

Under the current COVID-19 outbreak employees at NTNU must work from home unless otherwise specified. This affects all employees but those on temporary contracts face specific challenges. DION invited temporarily employed scientific staff to an online lunch meeting on March 25, 2020. We invited everyone to send in questions before the meeting and to share their concerns and questions in the group discussion. In total, there were 11 participants at the meeting. PhD candidates from different faculties (HF, MH, NV, VM, SU) were present as well as one Post-Doc. We tried to establish a broad representation across faculties, departments and employment. However, as none of the participants was a parent or funded by a scholarship (without employment at NTNU), we might miss key concerns of employees with children and externally funded researchers. The following list of concerns and suggestions is therefore not to be seen as exhaustive, but as a mere starting point. DION will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Key Concern 1: Delayed Research Progress and Contract Extensions

The main concern of temporarily employed researchers is the final date of their contract. For them, the situation of home office is not only a nuisance, which delays their work, it might mean that they will not finish their work within the time frame of their contract, causing worries about their personal and professional future. Being on a temporary contract also means that certain coping measures (e.g. delaying or rescheduling a task) may not be an option.

A reappearing question, therefore, is: *Who will be eligible for contract extensions?*

As of today, NTNU has not announced a general extension for all temporarily employed researchers (in contrast to e.g. the University in Bergen), but signaled special arrangements for example for *parents*, who must take care of and home school their children while in home office. DION supports this decision. However, other groups are also facing challenges at this time.

NTNU seems to consider a case-by-case regulation about contract extension. DION as well as the participants of the lunch meeting find this highly problematic for several reasons.

- Approaching this situation on a case-by-case basis implies that the lock-down only affects a few and thereby under-estimates and down-plays the impact of the situation on all temporarily employed staff. Could NTNU manage the likely high numbers of applications?
- What would be the parameters of the decision?
- The bureaucratic workload of a case-by case approach would most likely demand a lot of time and resources. Some people need answers now (e.g. in order to apply for visa extension etc.)
- Being uncertain about one's future for an extended period can have big impacts on one's mental health and productivity.
- Who is going to assess you? Certain personal relationships might make assessments difficult. This also raises the issues of inequalities and subjectivity between evaluators.
- Who will be financing these extensions? If the assessment and extensions are left to individual departments, the decision may be less about the applicants and more about departments' own financial capacities.
- What happens if your application gets denied?

During the meeting the following issues were discussed, which show the severity and breadth of the current situation and its impact, especially on temporarily employed researchers.

1. Challenges to acquire data, conduct experiments, interviews, fieldwork, etc.

Researchers with an empirical or experimental approach might not have enough data to work with in home offices. This affects both researchers who work in laboratories or other currently inaccessible facilities and people who do fieldwork and conduct interviews. Also, researcher who rely on access to certain documents and physical materials, that cannot be accessed online or brought home face the challenge of not being able to use the very data or information necessary for their work. The fact that the university libraries are closed, and physical books, journals and not least librarians are inaccessible also can slow down one's work progress significantly.

2. Physical context of home office

Home office can pose a very concrete and material challenges to many. Some might not find themselves in a situation in which focused work is possible. A flat might not be suited for home office, e.g. because it is shared with other people, because it is too small, not equipped with correct chairs, desks and other equipment. NTNU occupational health department has been good in distributing information about how to work from home. Even in their guidelines, they state that working from home is a demanding situation and that it might mean lowering the ambition of what can be done (Innsida March 25, 2020). However, just acknowledging and lowering one's expectations does not change the end of one's contract, the deadlines they have to meet and the worries that come with it.

3. Mental health aspects of Home Office

Home office is undoubtedly also affecting one's mental health. In our meeting, multiple fears and worries were shared about this. Several participants expressed that they were worried about their families in countries, where the Coronavirus pandemic has worsened, (e.g. Spain and Italy) and that this affects their ability to concentrate. Others struggle with social isolation because of mental health conditions like anxiety or depression. Leaving one's home, exercising and/or meeting others have been important for their wellbeing, which, in line with confinement guidelines, they can no longer rely on. Finally, the uncertainties about one's working situations and progress of research poses in itself a reason for many to worry and be stressed. While we hope that the mental health impact of this situation will be acknowledged (e.g. as a factor for possible contract extensions), we also want to underline that nobody should need to feel extra stress, stigma or being forced to have their emotional and mental state scrutinized in order to prove that this situation has been demanding. We encourage NTNU to find a solution where such pressure is avoided.

4. Residence permits

International scholars might be hit hardest with the fear of an ending contract and delayed research progress, as their residence permit is often connected to their employment status. In these cases, worries reach further than merely running out of money, but involve other concerns such as their legal status in Norway. These processes take time and require applying months in advance, especially when most public administrations are also affected by restrictions and closure. Although NTNU can not do anything about Norway's residence policies, we strongly advise to acknowledge these cases and help researchers who are affected by minimizing the bureaucratic obstacles at NTNU and enabling a fast change (read: extension) of contracts.

Key Concern 2: Lack of clear information and support

We know that everyone in the NTNU boards, unions and groups has been working very hard to communicate the decisions being made as fast and clearly as possible. These times are challenging for all of us and we want to positively acknowledge the work that has been done already.

In the meeting, however, several participants raised concerns about lacking support and clarity in the information and guidelines given. Here are some of the issues:

- some of the **guidelines** from NTNU are perceived as **unclear**, which is confusing. In the meeting, we found out that contradictory information was provided to employees even within the same department (e.g. about access to facilities or what is considered “essential”).
- There is **no clear information of whom to contact** and reach out to when you have questions or need clarification on a guideline.
- Unclear guidelines also expose staff to **pressure situations**. PhD candidates have felt pressured to go to the lab and conduct research, even when they were not comfortable doing so.
- **Supervision and guidance**: “I am feeling left alone” came up several times in discussion. Any outreach from supervisors came down to individual levels of engaged group leaders and supervisors. This lack of guidance also impacts temporary staff’s capacity to supervise others (e.g. PhDs, Master students).
- there is no clear plans or discussions of how to deal with **research stays/field work**, which are currently postponed
- **Research that depends on collaboration with external partners**: as of now, there is no clear information available about what to do, when your work is delayed due to your partners (in other institutions/countries) being on lock down. It is also unclear what would happen, when you are unable to deliver on deadlines to partners due to NTNU's lockdown.
- Can **systematic literature reviews** can count as part of your PhD’s articles? Some departments allow it, some do not. Under the current circumstances, this should be revised with an NTNU-wide rule.
- How does NTNU react to potential **publishing problems**? Delays in the work might lead to delays in submitting articles and in the review process. As some departments require a certain number of publications to be allowed to submit your thesis, this would automatically delay candidates.
- **Services** that we no longer have **access** to (e.g. library services): Independently of contract extensions, we need to find alternative for services.
- Support needed for making **home into a home office space**. Can employees get support/money for getting necessary chairs, tables, etc. ?

Possible Strategies and positive examples:

The virtual lunch meeting also brought to light positive strategies and initiatives that some departments or teams have implemented. So far, activities, outreach and communication are dependent on individuals’ initiatives.

Here are some positive examples that came up in the discussion and that other departments might learn from:

- Departments at SU has offered support (car access or paying taxi fees) for employees to get chairs, screens etc. from their offices to make sure people can work from home in good conditions.
- VM has regular department meetings to share resources and discuss problems. Group leaders were encouraged to discuss with their Post-Docs, PhDs and students how to work in the current situation, what to focus on, what things to **change in the academic plan**.
- some departments and research groups/centers organize common and regular lunches online, in which members of the respective groups are invited to join. MS Teams, Skype and Zoom provide good options for these arrangements.
- DION plans social online events and meetings for PhDs and post-docs to address social isolation and has supported the dissemination of NTNU’s guidelines and advice through DION’s communication channels.