

IMPLICATIONS OF ALERT LEVELS FOR RESEARCHERS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (VERSION 2)

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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 and since then moved to different levels as the pandemic progressed. However, to manage the risk associated with the pandemic and its impact on the livelihoods of South Africans, the SA government decided to follow a *risk-adjusted approach* based on specific criteria and will adjust the levels across the country based on these criteria (different provinces may be placed under different lockdown levels based on the level of COVID-19 infections in the particular province).

Criteria for the risk-adjusted approach:

- 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

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 due to contact with an asymptomatic/symptomatic person (fellow researcher or participant).
- Researcher/postgraduate student becoming infected by handling objects contaminated by the virus.
- Researcher/postgraduate student becoming infected by entering a high-risk COVID 19 area.
- Infecting co-researchers due to the aforementioned actions.
- Infecting own family members due to the aforementioned actions.
- More severely affected by COVID-19 if over the age of 60 and having a comorbidity or an illness causing an immunocompromised health status.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown alert 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 during a visit to the HEI.
- Infected by a researcher that might be asymptomatic/symptomatic during a visit by the researcher to his/her home or community centre.
- Infected by handling objects contaminated by the virus.
- More severely affected by COVID-19 if over the age of 60 and having a comorbidity or an illness causing an immunocompromised health status.
- Carrying the virus from the research site into the home or community.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown alert 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 the conduct of research blaming the university.
- The researcher carrying the virus into a private home or the community and the university being blamed for it.
- Researchers and postgraduate students becoming infected during research and blaming the university.
- Researchers not adhering to disaster and lockdown regulations e.g. visiting participants at their houses when social interaction is prohibited.

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

Specific guidelines have been formulated by the SA government to follow during the pandemic.

- Social distancing of at least 2 metres.
- 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. 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 |
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| Alert Level 5 Drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus and save lives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay home. • Leave house only to do allowable shopping/work/medical care/funeral of close family members. • Only essential services. • Transport restrictions. • Movement restrictions. • No gatherings of more than 10 people outside of a workplace will be permitted. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Education under total lockdown with only essential services allowed on campus. • Only permits to do essential upkeep of the university. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No research activities e.g. laboratory work or contact with human participants. • Only clinical research as part of patient care or treatment and vaccine trial research or laboratory work linked to COVID-19 research. • Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants. • Online quantitative research e.g. surveys. |
| Alert Level 4 Extreme precautions to limit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave house only to do allowable shopping/work/medical care/funeral of close family members. • To perform an essential and/or permitted service. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Education under lockdown with extremely limited and restricted access to the university by permit only. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essential laboratory work with a permit. • No research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity e.g. face-to-face |

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

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No gatherings of more than 10 people outside of a workplace will be permitted. | | <p>treatment and vaccine trial research.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants. Online quantitative research e.g. surveys. No research that is to be conducted in homes, communities, restricted government facilities, schools and facilities for the aged . |
| <p>Alert Level 2</p> <p>Social distancing and restrictions on leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence of the virus</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wear a mask when you leave home, wash or sanitize hands, adhere to social distancing of at least 2 metres, and sanitize surfaces (see health guidelines for more detail). Leave house to do allowable shopping/work/medical care/funeral of close family members. Preferably work from home. People above 60 and with co-morbidities to work from home and take additional preventive measures e.g. voluntary self-isolation. Home between 22:00 and 04:00. Allowed to visit with friends and family but not more than 10 people. Interprovincial movement allowed. Domestic air travel/car rental. No international travel. Visits of members of the public to governmental facilities e.g. correctional centres, health establishments, as well as | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maximum of 66% of the student population to return to campus Staff allowed in a phased in manner. Age and co-morbidity of staff managed. Campus readiness and preparedness must be well managed. Daily screening. Hand sanitisers available. High-risk areas identified and monitored e.g. libraries and laboratories. Issuing of permits as the phase-in occurs. Ensure physical distancing. Controlled return of students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final year students Practical/clinical training Laboratory work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Essential laboratory work with permission and appropriate safety measures as indicated under alert level 3. Access to the university and research activities only if you are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A final year undergraduate student Need to do practical/clinical training Laboratory work Postgraduate students Special requests No research participant allowed at the university Restricted research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity, which must be conducted under strict precautionary measures, where there is not more than 2 researchers present in a participant's <i>home</i>. |

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| | <p>to older persons' residential facilities are prohibited except to the extent and in the manner directed by the relevant Cabinet member.</p> | <p>- First-year undergraduate students.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restricted research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity, which must be conducted under strict precautionary measures, where there is not more than 2 researchers and 8 participants present for any type of <i>group work</i> in <i>community facilities</i> e.g. church hall, community centre etc. • Prohibition placed by the government on any visits by researchers to any governmental facilities e.g. correctional centres, health establishments, educational facilities e.g. school or universities, as well as to older persons' residential facilities. • Researcher has to ensure that the research team and participants have been screened for COVID-19, have masks, have used sanitiser and adhere to social distancing of at least 2 metres. • All possible risk mitigating measures should have been taken to ensure safety of the participants and the researchers. • Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants can continue as before. • Online quantitative research e.g. surveys, continue as before. |
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| <p>Alert Level 1</p> <p>Most normal activity resume, with precautions and health guidelines, followed at all times.</p> <p>All prepared for an increase in alert levels if necessary</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wear a mask when you leave home, wash or sanitize hands, adhere to social distancing of at least 2 metres, and sanitize surfaces (see health guidelines for more detail). • All sectors permitted to work. • Allowed to visit with friends and family but not more than 10 people. • People above 60 and with co-morbidities to work from home. • All modes of transportation allowed with restrictions of stringent hygiene conditions. • Interprovincial movement allowed, with restriction on international travel. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% of student population returns to campus with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social distancing - Health protocols - International students return. • Age and co-morbidity of staff managed. • Campus readiness and preparedness must be well managed. • Daily screening. • Hand sanitisers available. • High-risk areas identified and monitored e.g. libraries and laboratories. • Issuing of permits as the phase-in occurs. • Ensure physical distancing. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laboratory work and appropriate safety measures as indicated under alert level 3. • Access to the university and research activities open to all students and staff. • Limited research participants allowed at the university. • Restricted research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity, which must be conducted under strict precautionary measures, where there is not more than 2 researchers present in a participant's <i>home</i>. • Restricted research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity, which must be conducted under strict precautionary measure, where there is not more than 2 researchers and 8 participants present for any type of <i>group work</i> in <i>community facilities</i> e.g. church hall, community centre etc. • Restricted visits by researchers to any governmental facilities e.g. |

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| | | | <p>correctional centres, health establishments, educational facilities e.g. school or universities, as well as to older persons' residential facilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher has to ensure that the research team and participants have been screened for COVID-19, have masks, have used sanitiser and adhere to social distancing of at least 2 metres. • All possible risk mitigating measures should have been taken to ensure safety of the participants and the researchers. • Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants can continue as before. • Online quantitative research e.g. surveys, can continue as before. <p>Note: Please use the document "COVID-19 research risk assessment and management approach" (Greeff, version 2 of 17 July 2020) for details on precautionary measures.</p> |
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Note: Level 1 regulations might be adjusted according to published regulations when the country moves to this level.