

REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE) Communique: Research guidance in the time of level 1 of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Target group: All researchers/ investigators who are actively embarking on, engaged in research, or required to do so (including undergraduate and postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows, supervisors/ promotor, academic staff, and research support staff).

Purpose: To provide guidance on the continuation or commencement of in-person research in the context of lockdown level 1 and beyond.

Publication date: 15 March 2022

Document active: 15 March 2022 and until further notice.

Authors: Executive Committee of the REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE).

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. The SA Government declared a move to adjusted lockdown level 1 and has promulgated regulations with effect from 01 February 2022.¹
- 1.2. The COVID-19 pandemic remains unpredictable. Researchers thus need to be mindful of localized changes to infections rates and respond to such circumstances in a responsible and ethical manner. In ethical terms, this implies that researchers should prioritise the health, well-being and safety of research participants, their communities and research staff and students over other considerations.
- 1.3. Irrespective of the pandemic levels, researchers should be especially vigilant about the protection of vulnerable groups e.g., those older than 60 and/or with comorbidities) from infection and transmission of COVID-19.

2. GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH GOING FORWARD

- 2.1. Researchers are still encouraged to consider alternative ways of collecting data that do not involve physical contact or being in undue physical proximity of participants or communities². These alternative activities may 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 Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.
- 2.2. Research that requires physical contact or being in close physical proximity to participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, may continue if there are justified reasons why virtual or alternative ways of collecting data would be inappropriate or not feasible.
- 2.3. The REC: SBE and Faculty/Department Ethics Screening Committees (FESCs/DESCs) will review in-person research activities by doing a thorough risk-benefit analysis and evaluating the anticipated benefits of the research and measures that the researcher will put in place to prevent the spread of the virus.
- 2.4. The researcher is required to consider and adopt the National Disaster Management Act Regulations and other applicable national guidelines and protocols and adhere to the restrictions imposed by the risk-adjusted approach (Alert Levels) from government.
- 2.5. Researchers working outside of South African borders should ensure that they follow the national protocols of the country in which fieldwork will be conducted. The researcher must include a statement in their research proposal of the country(ies) in which fieldwork will take place and the protocols they must adhere to.

¹ For the latest updates on the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa and information about SA's national regulations, please visit <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/>

² Herewith referring to face-to-face individual or group interviews or any activity where in-person contact is unavoidable.

- 2.6. The measures that the researcher will put in place during in-person fieldwork (in order to adhere to disease containment measures) should be described in full in the informed consent/assent forms or processes.
- 2.7. The REC: SBE would like to remind 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. Possible suspensions of human research that involve physical contact or physical proximity to participants will impact on existing contractual and service level agreements with research assistants, fieldworkers, and other project staff. Where possible, researchers should proactively engage with the funder/sponsor/relevant stakeholders regarding these timeframes and make the necessary arrangements.
- 2.8. SBE research that requires visits to the following research sites will only be allowed if the facility can ensure that they are compliant with the regulations and directions set by the government for visits to: Correctional Centres, Detention Facilities, Holding Cells, Military Detention Facilities, health establishments and facilities, and older persons' residential facilities. Written permission should be obtained from the facility where the research will be conducted. The permission letter should be signed by an authorised person confirming that the facility is compliant with regulations and directions set by the government.
- 2.9. The REC wishes to remind researchers of their individual responsibility for managing and mitigating the risks to the multiple stakeholders involved in conducting in-person research in the current circumstances. Researchers should address/include the risks (and mitigations they have put in place) in the potential risks and benefits section of the informed consent form/process so that participants are well-informed of the risks of in-person research before agreeing to participate in such research activities:

2.9.1 Risks to research participants

- Becoming infected through contact with a researcher or fellow research participant who might be asymptomatic/symptomatic during a research-related activity.
- Becoming infected through contact with a researcher who might be asymptomatic/symptomatic during a visit by the researcher to his/her home, community centre or when meeting in a public place like a restaurant.
- Potential for being severely affected by COVID-19 if over the age of 60 and/or having a comorbidity or an illness causing an immune-compromised health status.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown alert level restrictions e.g., not wearing masks, etc.

2.9.2 Risks to researchers

- Researcher/postgraduate student becoming infected through contact with research participants who might be asymptomatic/symptomatic during a research-related activity. More severely affected by COVID-19 if over the age of 60 and/or having a comorbidity or an illness causing an immunocompromised health status.
- Infecting co-researchers due to the aforementioned actions.
- Infecting own family members due to the aforementioned actions.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown alert level restrictions e.g. not wearing masks, etc.

2.9.3 Reputational risks to researchers and/or the University

- Participants becoming infected through contact with a researcher during the conduct of research and holding the university accountable.
- Researchers not adhering to national disaster and lockdown regulations.

Please refer to the REC: SBE's webpage for more detailed advice and guidelines on the protocols that researchers should follow and useful resources: [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)

References and acknowledgments:

1. Health and Undergraduate Research Ethics Committees of Stellenbosch University (2020): HREC position statement dated 2020-03-20, HREC Communique 1 dated 2020-07-12 and HREC Communique 2 issued in October 2020.
2. Greeff, M. 2020. IMPLICATIONS OF ALERT LEVELS FOR RESEARCHERS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (VERSION 2). North-West University.
3. Department of Health. 2021. Draft Guidelines for research in a pandemic (not yet published).

ANNEXURE A: GUIDANCE FOR IN-PERSON RESEARCH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC³

- In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers, and the REC: SBE must proceed with consideration of the principle of *primum non nocere* or ‘first do no harm’ and an ethics of responsibility. Researchers must adopt a responsible approach to research in the context of COVID-19 which prioritises the health, well-being and safety of research participants, their communities and research staff and students over other considerations.
- The REC: SBE and FESCs/DESCs must carefully consider a reasonable ethical justification for in-person data collection in social science, behavioural and education (SBE) research to continue, especially where such research involves physical contact or being in close physical proximity to research participants, without the prospect of direct benefit that could outweigh the potential harm of COVID-19 infection.

1. APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS:

Researchers who wish to conduct in-person research during the COVID-19 pandemic must do the following:

- I.1. Submit your online application (new application for new studies, amendment for existing studies) to the FESC/DESC or REC: SBE for review and approval.
- I.2. The REC: SBE and FESCs/DESCs will consider applications for in-person research on a case-by-case basis by doing a thorough risk-benefit analysis and by evaluating the anticipated benefits of the research and measures that the researcher will put in place to prevent the spread of the virus.
- I.3. The following information/documents must be attached to your application:
 - Confirmation (by way of declaration in the REC application form) that you will follow and adopt the National Disaster Management Act Regulations and other applicable national guidelines and protocols and adhere to the restrictions imposed by the risk-adjusted approach (Alert Levels) from government.
 - If you are working with potentially vulnerable population groups, the submission of a detailed COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy and protocols that will be put in place to protect participants, yourself, your research team, and others whom you may interact with during your research. This document must be written in plain language as it is expected that researchers share this document with research staff and participants (where applicable) before any in-person activities are planned.⁴
 - If you intend to conduct in-person research on any SU campus or facility, please include the facility’s workplace plan and walkthrough risk assessment. It is expected that you obtain permission from the facility manager before you apply to the REC.
 - A COVID-19 contact register template to record the date, duration and nature of face-to-face contact, name and contact details for each person interacted with during the research. This register is a precaution to assist with tracing if it becomes necessary. The register will contain personal identifiable information and must be secured and stored under the strictest conditions as required by the Protection for Personal Information Act. The contact registers must be securely saved for at least three (3) months after the interaction has taken place.
 - In cases where in-person activities are contingent on the permission of gatekeepers or institutions, the researcher must provide evidence that the continuation or start of in-person activities would

³ The REC: SBE would like to thank Prof Minnie Greeff (North West University) for her guidance and permitting the REC: SBE to cite the COVID-19 Research Risk Assessment and Management Approach (Version 2).

⁴ The REC does not have a specific template for researchers. This is to ensure that researchers develop a document layout and format that is accessible to their specific research context. The ethical considerations regarding accessibility, readability and translations apply.

be supported by the gatekeeper before the initiation of the study. Such gatekeeper permission is considered critical in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

- In the case of sponsored studies, principal investigators need to submit written confirmation from the sponsor that they support that in-person data collection may commence for the study.
- A budget to enable the implementation of the proposed Risk Mitigation Plan (including costs of PPE, sanitizers, deep cleaning etc.) should, if applicable, form part of the budget submitted as part of the original application or amendment.

- I.4. Each activity that involves in-person interaction with another individual during the course of the research must be scientifically and ethically justified, weighing up the risk of health and safety of the participant and research team with any direct benefit to be generated from conducting this research.
- I.5. In the current COVID-19 context, in-person data collection from vulnerable communities, groups, and individuals such as the aged and persons with underlying disease/co-morbidities or who are immunocompromised are considered to be high risk. Researchers must also be mindful of conducting in-person research with people who live with or are caregivers of these vulnerable groups or individuals.
- I.6. The REC: SBE acknowledges that not all countries or areas have enforced strict lockdown regulations. If in-person research is planned outside of South Africa, the researcher must be cognisant of the current regulations on personal movement as determined by the government of that country. The researcher may need to provide some form of authorization or permission from local authorities stating that they may conduct in-person research in that country if there are strict regulations in place. Even if not required by the current regulations of that country, the researcher must keep a contact register of all participants.
- I.7. The researcher must indicate COVID-19 infection as a potential risk in their research, in the research proposal and sections 5.21 and 10 of the online REC application form(s). The researcher must report any instance of infection (of a research team member or participant) as a serious adverse event.
- I.8. Research Ethics approval of proposed in-person data collection does not override stricter requirements or other approvals required from relevant gatekeepers. Where stricter safety measures or precautions are required from any gatekeeper, such measures must be followed. The researcher must always comply with the strictest regulations or guidelines when interacting with institutions or organisations as various bodies, companies, schools, and institutions may have their own Occupational Health and Safety regulations, standards and guidelines related to COVID-19.

2. PROPOSED COVID-19 MITIGATION TOOLKIT

Please consider the following measures (where applicable) as part of your COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy:

Required set of behaviours during research interactions:

- Properly wearing a mask (covering both nose and mouth).
- Regular hand washing with soap and water or use of 70% alcohol-based sanitizer
- Social/physical distancing of at least 1.5m (seen as the most effective way).
- Not to touch face.
- Cleaning and sanitising of surfaces on a regular basis.
- Ensuring proper ventilation, and sufficient space in indoor venues. Wherever possible, consideration to meet outdoors rather than indoors should be made (allowing for privacy, where required).
- Ensure that all research team members screen themselves for symptoms daily before going out to do fieldwork. Use SU's recommended screening tool i.e. Higher Health Check:
<https://healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za/login/?next=/>

⁵ The role of gatekeepers (such as provincial government departments, schools, companies, etc.) in advising researchers regarding the resumption, limiting or suspension remains invaluable as they possess information relevant to the specific context. Their guidance should be respected as access to a research site is not for the REC to decide.

- SU researchers and students are advised to download the South African COVID-19 tracing app on their phones for the duration of research activities.⁶ Researchers who are conducting in-person research in other countries should check for recommended tracing apps available in the country of residence.
- Continued symptom monitoring, screening, and testing. If the researcher or any of the research team members or participants present with COVID symptoms shortly after in-person contact during interviews, the researchers and/or research team members should be tested, and if testing positive, should alert participants immediately.

Some equipment needed:

- Own mask (you might even need several if you are spending the whole day in the field and have to touch your mask or remove it in between data collection with participants).
- Thermometer, where relevant (this will depend on the venue used for face-to-face data collection).
- Alcohol-based hand sanitiser (70%).
- Sanitiser for surfaces e.g., chairs, table.
- A4 size plastic bag to put informed consent documents or paper questionnaires in (this will be left in the plastic bag for a minimum of three days).
- Basic materials on COVID-19 prevention protocols (proper use of masks, proper hand washing, grounds for social distancing, reason for cough etiquette) to distribute to participants.
- Box of tissues.
- Bag for disposal of, for example, used masks, tissues or gloves (if applicable).

Additional precautionary measures that may need to be put in place:

- Ensure research team members know how to be more sensitive and manage vulnerability created by COVID-19 in participants and the research team and that research team members have access to psycho-social care, where deemed necessary.
- Ensure that all research team members know how to apply the health guidelines during the conduct of the research and how to recognise the symptoms of COVID-19.
- Ensure that research team members know how to support and refer a participant or team member if suspected of being COVID-19 positive.
- Ensure research team members know how to manage the rest of the participants or the research team if they were in contact with the suspected COVID-19 positive team member or participant.
- Recognise the need for constant intensive monitoring by the project leader/study-supervisor(s) during the physical part of data collection to ensure that the research team adheres to all the precautionary measures.
- Plan for eventuality of one or more team members becoming ill on site and having to return home or be taken to a medical facility.
- Emergency procedures – e.g., communication if no cell service, field safety plan, map to nearest health facility/hospital.
- Allow extra time for logistics and co-ordination.⁷
- Get permissions ahead of time and send protocols to participants or relevant gatekeepers ahead of time. To avoid awkwardness, include that it is University COVID-19 policy not to shake hands, to maintain physical distancing, use hand sanitizer and wear masks to ensure the safety of all present.
- Establish if the team will be working with the public, contractors, or an at-risk community in less-than-ideal spaces, e.g. refugees. Assess the current level of COVID-19 infections in the community being visited.
- Avoid engaging in any field research where you cannot maintain appropriate physical distancing (1.5m).
- Physical distance (1.5m) must be maintained between any individual, including other team members.
- Avoid as far as possible any field activities requiring face to face discussions with members of the public unless physical distancing can be maintained.
- Limit the duration of face-to-face activities as far as possible.
- Limit the number of participants per day and space meeting times.
- Ensure a psycho-social space (be caring, build trust and limit fear by explaining what is being done).

⁶ <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-progress-south-africas-effort-contain-coronavirus-covid-19>

⁷ Researchers should be mindful of any curfews that apply in the country(ies) where fieldwork is done.

- Remember that the team will be seen as the face of the University and must model safe practices at all times.

(From Greeff, M. COVID-19 Research Risk Assessment and Management Approach (version 2), 17 July 2020.)
