

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA COVID-19 GUIDELINES: IMPLICATIONS OF ALERT LEVELS FOR RESEARCHERS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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This guideline document is complementary to the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics, dated 8 April 2020, and the Unisa Covid-19 guidelines for ERCs, dated 28 April 2020. The document aims to provide ERCs, researchers and postgraduate students with practical guidance on the implications of the alert levels on research to limit the transmission of the coronavirus and reduce the risk for both the researcher and the research participants.

Unisa supports the continuation of research activities, where possible, and researchers are advised to follow national regulations and adhere to the restrictions imposed by the various alert levels. ERCs, researchers and postgraduate supervisors must consider the potential risks of harm to research participants, communities, researchers, postgraduate students and the university relating to the collection of data during this time.

1. The potential risks of harm to the researcher/postgraduate student/members of research teams relating to Covid-19

- 1.1 Researchers, postgraduate students, and members of research teams might become infected with Covid-19 when:
 - 1.1.1 They come in contact with an asymptomatic/symptomatic person.
 - 1.1.2 They are handling objects contaminated by the virus.
 - 1.1.3 They are entering a high-risk/hotspot Covid-19 area.
- 1.2 The aforementioned actions pose a risk of transmitting Covid-19 to their families and subsequently to the community.
- 1.3 They could be fined or arrested for violating lockdown laws or appropriate lockdown level restrictions, such as:
 - visiting participants when social contact is restricted, and
 - travelling between provinces without the necessary permits.
- 1.4 Researchers, postgraduate students, and members of research teams that are above 60, and have co-morbidities, could put their health in jeopardy when they collect data by means of face-to-face activities.

2. The potential risks of harm to the University

Potential reputational harm to the University relating to risks of real or perceived non-adherence to governmental directives by staff, postgraduate students and members of research teams, as a result of:

- 2.1 Claims that the participants contracted Covid-19 due to their interaction with researchers or members of a research team.
- 2.2 Claims that researchers, postgraduate students, or members of research teams contracted the virus during the conduct of the study.

3. The implications of the alert levels for researchers:

- 3.1 The government is following a risk-adjusted approach based on the following criteria:
 - 3.1.1 The level of the infection rate;
 - 3.1.2 The rate of transmission;
 - 3.1.3 The capacity of health facilities;
 - 3.1.4 The extent of public health intervention;
 - 3.1.5 The economic and social impact of continued restrictions.
- 3.2 The restrictions for the alert levels are set out below. The current Covid-19 context is dynamic, and the implications below could change in tandem with adjustments to governmental directives.
- 3.3 Consider whether your data collection methods can be adapted considering the national restrictions.
- 3.4 Should researchers choose to adjust their data collection methods (for instance to electronic interviews), these amendments must be scientifically justifiable.
- 3.5 Requests for amendments must be submitted for approval by the relevant ERC.
- 3.6 In principle, any adjustments to data collection methods should limit the risks to researchers of breaking national Covid-19 regulations or putting the researcher at risk of contracting or spreading the virus.
- 3.7 Postgraduate students must consult their supervisors in relation to possible changes to data collection methods.
- 3.8 Issues of connectivity, online accessibility and data costs should be considered when switching to online means of data collection.

Alert levels	Implications for researchers and postgraduate students
<p>Alert level 5: Drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus and save lives. Higher Education under total lockdown with only essential services allowed on campus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No research activities e.g., laboratory work or contact with human participants. ○ Only critical 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.
<p>Alert level 4: Extreme precautions to limit community transmission and outbreaks while allowing some limited activity. Higher Education under total lockdown with only essential services allowed on campus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Essential laboratory work with a Unisa permit. ○ No research that requires physical human participant interactions in close proximity e.g. face-to-face interviews; focus groups or human sample collection (excluding clinical research as permitted by national guidelines and relevant Unisa permit). ○ Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants. ○ Online quantitative research e.g., surveys.

<p>Alert level 3: Restrictions on many activities including workplaces and socially, to address a high risk of transmission.</p> <p>Maximum of 33% of students return to campus.</p> <p>Controlled return of students:</p> <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 conditional to level 3 restrictions and relevant Unisa permit. ○ Access to university and research facilities only if you are a final year student conditional to level 3 restrictions and relevant Unisa permit. ○ No research that requires physical human participant interactions nearby, e.g., face-to-face interviews, focus groups, or human sample collection (excluding clinical research as permitted by national guidelines and relevant Unisa permit). ○ Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants. ○ Online quantitative research, e.g., surveys. ○ No research is to be conducted in homes, communities, restricted government facilities for the aged.
<p>Advanced alert level 3:</p> <p>33% of the student population will be allowed to return to campuses which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ All groups that have already returned. ○ Students in the final year of their programmes. ○ Student in years of study that require clinical training. ○ Postgraduate students who require laboratory equipment and other technical equipment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Essential laboratory work with a Unisa permit. ○ Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants. ○ Online quantitative research, e.g., surveys. ○ Limited research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity conducted under strict conditions, in pre-arranged public space and adhering to strict safety conditions. ○ <i>Postgraduate students that need to proceed with data collection methods involving physical human interaction with participants must inform their supervisors and notify the ERC by completing an amendment form, signed by the supervisor and student – the safety precautions must be clearly described (Refer to the "toolkit" in section 4 below).</i> ○ <i>All other researchers that want to proceed with data collection methods involving physical human interaction with participants must notify the ERC by completing an amendment form, signed by the researcher – the safety precautions must be clearly described (Refer to the "toolkit" in section 4 below).</i>
<p>Alert level 2: Physical distancing and restrictions on leisure and social activities to prevent a resurgence.</p> <p>Maximum of 66% of the student population may return to campus.</p> <p>Controlled return of students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Final year students ○ Practical/clinical training ○ Laboratory work ○ First-year undergraduate students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Essential laboratory work with a Unisa permit.</i> ○ <i>Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants.</i> ○ <i>Online quantitative research e.g., surveys.</i> ○ <i>Limited research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity conducted under strict conditions, in pre-arranged public space and adhering to strict safety conditions.</i> ○ <i>Postgraduate students that need to proceed with data collection methods involving physical human interaction with participants must inform their supervisors and notify the ERC by completing an amendment form, signed by the supervisor and student – the safety precautions must be clearly described (Refer to the "toolkit" in section 4 below).</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>All other researchers that want to proceed with data collection methods involving physical human interaction with participants must notify the ERC by completing an amendment form, signed by the researcher – the safety precautions must be clearly described (Refer to the "toolkit" in section 4 below).</i>
<p>Alert level 1: Most normal activities can resume with certain restrictions, precautions, and health guidelines to be followed at all times.</p> <p>100% of the student population returns with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Physical distancing ○ Health protocols ○ International students return <p>Age and co-morbidity of staff and students managed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Essential laboratory work with a Unisa permit. ○ Telephone and/or online platform interaction with human participants. ○ Online quantitative research, e.g., surveys. ○ Research that requires physical human participant interaction in close proximity conducted under strict conditions in homes, communities, restricted government facilities, schools, facilities for the aged (Refer to the "toolkit" in section 4 below). ○ <i>Postgraduate students that need to proceed with data collection methods involving physical human interaction with participants must inform their supervisors and notify the ERC by completing an amendment form, signed by the supervisor and student – the safety precautions must be clearly described (Refer to the "toolkit" in section 4 below).</i> ○ <i>All other researchers that want to proceed with data collection methods involving physical human interaction with participants must notify the ERC by completing an amendment form, signed by the researcher – the safety precautions must be clearly described (Refer to the "toolkit" in section 4 below).</i>

4. Strict safety and protocol guidelines with human participant contact (alert 1 and 2) – also referred to as the "toolkit":

The following guidelines are recommended to ensure the safety of the researcher(s) and participant(s):

- 4.1 Do not proceed with the intended contact data collection visit or meeting if the researcher and/or participant is feeling unwell.
- 4.2 Telephonic pre-screening before the visit is advised, as well as keeping a register of participants that were involved in face-to-face data collection activities.
- 4.3 The researcher and members of the research team must also be screened before any human participant contact. Keep evidence of the screening data signed by a witness.
- 4.4 Useful Covid-19 guidance is provided on the Department of Health WhatsApp group +27 60 012 3456.
- 4.5 When the visit can go ahead, please be mindful of the following procedures:
 - 4.5.1 Wearing an appropriate cloth mask. Do not touch your face and advise the participants to do the same.
 - 4.5.2 The researcher has to ensure that the research team and participants have masks and sanitizer.

- 4.5.3 In specific contexts, it will be essential to handout sanitiser and sealed cloth masks to the participants.
- 4.5.4 If possible, do a pre-screening by measuring the participants' temperature (including those of the researcher) and ask questions that were not included in the telephonic pre-screening.
- 4.5.5 Keep a physical distance of 2 meters;
- 4.5.6 Sanitize hands with 70% alcohol-based sanitizer or wash with soap and water for at least 40 seconds before commencing any activities.
- 4.5.7 Sanitize all surfaces before commencing activities and again before leaving.
- 4.5.8 Avoid the exchange of paper between participants and researchers, unless the use of paper is ethically or scientifically justified.
- 4.5.9 Use disposable gloves with the handling of hard copies of documents, put it in a paper envelope, and store it away. Researcher and participants to remove the gloves or sanitize your hands since the novel coronavirus can reside on paper for up to 3 days.
- 4.5.10 Store documents for a minimum of 3 days before taking them out.
- 4.5.11 The risk of contagion during the use and exchange of pens, digital devices, smartphones, and tablets must be considered and mitigated. Please refer to the links below, how to clean these devices.
- 4.5.12 No food may be shared. Pre-packed, sanitized items such as chips or water could be handed out if necessary.

Resources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html>

<https://www.ehs.washington.edu/covid-19-health-and-safety-resources>

Acknowledgment:

The guideline document was informed, with permission from Prof Minrie Greeff, Emeritus Professor: Africa Unit for Transdisciplinary Health Research, by:

- M. Greeff (21 May 2020), Implications of Alert Levels for Researchers and Postgraduate students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Guideline document.
- M. Greeff (11 June 2020), Implications of Alert Levels for Researchers and Postgraduate students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Webinar hosted by AUTHeR, North West University.

Additional resources consulted:

Watermeyer, J, Knight, J & Small, M, WITS non-medical REC guidelines for research during Covid-19.

South African Government, Webpage - Corona information and updates,
<https://www.gov.za/Coronavirus>