



Maastricht University

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Solutions for PhD
candidates and
postdocs

The coronavirus crisis has had a great impact on UM research. Research with human subjects, for example, has been halted and virtually all researchers experience bottlenecks caused by extra online teaching duties, care duties and limited facilities for work at home. PhD candidates and postdocs (researchers with temporary contracts), in particular, are faced with problems.

Maastricht University has developed a plan with potential solutions to address these problems. The Executive Board, Management Team, Research platform (associate deans for research), PhD Platform, Maastricht Young Academy and Recognising & Rewarding research committee were involved in the development of the plan. The terms of reference of organisations including the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), Dutch Federation of University Medical Centres (NFU), Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development (ZonMw), PhD candidate Network of the Netherlands (PNN) and POSTDOCNL were taken into account, as well as national and international developments including the new system of recognising & rewarding¹.

¹ www.vsnul.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/Position%20paper%20Ruimte%20voor%20ieders%20talent.pdf

For whom?

This document summarises the various solutions.

The complete plan, which is available [here](#), offers solutions for all Maastricht University PhD candidates and postdocs.

This plan was prompted by the difficult situation in which young scientists (with temporary contracts) find themselves due to the coronavirus crisis. Delays in their research can have serious consequences for the careers of this vulnerable group of scientists.

UM also, self-evidently, devotes attention to all other staff who are confronted with bottlenecks and problems. The Executive Board and the faculties are continually discussing issues such as the importance of making sure that sufficient capacity continues to be available for the transition to online education and resolving as many of the bottlenecks and problems caused by the coronavirus crisis as possible. This also includes monitoring the workload.

Two parts

The plan is divided into two parts:

- A. Generic framework of solution approaches**
- B. Standardised decision-making procedure**

A Generic framework of solution approaches

The generic framework encompasses a range of options and provides for customisation to arrive at the most appropriate solution. The options are focused on rounding off the research as far as possible in the available time and with the available resources by revising the content of research projects and, when possible, adjusting expectations (without lowering quality standards). This solution approach is in line with the new system of Recognising & Rewarding and the DORA principles that place the emphasis on quality (rather than quantity), content, creativity and the contribution that research makes to the state of knowledge. The commitment and cooperation of the supervisors and Principal Investigators is of crucial importance to the identification of suitable solutions. It will also be necessary to review agreements on modifications and adjustments that can be reached with external funders of research.

Revision of content of research projects and adjustment of expectations

The 'aptitude test to verify the ability to contribute to the independent pursuit of science' criterion is guiding for PhD research. Suitable solutions must be based on the principle that it is always possible to verify this aptitude, irrespective of the method or approach adopted in the situation. Consequently, the number of articles, chapters and publications is not of relevance, but rather the quality of the research and the PhD thesis – subject to the express condition that the minimum standard for PhD theses may not be compromised. This is necessary to guarantee the quality of UM PhD degrees and to avoid a disadvantaged position on the academic labour market.

Postdocs projects are often of a shorter term and strictly specified: sometimes explicit learning outcomes are lacking. In these cases, the learning outcomes will need to be examined closely together with the principal investigator (and, where relevant, with the external funder).

Potential solutions are:

- Adjustment of the study design;
- Adjustment of all or part of the research question (for example, in the event of physical examinations of persons in coronavirus risk groups);
- Adjustment of the quantitative standard for the number of articles;
- Adjustment of the expectations (for example, with respect to the number of studies, chapters and publications);
- A replacement study that can be carried out with the prevailing restrictions and available resources (for example, online rather than physical, with a different target group) in the same or a shorter period of time;
- A more flexible focus of the PhD thesis (for example, the inclusion of a COVID-19 study/publication in the PhD thesis in the place of a planned article);
- One less study/experiment to absorb the delay/overrun (moving on to the concluding phase at earlier than originally intended);
- Research using data that has already been collected;
- Literature review/meta-analysis (instead of an actual study);
- Study with a smaller number of human subjects;
- Repeating the study or discontinued study in a different form;
- Reduction of amount of field research or longitudinal research;
- Moving to another research phase.

Extra time solutions

In some research projects, implementing one or more of the aforementioned options will be insufficient to resolve the delay. Absorbing these delays by extending the contract is possible. A contract extension, where relevant a one-off extension, is intended for cases in which the ongoing research suffers a delay due to the corona measures and a revision of the research plan and adjustment of the expectations are impossible and, consequently, it will not be possible to complete the research in the original term of the contract.

The full framework (see [here](#)) contains more information on cases in which a contract extension is possible from a legal and Collective Labour Agreement perspective. Only employed PhD candidates (i.e. who receive an UM salary) come into consideration for a contract extension funded by UM.

Non-employed PhD candidates are not in employment with UM and, consequently, cannot be offered a contract extension. The completion of the research of these PhD candidates is facilitated by extending the hosting agreement so that they retain their access to UM facilities (such as the library) and qualify for an application for an extension of their residence permit. Some non-employed PhD candidates pay an annual PhD track fee. In some cases, it may be possible to waive the 2020 fees, either in whole or in part.

B. Standardised decision-making procedure

A standard decision-making procedure has been drawn up to find the best solution to problems caused by the coronavirus crisis. The decision-making procedure consists of five successive steps, the first of which is to assess whether rounding off the research in the available time and with the available resources will be possible. When this is not possible, and revision of the research and/or adjustment proves impossible, then employed PhD candidates and postdocs can submit an application for a contract extension to what is referred to as the 'faculty delay committee' of the relevant faculty. This committee assesses and decides whether a contract extension can be offered. A 'central delay disputes committee' has also been set up to offer PhD candidates and postdocs the option of lodging an objection against the decision of the 'faculty delay committee'.

In summary, the standardised decision-making procedure consists a sequence of five steps (see flowchart on next page). The full version is available [here](#).

PhD candidates/postdocs submit an application for a contract extension in their last year. Employed PhD candidates/postdocs who are not in their last contract year are nevertheless requested to compile information about the delay and the argumentation for the necessary contract extension and

document this information. In his/her last contract year, the employed PhD candidate/postdoc can then determine whether he/she has caught up with the delay or that a contract extension is actually required and, consequently, an application must be submitted to the 'faculty delay committee'.

Application

The faculties are responsible for the implementation of the generic framework of potential solutions and the standardised decision-making procedure. The faculties will be generous to PhD candidates and postdocs and endeavour to avoid delays. The individual faculties will communicate how they implement the plans.

The actual performance of the plans will be monitored at a number of levels. This is necessary, for example, to verify that all PhD candidates and postdoc are covered by the procedure. The correct use of both the generic framework of solution approaches and the decision-making procedure will also be monitored to guarantee that PhD candidates and postdocs are offered the most suitable solution or solutions for their individual problems and bottlenecks.

Flowchart of the standardised decision-making procedure

