

PhD trajectories in times of corona

The corona crisis has a huge impact on the entire country. Many sectors have come to a complete standstill. Academia is also affected by the crisis: teachers have to teach online from home, students fear study delays and much research cannot continue without problems. The corona crisis also poses problems for PhD candidates. Like many people, they experience stress from this situation, they may be afraid and experience difficulties in focussing on their research. Working from home can also increase loneliness. In addition to these relatable difficulties, PhD students also encounter more specific issues. PNN has identified a number of critical problems and is making urgent recommendations to universities, UMCs and research institutions on how they can play a role in reducing these problems for PhD candidates.

- **Compensation for delays:** A PhD trajectory has a concrete final goal and a corresponding concrete end date: at the end of the contract the thesis should (in theory) be finished. Due to the corona crisis and the associated measures, many PhD candidates will be delayed in their research. These delays are, for example, due to stalled or delayed research projects, spending a lot of time digitizing courses, or to personal situations that do not allow for a regular continuation of the PhD program. This makes it increasingly difficult for many PhD candidates to complete their project within their contract duration.
PNN calls for compensation for all PhD candidates who are facing or experiencing delays as a consequence of the corona crisis. Customized and lenient solutions are key. Customization is necessary because every PhD candidate encounters different problems: while the one can still conduct research to a limited extent, the other sees their entire project crumble. Customized solutions, in consultation with the PhD candidate, are required to address this. Leniency is required because of the magnitude of the corona crisis, which affects lives and work in many ways. In our opinion, care tasks are just as valid a reason for compensation as not being able to continue research. This compensation can take the form of a paid extension of the PhD trajectory, but also, for example, of relaxed requirements for obtaining the doctorate, for instance by requiring one fewer paper. All kinds of other solutions are also possible, but customization and leniency are crucial for all of these solutions. Due to the wide variation in types of PhD research, the level of the Graduate Schools seems best suited to us to provide this customization and this leniency.
- **Health is more important than research:** While some universities have shut down completely, other universities have placed the responsibility on principal investigators to determine which research is vital and which is not. Naturally, everyone thinks their own research is important, and everyone would like their own research to continue. However, we must ensure that no undesirable situations arise in which supervisors put pressure on PhD candidates not to adhere to the measures announced by the government, just to continue non-vital research. We therefore advocate an overarching policy of the universities to prevent researchers in situation of dependency (PhD candidates, but also postdocs, junior lecturers and researchers with temporary contracts) from unnecessarily feeling compelled to make their health interests subordinate to research interests.
- **Flexibility in the PhD defences:** It is currently, quite rightly so, not possible for PhD defences to take place physically. However, we see that universities deal with this problem in different ways. Some universities postpone PhD defences, others allow PhD defences to take place digitally, and yet others leave this choice up to the PhD candidates. Although we expect the first two groups of universities to offer some flexibility, we think it is undesirable that universities take this decision for the PhD candidate. For some PhD candidates, proceeding with the defence is problematic because the corona measures may hinder a proper preparation, while for others delay can lead to practical problems. Even if the university could offer flexibility if necessary, the standard chosen by the university puts pressure on the PhD candidate, who would have to object and go against the university's policy. We therefore advocate that universities implement policies that are flexible by default and make the choice between postponement or a digital defence in consultation with the PhD candidate.

We call on all universities, UMCs and research institutes to adopt our recommendations.

On behalf of the PhD candidate Network Netherlands
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