

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.

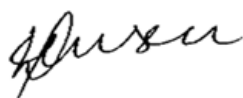
This moratorium will not apply to research described in scenario 2 i.e. desktop research, literature reviews, secondary data analysis, online or virtual data collection activities, individual or group interviews conducted via online meeting or web conferencing tools, such as Skype or Microsoft Teams.

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.

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

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 9590

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