

Faculty of Science Workload Plan

FACULTY OF SCIENCE BOARD

9th April 2021 (after advice Heads of Departments)

Approved by FB 26th March 2021

URL ENG: <https://tinyurl.com/vubeta-plan-workload-covid>

URL NL: <https://tinyurl.com/vubeta-plan-werkdruk-covid>

(Please use this link for suggestions, additions, comments etc.)

Acknowledgement

The guidance in the appendix is taken from the School of Business and Economics plan, with thanks.

Introduction

Recent years have seen much talk at VU Amsterdam about workloads and their alleviation. The situation has only been exacerbated further by measures in response to coronavirus and the extra demands they are making of us all. The Executive Board, together with participatory bodies, is therefore taking a number of important and urgent steps to tackle the heavy workloads experienced by many colleagues.

The government has this week announced a support package for the education sector. It appears from this that there will be extra money for the universities, for matters like those described above. However, it is not immediately clear how much this will be and when we will be able to spend it. For this reason, VU Amsterdam itself is now releasing funds in order act quickly.

It has been agreed with the deans that each faculty board will draw up a workload reduction plan by 10 March. In so doing, they are asked to consider a safe working environment, the role of managers and their contacts with staff. The starting point should be a good work-life balance and agreements on staff duties, including any temporary adjustments, with particular attention to recognition and rewards; see also the [VU Amsterdam Vision of 'Erkennen en Waarderen'](#).

Below is the plan for the Faculty of Science.

Specific measures

Teaching

1. In consultation with individual programmes, the mid-term reviews are postponed or modified.
2. The VU has submitted a request to extend the accreditation period for all programmes by one year.
3. Lecturers are asked to seriously consider offering courses over eight-week periods in the 6-1-1 format, as originally intended: six weeks with contact hours, one week of private study with sessions for questions and one week of examinations. This is less stressful for students and allows the lecturer to plan other activities in the seventh week. For four-week periods, a 3-½-½ pattern can be used.
4. To limit their own workload (administration, resits), lecturers are advised not to hold constituent tests which count towards the final mark. An alternative is to offer students tests they can use to monitor their own progress (“formative” rather than “summative” assessment).
5. Quality assurance is being maintained, but with the guidelines adapted to ensure that this is as “lean” as possible; no extra checks are done without good reason.
6. The Faculty Board is making funds available for additional staff such as student teaching assistants, as well to extend teaching duties for trainee research assistants, junior lecturers and postdoctoral researchers.
7. If this has not yet been done, departmental staff meetings should discuss whether the coronavirus crisis has resulted in any imbalance in the distribution of teaching duties and other tasks – and if so, how this can be corrected.

Research

1. As soon as possible, the Faculty Board will announce a new programme of contract extensions (or equivalent) for PhD students and postdoctoral researchers with temporary appointments. This will take into account any budget needed for additional related expenses.
2. For tenure trackers, the best option per person will be considered. When evaluating a tenure-track trajectory, particular emphasis will be placed upon the qualitative criteria.
3. Independent research assessments are postponed if possible (as has already happened in part with the upcoming assessments of Mathematics and Computer Science).
4. All WIZWI (Working Group on Implementation of Scientific Integrity Duty of Care) activities are suspended until 1 September 2021 at the earliest.
5. Recruitment of departmental research data management (RDM) coordinators is suspended until 1 September.
6. A general moratorium applies to the introduction of new rules for research unless there is broad consensus that these are absolutely necessary.
7. The faculty is very closely monitoring the support needed (legal, Nagoya, etc.) so as to avoid extra stress for researchers as much as possible.

Operations

1. For all operational matters where changes are necessary and cannot be postponed, a budget

for extra manpower is being made available. Priority will be given to people who are temporarily out of work because of coronavirus, such as student-assistants. Examples include support for the introduction of MARS (the new SAP), LabServant (registration system for materials etc.) and VUweb.

2. The Faculty Board is limiting its “questioning” of departments to a minimum.
3. The evaluation of the tenure-track policy is postponed until the autumn.
4. In principle, no new activities are to begin unless absolutely necessary (see point 1).
5. All reports will be kept as short and concise as possible.
6. The faculty is planning four meeting-free weeks per year, in February, May, October and around Christmas (so that Christmas/New Year has a meeting-free period of two weeks). Making the seventh week of each eight-week teaching period meeting-free may also be considered (see “Teaching”).

General

Meetings

1. The standard duration of a bilateral meeting (two or three participants) is **30 minutes**; consider it impolite to ask for more than this.
2. The standard duration of a larger meeting is 45-60 minutes; this should only be extended if there is broad consensus amongst all participants.
3. Meetings scheduled to last 30/45/60 minutes have an actual duration of 25/40/50 minutes. Take a short break to catch your breath and/or chat informally with another participant.
4. Plan breaks between meetings.
5. Plan a lunch break. To make scheduling easier, we suggest that everyone take this at the same time, between 12.30 and 13.00.
6. Where possible, limit minutes to lists of decisions and points for action.

E-mail

1. Consider using the telephone as an alternative to e-mail.
2. Do not e-mail colleagues in the evening or at weekends (if you compile an e-mail at these times, use the “Send later” option).
3. Keep your messages as brief as possible (preferably no more than ten lines).
4. If you expect the recipient to act in response to your e-mail, make this clear in the subject line or at the start of the message.
5. In case of long messages (20+ lines):
 - a. structure the message by using plain-text format;
 - b. start with a synopsis indicating who should read which part.
6. When forwarding a long message (or a series of messages) for information or to request action, it is polite and efficient to add a line or two at the top summarizing the content and stating why/when it might be useful to read.
7. Think carefully before you cc an e-mail to someone. Do they really need a copy?
8. Think carefully before using a mailing list. Do so only if everyone on the list really does need to be informed/involved.

Appendix

Guidance for managers

One of the most important factors in reducing workloads is communication between managers and their staff. Especially now that you meet less in person or in a natural setting, it is crucial to stay in contact with your personnel. When you do talk, reducing workloads and what you expect of one another (in terms of output, for instance) should be a frequent topic of conversation.

Below are some points to guide you as a manager.

- For every request, task or assignment, ask yourself: “Need to have, or nice to have?”
- At vital moments, such as when measures in response to coronavirus change, communicate with staff:
 - that you understand the situation everyone is in, expressing confidence in their commitment;
 - the implications at departmental/programme level (provide links to information/support);
 - exactly what you expect of them in these special circumstances, so that they are clear about that.
- Discuss the following points individually with each member of staff:
 - their work-life balance;
 - their needs and the possibilities with regard to particular tasks, including prioritization: what is really necessary and what is not, what energizes them and what does not, what could be done more efficiently;
 - their needs and the possibilities with regard to support from VU Amsterdam, such as arrangements and allowances for home working, IT, commuting and possible help from colleagues or other employees.
- Redistribution of tasks between employees or within teams.
 - Who could do more or less work at the moment?
 - Who can take on what, and what additional help do they need to do so?
- Provide additional support to employees who indicate a need for it or where you as their manager think it necessary.
- Accelerate external hiring of replacements when a colleague is temporarily absent.
- Organize opportunities for informal team/department/programme meetings.
- Make use of the so-called “flexible layer” (eg. freelancers) in teaching.
- Make use of student assistants for teaching and support (as far as possible using the government “corona jobs” subsidy scheme).
- Organize face-to-face bilateral and group meetings, if possible as “walk and talks”.
- Make temporary support arrangements.
 - Temporarily extend expiring contracts, especially for groups requiring special attention such as PhD students.
 - Enquire pro-actively about existing leave arrangements (such as holiday, parental, care, emergency and exceptional leave), ensuring that these are combined with agreements on expected output.

Guidance for employees

As an employee, if you find that you are experiencing an excessive workload it is important that you inform your manager immediately so that a solution can be found. Employees are also asked to come up with ideas themselves to reduce their own workload or that of their team.

Below are some points to guide you as an employee.

- For every request, task or assignment, ask yourself: “Need to have, or nice to have?”
- If your workload becomes too much, let your manager know.
- Try to perform your tasks as efficiently as possible: set priorities, create a suitable workplace, take regular breaks and time off, alternate energizing and energy-draining tasks, limit e-mail exchanges and meetings, set boundaries.
- If you are a lecturer, departmental secretary, examiner or coach: arrange frequent (e.g. weekly) contact sessions for students, so that you remain accessible and your mailbox does not overflow with queries.
- Whenever possible, arrange to meet colleagues face to face rather than on screen (e.g. “walk and talks”).
- Never hesitate to consult a confidential counsellor or staff welfare officer.