

Prof T Meyiwa
P. O. Box 392, UNISA, 0003
TELE: +27 (0) 12 429 2851
EMAIL: meyiwt@unisa.ac.za

TO: ALL RESEACHERS

DATE: 09 April 2020

SUBJECT: UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA COVID-19 POSITION STATEMENT ON RESEARCH ETHICS

Dear Colleagues

On 15 March 2020 President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the nation to declare a state of national disaster, following an increase in confirmed cases of COVID-19. The evolving COVID-19 pandemic requires that research is adapted on an ongoing basis to the dynamic situation.

A responsible approach to human participant, community engaged, animal, environmental, molecular and cell research is required in the context of COVID-19. Unisa supports the continuation of research activities, where possible, guided by the following principles and activities supported by the Policy on Research Ethics:

Protection of the participant, the community, and the researcher(s) and research support staff from any risks of harm while conducting research through the implementation of clear pragmatic risk mitigation measures.

Researchers must assess the risk - benefit ratio of a research study, particularly research that requires face-to-face contact, and the collection of data in public spaces or in locations where social distancing cannot be practiced.

The respect for the participant's rights for self-determination should always be carefully considered, for example the right to decline participation or to withdraw or collectively exploring alternative ways of participation.

In the interest of participants and researchers, the consensus is that new face-to-face or studies with an inherent risk to participants and/or researchers should not be embarked upon for the duration of the lockdown period.

Although this sounds like a blanket statement, registered Unisa Health Research Ethics Review Committees would be willing to consider well-motivated applications as exceptions only. The researcher needs to provide an accompanying letter with a detailed rationale for why this research study needs to be enacted during this time.

Unisa Ethics Review Committees (ERCs) will continue to accept and review research ethics applications but will clearly indicate where the ERC does NOT wish this study to commence with immediate effect in accordance with the lockdown regulations.

No research involving face-to-face contact or research studies involving settings where it is difficult to institute social distancing or practice protective measures may continue without formal notification and approval by the ERC that granted the approval in consultation with one of Unisa's registered Health ERCs/RECs.

Where or when it is unavoidable to reduce, suspend or postpone research activities, the onus is on the principal researcher to notify the ERC that approved the research study and to provide a rationale why the research needs to continue.

The ERC must inform the Unisa Research Ethics Review Committee (URERC) of all ongoing studies that may pose a risk of harm relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. National instituted protective measures such as hand hygiene, cough etiquette, and social distancing should be implemented, and monitored at sites where these studies will continue.

Research for degree purposes: The College of Graduate Studies and the Heads: Graduate Studies and Research will negotiate processes to mitigate the possible negative fallout to student progress (both new research and research that is in progress). The COVID-19 outbreak and its ramifications are difficult to measure or predict, but the suggested time frame for this position statement to be enacted is not less than the lockdown period.

Staff, researchers and supervisors are requested to carefully monitor any further internal communications for directives and guidance on this matter. Researchers who are dependent on internal, and more so external, sources of funding and sponsorship should consider the potential risks that COVID-19 and social distancing strategies will have on project milestones and audit reporting deadlines. Where possible, researchers should engage with the funder/sponsor regarding these timeframes.

Approved research that may continue without ERC notification

- Research conducted by Unisa researchers that does not engage participants face-to-face and thus limits or does not pose the risk of COVID-19 infection may continue without ERC notification.
- Research studies that collect data online or consists of the review of records are considered of low risk in current circumstances and may continue.
- Data science research and other forms of research that does not require face-to-face interaction may continue.
- Laboratory-based research where appropriate safety precautions can be taken and legitimate access to the facilities negotiated may continue (except research related to COVID-19).

The researcher/s remain responsible to ensure safety and protective measures, and to continue to minimise risk.

The onus is on the researcher to contact the relevant Ethics Review Committee if uncertain or concerned about how, or if at all, to proceed with approved research studies.

Kind regards



Prof T Meyiwa

Vice Principal: Research, Postgraduate Studies, Innovation and Commercialisation

Acknowledgement:

Stellenbosch University (SU) Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) Researchers' Position Statement on Research Involving Human Participants (Clinical Research), 6 April 2020