

COVID-19 related project delays and contract extension applications for PhDs and Postdocs in Norway

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Introduction

This survey was conducted by SiN shortly following the deadline many higher education institutions had imposed for temporary research staff to apply for prolonged employment on grounds of delays experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic (15 August). The aim was to gain insight into the prevalence of delays among PhDs and postdocs, their need for a contract extension and the perceived possibilities for obtaining an extension at their respective institutions. The survey was opened on 17 August 2020 and closed on 1 October 2020, and disseminated widely during this period through the SiN network of local organisations.

Close to 800 responses were collected, which represents a non-representative sample of more than 10% of the total number of PhDs and postdoctoral researchers employed in Norway (~7500 in 2019). While these numbers are not representative of all temporary research staff across higher education institutions in Norway, they reflect an even spread across multiple large universities and the experience their PhD students have had with the extension application process. This survey was conducted before many of the applicants were informed of the decision made by their employer to prolong their contract. However, the aim was not so much to obtain estimates of the relative success rates of applications, as to get an impression of the *scope of delays* versus the *perceived opportunities* offered by higher education institutions to compensate for delays incurred due to COVID-19.

The results are structured into four main sections: contract type (employer, research position and funding source), project delays (amount of delay and need for extension), extension application guidelines (provision of information, perceived clarity of information and perceived eligibility for extension) and extension application decisions (intention to apply for an extension, whether the extension was granted or not, and motivations for not applying). Finally, the respondents were also asked if they had any other comments they wished to make. A selection of these comments is provided at the end.

Overall, the results illustrate the widespread discrepancy between delays experienced, and delays compensated. This can be attributed to many different factors, some of which are borne out by this survey. The most obvious reason stems from lack of knowledge or understanding of institutional guidelines for compensation. On top of those who *are not* aware of formal arrangements for contract prolongations, those who *are* aware of such arrangements feel pessimistic about their chances of success were they to apply for an extension. This might indicate that the criteria designed by the institutions are too strict or don't cover all possible reasons for delay. Such an explanation is consistent with the observation that many respondents who applied were not (fully) compensated for their delay, and the large number of respondents who did not even try to apply because they did not think they would be successful.

These findings illustrate the need for better communication and the inclusion of more transparent and less strict evaluation criteria. As things are now, many temporary research staff forego the opportunity to be compensated for the delays caused by COVID-19, which can harm both their research careers and their university in the long run. The factors that contribute to low application numbers and success rate should therefore be weighted carefully in future extension policy decisions.

Highlights

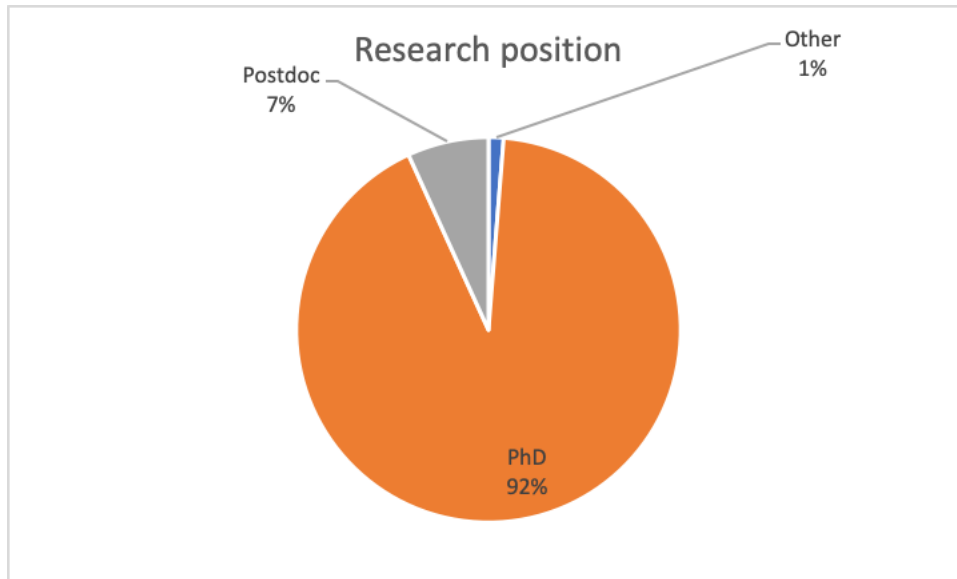
1. Most respondents (92%) are PhD students, which indicates that postdocs are undersampled in our study¹; this is a problem in itself and corroborates anecdotal evidence SiN has gathered on the difficulties of reaching out to postdocs through local institutions.
2. Respondents are mostly funded by the Kunnskapsdepartementet (31%) or Forskningsrådet (33%).
3. Survey respondents were more or less evenly spread across seven large higher education institutions in Norway: NTNU, NBMU, UiO, UiT, OsloMet, UiA and UiS.
4. An overwhelming majority (84%) of respondents has suffered delays in their project due to COVID-19. A majority of this majority (87%) says they **will need an extension** to make up for this delay.
5. In September, about a quarter (23%) of respondents were still not informed about extension policies. Nearly half (44%) of the informed respondents either **did not think the policy was clear enough to apply** (28%) or did not know the full extent of the guidelines (17%).
6. More than half of the respondents who need an extension (53%) don't think they will be eligible for an extension at all (17%) or receive the extension they need to make up for their delay (36%).
7. Most respondents who need an extension already applied (62%) or were planning to apply (24%) by the time they filled in the survey. This means that 14% of those who need an extension **are not planning to apply for an extension**.
8. On average, a third of the respondents who applied were still waiting for the outcome of their applications. Of those who were aware of the outcome, more than a third either got no extension at all (16%) or less than they asked for (21%).
9. Knowledge of the outcome as well as success rate (defined as getting the extension needed to fully compensate delays) **was higher among those with shorter delays**, varying from 40% of outcomes known and a success rate of 75% among respondents with less than month of delay, to 25% of outcomes known with a success rate of 55% among respondents with more than two months of delay. Of the unsuccessful applicants (defined as having a residual delay after knowing the outcome of their application), respondents with a longer delay were less likely to receive a flat-out rejection, but more likely to get an extension that was less than they asked for.
10. Respondents who were delayed by COVID-19 but did not choose to apply for an extension, mostly did so because they **did not think they would be successful**. The second and third most commonly cited reason for not applying for an extension were not needing an extension, or needing it less than others. This indicates that perceived (relative) need (i.e. self-sufficiency and knowing others have it worse) also factors into the decision to apply for an extension through the institution.

¹ Based on the NSD database for statistics of higher education, we would expect 78% of respondents to be PhD students and 22% of the respondents to be postdocs, if sampling were random.

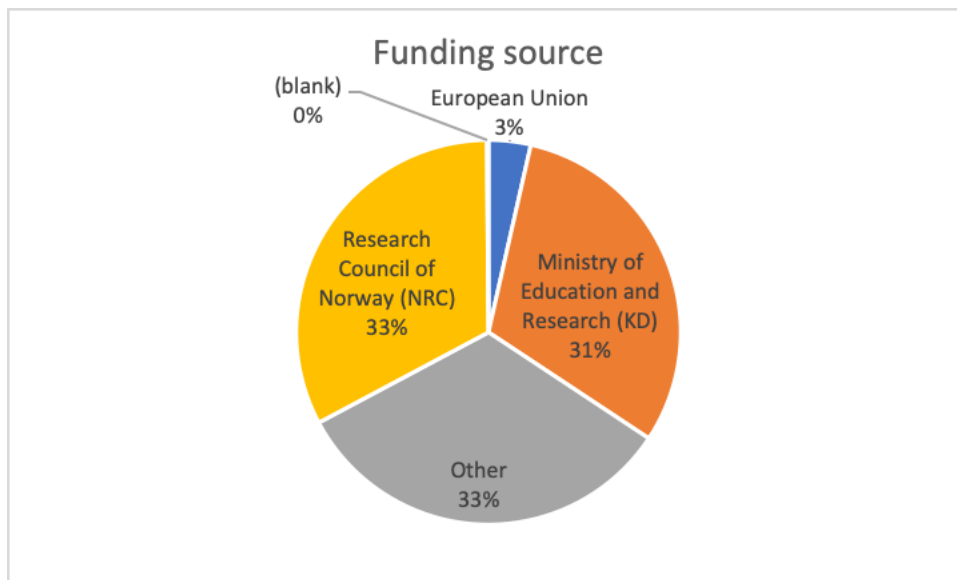
Results

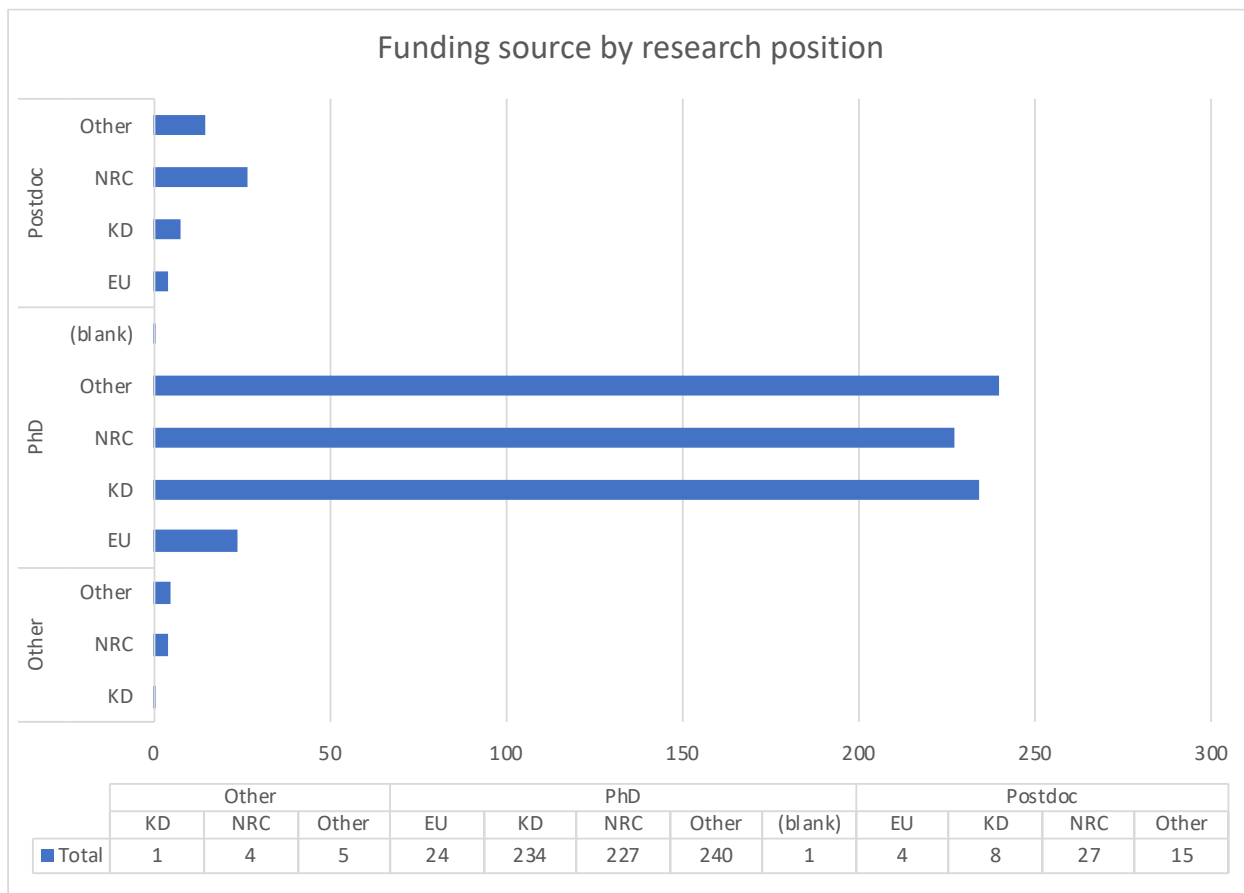
1. Contract

Which temporary research position do you hold? (n=790)



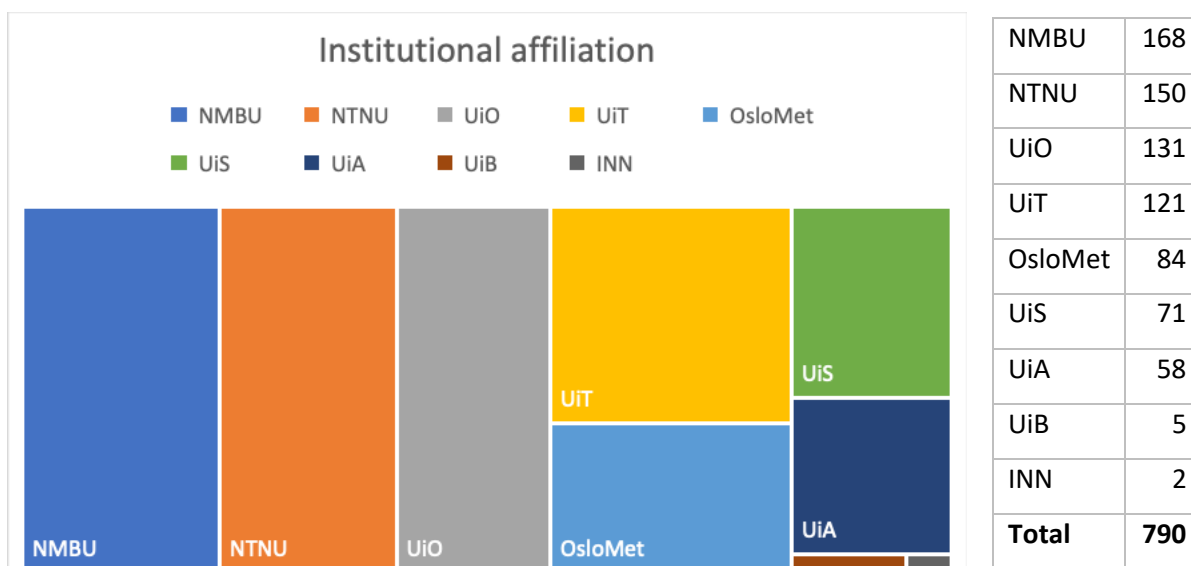
What is the funding source of your research position? (n=790)





With which university are you affiliated? (n=790)

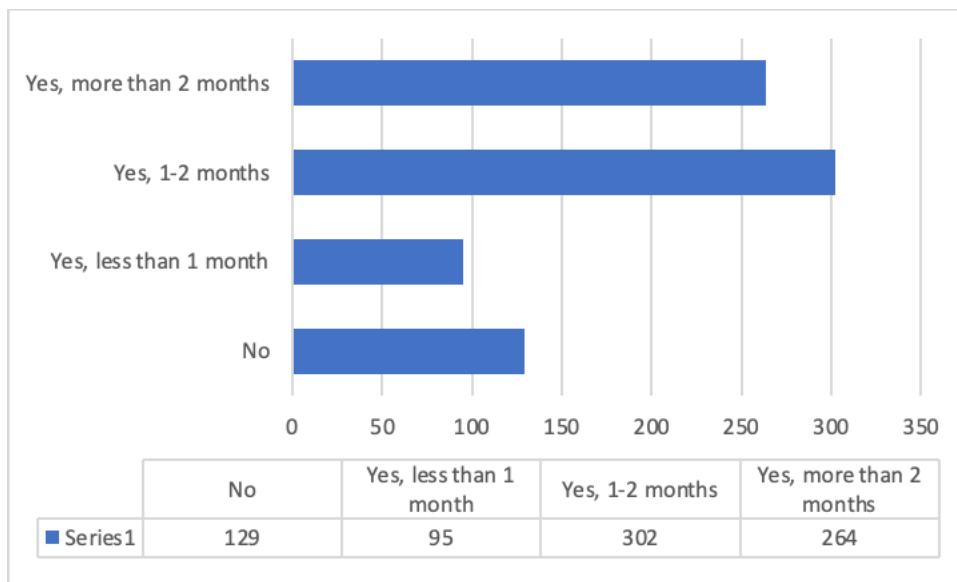
Seven universities had at least 50 respondents (NMBU, NTNU, UiO, UiT, OsloMet, UiS and UiB).



2. Project delays due to COVID-19

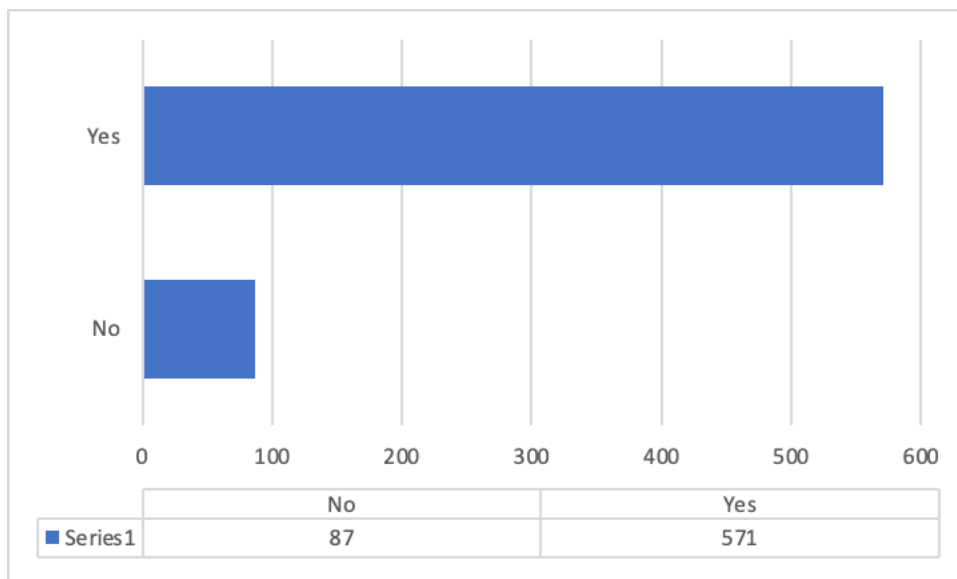
Have you suffered delays in your research due to COVID-19? (n=790)

661/790 (84%) of respondents have suffered delays in their project as a result of COVID-19.

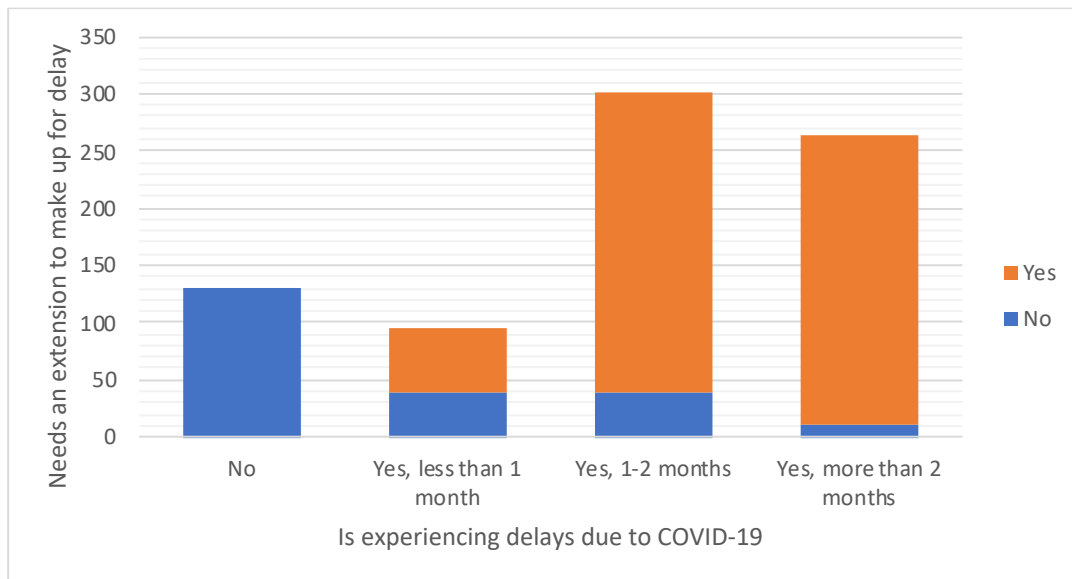


Do you think you need to receive a contract extension to make up for this delay? (n=658)

571/658 (87%) of those who suffered delays, say they will need an extension to make up for the delay.



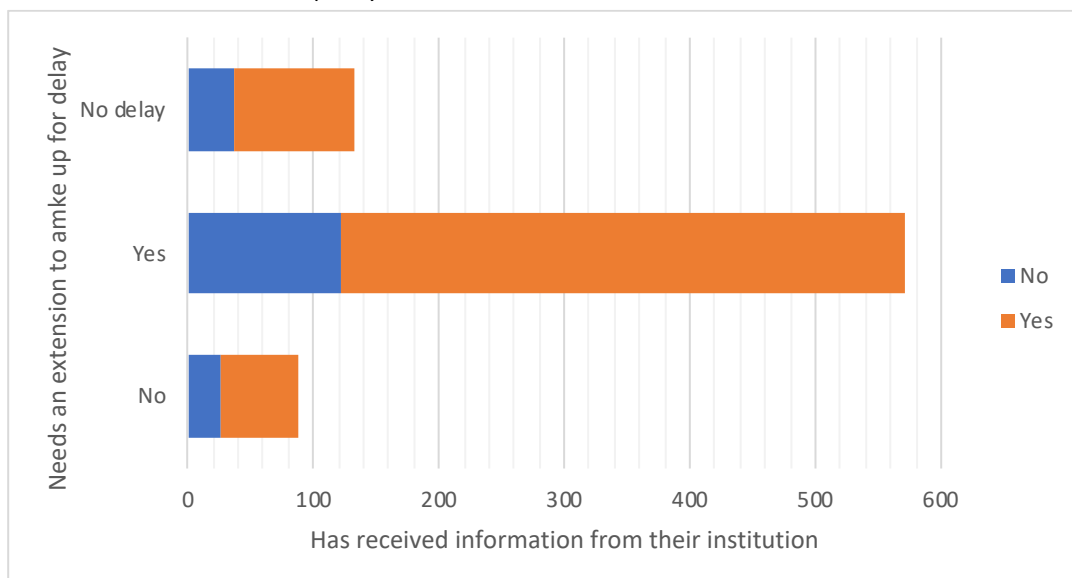
The proportion of respondents who think they will need an extension to make up for their delays, increases with the extent of the delay, from 59% of those who experienced <1 month delay, to 87% of those who experienced 1-2 months delay and 95% of those who experienced >2 months delay.



3. Information about COVID-19 related contract extensions

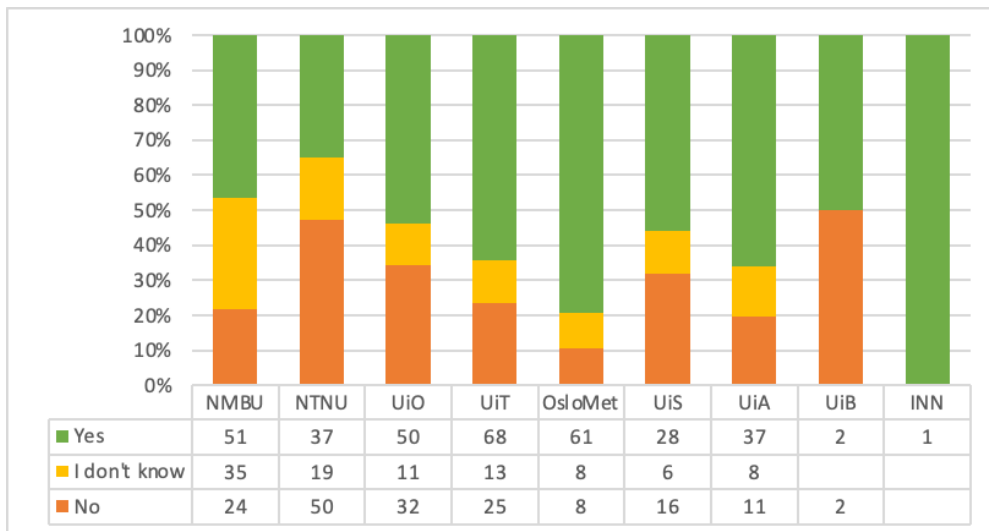
Has your institution provided information about a possible contract extension? (n=790)

606/790 (77%) of respondents says their university has provided information about possible contract extensions. This number is higher among people who need an extension (79% percent) than those who do not need an extension (70%).



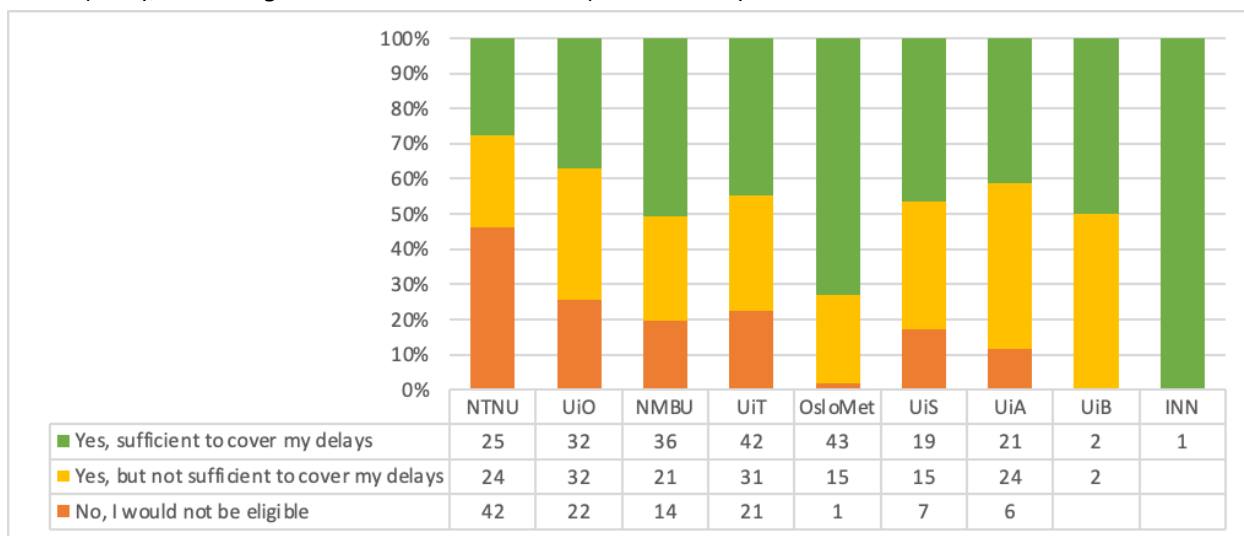
Did you feel this information was clear enough for you to apply? (n=603)

On average, 335/603 (56%) felt the information provided was clear enough to submit an application. This proportion varied significantly across universities, with highest degrees of unclarity (“no” or “I don’t know”) at NTNU (65%) and lowest at OsloMet (21%), excluding institutions where n < 50 (UiB and INN).

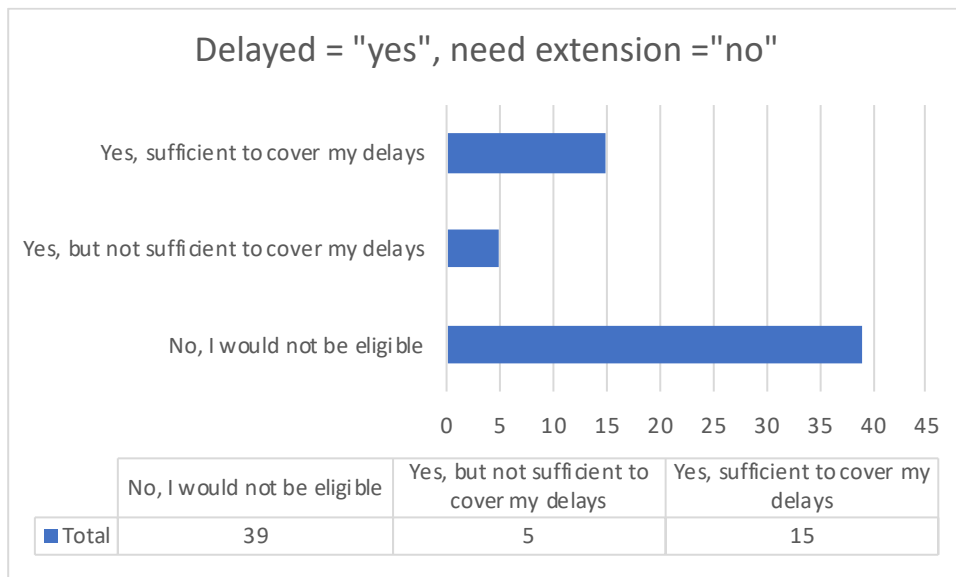


Based on your institutional guidelines, do you think you would be eligible for an extension? (n=498)

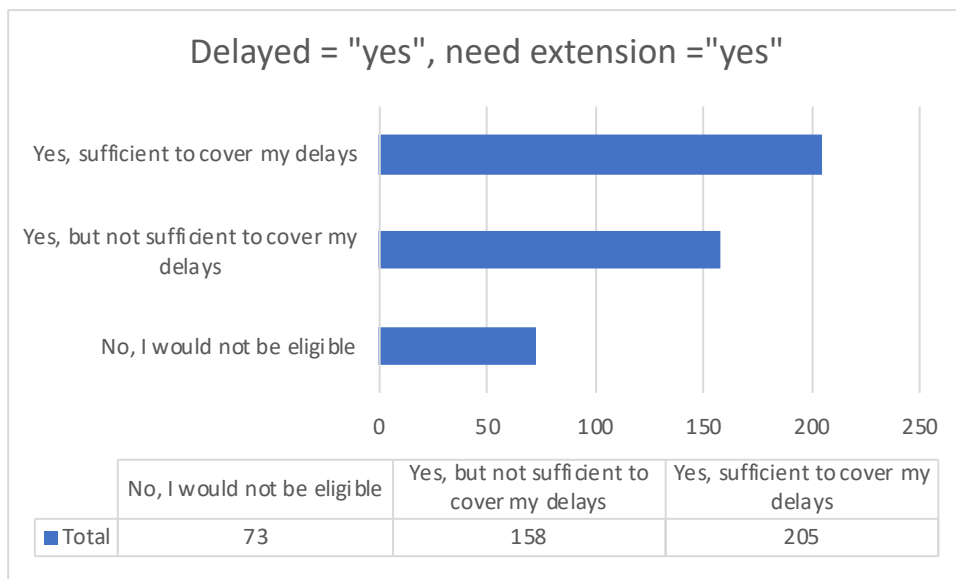
Less than half 221/498 (44%) of those who are experiencing delays as a result of COVID-19, are convinced that they are eligible for an extension that can cover the extent of their delay based on the guidelines provided by their institution. This proportion varies significantly across universities, with the highest confidence of obtaining sufficient compensation at OsloMet (73%) and the lowest confidence at NTNU (27%), excluding institutions where n < 34 (UiB and INN).



39/59 (66%) of those who are delayed in their project, but say they don't need an extension, think they will not be eligible based on their institution's guidelines. The majority of these are employed at NTNU (33%) and UiO (26%).



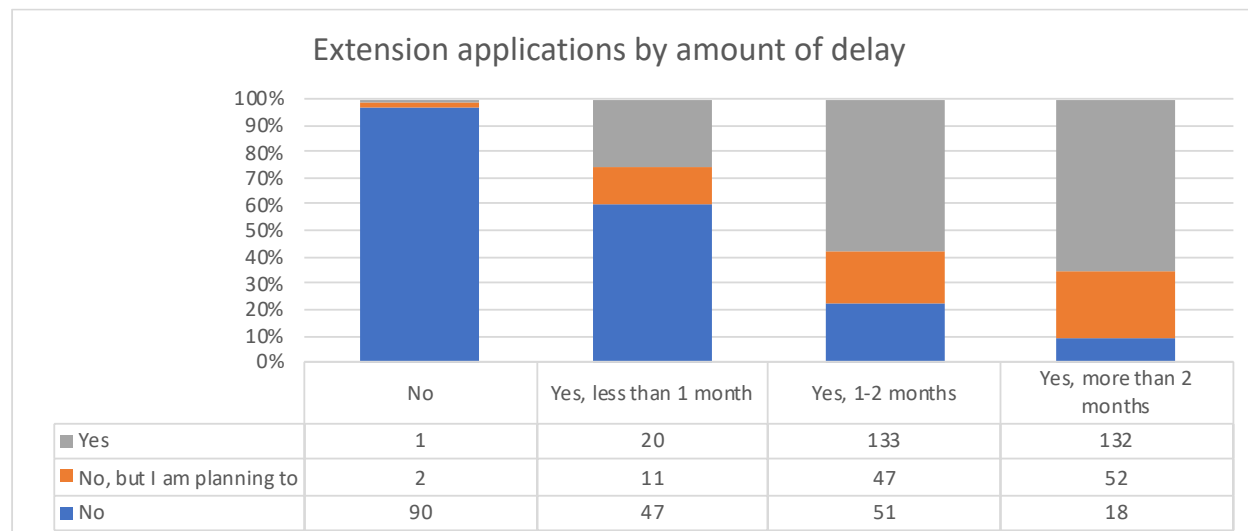
73/436 (17%) of those who are delayed in their project, and say they will need an extension, think they will not be eligible based on their institution's guidelines. The majority of these are employed at NTNU (38%) and UiT (25%).



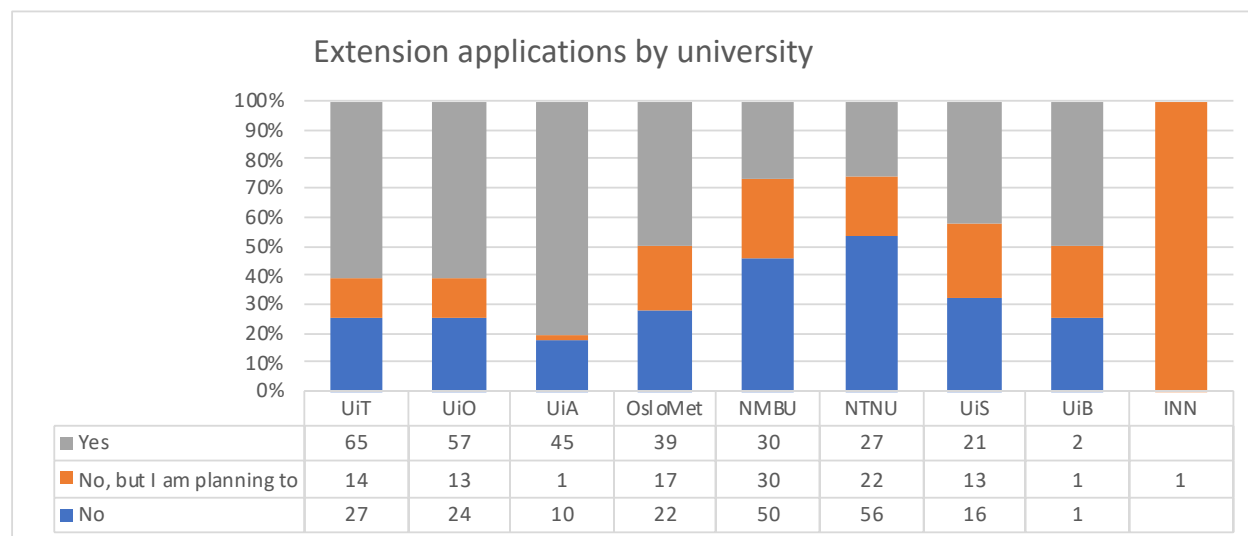
4. Applications for COVID-19 related contract extensions

Have you applied for an extension? (n=604)

286/604 (47%) of respondents who received information from their institution about possible contract extensions, applied. Another 112/604 (19%) said they were **planning to apply**.



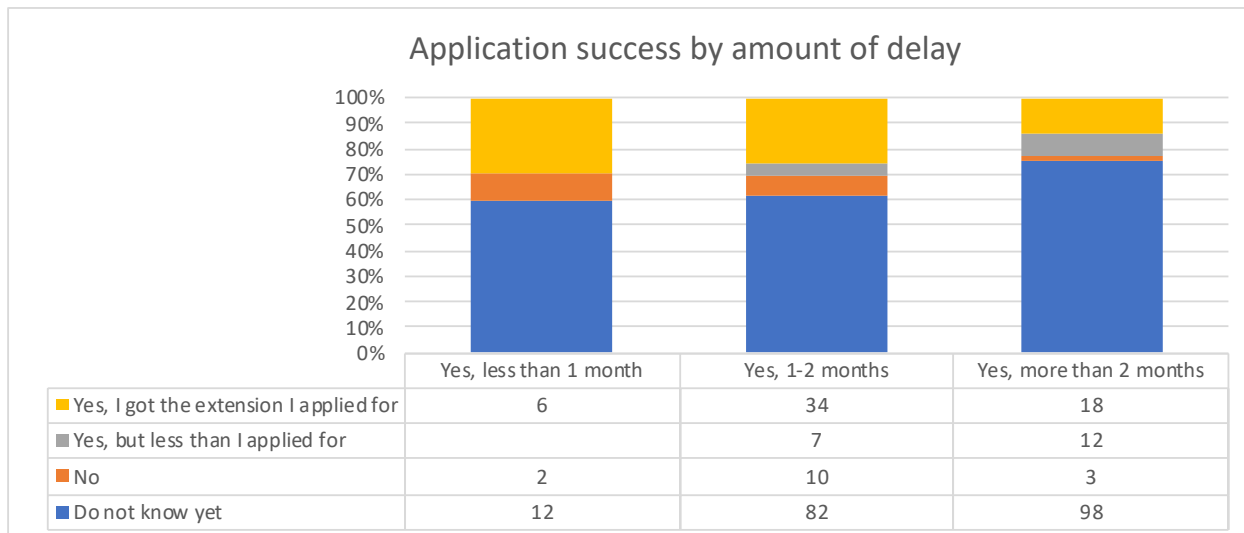
The majority (60%) of respondents who were delayed by less than one month, decided not to apply. Of those who were delayed by more than one month, the proportion of respondents who has applied or is planning to, rises to 78% when the delay is between one and two months, and 91% when the delay is more than 2 months.



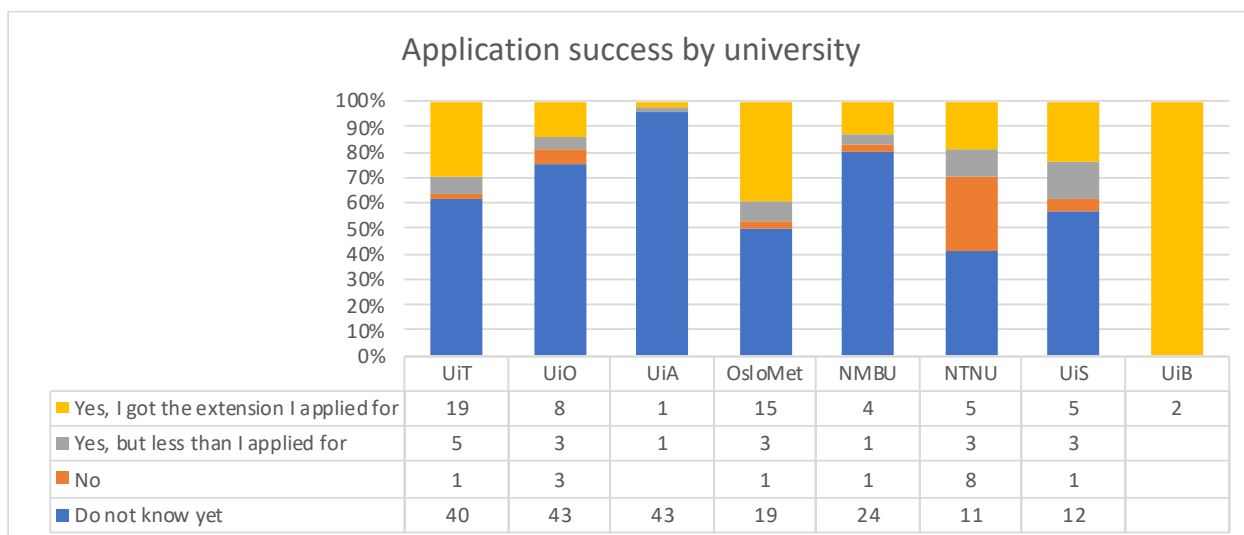
Intention to apply varies across institutions, with the highest application rate at UiA and the lowest at NTNU.

Were you granted an extension? (n=280)

189/286 (68%) of those who needed and applied for an extension were not certain of the outcome yet. Of those who were aware of the outcome, more than a third (36%) did not get the extension (16%) or less than they applied for (20%).



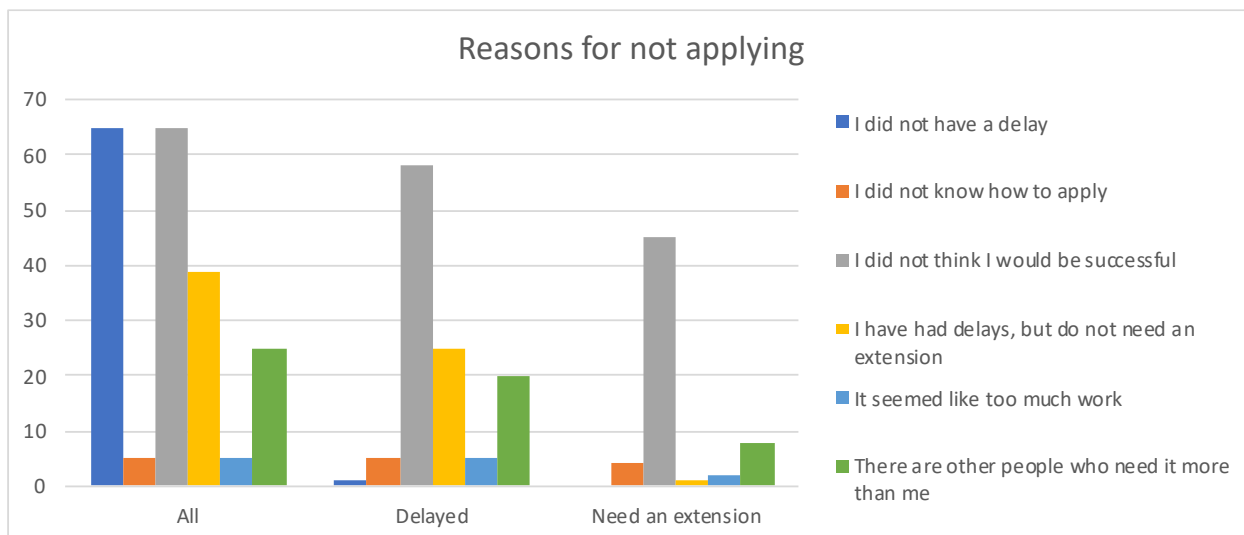
The percentage of successful applications (64%) decreases with the amount of delay, from 75% for those with < 1 month delay (n=8), to 67 for those with 1-2 months of delay (n=51) to 55% for those with > 2 months of delay (n=33).



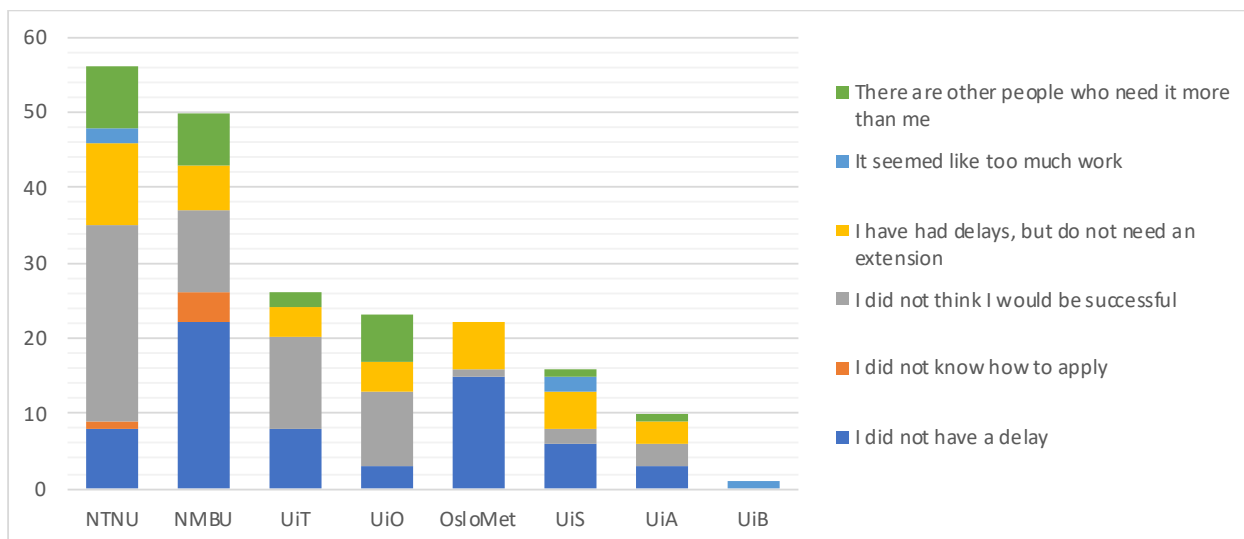
Success rate also varies by institution, with the highest rate of successful applications at OsloMet and UiT (> 75%) and the lowest at NTNU (31%). UiA stands out because virtually no one (96%) knew whether their application was granted yet.

Why did you not/ are you not going to apply? (n=204)

204/604 (53%) of respondents who received information from their institution about possible contract extensions is **not planning to apply**. Not having had a delay and low confidence in success are the two most prevalent reasons cited by respondents (65/204 or 32% each, respectively).



The majority (114/204) of respondents who are not planning to apply for an extension, nonetheless suffered delays in their project, while 60/204 (29%) of respondents who are not planning to apply still say they need an extension in order to compensate for the delays they incurred. The main reason that was cited for not applying by both of these groups, is that **they don't think they will be successful**. This pessimistic outlook was relatively highest among respondents from NTNU, UiT and UiO (> 40%), and lowest at OsloMet (5%).



5. Selection of comments

Do you have any other comments? (n=181)