SERVICES AND MEASURES FOR JUNIOR RESEARCHERS DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Information packet for junior researchers
The coronavirus pandemic has confronted us all with major personal and professional challenges. Junior researchers, especially those currently in their qualification phase, find themselves in 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 quickly 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 executive assistant to the Vice Rector for Career 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 coronavirus pandemic

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

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 by six months. Concretely, this means:

The total permissible duration of employment as put forth in § 2 (1) sentence 1 and 2 is extended by six months if the candidate was employed in accordance with § 2 (1) between 1 March 2020 and 30 September 2020. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) is authorised by legislative decree with approval of the Bundesrat to extend the permissible duration of employment by a maximum six additional months insofar as this is deemed appropriate based on the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Federal Republic of Germany; the extension also applies to employment situations established after 30 September 2020 but before the conclusion of the period of extension provided in the legislative decree. (§ 7 (3) WissZeitVG BT-Drucksache 19/18699)

The amendment applies accordingly to all employment situations per § 2 (1) WissZeitVG which commenced or existed at any time between 1 March 2020 and 30 September 2020.

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 be able 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 mitigated according to the person's individual needs.

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 an individual workplace and workload scheme which is both feasible in the current situation and serves to achieve the desired results (for example, with respect to projects and resources). 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. If another candidate has already been offered the position which you hope to have extended, it is possible to continue payment of your salary for an additional six months from the faculty's augmented “corona budget”.
2. Use of § 7 (3) WissZeitVG (which is retroactively applicable to 1 March 2020).
3. For civil-servant qualification (temporary lecturers (Akademische Räte), assistant professors (Juniorprofessoren)): The extra/double burden caused by the coronavirus pandemic can be considered when evaluating the probation period; at present, individual extensions may not be granted in accordance with civil-servant law. However, the state government of North Rhine-Westphalia has announced a further amendment to take effect in autumn 2020 which would allow civil-service candidates to receive a six-month extension analogous to the amended WissZeitVG provisions.
4. For assistant professors with a negative evaluation or without tenure track: you could request a one-year extension (in the case of a negative evaluation) or a seventh-year extension (for candidates without tenure track).
5. Individual relief (e.g. reduction of teaching duties, team teaching, less synchronous instruction, temporary redistribution of administrative tasks, support from
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 initial packages of funding measures 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).

As things currently stand (June 2020), most scholarship holders and Excellence Clusters are not eligible to apply for additional funding. 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, assistance is also available from low-threshold and independent central advice services, such as the Equal Opportunity Officer (either the central Equal Opportunity Officer or the faculty-level Equal Opportunity Officer), the Staff Council and the Family Service Office.

If you are e.g. a temporary principal investigator (module “Eigene Stelle”), 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 in order, for example, to participate in committee meetings, job interviews, seminars etc. Parental employees of the WWU who are not entitled to emergency childcare on the basis of state regulations now have the possibility to have their children reliably minded in case professional obligations suddenly arise.
At least until 17 July 2020, the WWU is offering its employees the following services:

- low-threshold, needs-oriented consultation by the Family Service Office.
- short-term childcare provided by the external service provider PME Familienservice at its premises on Friesenring.
- childminding by one caregiver in the family’s home environment. Please consult the provisions of the Coronavirus Protection Regulations of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. It is crucial that only the same caregiver minds the child(ren) in the private household.
- online childcare (groups of up to six children ages six to twelve years).

In urgent cases, you can obtain help by sending an email with corresponding justification to service.familie-back-up@wwu.de or phone +49 251 83-29713.

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 workplace, 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 consistently 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. They 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).

• 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 everyday situation.

**Staying healthy in your home office**

• The Operational Health Management 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 Counselling Service for Staff and Management in Conflict-, Addiction-and Health-related Matters provides confidential, short-term support to employees and supervisory staff. 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.