

The Impact of COVID-19 on Young Academics

Young Academy Leiden – Position Paper

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic affects society at large, disrupts university life and also has major consequences for early career researchers at Leiden University. Leiden University closed its doors for the first time since the Second World War. Nevertheless, work continues from thousands of home offices as academic staff scrambled to switch to online formats on short notice. YAL acknowledges the hard work of all colleagues at the university who made this transition possible.

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on early career academics takes different shapes and sizes. Some researchers could not continue their lab work, others are very concerned about finishing their research project before their temporary contract runs out, many academics worked hard to move their teaching online and for quite a few these challenges were met while performing care duties at home.

This Young Academy Leiden (YAL) position paper focuses on the effects of the crisis on young academics at Leiden University and makes a series of recommendations. Our analysis and recommendations are based mainly on two sources: first, a young interfaculty lunch meeting held on the 7 May, which was attended by approximately 40 colleagues; second, an [online survey](#) organized by YAL in early May, in which over 200 early career academics from Leiden University participated.

Points of concern

Early career academics note various concerns. These can be divided under the themes of research, teaching, career, and personal issues.

Research

Regarding research activities, a general distinction can be drawn between those colleagues which can relatively easily continue work from their home offices and those who cannot.

- Many report that teaching has taken priority over research when it had to be moved online. Of the survey respondents, 66 percent are concerned about their quality of research, whereas 33 percent are concerned about the quality of teaching.
- Research projects that depend on field, lab or other data-driven work are seriously impaired. Many projects experience delays and some have halted entirely.
- Deadlines for deliverables will not be met if not extended. The [messages of NWO and ZonMW \(the Netherlands Organisation for Health Research and Development\) and universities regarding 'tailored solutions'](#) is welcome, but also leads to uncertainty in the short term.
- New funding opportunities focussed on the pandemic with short application deadlines to apply sometimes add to more anxiety and stress in an already challenging work environment.
- There are concerns about new funding opportunities focussed on the pandemic and what this will mean for already strained regular research budgets. For instance, a number of charities that support medical research are currently suffering from lack of donations for non-COVID research, which will dramatically reduce funding sources for these researchers.

- Mentoring duties of young academics have increased at the expense of research time. They are providing additional and much-needed guidance and support to group members to keep them mentally healthy and motivated.

Teaching

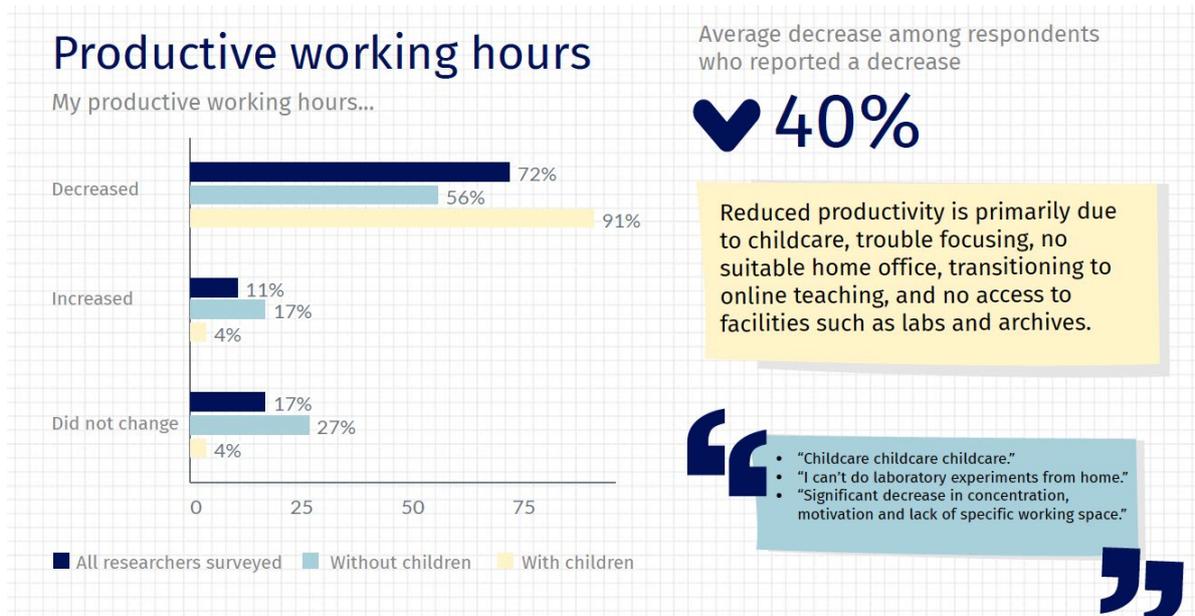
Online teaching will continue for the remainder of the academic year 2019/20. For the academic year 2020/21, hybrid forms of teaching are envisaged, where a return to physical teaching will take place where possible. Against this backdrop, researchers have the following concerns:

- A number of colleagues feel that the sudden move to online teaching and managing online classes is very demanding. Those with a teaching load that they could just about manage before the COVID-19 crisis hit, are now in danger of being overburdened.
- Teaching workgroups and seminars online is much more tiring than doing it face-to-face. Class discussions are less interactive, with students often turning their videos off. This hurts the quality of small group seminars or workgroups.
- Some young academics express concern about student course evaluations being scrapped in some faculties. While this is understandable for the current semester, it was seen as problematic by some, since the evaluations would be particularly useful for preparing for next semester’s hybrid teaching formats. Moreover, although YAL remains critical about using course evaluations for performance evaluations, they remain an important component for many such performance evaluations and job applications, especially for early career academics.

Career

Many participants praised the support they had received from their supervisors/principal investigators. However, in terms of opportunities for professional development, both short and medium terms consequences of the pandemic were noted in our survey and during our lunch meeting. In essence, young academics are worried that the crisis causes a career gap of at least half a year which will have lasting detrimental effects for their professional ambitions.

- Inequalities between different groups regarding the effects of the crisis are a major concern, not in the least between staff with permanent and temporary contracts. Colleagues on non-



Source: Young Academy Leiden, *Impact of COVID-19, Survey Outcomes for 204 Early Career Researchers (May 2020)*, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/yal/yal-infographics-corona-survey-a4-25-5.pdf>

permanent contracts, in particular post-docs and *docenten*, are anxious about their future regarding job security. This applies in particular to those whose contracts are scheduled to expire this year. Many fear that they might soon face unemployment in an unforgiving job market. In the words of one of the participants: “Tenured people have time not to be worried.”

- The effects of the crisis vary also across households. Young academics with children or other care duties are affected in particular by the crisis. As shown by our survey, 91 percent of respondents with children report reduced productivity during the lockdown (see figure above).
- Early career academics express concerns that gender imbalances may be aggravated by the crisis. The [gender gap](#) in journal submissions seems to have increased in [some journals](#) (although [analysis for another journal](#) shows a slightly different picture). While we do not observe clear gender differences in our own survey, we should be cautious that existing inequalities are not reinforced by this crisis, with many women taking on the burden of childcare and other domestic duties more than men.
- Grant opportunities have become more uncertain, which diminishes prospects for permanent employment or promotions even further, especially in the Dutch system.
- Conferences, which serve as important networking events and in some fields also as recruitment opportunities, have been cancelled.

Personal

In an environment where many young academics were facing challenges to keep a healthy work-life balance even before the COVID-19 crisis hit, many noted the additional strain that the pandemic has put on their personal wellbeing.

- There has been a great loss of productive working hours. Survey participants who suffered a decrease in productive working hours report a rather substantial decrease of 40 percent.
- In general, there is a sense that the boundaries between work and life become even more blurred than they were before the onset of the crisis. Many tasks tend to take more time than before, which leads to further encroachment of work on evenings and weekends. An increasing number of young academics might be heading towards an eventual burnout under the current circumstances.
- Young academics without a partner and/or family network in the Netherlands particularly experience loneliness due to the extended nature of the lockdown. Special attention should be paid to their well-being.

Recommendations

Addressing the above concerns is not easy. Young Academy Leiden recognizes the work within Leiden University that many have undertaken to address some of these concerns in the short term. As the corona virus is likely to continue to affect academic life in the foreseeable future, we offer the following recommendations in dealing with its consequences, particularly from the perspective of young academics:

- Young academics on non-permanent and especially short-term contracts should get clarity as soon as possible regarding their future job situation. Institutes should find ways to extend the contracts of temporary staff if possible and offer promotion or extension of contract if this is due as soon as possible, to avoid unnecessary uncertainty and hence stress in the coming months.

- Nationally, universities should petition the government, NWO and ZonMW to make available funds to extend the contracts of non-permanent research project staff, given the highly competitive nature of the job market and the serious effects the crisis has on this group. Like other sectors, the Dutch knowledge economy deserves strong financial support to protect vulnerable employees.
- Efforts should be made to ensure that postdoctoral researchers at Leiden University are integrated as much as possible in the work groups of their respective institutes and receive adequate guidance by their supervisors to continue their projects under the current circumstances.
- Hiring and promotion committees should take the short- and medium-term effects of the crisis into account in hiring and promotion decisions. This includes paying attention to gaps in research and other output that can be traced back to the lockdown period.
- Hiring committees should take into account the extent to which young academics were particularly disadvantaged, such as those with children at home. They should be aware of potentially increased gender imbalances, too. At the same time, it should be avoided that male academics who provide most of the childcare are disadvantaged.
- In Performance and Development Interviews (PDIs), supervisors should take into account the effects of the crisis on employees' achievements. This includes restrictions on conducting research and the inability to attend conferences during the lockdown.
- Senior colleagues are encouraged to use their networks to help PhD candidates, postdocs and other colleagues in the pursuit of their professional ambitions.
- With a view to reducing stress levels, this is a time when academics should not be putting undue pressure on colleagues. The current situation is not "business as usual". Colleagues' home situation should be taken into account.
- It is important to focus on the university's core business: teaching *and* research. More emphasis should be put on the continuation of research, as maintaining teaching should not be the sole priority.
- With online (or hybrid) teaching becoming a long-term situation, support for teachers in transforming their lectures to an online or hybrid format should be increased. A start would be asking the type of help that is useful to teachers.
- Course evaluations should be reintroduced as soon as possible given their importance as a means of feedback and for performance evaluations and job applications.
- While the university's support, including from ICLON, was seen as positive, more assistance from the university regarding software problems is needed. IT support and digital environments should be further professionalized. The software solutions for synchronous classes are not reliable enough, particularly when internet connections are slow.
- The drastic changes caused by the crisis should also prompt a more profound reflection on the ways we have organized our teaching and conduct and disseminate our research. Returning to the status quo ante cannot be the goal. Instead, the university should strive to emerge from the crisis with a more sustainable, resilient, and technologically advanced way of working.