

>>SERVICES AND MEASURES FOR JUNIOR RESEARCHERS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Information packet for junior researchers

December 2020/January 2021

The coronavirus pandemic has confronted us all with major personal and professional challenges. Junior researchers, especially those currently in their qualification phase, have faced particularly difficult circumstances. Along with reorganising their professional routine (requiring additional work) and assuming familial responsibilities (additional burden) under coronavirus restrictions, filling in as needed to care for their children and family members, they are pressed to continue advancing their own academic qualification. The University of Münster (WWU) is committed to actively supporting its junior researchers in this situation and reducing pressure and insecurity by offering a variety of services and measures. In this way, the WWU wishes to do its part during the current pandemic to keep junior researchers healthy, creative and concentrated on their research projects in an individually tailored working environment. In this document, the WWU would like to inform you about the services and measures available to junior researchers, along with contact partners who are available to assist you in a relatively prompt and unbureaucratic manner.

Important! Please remember that these services and measures are equally targeted at women, men and gender-diverse persons. While current studies show (see [Coronavirus and Equal Opportunity](#)) that a much higher proportion of women have been shouldering childcare and familial care responsibilities in addition to their professional obligations during the pandemic, the WWU encourages all members of the University to negotiate a fair and uniform distribution of familial duties, to which end it offers targeted relief and individual advice services.

If you require more information or have any suggestions for improving this document, please contact the personal advisor to the Vice Rector for Strategic Personnel Development, Dr Corinna Lenhardt (email: corinna.lenhardt@uni-muenster.de; tel. +49 251 83-22332).

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1. The academic qualification phase during the Covid-19 pandemic

Legal basis: Amendment to the Fixed-Term Employment Act for Academic Staff (WissZeitVG)

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the maximum duration of employment for academic staff provided by the Fixed-Term Employment Act for Academic Staff (WissZeitVG) has been extended to a total of twelve months in accordance with § 7 (3) WissZeitVG in conjunction with WissBdVV.

Amendment to the WissZeitVG: Implementation and measures at the WWU

The basic policy of the WWU is that all staff who are pursuing academic qualification should have the possibility to complete their qualification activities during their employment period. Restrictions and impediments resulting from the coronavirus should be avoided or compensated as best as possible, and cases of hardship should be thoughtfully examined on a case-by-case basis and adjusted accordingly.

Based on this general policy, junior researchers are encouraged to discuss their personal and professional situation with their (academic) supervisor. The goal is to implement a workplace arrangement and workload which is both feasible in the current situation and serves to achieve the

desired results (for example, with respect to projects and resources). For example, you could discuss the following options with your supervisor:

1. Normal extension of the fixed-term employment contract based on a new prognosis on the duration of your qualification requirements; short-term extensions should not be granted during the qualification.
2. Use of the extended maximum period of fixed-term employment (in acc. with WissZeitVG, see above).
3. Individual relief (for example, reduction of teaching duties, team teaching, less synchronous instruction, temporary redistribution of administrative tasks, support from student/research assistants who can be financed, e.g. through the faculty's "corona budget").

Applications for employment extensions can be submitted to the responsible HR [department 3.3](#). Approval of extended employment beyond the former maximum term limit can only be granted to offset the actual additional burden caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In the application, the academic staff member should provide a written statement confirming that the coronavirus pandemic has had an adverse impact on the progress of his/her academic qualification. The statement should include key points outlining how the pandemic affected the qualification measures.

Extensions to fixed-term civil servant employment contracts

Typical civil servant positions with fixed-term employment status include assistant professors (*Juniorprofessoren*), temporary lecturers and temporary senior lecturers (*Akademischer Räte* and *Oberräte auf Zeit*). The law regulates the duration of employment and the time when interim evaluations are conducted (for assistant professors).

Delays caused by restricted operations at the University or the lack of sufficient childcare due to closures of day care facilities and schools should be considered in job evaluations or "probation" decisions in favour of the employees.

Due to coronavirus pandemic-related restrictions in the higher education sector, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia has amended the Higher Education Act to allow assistant professors (*Juniorprofessoren*) and temporary (senior) lecturers (*Akademische (Ober-) Räte*) who worked as civil servants at any time between 1 March and 30 September 2020, to request and receive an employment extension of an additional six months following the conclusion of their total permissible term of employment (§§ 39 (5a), 44 (8a) HG).

In addition to this six-month extension granted to fixed-term civil servants, the recently issued Higher Education Fixed-Term Limit Extension Regulation (HSBdVV) permits an additional extension of up to another six months (§§ 1 and 2 HSBdVV).

Fixed-term civil servants who are hired or employed between 1 October 2020 and 31 March 2021 are consequently eligible to receive an extension of up to six months to their maximum fixed-term limit (§§ 1 and 2 HSBdVV).

Corresponding requests can be submitted to the responsible HR staff in [Dept. 3.1](#) via official channels.

Qualification in third-party projects

Job extensions (generally of the “cost-neutral” kind) are usually possible and can be requested in accordance with the rules of the third-party funding provider. Large third-party funding providers, such as the DFG, BMBF and the Volkswagenstiftung, have created funding packages to cover additional expenses (particularly for material resources). The purpose of these measures is to ensure that research work which could not be conducted as intended and at the desired level of productivity due to the current situation can continue and be completed as planned (see [here](#)).

Please contact your respective third-party funding provider for information on their current funding policies.

Contacts

If you have any questions concerning your qualification phase, the first person you should contact is your (academic) supervisor. If you belong to a collaborative research centre (SFB), Excellence Cluster, graduate school etc, the respective coordinator can assist you further.

Of course, support is also available from low-threshold and independent central advice services, such as the Equal Opportunity Officer (either the [principal Equal Opportunity Officer](#) or the [faculty-level Equal Opportunity Officer](#)), the [Staff Council](#) and the [Family Service Office](#).

If you belong to a specific third-party project, please contact the third-party funding provider.

If you have teaching-related questions, you can receive quick, unbureaucratic help by contacting corona.lehre@uni-muenster.de.

Questions concerning personnel matters should be directed to corona.personal@uni-muenster.de.

We also recommend reading the information provided in the **employee FAQs about the coronavirus** ([Link](#)).

2. Coronavirus, research, teaching, self-administration – and familial duties?!

If you are struggling to meet your professional obligations due to the cancellation or restriction of childcare or family caregiving options, there are a number of support services available at the WWU. Even if you do not have (additional) caregiving responsibilities, you are eligible to receive support through these relief measures, e.g. for managing the special demands of converting teaching activities and materials to digital formats.

Emergency childcare

In some cases, employees are in desperate need of childcare so that they can participate in committee meetings, job interviews, seminars etc. The WWU offers its employees the following services:

- low-threshold, needs-oriented consultation by the [Family Service Office](#).
- short-term childcare solutions for students and staff who must attend committee meetings, lectures or take examinations, or must attend to duties outside the core childcare hours or need childminding services due to the short-term interruption of childcare due to illness or the unscheduled closure of a day care facility. The Family Service Office offers back-up childminding services at no charge to fathers and mothers employed at the WWU, as well as

event coordinators and their internal and external conference visitors. The services are provided in cooperation with pme Familienservice Münster at its premises on Friesenring, the Adventure Kids, or directly at the event venue. Services also include babysitter financing. Please contact the [Family Service Office](#) if need arises.

Extension to leaves of absence to care for sick children

To assist parents during the coronavirus pandemic, children's sickness benefits have been extended by an additional five days per parent, and for single parents, by an additional ten days. This decision was announced by the leading representatives of the grand coalition on 25 August 2020. Employed parents are therefore allowed to take a total of 15 days (or 30 days for single parents) per child per year as a result of the pandemic. [More information](#)

Financial compensation for loss of work due to a lack of childcare

If you are forced to miss work due to a lack of urgently needed childcare, you may apply for financial compensation under certain conditions according to regulations effective since 30 March 2020. [More information](#)

Workplace and working time adjustments

If the cancellation or restriction of regular childcare services prevents or makes it extremely difficult for you to perform your work despite flexible working times and workplaces, you can bring up the matter with your supervisor – or ideally, your supervisor will proactively approach you to find a mutually acceptable solution to your problem. In addition to emergency childcare, there are other options available, e.g.:

- flexible working hours
- extending internal deadlines and relaxing scheduled agreements as much as possible
- working from home while caring for one's child(ren) in contrast to normal policy
- use of (remaining) holidays
- taking special paid holiday time for up to three days (if not already used)
- taking special holidays which are eligible for compensation benefits, covering up to 67 % of lost income for between 10 and max. 20 weeks (total time allotted to both parents)
- it may be possible in exceptional cases to take special holidays without compensation or have your working hours reduced in the short term. Please note that this option is intended as a long-term measure!

In consultation with your supervisor, further adjustments and flexible solutions can be arranged which fit your individual needs. The aim is to develop creative and personally tailored solutions which offer the best possible relief to junior researchers with familial duties. Possible options could include, for example:

- hiring research/student assistants to support you and/or providing compensation for tasks which cannot be performed at work (financed, e.g. through the faculty's "corona budget")
- establishing a team-teaching model to reduce the workload of individual instructors
- temporarily redistributing and reprioritising academic self-administrative tasks in the team
- organising regular Zoom team meetings to increase the visibility of those working at home while reducing the obligation of being constantly available
- repeating successful online teaching formats in the coming semester (even if regular contact studies are resumed) to help lessen the burden in the time ahead

Virtual continuing education programme

- The Centre for Teaching in Higher Education (ZHL) and its ZHLdigital office offer a wide range of support services to instructors who wish to use digital technologies in their teaching

activities. Instructors can also request individual consultation and assistance with course planning. The ZHL has put together a large toolbox for digital university teaching, accompanied by detailed instructions for ease of use ([Link](#)).

- The [internal continuing education programme of the WWU](#) with current virtual programmes, such as “Virtual Management”, “Staying Relaxed While Working from Home”, “Stress Be Gone – Managing Stress as Demands Change”, “Being a Mother and Academic – During and After the Pandemic”, “Body Language and Communication in Video Conferences, Webinars & Co.” and “Workshop for Fathers” (all in German).
- [\(f\)empower. Coaching and peer counselling](#): A service offered by the Equal Opportunity Office and the HR Department to female employees of the WWU to help them cope with additional challenges caused by the coronavirus pandemic.
- Advice services oriented specifically to one’s personal needs, and virtual events for doctoral candidates and postdocs by the WWU Graduate Centre ([advisory services](#) and [events](#)) and the Equal Opportunity Office (e.g. the [Support Circle](#) for women junior researchers).

Virtual support programme for parents of school-age children

The learning server project supports parents with school-age children in the area of reading and writing. Parents who spend time revising with their children are provided all the virtual materials necessary to sustain their children’s learning progress and ensure stress-free but effective support. This includes diagnosis, individually tailored revision, accompanying qualification and video support. The app offers something for all classes and age groups at all skill levels – from closing minor gaps in knowledge to providing support to children with reading/spelling deficiency. To obtain a brief introduction to the app and the required learning server app codes, send an email to info@lernserver.de.

3. Staying healthy

Living and working in a pandemic is anything but easy. You have been catapulted out of your normal working routine and have landed in a home office. You might be struggling to meet additional, ongoing childcare and familial caregiving responsibilities, and you can no longer fully rely on the physical presence of friends, family and colleagues who would normally help you in crisis situations. Below you will find various programmes and tips to help you stay healthy and happy in this new situation.

Staying healthy in your home office

- The Occupational Health and Environment Protection (StabAU) office has compiled tips [here](#) for creating a healthy, pleasant home-office environment.
- [Hochschulsport@Home](#) offers sports and nutritional advice for employees working at home with live workouts, virtual courses, mini programmes and training plans for a healthy mix of exercise and relaxation. And the daily athletic Zoom meeting called “Auszeit in der Hauszeit” (Time-Out at Home) is no longer an insider’s secret.
- The Student Advice and Counselling Centre (ZSB) offers a list of psychological tips for “on the go” [here](#) and in a more detailed PDF download [here](#).

Help and contacts for those suffering from psychological strain

- The WWU advice office provides confidential, short-term support to employees and supervisory staff who are suffering from psychological strain due to conflicts, addictions and health problems. If you require help, please contact Sabine.Kolck@uni-muenster.de (tel: +49 251 83-22422).
- The [Procrastination Outpatient Clinic](#) of the Faculty of Psychology/Sport and Exercise Sciences (FB 7) offers diagnostics, consultation and therapy to employees and students who

suffer from chronic procrastination. The therapists are bound to confidentiality so that supervisors and colleagues will not be notified.

- The Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) offers a blog on psychological health during “corona times” ([Link](#)) and has established a freephone advice hotline. You can reach the BZgA advice hotline from Monday to Thursday, 10 am to 10 pm and Friday to Sunday from 10 am to 6 pm, also on holidays at: 0 800 2322783.