This document is intended to offer advice on how you might modify your study protocol during the current COVID-19 circumstances in order to limit transmission of the novel coronavirus and reduce risk both for the researcher and the research participants.

Researchers are advised to follow national regulations, guidelines and protocols in the collection of data during this time.

We are not saying that researchers cannot do face to face activities or that we will deny you ethics clearance if you want to do this, merely that you should consider other ways of collecting your data in the circumstances.

Consider whether your proposed methodology can be adapted in light of national restrictions around COVID-19. Studies that involve a door to door survey in a community, focus groups, or ethnography in a restaurant, for example, are not going to be possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies that involve handing out a hard copy questionnaire or doing face to face interviews, for example, may be adapted towards online modes of data collection. Please consult your supervisor in this regard if you are a student.

Some studies may not lend themselves to electronic/online data collection and some populations may not be reachable via such means. If your methodology cannot be adapted, then you may need to reconsider your research methodology. Please consult your supervisor in this regard if you are a student. If you decide to proceed with face to face data collection, then your application should outline the steps you will take to prevent transmission, adhere to social distancing rules, and promote safety of the researcher and participants.

Any paper-based research carries the risk of contagion, since the novel coronavirus can reside on paper for 2-3 days (some estimates indicate up to 5 days). Please avoid the exchange of paper between participants and researchers, unless there is a strongly justified need to use paper in the research and very carefully outlined plans are put in place to ensure sanitization. Also consider the risk of contagion when the use and exchange of pens, digital devices, smartphones, tablets are required for consent purposes.

Wherever possible, use electronic means to facilitate the consent process and data collection. For example, make use of email, online mechanisms such as Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, Whatsapp, Skype, or Zoom to collect data wherever possible.
Considerations on how best to preserve participants’ anonymity and confidentiality must be retained when alternative electronic platforms are used. For example, participants can be sent the PIS via electronic means and consent can be recorded verbally.

When switching to electronic/online means for your research projects, please consider issues such as connectivity, online accessibility, and data costs. This issue is relevant to both researchers and participants. For example, a study that involves interviews with Wits students should make use of zero-rated platforms to avoid incurring data costs. When considering a switch from face to face to online interviews, the researcher must consider whether the participants have access to Wi-Fi or data and if not, how such costs will be covered.

Please do not hesitate to speak to your research supervisor, contact your School Committee Chair, or get in touch with us for any queries related to your studies.

For more information on the COVID-19 situation in South Africa, please visit http://sacoronavirus.co.za, or call the official toll free call centre on 0800 029 999, or send HI to 0600 123 456 on WhatsApp.

Compiled by J. Watermeyer, J. Knight, M. Small
(HREC Non-Medical Chair and Deputy Co-Chairs)

UPDATE JUNE 2020

Information from the Gauteng Department of Education (10 June 2020):

“Kindly note that visitors are currently NOT permitted into the GDE school premises because of the pandemic (Covid 19) challenges, as the Department is not certain of the status of the learners or teachers; this includes Researchers.

Researchers may, however collect data online, telephonically or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate. The approval letter will then indicate the type of arrangements that have been made with the school.

The Researchers are advised to make alternative arrangements with the schools via Fax, email or telephonically with the Principal.”

Contact:
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