

# **IMPLICATIONS OF ALERT LEVELS FOR RESEARCHERS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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## **1. Background of this document**

South Africa went in a lockdown at midnight on the 26 March 2020 at a lockdown alert level 5 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To manage the risk associated with the pandemic and its impact on the livelihoods of South Africans, the government will adjust the levels across the country, based on the level of COVID-19 infections (different provinces may be placed under different lockdown levels based on the level of COVID-19 infections in the particular province).

## **2. Risks involved in conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic**

To be able to manage the risks inherent in undertaking research during a global pandemic, it is necessary to be aware of these risks. As such, the following section indicates the main risks that have to be addressed before research can proceed.

### **2.1 Risk to the researcher:**

- Researcher/postgraduate student becoming infected (age/co-morbidity) due to contact with an asymptomatic/symptomatic person, by handling objects contaminated by the virus or by entering a high-risk COVID-19 area.
- Infecting co-researchers due to the aforementioned actions.
- Infecting own family due to aforementioned actions.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown level restrictions e.g. not wearing masks, travelling without appropriate permits etc.

### **2.2 Risk to the participant:**

- Infected by a researcher or fellow research participant that might be asymptomatic/symptomatic.
- Carrying the virus into a community.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown level restrictions e.g. not wearing masks, travelling without appropriate permits etc.

### **2.3 Reputational damage to researchers and/or the university:**

- Participants infected by the researcher during conduct of research.
- Researchers and postgraduate students becoming infected during research.
- Not adhering to emergency and lockdown regulations e.g. visiting participants at their houses.

### **3. Health guidelines to follow during the COVID-19 pandemic**

- Social distancing of at least 2 meters.
- Regular handwashing with soap or 80% alcohol-based sanitising hand rub.
- Wearing an appropriate mask when leaving home.
- Not to touch your face with unwashed hands.
- Covering your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, preferably into a tissue or your elbow.
- Sanitising all areas and surfaces.
- Avoid unnecessary public travelling and stay away from large groups of people.
- Refrain from smoking and other activities that weaken the lungs.
- Stay home if you feel unwell.
- Contact the appropriate health authorities, if you suspect you have COVID-19, to arrange for screening testing and possible treatment.

### **4. Lockdown restrictions that will remain in place through every lockdown level**

- No gatherings of more than *10 people outside of a workplace* will be permitted.
- Must wear a cloth face mask.
- Closure of the following businesses and events:
  - Conference and convention centres.
  - Sit-in restaurants and hotels.
  - Bars and shebeens.
  - Entertainment venues including cinemas, theatres, concerts.
  - Religious, cultural and social gatherings.

## 5. Implications of the lockdown levels for researchers

The government is following a risk-adjusted approach based on the following criteria:

- The level of the infection rate
- The rate of transmission
- Capacity of health facilities
- Extent of the public health intervention
- The economic and social impact of continued restrictions

**Important note:** It is the responsibility of each researcher to be aware of the alert level and to adhere to all regulations and guidelines of the specified level. Should a level revert back to a higher level, the researcher should adjust to the indicated implications discussed in the table below.

Level	Regulation Implications for Social Interaction and Movement	Higher Education Guidelines	Implications for Researchers
<b>Alert Level 5</b>  <b>Drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus and save lives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stay home</li> <li>• Leave house only to do allowable shopping/work/medical care/funeral of close family members</li> <li>• Only essential services</li> <li>• Transport restrictions</li> <li>• Movement restrictions</li> <li>• No gatherings of more than 10 people outside of a workplace will be permitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher Education under total lockdown with only essential services allowed on campus</li> <li>• Only permits to do essential upkeep of the university</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No research activities e.g. laboratory work or contact with human participants</li> <li>• <b>Only</b> clinical research as part of patient care or treatment and vaccine trial research or laboratory work linked to COVID-19 research</li> <li>• Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants</li> <li>• Online quantitative research e.g. surveys</li> </ul>
<b>Alert Level 4</b>  <b>Extreme precautions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leave house only to do allowable shopping/work/medical care/funeral of close family members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher Education under lockdown with extremely limited and restricted access to the university by permit only</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential laboratory work with a permit</li> <li>• No research that requires physical human participant interaction in</li> </ul>

<p><b>to limit community transmission and outbreaks while allowing some limited activity</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To perform an essential and/or permitted service</li> <li>• Have to go home after work</li> <li>• Home between 20:00 and 05:00</li> <li>• Preferably work from home</li> <li>• People above 60 and with co-morbidities to work from home</li> <li>• Not allowed to visit with friends and family</li> <li>• No social activities or gatherings</li> <li>• No movement over provincial boundaries except for work and school</li> <li>• Wear a mask when you leave home</li> <li>• Courier and postal services available</li> <li>• Limited public transport</li> <li>• No gatherings of more than 10 people outside of a workplace will be permitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only permits to do essential upkeep of the university</li> </ul>	<p>close proximity e.g. face-to-face interviews, focus groups, human sample collection, etc. except clinical research as part of patient care or treatment and vaccine trial research or laboratory work linked to COVID-19 research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants</li> <li>• Online quantitative research e.g. surveys</li> </ul>
<p><b>Alert Level 3</b></p> <p><b>Restrictions on many activities, including at work-places and socially, to address a high risk of transmission</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leave house only to do allowable shopping/work/medical care/funeral of close family members</li> <li>• To perform an essential and/or permitted service</li> <li>• Have to go home after work</li> <li>• Preferably work from home</li> <li>• People above 60 and with co-morbidities to work from home</li> <li>• Not allowed to visit with friends and family</li> <li>• No social activities or gatherings</li> <li>• No movement over provincial boundaries except for work and school</li> <li>• Wear a mask when you leave home</li> <li>• Courier and postal services available</li> <li>• Transport restrictions</li> <li>• Movement restrictions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maximum of 33% of students return to campus</li> <li>• Age and co-morbidity of staff managed</li> <li>• Campus readiness and preparedness must be well managed</li> <li>• Daily screening</li> <li>• Hand sanitisers available</li> <li>• High-risk areas identified and monitored e.g. libraries and laboratories</li> <li>• Issuing of permits as the phase-in process occurs</li> <li>• Ensure physical distancing</li> <li>• Controlled return of students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Final year students</li> <li>- Practical/clinical training</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential laboratory work with a permit and appropriate safety measures as indicated under section 3 or laboratory work linked to COVID-19 research</li> <li>• Access to the university and research activities only if you are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A final year student</li> <li>- Need to do practical/clinical training</li> <li>- Laboratory work</li> </ul> </li> <li>• No research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity e.g. face-to-face interviews, focus groups, human sample collection, etc. except clinical research as part of patient care or</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No gatherings of more than 10 people outside of a workplace will be permitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Laboratory work</li> </ul>	<p>treatment and vaccine trial research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants</li> <li>Online quantitative research e.g. surveys</li> <li>No research that is to be conducted in homes, communities, restricted government facilities, schools and facilities for the aged</li> </ul>
<p><b>Alert Level 2</b></p> <p><b>Social distancing and restrictions on leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence of the virus</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leave house only to do allowable shopping/work/medical care/funeral of close family members</li> <li>To perform an essential and/or permitted service</li> <li>Have to go home after work</li> <li>Home between 20:00 and 05:00</li> <li>Preferably work from home</li> <li>People above 60 and with co-morbidities to work from home</li> <li>Allowed to visit with friends and family but not more than 5 people</li> <li>No social activities or gatherings outside the home</li> <li>Some movement over provincial boundaries according to guidelines</li> <li>Wear a mask when you leave home</li> <li>Courier and postal services available</li> <li>Transport restrictions (domestic air travel/car rental)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maximum of 66% of the student population to return to campus</li> <li>Age and co-morbidity of staff managed</li> <li>Campus readiness and preparedness must be well managed</li> <li>Daily screening</li> <li>Hand sanitisers available</li> <li>High-risk areas identified and monitored e.g. libraries and laboratories</li> <li>Issuing of permits as the phase-in occurs</li> <li>Ensure physical distancing</li> <li>Controlled return of students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Final year students</li> <li>Practical/clinical training</li> <li>Laboratory work</li> <li>First-year undergraduate students</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essential laboratory work with a permit and appropriate safety measures as indicated under section 3.</li> <li>Access to the university and research activities only if you are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A final year student</li> <li>Need to do practical/clinical training</li> <li>Laboratory work</li> </ul> </li> <li>Limited research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity, conducted under strict rules in homes, communities, restricted government facilities, schools and facilities for the aged following the specific level specifications</li> <li>Researcher has to ensure that research team and participants have been screened for COVID-19, have masks and sanitiser</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movement restrictions (movement between provinces at level 1 and 2 restrictions)</li> <li>• Domestic work and cleaning services (restricted contact in homes)</li> <li>• No gatherings of more than 10 people outside of a workplace will be permitted</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All possible safety measures should have been taken to ensure safety of the participants</li> <li>• Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants</li> <li>• Online quantitative research e.g. surveys</li> </ul>
<p><b>Alert Level 1</b></p> <p><b>Most normal activity resume, with precautions and health guidelines, followed at all times.</b></p> <p><b>All prepared for an increase in alert levels if necessary</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All sectors permitted to work</li> <li>• Allowed to visit with friends and family but not more than 5 people</li> <li>• Transportation restrictions (all modes with stringent hygiene conditions)</li> <li>• Movement restrictions (interprovincial movement allowed, with restriction on international travel)</li> <li>• No gatherings of more than 10 people outside of a workplace will be permitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 100% of student population returns to campus with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social distancing</li> <li>- Health protocols</li> <li>- International students return</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Age and co-morbidity of staff managed</li> <li>• Campus readiness and preparedness must be well managed</li> <li>• Daily screening</li> <li>• Hand sanitisers available</li> <li>• High-risk areas identified and monitored e.g. libraries and laboratories</li> <li>• Issuing of permits as the phase-in occurs</li> <li>• Ensure physical distancing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential laboratory work with a permit</li> <li>• Limited research that requires physical human participant interaction conducted under strict rules in homes, communities, restricted government facilities, schools and facilities for the aged following the specific level specification</li> <li>• Researcher has to ensure that research team and participants have been screened for COVID-19, have masks and sanitiser</li> <li>• All possible safety measures should have been taken to ensure safety of the participant</li> <li>• Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants</li> <li>• Online quantitative research e.g. surveys</li> </ul>

\* Under development by government and might change over time