Information Note—FQPPU

Academic Research Conditions and Constraints During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The academic community, like the rest of society, has been upended by the surreal climate created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only have professors been called on to review and, if necessary, adapt how they teach in a context that requires social isolation, but they have also had to reorganize their research activities. The urgency to provide teaching services led to putting the review of research constraints on the back burner. It is, however, necessary.

This information note aims to document the obstacles and constraints associated with conducting academic research activities for university professors and to begin to reflect on the implications of this unprecedented context.

1. Access to the Premises and to Research Data

In general, university administrations have recommended that all activities and experiments (on site) that are not urgent and that will not lead to a major loss of data should be postponed until the university reopens. Researchers have been called on to review their research program to take into account that all non-essential and unnecessary activities located on campus have been suspended. However, research activities aimed at addressing the COVID-19 threat are to be fully maintained, while respecting the social distancing measures in effect. All other research activities can take place remotely, while ensuring compliance with the ethics certification in effect for the research project.

Research involving live materials
Campus access restrictions are some of the initial concerns mentioned by researchers who work with materials for which human attention is needed. University administrations have been given the authority to determine what constitutes a necessary and essential research activity and to prepare protocols for accessing the relevant spaces on campuses. As such, access to various buildings is restricted to authorized persons involved in research programs that require caring for animals, plants, or cell cultures.

Research involving human subjects and field research
In the context of the pandemic, several research projects that involve human subjects (such as studies, surveys, and interviews) or that require travel here or abroad are suspended until further notice,¹ pursuant to guidelines set out by public authorities. These guidelines will, of course, lead to delays for completing research projects and may also lead to biases or other issues for research projects.

Collaborative research
It should be noted that collaboration initiatives between researchers are continuing to occur, within an “open science” movement, which began several years ago. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) signed onto the Wellcome Trust’s joint statement on sharing research data and findings relevant to the novel coronavirus (nCoV) outbreak. Several researchers have indicated that in this unique climate,

¹ As of April 2, 2020, all research and creation activities conducted by professors that take place in centres, laboratories, or the field (whether they fall under the purview of universities or their affiliated centres) must be discontinued until May 1, 2020.
collaborative arrangements within the scientific community (e.g., to transfer material) have been agreed
to more quickly as a result of the shared quest to find a vaccine.

**Internal and administrative processes**

As is the case for the work carried out by society in general, the work of administrative support staff in the
university setting has slowed. This has led to delays with regard to grant application submissions, award
notifications, signing of contracts, hiring of staff, purchasing of materials, etc. Internal deadlines for various
competitions may need to be changed. Slowdowns are also to be expected in the evaluation of applications
for internal funding and ethics approval for studies (involving humans or animals). The lack of access to
technical resources available to professors and needed to conduct research may lead to delays in the
normal progression of research activities. Finally, delays may also occur because universities are
prioritizing the evaluation of proposals directly related to COVID-19 until the end of the public health
emergency.

### 2. Impact on Career Advancement and Research Productivity

Beyond the closure of their workplaces, professors have not been spared from the constraints imposed by
the government since the start of the public health crisis caused by the spread of COVID-19. For example,
a number of them must deal with the closure of day care services and schools and, as a result, balance
remote work and family life in the confinement context. The same goes for professors who are informal
caregivers for one or more family members and whose services are needed during this time of crisis. While
certain research activities may be normally carried out remotely at home, the current situation in homes
does not often allow for conducting such activities effectively. Other factors may also contribute to
creating a climate that is not conducive to conducting research activities as one “normally” would, such as
unequal access to the necessary technological resources and tools, as well as lack of adequate training on
how to use them. Anxiety and distress may also affect professors during this period of uncertainty.

The growing gaps—which will continue to grow—between the conditions for conducting research in
various academic disciplines, particularly due to varying personal situations, will have consequences on
the advancement of knowledge and on scientific production. Other impacts can be expected on career
advancement, particularly on research production, which is central to the evaluation and promotion
processes. It is also critical to obtain funding internally as well as through funding agencies. It is clear that
these obstacles will affect many of our fellow professors in different ways. The special measures that have
been implemented will have varying impacts based on personal situations, academic disciplines, and types
of research. Gaps in the research community may also be due to measures taken by governments and
protocols implemented in universities, both here and abroad.

### 3. Impact on Funding for University Research

While the current pandemic has led to obstacles related to the normal pursuit of research activities for a
number of professors, e.g., by limiting access to spaces dedicated to research, access to funding has also
been a major issue. This concern must be put into a broader context. Currently, the federal public support
announced thus far adds up to over $255 billion, which represents 10% of the country’s GDP, but this
percentage could increase even more as a result of talks that are taking place about providing assistance
to other sectors, such as the oil sector. Program expenses could thus represent approximately 15% to 20%
of the GDP. These interventions will push Canada to have a deficit of over $112.7 billion in 2020–2021,
according to the analysis carried out by the parliamentary budget officer and published on March 27, 2020.
In relation to the size of the Canadian economy, the deficit will reach 1.2% of the GDP in 2019–2020 and 5.2% of the GDP in 2020–2021. According to the Université de Sherbrooke economist, François Delorme, a return to a balanced budget is not to be expected in the short or medium term, i.e. not until 6 to 10 years have passed, depending on the scenario.

**Responses from public funding agencies**

The current upheaval has created a climate of uncertainty among researchers and other research staff—uncertainty that agencies that fund research are trying to dispel via various measures. They have already recognized that the unusual context will have effects on studies that may become compromised or may slow down, on the capacity to conduct or evaluate research projects, on the preparation and introduction of grants and awards, and on the process for submitting articles for publication. In this regard, universities are in discussion with these organizations so as to limit the negative effects of the current pandemic on research.

To reassure the academic community, the three federal councils (SSHRC, NSERC, and CIHR) informed researchers that they could submit requests to extend the term of their grants, that certain eligible expenses for travel that had to be cancelled would be reimbursed, and that other costs incurred concerning financial commitments, such as wages for research staff, would still be paid through the grants as planned. To learn more about the various solutions that have been implemented for each award and funding program offered, visit the respective websites of each funding agency. Updates are made daily. In many cases, they will continue to receive applications, but certain application deadlines have been extended. The effects seem to vary; for some programs, delays are to be expected for the processing of applications, while others will only be slightly late.

Meanwhile, Quebec’s Chief Scientist notified the scientific community that the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQs) would demonstrate flexibility, particularly in relation to the submission of the required documents by grant recipients, but also to expenses incurred as a result of disruptions related to COVID-19. On April 9, in a press release from the FRQs, it was announced, in an about-face in relation to the March 25 guidelines, that funding would be extended by one full year for research clusters, centres, institutes, and research networks funded by the FRQs. As a result, the start of the next competitions for all of these programs will be delayed by one year.

**Priority: COVID-19**

The federal agencies are giving priority to funding programs, both old and new, being implemented to face the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of professors are being solicited during this

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4 For the grant end dates, NSERC and SSHRC will approve an extension of no more than 12 months to allow for the use of current funding ending no later than March 31, 2021. CIHR will extend funding by one year for all investigator-initiated research grants scheduled to expire between June 30, 2020, and March 30, 2021.

5 For example, the three federal funding agencies (SSHRC, NSERC, and CIHR) and the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQs) announced that travel cancellation fees in the context of research and creation activities will be included in eligible expenses for a research grant.

period of crisis and are contributing to efforts to combat COVID-19. While some researchers were already working on this subject, many decided to refocus their activities to contribute to this collective effort. On March 23, the Prime Minister of Canada implemented Canada’s plan to mobilize science to fight COVID-19. On March 11, he had already announced an investment of $275 million for coronavirus research and medical countermeasures through the federal funding agencies (CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC), as well as through the Canada Research Coordinating Committee (CRC) via the New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and Genome Canada. For the moment, the planned budgets for 2020 for the three federal agencies will be maintained, but they may subsequently be modified, due to investments announced for research related to COVID-19.

Quebec is also participating in this effort. The Quebec government allocated funds to the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQs) for studies related to COVID-19. The FRQs announced the creation of the Québec COVID Network in response to the strong mobilization of members of the research community, who, over the past few weeks, submitted over 150 research and innovation proposals to the working group formed by the FRQs, the Ministère de l’Économie et de l’Innovation, and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux.

However, this (re)direction of funding to projects related to combatting coronavirus, while necessary (and temporary), will of course affect the research community. In a context in which the entire country must face a “return to normal,” which will be challenging on the economic front, the imbalance that may result for funding in various academic disciplines and for different types of research may well be a reality the academic community will have to face for months or even years to come. For the moment, available financial data does not allow for evaluating the situation; a more detailed analysis should be carried out in future. In fact, while we know that amounts were directed to studies related to COVID-19, we do not yet know if this is “new funding” or if (and to what degree) the budgets planned for 2020–2021 for science and research (allocated notably through the federal funding agencies and through the FRQs in Quebec) will be slashed.

Evaluation processes and collegiality
The FQPPU also has questions about the selection process for research projects toward which funds will be allocated by governments to combat COVID-19. Currently, the Quebec government is taking the lead by offering funding to businesses and research centres. Moreover, an FRQ–MÉI–MSSS working group was created to coordinate proposals from the scientific community and to select projects that will receive funding. For the moment, details about how the evaluation committees will operate are not yet known, but it is very likely that the regular evaluation process for the proposals may be affected, given the urgency of the situation, which would thus create a precedent.

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10 This working group is made up of the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQs), the Ministère de l’Économie et de l’Innovation (MÉI), and the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS).
4. Impact on preparing the next generation of researchers

Research disruptions have not only affected professors. While several grant programs were extended by the main funding agencies, other competitions were (or may be) postponed or cancelled. The agencies noted that extensions would be awarded at the request of grant holders, but some universities took the lead by submitting a group request so that each researcher did not need to submit an individual request. FQPPU member unions and associations should encourage their respective universities to do the same.

These funds allow for hiring research staff, including students and post-doctoral fellows, whose employment status could be affected. Guidelines vary by university (see Appendix 1). A number of universities have still allowed hiring and contract renewals to be expenses in cases of research funding that has already been secured. Moreover, contracts in effect that are based on scheduled hours (that are known and have been agreed to), until May 1, 2020, will be honoured. However, for the moment, it is not possible for new post-doctoral fellowships to begin.

Conclusion

If this crisis has shown one important thing, it is the fundamental role of science and research in society. On numerous occasions, in the context of government allocations and communications, decision-makers have relied on the advice of scientific experts and have used a number of popularizers of scientific knowledge to inform the population of virus developments. The FQPPU plans to continue its work of raising awareness among public authorities and the Ministère de l’Enseignement supérieur about the rightful place of science, in particular that of academic research, in guiding political and policy decisions. At the same time, we plan to emphasize to governments the importance of maintaining and increasing consistent funding for scientific research in all academic disciplines.

Over the coming months, the FQPPU will continue its work to document and analyze the issues that affect research practices and funding. This work may take some of the following forms:

- Preparation of an analysis of the post-pandemic situation and the impacts on (1) research funding, (2) scientific output, and (3) career advancement.
- Political representations to emphasize the importance of maintaining balance in the funding of basic research and practical research, but also in relation to multiple academic disciplines.
- An analysis of the evaluation process for proposals and of the awarding of funding in the context of the fight against COVID-19.
- Representations to federal and provincial funding agencies to ensure that they are taking into account delays in research activities and the impact on research dossiers.
- Tools for member unions and associations to assist with negotiating terms for resuming research activities and to ensure that delays have the least possible impact on promotion dossiers and internal funding.

Last updated: April 15, 2020

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11 The majority of universities have an FAQ website about research that provides details about their respective guidelines.
## Appendix 1

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