriendelike groete/Kind regards



Professor Len Hansen

Chairperson: Research Ethics Committee (Social, Behavioural and Education Research) on behalf of the REC: SBE.