



COVID-19 related project delays and contract extension applications

Results from a nationwide survey among PhDs and postdocs in Norway, carried out August – September 2020



1 December 2020

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1 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 2020). 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. This survey followed in the footsteps of an initial interview in *Khrono* where leaders of different PhD organizations went out and expressed serious concern over the handling of delays PhDs experienced due to corona. 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 organizations, as well as through social media.

Close to 800 responses were collected, constituting 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: background information of respondents, 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. The comments supply additional detail and were used to contextualise the responses given in the survey.

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.

The results also show that there are large institutional differences in the satisfaction of temporary employees with the extension application handling at their university. Satisfaction is generally higher at universities with smaller PhD programmes, such as OsloMet, and lower at larger institutions such as NTNU and UiO. Despite these relative differences, issues with uncertain timelines, insufficient compensation and unrecognized reasons for delay are widespread, and the trends described above apply across Norway.

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.

2 Highlights

1. Most respondents (92%) are PhD students, which indicates that postdocs are undersampled in our study¹; this corroborates anecdotal evidence SiN has gathered on the difficulties of reaching out to postdocs through local institutions.
2. Survey respondents were more or less evenly spread across seven large higher education institutions in Norway: NTNU, NBMU, UiO, UiT, OsloMet, UiA and UiS².
3. 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.
4. 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%).
5. 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%).
6. 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**.
7. 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%).
8. Success rate (defined as getting the extension needed to fully compensate delays) **was higher among those with shorter delays**, varying from 75% among respondents with less than one month delay, to 55% among respondents with more than two months delay. Respondents with longer delays were less likely to know the outcome of their application. They were also more likely to receive **less extension than they asked for**. This suggests that early and positive decisions favour applicants with shorter delays.
9. 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, were not needing an extension, or needing it less than others. This indicates that relative need coupled with awareness of resource constraints factor into the decision to apply.
10. Most of these statistics vary by institution, with the largest universities (NTNU, UiO) scoring generally worse and the smallest (especially OsloMet) scoring better.
11. Nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents gave additional comments, mostly from institutions where information provision and chances of success were poorest. These comments shed light on the stress and uncertainty respondents are feeling in the face of accumulating delays and what they perceive to be a lack of support from their institution.
12. While most comments focus on insufficient information and transparency of procedures, a worrying subset also report **being deterred from applying** either by the criteria themselves or through informal communication – ranging from subtle discouragement to explicitly being advised or asked not to apply – usually with reference to invalid causes for delay, insufficient funds, and (other) priority candidates for extensions.
13. This shows that locally varying conditions and practices shape the implementation of what should be universal guidelines, creating space for unequal treatment of applicants.

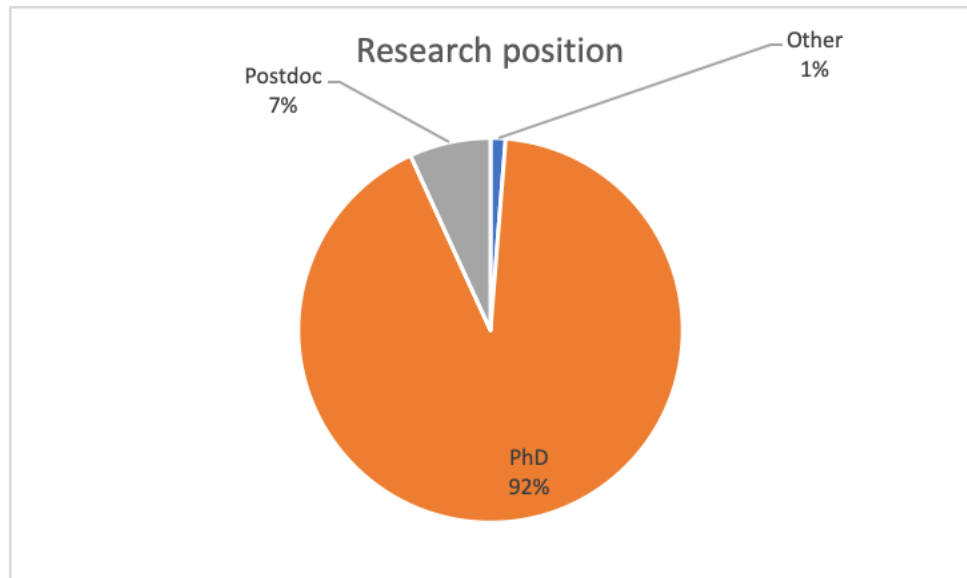
¹ Based on the NSD database for statistics of higher education, we would expect 78% of respondents to be PhD students and 22% of the respondents to be postdocs, if sampling were random.

² Unfortunately, we were not able to get sufficiently many responses from PhDs and postdocs at UiB.

3 Results

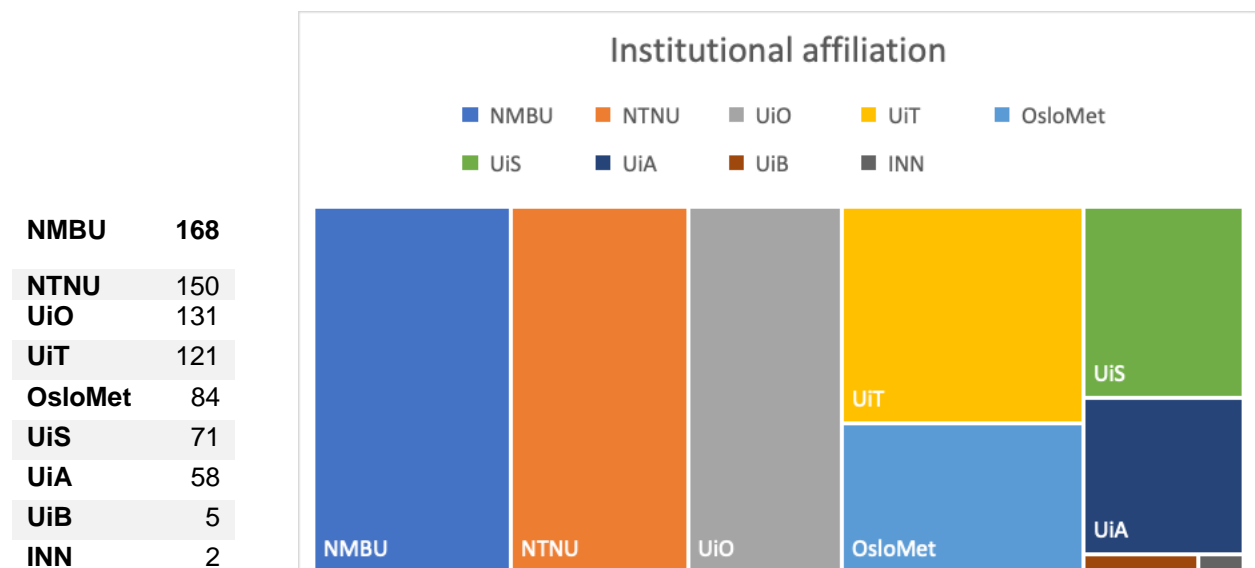
3.1 Background information of the respondents

Q1: Which temporary research position do you hold? (n=790)



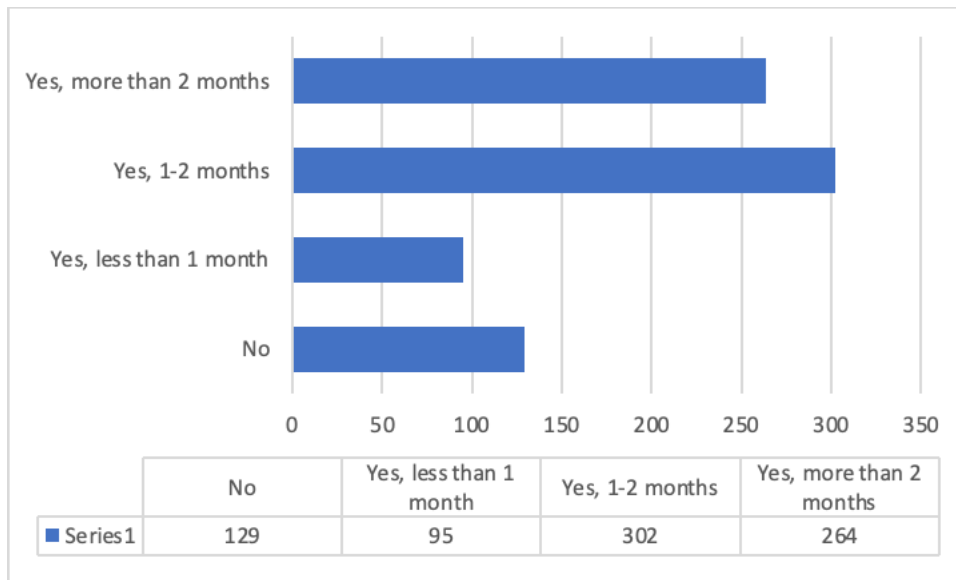
Q2: With which university are you affiliated? (n=790)

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



3.2 Project delays due to COVID-19

Q3: 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. Delays come from a variety of sources. These include unable to do data collection, not having access to lab and other research-related technology, undesirable working conditions in homes not suited for work, which caused further neck and back pains, as well as headaches. Unideal living conditions taking its toll on working from home was thoroughly described by one respondent:

“My partner and I both worked from home in our 25 m2 apartment with one big room that is used as kitchen, living room and bedroom combined. No other rooms have sufficient light and air quality to work in, nor space for a table and chair. The kitchen table has only room for one person to work at. The other person worked from the sleeping couch that we use as a bed. I made a lot of efforts to work in these conditions like completely changing my priorities (since I could not work from the lab), working in the evenings when my partner had online meetings where he had to be active and working in weekends since my back would feel bad after some time.”

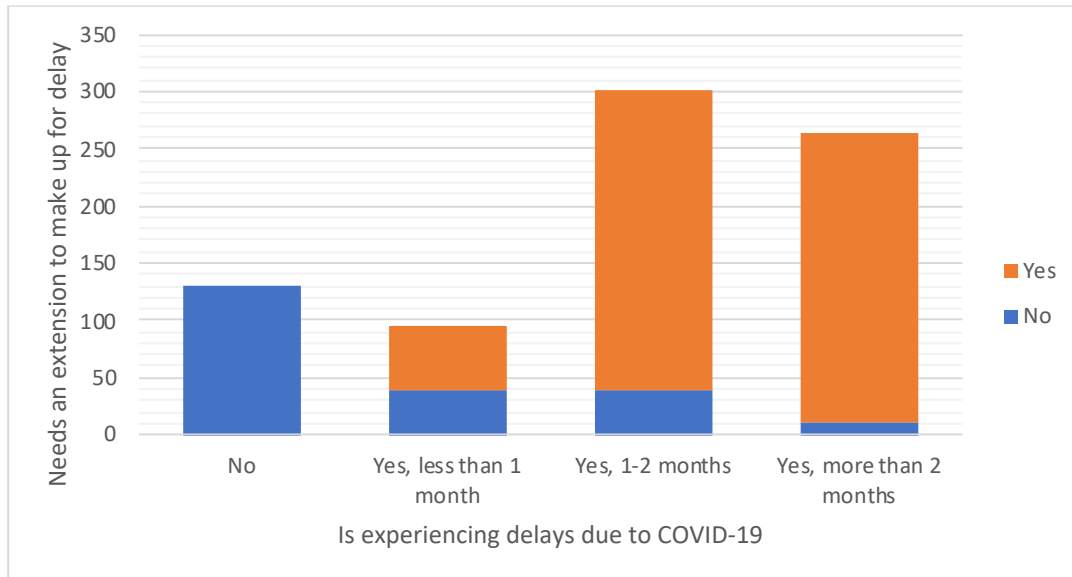
PhD, NTNU

In addition, and just as important, respondents’ reasons for being delayed also included stress, worries, the psychological impact of managing a work situation with a lot of uncertainty, mental strains and isolation. As one respondent commented:

“Even though I did not have any specific problems that delayed my work (taking care of own children, not being able to collect data etc.), I still experienced that my work efficiency slowed down during the period of working from home. A typical ‘advice’ you would hear when complaining about this, was that you shouldn’t have as high expectations for efficiency, and give yourself some slack during the lockdown. But that is difficult for the ones of us working on a time-limited project. I am worried I have lost valuable time that I will not get back.”

PhD, UiS

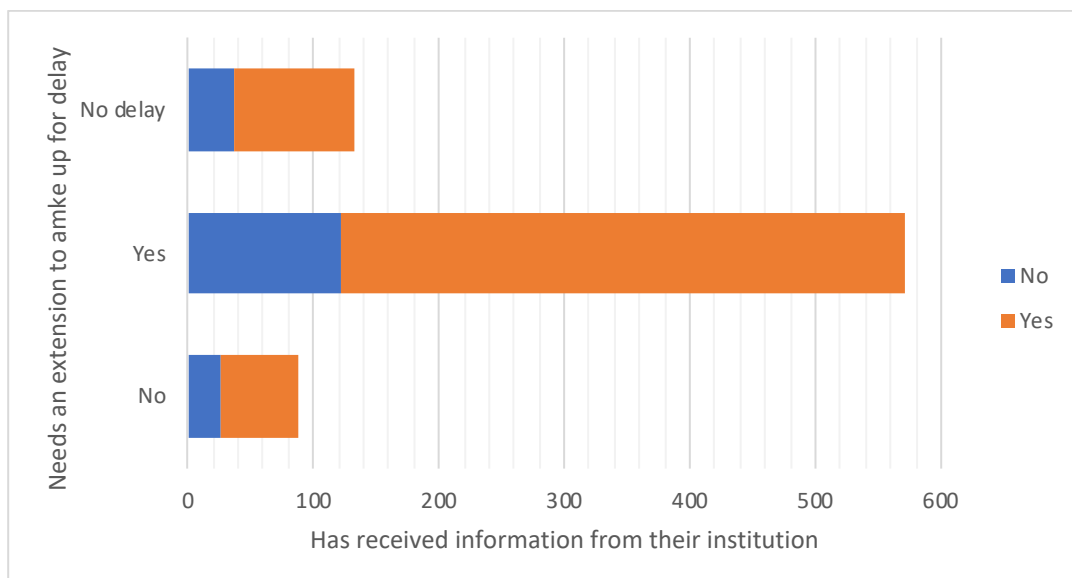
Q4: Do you think you need to receive a contract extension to make up for this delay? (n=658)



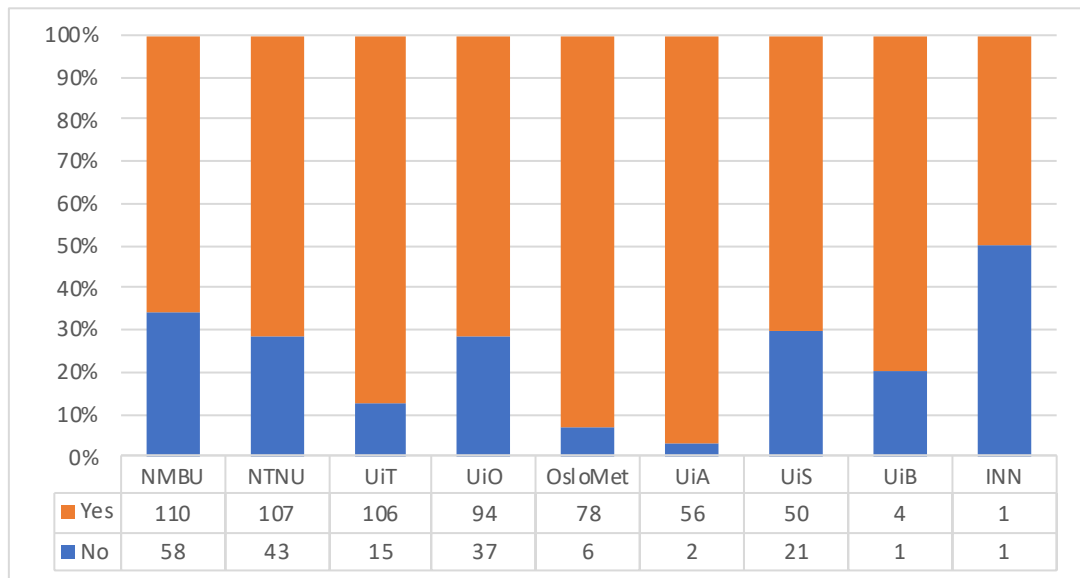
571/658 (87%) of those who suffered delays, say they will need an extension to make up for the delay. The proportion of respondents who think they will need an extension, increases with the extent of the delay, from 59% of those who experienced <1 month delay, to 87% of those who experienced 1-2 months delay and 95% of those who experienced >2 months delay.

3.3 Information about COVID-19 related contract extensions

Q5: Has your institution provided information about a possible contract extension? (n=790)

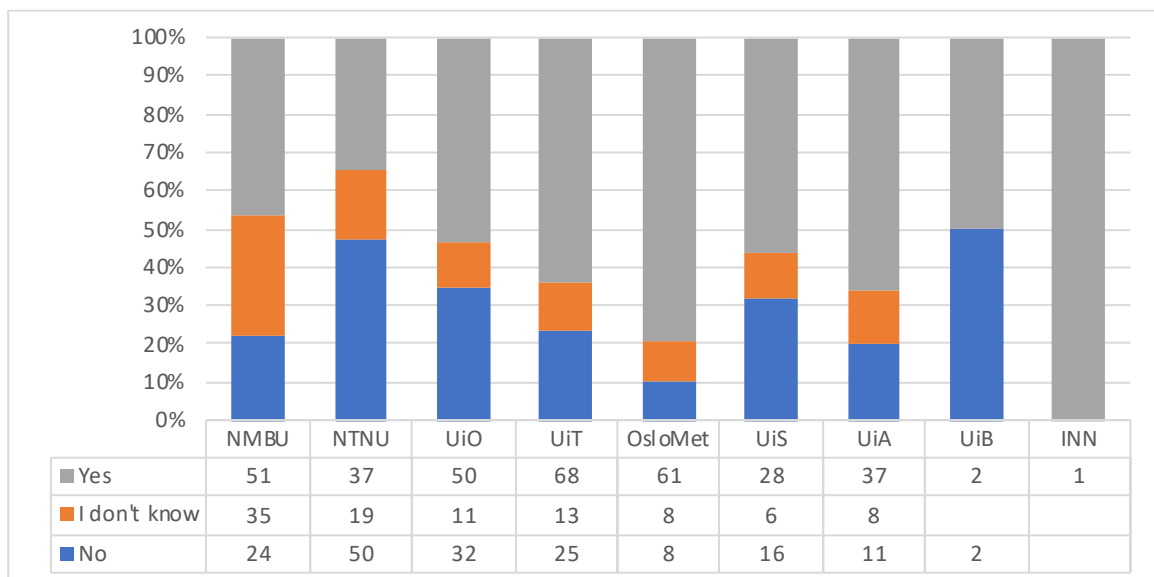


606/790 (77%) of respondents says their university has provided information about possible contract extensions. This number is higher among people who need an extension (79% percent) than those who do not need an extension (70%).



The number of respondents who received information about possible contract extensions varies by institution. This number is highest for UiA (97%) and lowest at NMBU (65%), excluding institutions where n < 58 (UiB and INN).

Q6: 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). From the comments, respondents highlight low-quality, fragmented and confusing information. Two respondents at two different institutions also commented on the fact that communication about possible extensions was only done in Norwegian, thus creating an extra barrier for international PhDs. The lack of information given at NTNU is especially apparent in the following comments:

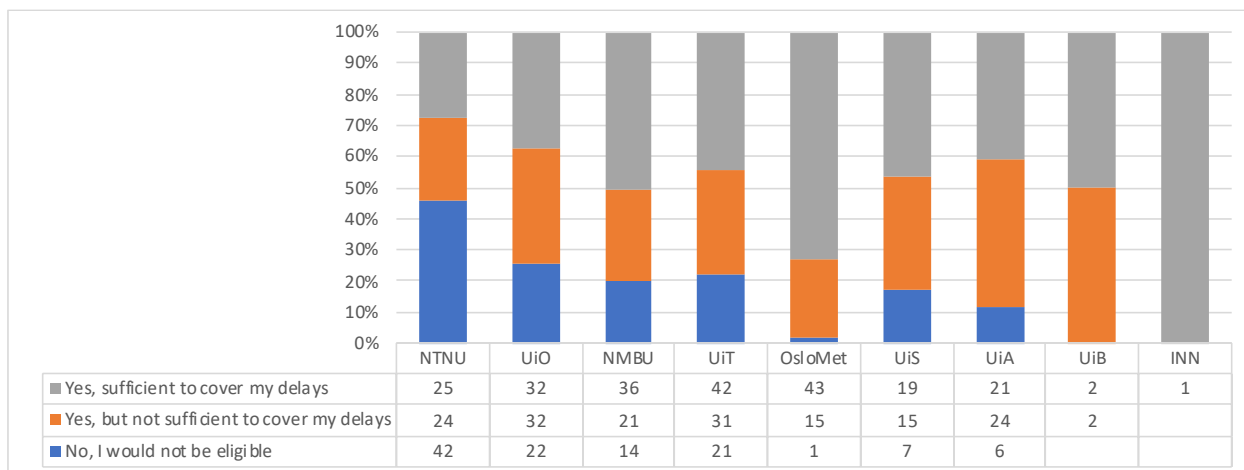
“It seems that there was no central organisation of how information is distributed. That lead to some departments and faculties communicating very well, while others remained unclear and caused a lot of confusion among temp. staff. The big variation in information between faculties and departments should have been handled better.”

PhD, NTNU

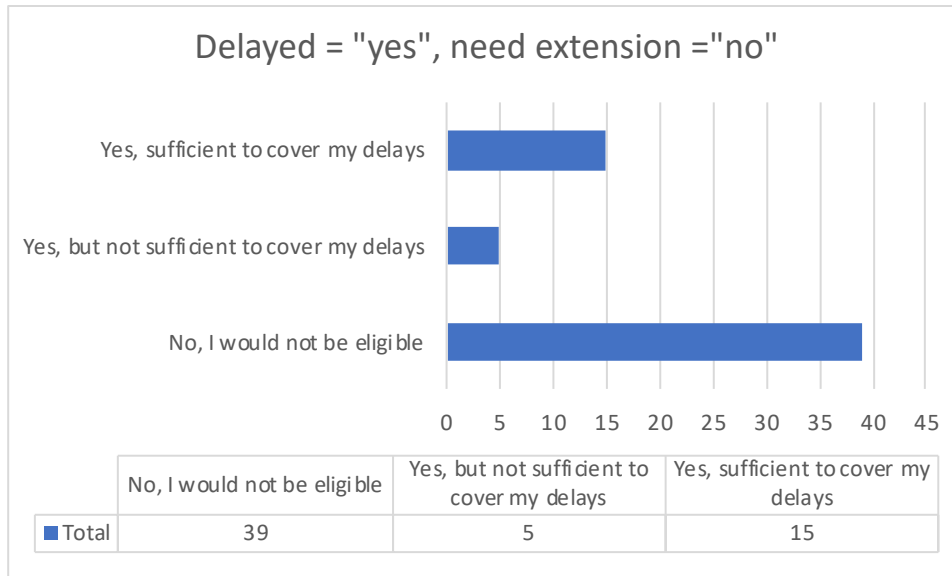
“I did apply even though the information that was provided was not sufficient. I sent emails to HR to get more information about what was needed. And apparently there was a deadline that had passed already that PhDs at my department were not informed about.”

PhD, NTNU

Q7: 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).

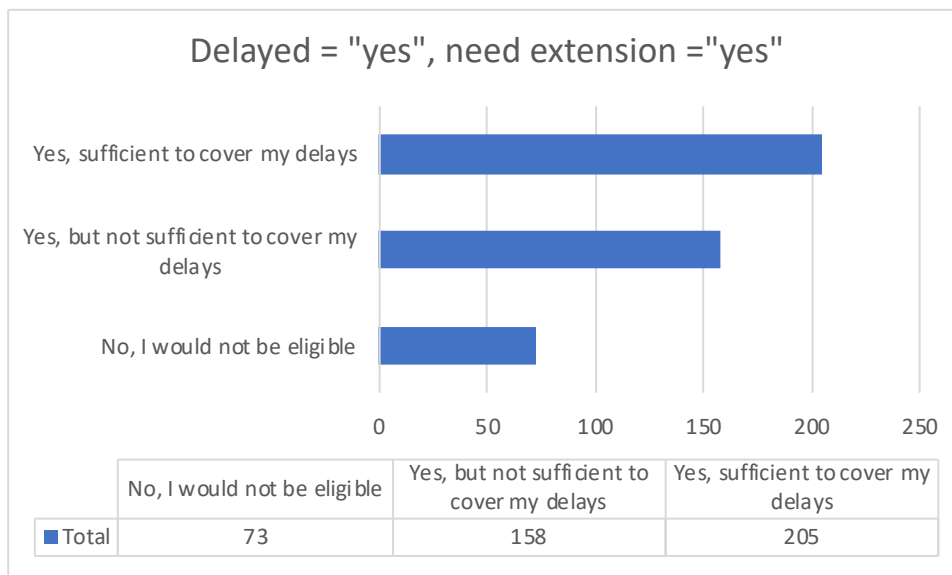


39/59 (66%) of those who are delayed in their project, but say they don't need an extension, think they will not be eligible based on their institution's guidelines. The majority of these are employed at NTNU (33%) and UiO (26%).

While it could be argued that needing an extension is a criterion for being eligible in the first place, denying a need can also be tied to altruistic tendencies, such as thinking other people need it more. This sentiment is also expressed in one comment by a respondent who wrote that at his institution:

"Many ended up not applying out of fear of taking away the opportunity for someone else, who they felt deserved it more."

PhD, UiO



In contrast, 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 highest fractions of these are employed at NTNU (40%) and UiT (20%).

On average, 53% of respondents are not confident they will be eligible for an extension that can compensate for the full extent of their delay. The pessimistic outlook on getting extension seems to stem from information given and the application process. Here, respondents commented on various reasons for this pessimism:

“The main issue is for me I think the uncertainty to whether I would be eligible for an extension or not because it is not very clear from the guidelines, and also how hard you will have to argue/fight to get it.”

PhD, NTNU

“Yes, the way the extension application was formulated was very demotivating and basically stating that you're not eligible if you're not in your last year and if you weren't planning on doing any lab work. But who does lab work in their last year anyway? Is no one eligible for extension then? And I handed in my application over a month ago without hearing back even a word about whether it has been received or reviewed or anything. We were told that we can only apply for an extension in the last six months of our PhD, which doesn't allow enough time for planning nor provides reassurance.”

PhD, UiO

“I am afraid I will not be eligible because my delays are less concrete. I do not have children and I was not sick. However, I have found it incredibly difficult to concentrate at all since the pandemic began. I spend 8 to 12 hours every day TRYING to work but hardly able to get anything done.”

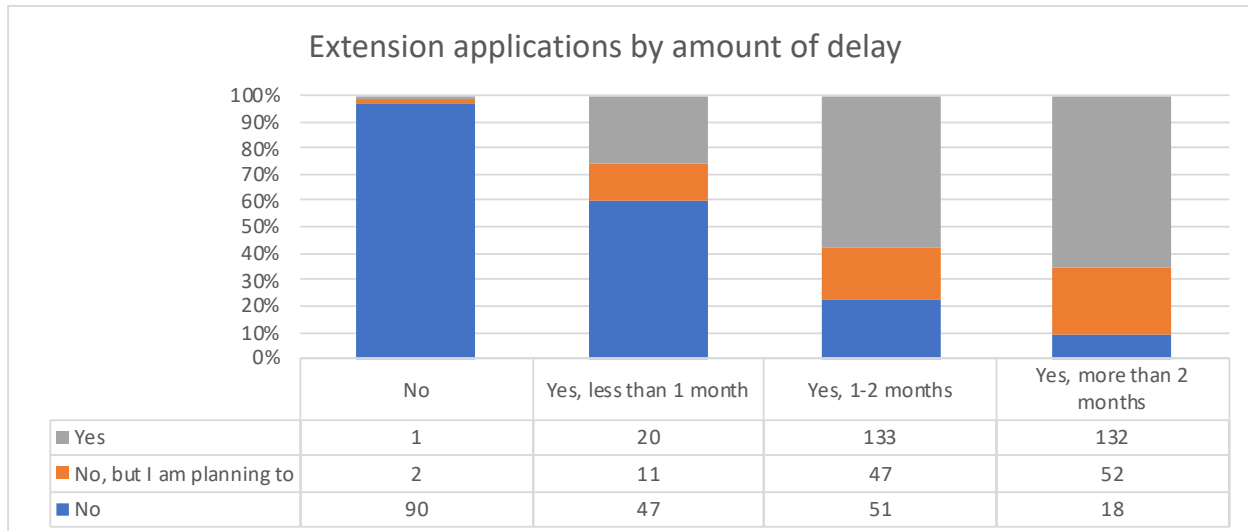
PhD, UiT

“There are extensions possible for concrete things like loss of time due to illness, caregiving, and access to necessary resources (e.g., lab, Wi-Fi, etc), but there are no extensions available for the less concrete things like reduced efficiency due to home office conditions, worsened mental health, delays in communication, and even just the inability to casually discuss your work with colleagues. This all contributes to a loss of time, but it is much harder to pin down, and then for some reason, not possible to get an extension for...”

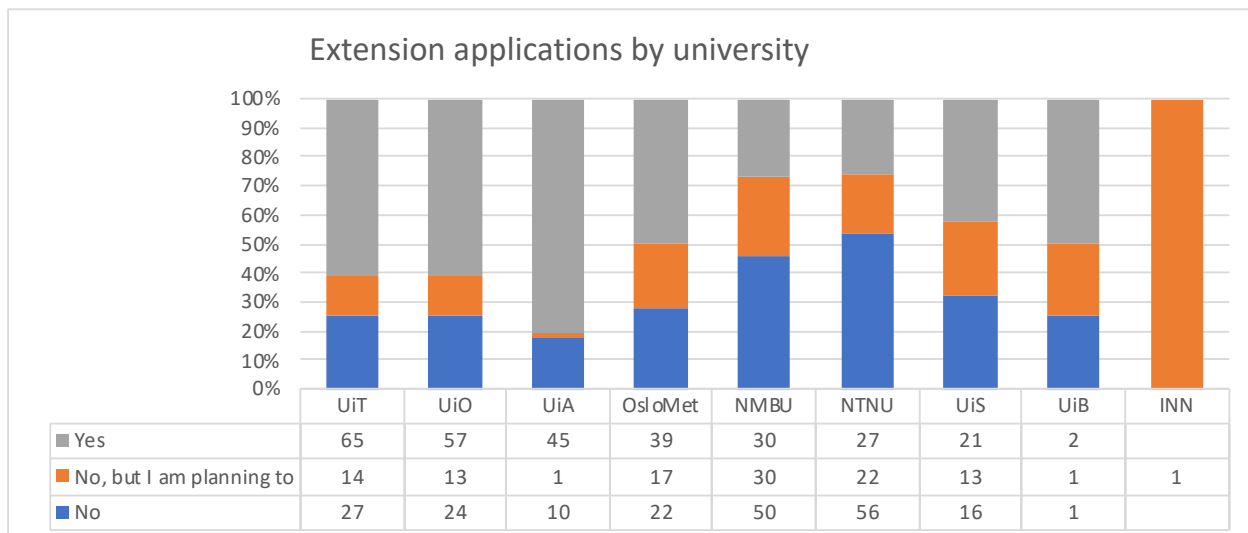
PhD, UiT

3.4 Applications for COVID-19 related contract extensions

Q8: Have you applied for an extension? (n=604)

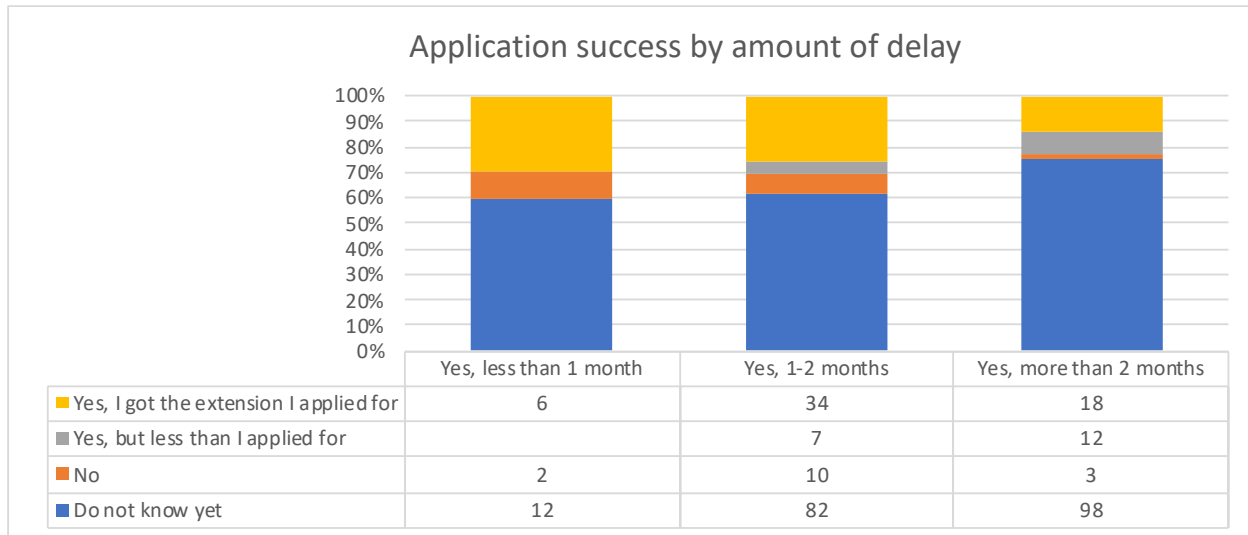


Nearly half, 286/604 (47%) of respondents who received information from their institution about possible contract extensions, applied. Another 112/604 (19%) said they were planning to apply. The majority (60%) of respondents who were delayed by less than one month, decided not to apply. Of those who 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.

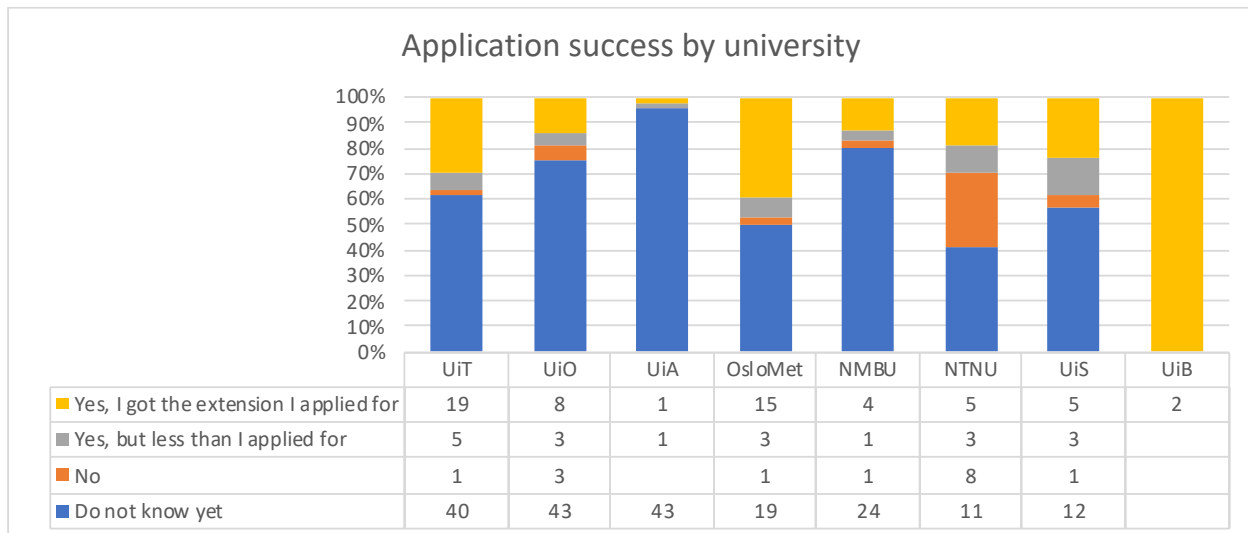


Intention to apply varies across institutions, with the highest application rate at UiA and the lowest at NTNU. Under Question 10, the most common reasons for not applying are listed (p. 15), chief among which is the subjective perception on chance of success.

Q9: 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. Comments from respondents gives in insight into the different application outcomes:

“I applied for two months extension. Got one month and another extra month if my progress is deemed satisfactory.”

PhD, UiO

“I’m estimated to be 6-12 months late with my data collection, due to covid-19. But I only got 75 days extension.”

PhD, NTNU

“Those graduating this Spring/Summer that applied only got a tiny fraction of what they asked for (1-2 weeks instead of 1-2 months). As funds to the department for compensation are not likely to increase any time soon, this makes things look a bit dim for those of us that graduate in roughly a year and thus have “lower priority” when it comes to compensation.”

PhD, NTNU

Despite successful applications, the process still left some respondents with a bitter aftertaste:

“I did get a one-month extension, but I must say the whole process has been very frustrating. From the withdrawal of the promise of one month to everyone to the time it took to get (not very clear) information from the faculty, the lack of clear criteria for granting extensions etc., I have also spent a significant amount of time being worried about what would happen and angry at an employer that treats its employees this way. It also did not help that the faculty framed the application process as them being nice enough to let us apply for an extension.”

PhD, UiB

“Delays caused in my project were due to travel restrictions and closure of large-scale international facilities (due to COVID). The university didn't consider this situation in spite of providing a very detailed case with all the relevant documents. They just gave me an extension to compensate the times during which the university was closed. My immediate manager supported my case. But people who take these decisions seem to not understand the case very well. On top of this, they took really long time to take this decision. I was not allowed to make an appeal questioning this decision. It is a very frustrating situation.”

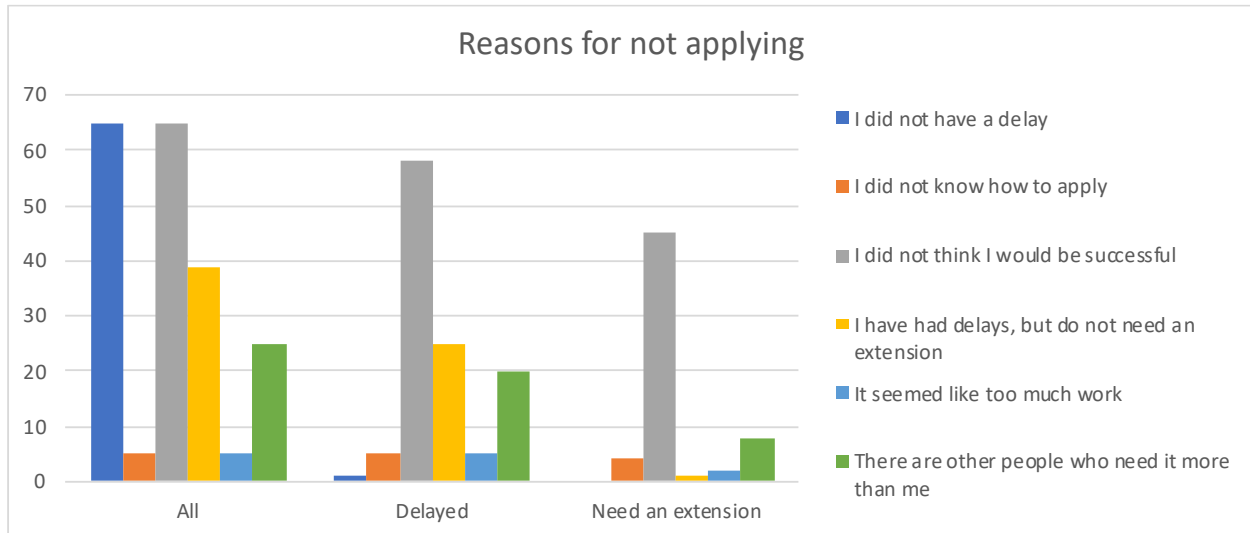
PhD, UiS

For those who are unsuccessful, delays that are not compensated can lead to lower quality research and unfinished research projects in the future. In the worst, a rejection can destroy even the hope of ever completing a PhD, and cause students to drop out of their programme. Like one respondent reported:

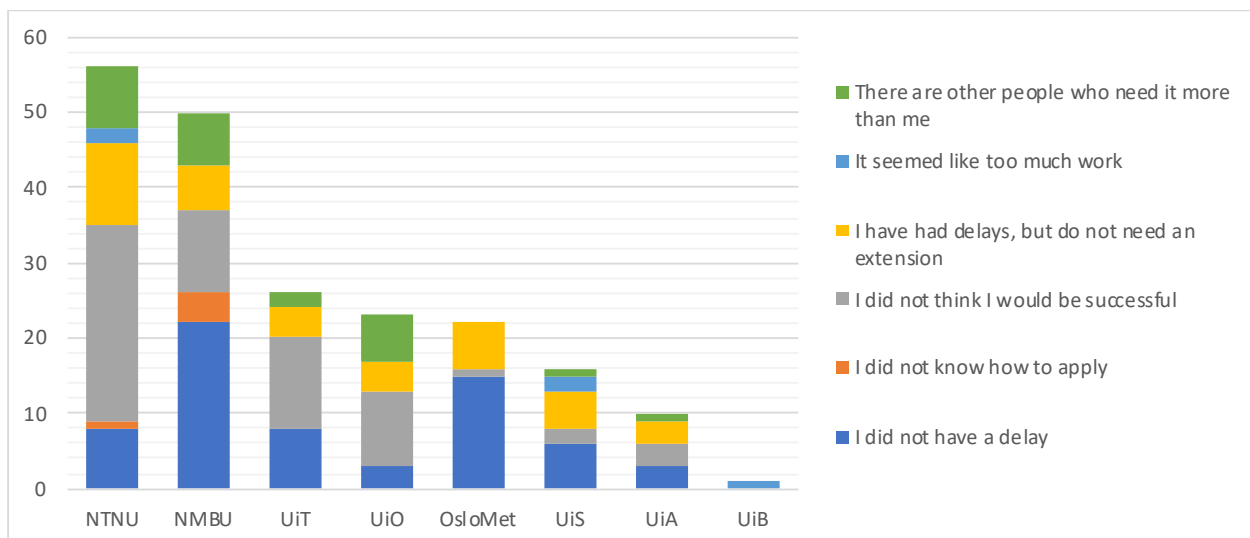
“I got told by the department head that I would not receive an extension. I was rather expected to finish my PhD alongside working full time in another job. This was not feasible for me; therefore I quit my PhD.”

PhD, NMBU

Q10: 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%).



The pessimistic outlook on eligibility and application success as well as the self-sacrificing conviction that “other people need it more than me” have already been mentioned under Question 7 (pp. 11-12), and these motivations for not applying are therefore consistent with the results from earlier questions.

The comments paint a more complex picture of the various reasons for not applying. There was a striking resemblance among comments that highlight various ways of being deterred from applying – either by the application procedure itself or by being discouraged, advised or even asked not to apply – as reasons not to seek extension:

“It was emphasized that PhDs near the end of their program or with children were priority, and that anyone else would have to provide evidence of delay / justification. I believe everyone experienced a delay, but that the invitation to apply for delay was implicitly discouraging those very applications. I did not apply.”

PhD, UiT

“Since I have two years left on my contract, I am not a priority candidate for receiving extension.”

PhD, UiO

“My head of department wrote me an email saying I was prohibited to apply for an extension as I do not have small children in my care.”

PhD, UiS

The power of the supervisor in supporting an application is also an important factor, as illustrated by the following comments:

“My supervisor did not agree.”

PhD, UiT

“I think an extension would be helpful, but my supervisor advised otherwise.”

PhD, NTNU

In addition to being informed that they are either not eligible or not among the prioritized candidates, respondents are sometimes also dissuaded from applying, because their institution allegedly does not have enough funds:

“Extensions are dealt with at department levels. We’ve already been warned that department finances will be an issue.”

PhD, NTNU

“As far as I got it the university had no money to cover my extension, that is why I did not apply for it.”

PhD, UiS

Academic culture can also lead to the fear that applying for an extension will be seen as weakness, rather than strength, or that it will incur a high mental or professional cost:

“I did not apply because I fear my non-Norwegian supervisor (who has been vocally thrilled about his “teaching-free writing covid holiday”) would see me as not fit for the pressure and strain of academia. My mental health has really, really taken a turn for the worse and I don't think I will be able to continue in academia after my contract, but at the time it seemed like too high of a risk to fight for a two month extension at the possible cost of my entire future career.”

PhD, NTNU

All these factors combined actively suppress the number of extension applications at universities in Norway and therefore create a mismatch between the delays actually experienced, and the delays compensated.

4 Discussion

The results from this survey show that delays among PhD students in Norway as a result of the covid-19 pandemic are widespread and that the majority of them are in need of an extension to be able to complete their project. While this survey garnered fewer responses from postdocs, there is no reason to assume the situation for them is any different, and they likely face many of the same challenges in completing their projects. The results also show that the extent of delays experienced is not matched by the degree of compensation given. While the degree of information and extensions granted varies across institutions, the results consistently show that compensation is generally insufficient to meet the needs of temporary staff, even at universities that are relatively generous. This can be accounted for by multiple factors, such as: narrow eligibility criteria, lack of information about the application process, poor application handling, and decentralised resources and accountability. These factors all contribute to determine an individual's assessment of their own situation, their eligibility for extension, the effort involved in applying and the potential risks and rewards, and hence their decision to apply. They will also influence the treatment of potential applicants by university administration and supervisors, and hence their knowledge and ability to apply and their chance of success. An effective institutional response therefore addresses all those concerns.

Many respondents were pessimistic about the possibility to get a sufficient extension to cover the total extent of their delay. This has to do with formal eligibility criteria and framing of delays, as well as with informal communication in local networks. At many institutions, applications were restricted (or at least, so were respondents told) to people in the final months of their contract, or people with care-giving responsibilities. This has left PhDs students and postdocs in earlier stages of their contract and who were struggling at home, despite not having carer responsibilities, unsupported. At the same time, the strict definition of what constitutes a delay has left many unsure whether to apply, because their delays were not explicitly covered by the criteria or procedures shared by their institution. This applies particularly to those delays extending beyond the lockdown period, and those caused by reasons that were not recognised.

While concrete problems with data collection or access to facilities have been formally recognised as causes of delays, less tangible reasons such as reduced concentration at home or poor mental health due to isolation were not taken into consideration everywhere. These nonetheless also takes their toll on productivity. The effects of impaired working conditions, such as working from home without sufficient space or ventilation, sharing the work space with household members, and not having the same office equipment or interaction with co-workers, are hard to quantify and hence report. The mental health costs of covid-19 on temporary researchers should not be underestimated either. This demanded urgent attention already before the pandemic, which has only increased the problem, according to two surveys done by Nature ([2019](#); [2020](#)).

Beyond the formal guidelines, respondents have been discouraged from applying (and possibly rejected or not gotten the extension they need), because their supervisor did not support them, because they were told that others had priority, or that the university or department did not have enough money. This shows that rumours or advice circulating in informal networks are an important source of information for PhDs and postdocs, who are often isolated and may not know where else to turn for advice or support, and can override or even conflict with the official guidelines when considering to apply.

A similar issue relates to transparency about the application process through formal channels. Respondents often experienced a lack information regarding deadlines, who was allowed to apply, when they could expect a decision and on which grounds. Others were uncertain how to apply or how the applications would be processed. The slow decision-making is exemplified by the large number of people who are still not informed of the outcome of their

application today. Others who are aware, often receive little to no justification for a rejection or unclear reasoning behind getting less extension than asked for. This raises concerns whether application forms actually capture the respondents' needs, and whether the committees handling them understand the full reality of the plight of PhDs and postdocs. These unreasoned decisions are even more problematic for respondents that don't know how or are not allowed to appeal.

The main strategy for handling the effects of covid-19 on research in Norway, thus far, has been to design universal guidelines for contract extension, and delegate the implementation to individual higher education and research institutions. This means that while all PhDs and postdocs should theoretically be treated equally, local variations in interpretation can emerge and lead to unequal treatment. This is corroborated by the discrepancies observed across universities, with clear differences in application numbers and success, but also within universities, with respondents commenting on varying levels of resources and information across faculties or even departments. At institutions that have been successful in disseminating, implementing and following up on central guidelines for extensions, respondents reported higher levels of satisfaction with the information provided and the outcomes of their applications.³

The delegation of responsibility we have witnessed in the handling of covid-19 extension applications is typical of countries and institutions that have a decentralised form of organisation, such as Norway. But nation-wide problems caused by external factors, such as the covid-19 pandemic, require an effective institutional response. This is both to ensure that policies concerning those affected benefit all equally, and to ensure that local differences in institutional capacity (due to funding, administrative support or other) will not affect their implementation. Given the size and severity of the problem, this cannot be left up the discretion of individual departments and supervisors alone. A central solution to the impact that covid-19 has had, and will continue to have, on researchers across Norway, is needed.

While many researchers are still not aware of the full extent of their delay and whether a contract prolongation has been granted or will be granted in the future, the current survey does demonstrate that the current model is lacking in certain key respects and is likely to underestimate and undercompensate the true extent of delays. To prevent these problems from spreading as the covid-19 crisis continues, future covid-19 extension policies should acknowledge the full set of tangible and non-tangible sources of project delays and ensure an unbureaucratic, transparent and timely handling of extension requests. The majority of PhDs and postdocs in Norway are still in need of contract prolongations. While some of them have succeeded in getting the extension they need, many others received insufficient compensation, were not properly informed, or are in other ways discouraged from applying or not able to apply. This latter group carries the risk of not completing their projects on time, experiencing additional stress and anxiety, or when the situation seems hopeless, dropping out of their programme altogether. As long as covid-19 extension policies fail to be inclusive and transparent, the research of these PhDs and postdocs will continue to suffer, with negative consequences for their well-being, their career, and the research output of their universities as a result. We therefore urgently recommend revising the existing policies.

To monitor the outcome of the covid-19 extension applications and the effect of the pandemic on the completion of PhD and postdoc projects in Norway, a follow-up survey is planned in 2021.

³ It is telling that satisfaction is highest at institutions with small PhD cohorts, such as OsloMet, and dissatisfaction is most pronounced at institutions with very large PhD cohorts, such as NTNU. This could point to differences in organisational structure or budgeting that make it easier to mobilise action and resources in smaller organisations, where lines of communication are shorter than in larger, more bureaucratic universities.

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