Analysis of consequences
due to the corona pandemic

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1 Summary and recommendations

Based on the results of a survey conducted by LDK, it is clear that all PhD students at Lund University have been affected in various ways by the corona pandemic. In this report we highlight the main issues identified, which can be summarised as follows:

- PhD students argue that they need prolongation to have a fair chance at meeting the learning outcomes of their education. In particular, mental health and work motivation problems are common. A quantitative follow-up study on this aspect is needed.

- **It is imperative that all PhD students discuss their situation with their supervisor(s) and other stakeholders of their education, and document any delay of their education in their individual study plans (ISPs).**

- It is important that the work environment allows for full-time work. However, if the home work environment is not conducive to this, solutions have to be found with the head of department. Example solutions could be alternate work locations, improvements to home work environment or recognition of not being able to work full-time. PhD students with children are particularly challenged.

- The university should make a statement verifying that consequences incurred due to the corona pandemic with respect to documented delays to the PhD education, qualify as valid reasons for prolongation.
2 Introduction

This document provides an overview of information gathered from PhD students at Lund University regarding consequences to their education which they may face due to the changes in work environment and processes imposed on them in order to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (which causes the Covid-19 disease).

The information has been gathered from meetings and interviews combined with the responses from about 150 PhD students in a qualitative survey carried out by LDK in the period between March 30 and April 17, 2020.

2.1 Questions asked in the survey

The following questions are asked in the survey:

1. Do you feel that sufficient information is being channelled out from the Faculty and Department? (the only quantitative question)

2. What are the challenges that you face while adapting to work during the covid-19 situation?

3. How do you think Lund University can help in the issues that you are facing?

4. What are the resources that you feel are absent for your work during this situation? (e.g. e-books/computing facilities/connectivity/ease of information online)

5. What are the resources from Lund University that you feel are useful for your work during this situation?

6. Other concerns?

In the following we first examine the answers on the university response, then we outline the problems experienced. We examine the aid requested by the PhD students from the university and provide our recommendations.

3 Perception of the university response

From the survey, 69% of the responding PhD students are happy with the information they have received from the university (covers all of central, faculty and department levels). About 6% are unhappy, which to a large extent concerns getting the information in English in a timely manner.

Many PhD students respond that the availability of the online video conference tools, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, have been instrumental and important for them in order to enable working from home and keep in contact with their colleagues.

For teaching courses online, it is also worth noting that the online course assistance tool, Canvas, has been a highly useful platform.
4 Problems experienced by PhD students

We discuss here the major themes in the responses received.

4.1 Work environment

Nearly everyone who responded to the survey has been affected by the transition of the work environment to working from home. In particular, those with children find it difficult to maintain their usual working hours and to manage full-time work. Another common problem is the lack of a proper work space with the necessary equipment including an office desk and chair.

Many respondents note that they have had less communication with their supervisor and respective research group, leading to less information in general and a lack of feedback on their work.

For many, working from home is simply not an option given the nature of their research - with fieldwork, lab experiments and external collaborator visits. This relates to the point 4.2.

4.2 Access to resources

Access to resources, which varies extensively depending on field of research, is a major concern. As for PhD students with fieldwork abroad, they lose the opportunity to collect their data and have to either switch to a different project or postpone their data collection until a later date. This requires a major change to their research plan and ISP.

Students working in labs face further issues that range from getting access to the lab to running out of lab supplies and then waiting indefinitely to get fresh supplies.

Cancelled conferences and research visits are also a major concern, given that PhD students need to present their research to international audiences during their four years. Furthermore, the cancellation or postponement of national and international PhD courses also has a large impact on the possibility to finish on time.

4.3 Mental health

A majority of the respondents replied that the lack of social stimuli is leading to a reduced motivation in their work. PhD students are also in a situation where they can be insecure in their work and need to be in contact not only with their supervisors, but also with their peers.

Some initiatives with social online video meetings have helped to slightly alleviate these difficulties, but in general it is not perceived as a good substitute for real contact. Seminars conducted via online video links do not allow for mingling before and after, which is a loss particularly mentioned by many.

Relating to the previous section on access to resources, many face feelings of uncertainty and anxiety stemming from not being able to collect data and in some cases having to redesign PhD projects.

A small portion of the respondents are more broadly worried about the global pandemic situation, and they find it hard to focus on their work at hand.

In general, many PhD students feel that they are losing time and are in need of prolongation to have a fair chance of achieving the learning outcomes of their education. A quantitative study of this topic is needed.
4.4 Added workload due to digital teaching

It varies from department to department how teaching is handled. Some departments track hours spent, while others have a lump sum for each course taught. Some PhD students are concerned that the extra effort they put into teaching due to the shift online is not counted in the compensation given for the courses.

4.5 Cost responsibilities

In particular for students funded by external grants, there is a worry about cost responsibilities. Lund University Conference Services charges 25000 SEK for services rendered during a digital defence, and some supervisors may be reluctant to pay for this.

There is also a concern that some funding schemes may not be sufficiently flexible to cover prolongation needed due to the consequences of the corona pandemic. Who should cover these expenses?

5 Requested aid from the university

Two types of aid are mainly requested by the PhD students: improvements to the home work environment and prolongation of the education.

5.1 Working from home

Many PhD students praise the fact that systems exist to facilitate working from home, in the form of VPN access and article searching through LUBsearch. Some feel the access is not working properly, and there is a need for more timely support.

Many feel simple actions could be taken to make it more feasible working from home, such as the transfer of office equipment etc. to the home environment. In the beginning, working from home was seen as a short-term solution, but over time, proper working environment equipment becomes a necessity.

It is our clear recommendation that this question should be tackled more proactively from the departments if they are not doing so already.

5.2 Prolongation

There is no doubt that the PhD education suffers in quality as a consequence of the corona pandemic. The proper questions are: How much? and How does it vary between individuals?

It would be advantageous to do a quantitative study asking the PhD students how much work they do compared to how much work they need to do. This study would benefit from using the university survey system where all PhD students are queried, can only answer once and are reminded if they don’t fill it out.

In any case, we ask that the university keep an open mind about time loss that is not easily documented.

It is very clear that early discussions between PhD students and supervisors are needed, and getting everything documented in the ISP is incredibly important. We recommend these discussions to be encouraged everywhere.
6 Valid reasons for prolongation

When it comes to reasons for why prolongation can be awarded, we take a look at the law – namely the Swedish Higher Education act 5 ch. 7 § (in Swedish):

“En person får vara anställd som doktorand under sammanlagt högst åtta år. Den sammanlagda anställningstiden får dock inte vara längre än vad som motsvarar utbildning på forskarnivå på heltid under fyra år.”

“Den sammanlagda anställningstiden får dock vara längre [. . .], om det finns särskilda skäl. Sådana skäl kan vara ledighet på grund av sjukdom, ledighet för tjänstgöring inom totalförsvaret eller för förtroendeuppdrag inom fackliga organisationer och studentorganisationer eller föräldraledighet.”

Loosely explained, valid reasons for prolongation are sick leave, parental leave, duties in the military, trade union or student union, and other special reasons (“särskilda skäl”).

It is not always clear what is meant by “särskilda skäl” as the list is open, and since prolongations are often decided on department level, there is unfortunately a large variance and a bit of unfairness in who can get prolongation for what.

Therefore, we call for a statement from the university noting that delays due to the consequences of the corona pandemic qualify as a “särskilt skäl”.

This would be a huge support for PhD students who are worried about their prolongation applications, especially for those where funding is short or they are dependent upon external financing.

7 Further contact

LDK is available for comments and questions and can be reached by email at ldk@ldk.lu.se. The doctoral ombudsperson (DOMB) is also available for support should it be needed, and can be reached by email at domb@ldk.lu.se.