

## Questions and answers on assistants' research and working conditions at the time of Covid-19, April/May 2020

### A) Duration of employment contracts

**avuba:** There is great uncertainty regarding the potential extension of assistants' contracts once the current contract term has expired. Contract extension is a valid concern as the measures may have led to the following circumstances:

- limited or complete lack of access to research materials and/or necessary research data (workplace, laboratory, libraries, data located abroad, etc.), which will mean that assistants are unable to meet their planned deadlines
- the interruption – or even abandonment – of ongoing studies that will have to be started again from the beginning and for which no money or working time is planned
- the additional workload for preparing classes
- reduced working time as a result of caring duties, particularly for assistants with young children
- the cancellation or postponement of planned seminars, research stays and conferences, including the resulting lack of credit points required to submit dissertations
- uncertainty regarding the start or postponement of grants/scholarships/fellowships abroad
- the fact that it is almost impossible at the moment to continue with projects that require collaboration between multiple people in one place and/or the use of laboratory/workshop infrastructure

Although the President's Office has declared itself fundamentally in favor of extending employment contracts, it is feared that funding will, in reality, prove problematic on the project management side, and so contract extensions cannot be granted.

*Addition: avuba has asked the free legal advice service (skuba clinic) to clarify whether assistants have the right to contract extensions. Unfortunately, they do not; the Regulations for Academic Personnel ("Ordnung für das Wissenschaftliche Personal") state that it is possible to get a contract extension (the word MAY is used). Section 23 also states that "...If it is absolutely necessary for academic training, and in particular in the case of family responsibilities, the contract may be extended for a maximum of one year in justified cases." Specifically, this means that the maximum duration for doctoral students (5 years) and postdocs (7 years) must not be exceeded, and the reasons and impact must be explained to and discussed with the supervisor in order for the employment contract to be extended (4 + max 1 year for doctoral students or 6 + max 1 year for postdocs).*

**President's Office:** The current pandemic will affect each assistant very differently, from "no restrictions whatsoever" to "delays" (e.g. limited access to measuring equipment), all the way through to "interruption or abandonment" (e.g. no access to research materials abroad).

An assistant's family situation (caring for young children or sick relatives) often presents an additional challenge. Potential, funded contract extensions should therefore be based on actual impairments experienced; "equal treatment" in the form of automatically extending all contracts would be neither viable nor appropriate.

The university management and all external funding providers know how challenging this is for assistants and are striving to find flexible solutions suited to individual situations. In accordance with the Regulations for Academic Personnel (Section 23), applications can be made to extend terms of employment for assistants (doctorate, postdoc) in structural posts beyond the maximum duration. Such an application, including reasons and reference to the current situation, can be submitted in individual cases to the decentralized HR and from there to the central HR via supervisor.

When it comes to externally funded posts, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) has already agreed a range of measures to avoid potential funding shortfalls. Researchers whose projects are due to end before 31 December 2020 can extend them by up to six months on a cost-neutral basis. “Cost neutrality” refers to the overall project budget here, and **not** to individual employment relationships; the SNSF salary levels for assistants remain unchanged. If the remaining funds are not sufficient for cost-neutral extension, an application can be made to the SNSF for an additional contribution. If a funding shortfall develops because a new project funding application to continue the research will not be submitted until 1 October 2020, bridge financing can be granted for the period from 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021. Where necessary, the SNSF guarantees extensions for researchers whose SNSF mobility grants (Doc.Mobility, Early Postdoc.Mobility, Postdoc.Mobility and Advanced Postdoc.Mobility) end between 30 April 2020 and 31 December 2020. For details, see <http://www.snf.ch/en/funding/directaccess/coronavirus-snsf-update/Pages/default.aspx>.

We can therefore conclude that assistants directly affected by the coronavirus crisis meet the requirements for the funded extension of employment contracts and project terms. This applies to structural and externally funded posts.

## **B) Laboratory and workplace conditions**

**avuba:** We have heard that laboratory conditions – what forms of work are permitted in the workplace/laboratory and when, and how many people are permitted in a room at the same time – are not being implemented identically throughout the university. In addition, assistants wish to return to their workplaces as soon as national conditions allow and in compliance with hygiene measures.

**President’s Office:** The measures agreed by the university management at the end of March 2020 to combat the pandemic in the research environment are based on three principles: 1) High safety standards (hygiene measures, social distancing, “1 person per room” rule) aim to prevent virus transmission within the university. 2) Switching to working from home wherever possible and suspending non-priority work minimizes researchers’ presence at the university and on public transport. 3) Maintaining minimal, emergency operations aims to limit the damage to long-term research projects by enabling essential research activities that cannot be postponed to take place subject to high safety standards. The general university conditions were coordinated with the research committee and the Deans of Research to accommodate the needs of individual subject areas. The situation on the ground varies greatly, and so the circumstances can only be evaluated locally with the relevant specialist knowledge. The department management teams are therefore responsible for drawing up and implementing specific emergency operation concepts for the research environment in line with the university requirements and also for prioritizing individual activities; these concepts must be approved by the faculty and the Vice President’s Office for Research.

The university management has opted for uniform safety standards and emergency operation concepts adapted to local circumstances. It would have been possible to establish “the same laboratory conditions for all” via the centralized, standardized implementation of all operating concepts, but only by reducing them to the “lowest common denominator”, and would therefore have worsened conditions for all researchers. This would also have created even greater “inequality” between experimental and theoretical researchers.

Adapted emergency operation concepts for the departments have been developed based on the university safety standards. These concepts stipulate how many people are permitted to work in a particular room and the safety conditions to be followed. The operating concepts take into account the specifics of individual activities, room sizes, etc. and regulate, in detail, which forms of work are permitted and when, and how many people are permitted in a room at the same time. These concepts also regulate how the various occupational safety guidelines can be followed under social distancing conditions to accommodate relevant risks (chemical safety, biological safety, lasers, liquid nitrogen, etc.).

Compliance with the safety standards will be ensured by the departments and regular external checks by facility services, and will be documented in writing. Laboratories that do not stick to the rules will be closed. The safety concepts were successfully implemented during emergency operations – there have been no known cases of virus transmission on the university premises.

As part of the gradual easing of preventive measures announced by the Swiss Federal Council on 16 April 2020, the departments have been asked to develop operating concepts adapted to the research activities in the departments. These concepts must ensure that the regulations on hygiene, distancing and contact tracing can be complied with at all times. This will enable extended access to the laboratories from 27 April 2020 so that researchers can gradually continue their work. More information can be found on the [university's coronavirus webpage](#).

### C) Dissertation defense

**avuba:** Despite the information provided by GRACE and avuba, some people are not yet clear on how to proceed if they have to defend their dissertations between now and the end of the coronavirus measures.

**President's Office:** The regulations concerning PhDs are the responsibility of the faculties or, if applicable, their promotional committees. Inquiries should be addressed (possibly via the supervisors) to the respective Dean's Office. Doctoral students do not have to regulate their doctorate themselves.

### D) Taking vacation

**avuba:** There are rumors that vacations must be taken by the end of July. On the one hand, it is unclear how many vacation days are affected by this; on the other hand, assistants wish to retain some vacation days so that they can visit their families and/or travel abroad later in the year.

**President's Office:** It is not compulsory for approved vacation to be taken if travel has been cancelled due to the coronavirus crisis. It can be postponed in consultation with the relevant line manager. Vacation can be taken at any time in consultation with the line manager.

### E) Credit points

**avuba:** In certain subject areas, participation in conferences is compulsory to successfully complete a doctorate. Will online conferences be credited if need be? Or will the requirements (doctoral ECTS target) be reduced because many conferences have had to be cancelled?

**President's Office:** One of the university's guidelines is that, as far as possible, studies should not be extended due to the coronavirus. In principle, this also applies to academic achievements (credits) for doctorates. The requirements differ somewhat between the departments. Where necessary, the committee representatives should talk to the respective faculty, and possibly to the heads of programs, to find flexible solutions. As it is unclear when larger "physical" conferences in particular will be permitted again, we are sure everyone is open to alternatives.

**F) Travel fund**

**avuba:** Various conferences due to take place this year have been postponed until next year, but some assistants have already made plans to attend a different conference next year; will it be possible to apply for twice as much travel funding next year?

**President's Office:** In view of the pandemic developments, we do not expect people to travel twice as much in the next year. Unused travel fund money will be carried over to the following year.

**G) Communication**

**avuba:** Assistants would like to receive more information, more regularly from the President's Office/faculties regarding rules, guidelines and outlooks, i.e. when specific activities are expected to be allowed again.

**President's Office:** The university management strives to communicate its decisions promptly with information tailored to the target group. As soon as the national and/or cantonal authorities communicate their decisions, the President's Office holds a Zoom meeting to discuss the consequences for the University of Basel and decides on the measures required. These measures are usually communicated immediately. The Federal Council will hold a meeting on 29 April 2020 to decide which measures to ease from 11 May 2020; on 27 May 2020, the Council will announce the procedures to be implemented from 8 June 2020. The University of Basel will inform its members promptly.

Open questions can be sent to [corona@unibas.ch](mailto:corona@unibas.ch). We will answer these questions in good time and then amend the Q&A section on the employee webpage.

<https://www.unibas.ch/en/News-Events/Coronavirus/For-Researchers.html>