



Guidelines for extensions to doctoral studentships due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Due to their fixed-term employment, doctoral students are a group at particular risk of being negatively affected by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The university may therefore need to make decisions on measures that affect doctoral students in both the short and long term. From a short-term perspective, the doctoral student may be at the end of their studies and employment and, due to the effects of the pandemic, be forced to delay the public defence of their thesis until after the end of their period of employment. From a long-term perspective, the pandemic may also affect doctoral students in the early and mid-stages of their employment as they have not been able to start work on their thesis or their studies as planned.

Nation regulations on extensions to doctoral studentships

Under the provisions of Chapter 5, Section 7 of the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, the total period of employment for a doctoral student may “not exceed the time corresponding to full-time third-cycle study for four years unless there are special grounds. Such grounds may comprise leave of absence because of illness, leave of absence for service in the defence forces or an elected position in a trade union or student organisation, or parental leave”.

An evaluation by the Swedish Agency for Government Employers has clarified that it should be possible to extend the total period of employment if a doctoral student has been unable to fulfil their obligations due to circumstances that can be linked to COVID-19.

Grounds for extension

How, and to what extent, a doctoral student’s work has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic varies from case to case, so it is not appropriate for the university to decide on a general extension for all doctoral students. Additionally, a general extension may disadvantage the students whose work is more delayed than the extra time allowed by a general extension. This could potentially lead to poorer financial circumstances for the research environment as a whole, such as fewer doctoral students, postdocs and other researchers which, consequently, can disadvantage doctoral students. Instead, the university will assess each case individually, to determine whether an extension will be permitted.

Some situations in which there are grounds for an extension:

- Empirical investigations in environments that are inaccessible during the pandemic or environments that are not currently approving fieldwork, and which cannot be replaced by other suitable solutions.

- Cancelled travel to collect material.
- Recruiting and utilising research subjects is difficult or impossible.

General anxiety that is due to the pandemic (and which has not led to sick leave), does not provide any grounds for extension.

A decision on an extension due to the COVID-19 pandemic is made by the vice-chancellor¹ after an application has been submitted by a doctoral student (and approved by the principal supervisor) and after that application has been processed by the relevant steering committee. An application should be made when it is confirmed that work on the thesis will de facto be delayed or has already been delayed. NB: Lost working hours do not necessarily entail serious delays to the thesis work or that employment needs to be extended for this reason.

Procedure for applications for extensions to doctoral studentships due to the COVID-19 pandemic

An application for an extension to a doctoral studentship due to the COVID-19 pandemic is made on a specific form that can be downloaded from the employee web.

Procedure:

- The form is filled in by the doctoral student.
- The form is approved by the doctoral student's principal supervisor.
- The form is sent to the secretary/chair of the steering committee for the research area for doctoral studies to which the doctoral student belongs. This person is responsible for registering the application and reporting the case at the subsequent meeting of the steering committee.
- The application is processed by the relevant steering committee. The steering committee decides whether to recommend that the vice-chancellor extends the doctoral studentship.
- The secretary/chair of the steering committee informs the relevant HR generalist at the academic school of the steering group's recommendation (via the minutes or similar).
- The HR generalist presents the case at the vice-chancellor's executive meeting (regardless of whether the steering committee recommends an extension).
- The vice-chancellor decides whether the doctoral studentship will be extended, the length of any extension and how it will be financed. The documentation on which the decision is made comprises the doctoral student's application and the recommendation of the steering group.
- The doctoral student is informed of the decision.
- If the vice-chancellor grants the application the relevant HR generalist extends the period of employment according to the relevant procedure.

¹ Normally, the head of school decides what leave provides grounds for extension, see *Regulations for Doctoral Studentships at Södertörn University, reg. no. 1094/1.1.2/2017*

Documentation of changes and deviations to the individual study plan

Even though a specific application is required for an extension, all changes and deviations from the doctoral student's study plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic must be documented in their individual study plan.

Where possible, the doctoral student's project must be re-planned and adapted to the current situation. Can some elements be moved forward or back? Can different types of studies be conducted, ones that are not affected by the current situation? Changes of this type must also be documented in the individual study plan.