

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

Information packet for supervisory staff

December 2020/January 2021

The coronavirus pandemic has confronted us all with major personal and professional challenges. Junior researchers and 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. There is still no way of knowing what consequences the pandemic may have on the future careers of junior researchers. 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. As a supervisor, you bear a special responsibility and obligation to care for junior researchers even though you yourself are working under enormous stress already. Therefore, in the following 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 and your colleagues 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. As a supervisor, you have the chance to bring up the subject of excessive professional and familial burdens at an early stage and help your junior researchers find suitable solutions.

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](mailto: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 ([§ 7 \(3\) WissZeitVG BT-Drucksache 19/18699](#)).

### **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, supervisory staff should broach the subject of their colleagues' personal and professional situation in an open and supportive manner, especially if they happen to notice signs of over-exertion and persistent stress. The goal is to develop 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). For example, the following aspects can provide potential solutions and can be adapted to your colleague's personal situation:

1. Normal extension of the fixed-term employment contract based on a new prognosis on the duration of the qualification requirements; if possible, no short-term extensions should 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").
4. The faculties have been allocated funding for digital teaching activities which you can request and make use of. Additional funding can also be provided within the faculties, institutes and working groups to pay for student/research assistants who can support staff in their qualification phases.
5. Talk to your staff about their technical equipment in their home office. Are there perhaps older laptops, cameras, microphones etc. at the institute/faculties which they might use?

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 ([department 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**

As a supervisor or manager, you are the first person whom junior researchers are supposed to contact if they have any questions. In a collaborative research centre (SFB), Excellence Cluster, graduate school etc, the respective coordinator is also designated as the first contact partner.

Of course, there are cases when staff may seek advice which exceeds your competence as a supervisor or lies beyond your area of expertise. Your staff can also seek assistance 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 or your staff have any questions about teaching operations, you can receive quick, unbureaucratic help by contacting [corona.lehre@uni-muenster.de](mailto:corona.lehre@uni-muenster.de).

Questions concerning personnel matters should be directed to [corona.personal@uni-muenster.de](mailto:corona.personal@uni-muenster.de).

Also consult the information provided in the [employee FAQs about the coronavirus](#).

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

If your colleagues are struggling to meet their professional obligations due to the cancellation or restriction of childcare or family caregiving options, not only can you offer on-the-job relief with the measures mentioned above, but you can refer them to one of the many support services offered at the WWU. Even colleagues who do not have (additional) caregiving responsibilities are eligible to receive support through these relief measures, e.g. helping instructors cope with 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.

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 an employee is forced to miss work due to a lack of urgently needed childcare, he/she 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 an employee to perform their work despite flexibility to working times and workplaces, you can proactively discuss the matter with your colleague and try to find a mutually acceptable solution to the problem. In addition to emergency childcare, additional options can also be taken, for example:

- flexible working hours
- being as lenient as possible regarding internal deadlines and scheduled agreements
- 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)

- only in exceptional cases may employees take special holidays without compensation or have their working hours reduced in the short term. (Please note, this option is intended as a long-term measure and the WWU strongly advises staff to choose this option only in absolutely exceptional and substantiated cases!)

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 junior researchers 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).
- Of course, there are advisory services, coaching seminars and continuing education programmes for supervisors like yourself. The [internal continuing education programme of the WWU](#) is currently offering the online workshop "Virtual Management"; the department of [personnel development advises supervisory staff](#) and offers professional coaching seminars for supervisory staff if desired.

### 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](mailto:info@lernserver.de).

## 3. Healthy supervisors, healthy team

Living and working in a pandemic is anything but easy. You and your team have been catapulted out of your normal working routine and have landed in home offices. 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. Despite all the responsibility you feel toward your colleagues, projects and social environment, do not ignore your responsibility for your own health and well-being! Below you will find various programmes and tips to help you and your staff 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 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](mailto: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.