

GUDK - The Doctoral Student Committee of the University of Gothenburg

Newsletter 1, 2019/2020: The Covid-19 pandemic

Words from the chairperson: PhD students and Covid-19

This GUDK newsletter will focus on the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to PhD students at the University of Gothenburg (UGot). I want you all to know that the student unions, GUDK and the PhD representatives in central boards and committees are monitoring the university's work with the pandemic closely and aim to make sure that you will get the education you are entitled to.

It is at this point impossible to overlook the impact the Covid-19 pandemic will have on society, and it is likely that we all will be affected in one way or another. Therefore, this situation requires a certain level of flexibility when it comes to matters such as supervision, defenses, prolongations, courses and research projects in general. Our faculties as well as university-wide boards and committees are currently working hard to establish general guidelines for such matters, and I hope that you have already been informed regarding burning issues such as online defenses and remote work. In this newsletter, I aim to gather university-wide information regarding aspects of special importance for PhD students, and to inform you about GUDK's current work on and around these issues.

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Most of the information in this newsletter comes from the UGot staff portal:

<https://www.gu.se/omuniversitetet/aktuellt/coronaviruset>

What is GUDK?

The doctoral committee is an association of PhD students from each faculty. GUDK is a part of the University of Gothenburg Student Unions (GUS), which is made up of three of the four student unions at GU. Each PhD council at faculty level elects two representatives (a regular and an alternate) for GUDK. GUDK's purpose is to provide a platform for collaboration between PhD students and to increase PhD students' control over their learning and work situation. GUDK focuses on the central level and on matters that are relevant for all PhD students at the University of Gothenburg.

Please visit www.gus.gu.se/om_gus/gudk/ for more information.

The role of GUDK and doctoral representatives during the Covid-19 pandemic

PhD student representatives on central boards such as the [Committee for PhD education](#) and the [Research board](#) continuously report to GUDK, and we have been in close contact about the Covid-19 situation. Furthermore, we remain in close contact with the chairperson of GUS, [Elin Gunnarsson](#), who is part of a newly instated assessment group, which continuously works on issues related to the virus. Our last GUDK meeting was almost exclusively devoted to the Covid-19 situation. The representatives reported from their respective faculties, and discussed what they perceived as the most burning issues for PhD students right now. In this newsletter you will find a summary of those topics.

Do not hesitate to contact GUDK if there are any additional matters you would like us to work with in relation to Covid-19 and PhD students at the University of Gothenburg.

Important topics regarding the impact of Covid-19

Doctoral defenses

According to official UGot information, it is possible to conduct a PhD thesis defense remotely. [Special guidelines](#) (unfortunately, only available in Swedish) about how to conduct a PhD thesis defense entirely or partially by remote access were made available on March 25, 2020. However, it is also stated that if a doctoral defense is canceled, the doctoral studentship (employment) should be extended if necessary. See the [FAQ for UGot staff](#) for more information.

Prolongation for project delays

The issue of different kinds of project delays have been discussed at length in central boards and committees. Faculties and PhD student representatives have contributed with their thoughts regarding how such prolongation would best be administrated, and we expect guidelines to be presented shortly. However, we want to urge you to carefully document all project delays in your ISP. If you do not have an active ISP, ask your supervisor to open a new one. The ISP is supposed to be a living document, and may also be used advantageously as a project logbook. You should also save any documentation of cancelled field trips, field work, data collection and similar aspects of your PhD work.

Important topics regarding the impact of Covid-19

Anxiety and safety measures

We know that many of you are worried, and maybe even scared in this time of global crisis. At the same time as you might worry about our own and maybe a loved one's health, you might also feel insecure and worried about your PhD project and upcoming deadlines. Some PhD students find it practically impossible, for various reasons, to work from home. They are now worried that the university will close all together. Other PhD students worry because their supervisors want them to do as much lab work as possible before the situation gets even worse. They question the sustainability of working even harder than before, while at the same time trying to cope with everything else that is going on in the world. Finally, there are PhD students who need to use public transportation in order to get to work, and who find that little or no measures are being taken by the departments to prevent the spread of virus in the labs, kitchens or other shared facilities. To them, it seems as if PI:s and supervisors now have the right to take decisions regarding the safety of PhD students.

In short – we all worry for different reasons. No matter why you worry, GUDK wants to give you one piece of advice: Talk to someone about your concerns. Consider talking to your supervisor, your doctoral examiner or your HR-person. It might be possible to come up with a compromise. Employees who feel anxious and stressed can also turn to the [Occupational Health Service](#) for support.

Remote work

All higher education in Sweden is now conducted on online platforms, and staff is recommended to work from home if possible. This is done in order to help reduce the risk of spreading the infection in society. However, the official information from the university makes it clear that the head of department (or, closest line manager) is responsible for deciding which staff members can work remotely and which are needed at the work place. Your manager can also order you to work from home.

If you are working from home, please consider the ergonomics of your home office. Maybe you could take your office chair and monitor home with you? Also, do not forget to take breaks and maybe go for a walk during the day. If you feel socially isolated, join us for a GUDK [Zoom PhD "fika"](#)! So far, two online fikas are planned: April 29 at 3 PM and May 8 at 10 AM.

Supervision

We hope you have already discussed the Covid-19 situation and the impact this will have on your project with your supervisors. If you have any problems related to supervision we recommend that you talk to your head of department or doctoral examiner. In more severe situations, you can also contact the [GUS ombudsmen](#) for support.

Flexibility

As stated, this situation requires a certain level of flexibility regarding supervision, defenses, prolongations, courses and research projects in general (though this list is not exhaustive). If you cannot conduct necessary fieldwork or gather important data, it might be possible to make slight modifications to the project, or to write a review article instead of an empirical article. Since we do not know how long we will have to live with this situation, it might be helpful already at this stage to discuss such issues with your supervisor.

VAB, sick leave and other possibilities for leave

If you or your children are sick, you always have the right to [paid sick leave or VAB](#). Such leave should always be reported in Primula as well as to Försäkringskassan, in order to get both sick pay and the prolongation you are entitled. A common misconception among PhD students is that you will only get prolongation for long-term sick leave. This is, however, not correct. You are entitled to prolongation for all days you are on reported sick leave.

Some PhD students have wondered if the newly instated rules for short-term lay-off with pay ([korttidspermittering](#)) might be applicable for PhD students. This is however not the case, since we are employed by the state, and this support only concerns the private sector.

Finally, if you feel that you cannot work efficiently due to current circumstances, you might consider reducing your working hours. According to the [UGot rules and regulations for third-cycle studies](#), we have the right to request a leave of absence, to a maximum of 50% of full time. Such leave always has to be approved by the head of department. However, it is important to consider the long-term impact of such leave on your personal economy, since a lower salary also means a lower SGI (income qualifying for sickness allowance) and unemployment benefit.