

To the board of the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas

Date: 26 August 2020

### **Request for Extension for PhD candidates at IFIKK, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

We appreciate that the University has implemented guidelines making room for extensions of the contracts of PhD candidates who can document impeded progression due to the COVID-19 pandemic. No less, we are worried that the individual-level application and assessment procedure will give rise to unfair outcomes. After weeks of closed offices, travel restrictions and other measures, we know that many PhD candidates have had to postpone or cancel plans for data collection, conferences and academic visits. As importantly, our capacity to work has been reduced, not only by lack of access to offices and office facilities, but to a general sense of uncertainty and anxiety, as well as lack of collegial contact. We are worried that the criteria for assessing whose contracts should be extended do not take the complex, and often difficult to articulate, causes of impeded progression into account.

Therefore, we ask that all PhD contracts at the Department be extended by 4 weeks. All of us have suffered reduced productivity and have, by consequence, a justified claim for extension. In the case of the Department's students and permanent academic staff, the need for extra time has already been acknowledged by concrete policy measures:

- At most of the departments, students have been granted a general extension at both bachelor and master level.
- Similarly, deadlines pertaining to permanent academic staff have been postponed, such as funding and project applications (e.g. the RCN application deadline in May). This further acknowledges the sub-optimal working conditions during this time, beyond the student level.

Both students and permanent academic staff receive substantial time compensation because of the pandemic, and we fail to see why the same should not apply to doctoral candidates. Because of the time limit on the doctoral scholarship, PhD candidates have, if anything, a greater need for productive use of their time. Of course, some have been particularly impeded by the situation, with illness or children to stay home with, but these cases are already being dealt with. Our present concern is with the further reasons for contract extensions, that are, in a sense, common to all of us. The particular reasons may vary individually: a cancelled conference for which one put in a lot of work, anxiety, poor working conditions, demotivating working atmosphere, loneliness, inaccessibility to the library, etc. All of these conditions engender lower productivity. Ranking the individual reasons given, and deciding appropriate time extensions on a case-by-case basis (which is how we interpret UiO's current policy) quickly becomes subjective, time-consuming and benefits those who are skilled at *articulating* formal requests (not necessarily those who need it the most). We are worried that individual extension negotiations will lead to differential treatments, inequalities and injustices, in addition to consuming substantial amounts of time from applicants and administrators. Based on talking to other PhD candidates, we are in particular worried that:



- The hitherto unclearly communicated procedures for when, where and how to apply for extension, combined with the complexity of the causes leading to our reduced work capacity, have left many of the PhD candidates feeling resigned and are no longer planning to apply for extension.
- This might disproportionately affect our international colleagues, who are less likely to be acquainted with formal procedures and chains of command.
- Unproductivity during this time might be caused by reasons that are difficult to articulate in an individual application, such as anxiety, stress and in general an increased mental strain during the pandemic.
- There seem to be some who consider themselves less affected than others, and therefore do not plan to apply for an extension because they believe their extension might come at the expense of the extension of someone who deserves it more.

We therefore suggest a general extension for all PhD candidates by 4 weeks. We argue that the 4-week extension should be granted on a general, objective basis on the following grounds:

- The pandemic has forced us to use home offices for at least 9 weeks, depending on our individual situations. All PhD candidates have seen a significant reduction in productivity during this period.
- A 4-week extension is a reasonable and fair compensation for the reduction in productivity.
- Individual assessments place the burden of proof on the PhD candidate. Our loss of progression can be difficult to document, and will likely be left unaddressed without a general extension. As we are employed on fixed-term contracts, reduced productivity during the pandemic might affect our chance and rate of completion.
- Our proposal contributes to the goal of the University of ensuring and facilitating the timely completion of all PhD projects. In short, it is in the interest of the Department, Faculty, University and government that we complete our work.
- PhD candidates are affected irrespectively of where in the research process they are, although the reasons for, and the nature of, the impact varies. The situation affects all stages of a research process: as an example, newly hired candidates will need more time to navigate a new job, while candidates that have progressed further will have had to postpone data collection or cancel or interrupt research stays abroad.
- As a group of early career scholars, PhD candidates are more likely to have less adequate working opportunities at home due to living in smaller and often shared apartments.

Our joint request is not intended to suggest that everyone has been affected equally, but rather to settle one of the issues that we all have in common. Furthermore, we want to stress that the general extension we request should not replace, but come in addition to extensions for PhD candidates with care-taking responsibilities, cases of sick leave, and/or additional compensation for unexpected costs incurred due to interrupted field-work or other individual needs. As an example, a candidate entitled to the four-week extension due to childcare, as suggested by the department, would according to our proposal be entitled to a total of eight weeks extension -- including the four-week general extension. Those who have other needs and require any additional resources or time will supplement this request with an individual application. However, settling this request for a general extension will reduce the number of very similar individual applications.

Sincerely,

All PhD candidates at the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas:

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Francesca Canepuccia

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