

Survival guide for researchers at ULB

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UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES

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0. Introduction

By drawing on our union experiences, analyses and theoretical elements, as well as concrete and practical information, this guide aims to provide some keys to understanding the challenges of the various statuses of scientific staff at the university (researchers, contract workers, scholarship holders, PhD candidates, etc.) as well as the hierarchical and competitive context in which they have to operate. More generally, this guide invites readers to question the way the uni-versity functions.

The guide is an initiative by young researchers and PhD candidates from the union committee of the CGSP Enseignement Recherche (General Union of Public Services for Teaching and Research) at Université Libre de Bruxelles. It is important to note that this work is not, and probably never will be, completely finished, as the reality of university life changes so fast. So we are also inviting feedback, criticism, new contributions and involvement. By offering some keys to understanding, organizational tools and practical help, the guide aims to show ways of intervening in the balances of power that are embedded in the university (and to try and overturn them!). We hope it will be an initial meeting point and help to create spaces where workers can exchange views and organize.

The content of the first section, «Working at the university», is more theoretical and analytical. Amongst other things, we question the concept of an academic career by attempting a critical deconstruction of the foundations on which it is based. We also take a look at the relationships of tension the university has established between teaching and research by favoring the latter to the detriment of the former. In this first section, we also try to make visible the official or unofficial hierarchical relationships that shape the university, which are all too often blurred by the way the university distances itself from the pyramidal organization of traditional companies. Finally, to close this section, we will focus more specifically on women's place in academia, a difficult place to occupy.

The second section, «In Practice», aims to provide in a direct and concrete way the information needed to understand the wide variety of legal statuses the scientific staff can have, and their impact on employment and social security rights. It describes what types of aid are available in terms of unemployment, sickness, maternity/paternity and pensions. This section will end with a focus on the impact of the COVID public health crisis on the scientific staff's work and the CGSP ER's fight to secure an extension of research contracts.

Finally, the third section, «Organizing and standing up for ourselves: suggested tools», stresses the importance of organizing collectively in order to be able to create balances of power to counteract the many relationships of domination that exist at the University – relationships based on hierarchy, age, experience, gender, etc. This section will discuss some ideas, tools, and forms of self-help and resistance that will allow us to break away from systems of exacerbated competitiveness in the research world.

Finally, at the end of this guide, you will find a list of resources and useful links to help you understand the issues and information discussed in these few pages.



A PhD candidate sends her thesis flying
because she has to finish it on unemployment benefits.

1. Working at the university

1.1. A stressful career with a lack of job security

Job insecurity is a common structural feature of academic employment. For example, Université Libre de Bruxelles had 2,633 scientists in an unstable situation (mainly PhD candidates) compared to only 804 scientists in a stable situation (mainly full-time permanent academics) in 2020-2021. This situation has not improved over the years, as investment in research is largely focused on creating temporary positions, which are less expensive and can be created in greater numbers for the same amount of money. For example, the budget for remunerating the FNRS' 1,505 PhD candidates in 2016 (39.2 million euros) was less than that for the 406 qualified researchers (permanent positions) in the same year (46.9 million euros).

The university is thus employing more and more temporary workers, to whom it cannot provide stable employment, creating a real bottleneck in access to permanent scientific employment. For example, in 2005, there was one academic for every two PhD candidates at French-speaking Belgian universities; in 2014, it was one for every three¹.

Due to the scarcity of job vacancies in relation to demand, a scientific career involves a series of competitions and competitive examinations. The first important competition is the one to be able to embark on a PhD - anyone who has applied to the FNRS has experienced this. The applicant/PhD candidate learns quite early on that the scientific world is organized around competition, as the success rate at this stage is already fairly low (around 25% currently, in other words 3 out of every 4 applications are declined). Even with their PhD under their belt, temporary researchers still cannot access a permanent scientific position. Securing this type of position requires a very competitive CV, which a young PhD holder does not possess: they need to improve their profile significantly. The scientist then undertakes the arduous task of finding new funding and temporary contracts (contract research, postdoctorates) while working to add lines to their CV so they have a chance in the tough competition for permanent positions. The two most important criteria in the selection process for permanent positions are the international dimension of the applicant's career path and productivity in terms of publication. If Universities favor these criteria, it is because they are themselves in

1 GURNET Nathan, FUSULIER Bernard, TILMAN Alice, 2018, «Insertion professionnelle des doctor.e.s récemment proclamé.e.s. «Premiers résultats à partir de l'analyse de trois cohortes semestrielles», Louvain-la-Neuve, IACCHOS-GIRSEF/CIRFASE-UCL.

competition with other academic institutions, in particular to improve their place in the international rankings, which evaluate universities' productivity – number of prestigious awards won, number of publications in high-ranking journals, number of times cited – now defined using the well-known term «scientific excellence».



A researcher who has been «advised» to write another article for the umpteenth time...

If he wants to secure a new contract at any rate!

This situation causes **occupational stress**² for researchers. The nature of a competitive set-up is that there is potentially always an opponent stronger than you. So the outcome of the competition is very uncertain, driving the competitors to keep doing more. This model of a scientific career thus creates a specific relationship to employment: one of total commitment. This type of commitment is justified by the idea that research is not a job like any other: like involvement in artistic activities, it is a vocation that necessarily requires temporal availability, thus blurring the line between what is work and what is not. The competitive aspect of the activity in particular is very time-consuming for a researcher in an unstable position. Since the level of production to be reached to win the competition is fixed only in relation to the level of production that competitors can reach, it is potentially unlimited: the only limit is how much time the researcher can spend on it. Working time thus frequently eats into non-working time, which is the price to pay for achieving the required productivity and staying in academia: for example, it is quite common for scientists to write in their free time, in the evenings or on weekends. The demands of international mobility mean

2 A study by K. Levecque among PhD candidates at Dutch-speaking Belgian universities concluded in 2017 that one out of two PhD candidates was in psychological distress and one out of three was at risk for a mental health disorder. Levecque K. et al. 2017. Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. Research Policy. Vol. 46, n°4, pp. 868-879.

that the rhythm and logic of the private sphere conflict with those of the professional sphere. Many postdoctoral researchers go on international mobility at a time when they are young parents, which creates family dilemmas and very challenging interactions between the two spheres. This penalizes women in particular [Cf. «1.4 Women: a difficult place to occupy»].

1.2. Research versus teaching

A particular feature of the university is that many of the scientists who work there are involved in both research and teaching activities. It should however be noted that **the relationship between teaching and research is often strained**, for several reasons.

The first reason is that teaching is undervalued compared to research. As soon as someone begins a scientific career, they understand that if they want to continue it, the main thing that counts is the extent (rather than the quality) of their scientific output [Cf. «1.1. A stressful career with a lack of job security»]. That is practically the only thing valued by the committees that assess applications for jobs or university funding. As a result, because of the competition between scientists, combined with the overvaluation of research compared to teaching in career evaluation, teaching and research do not coexist in a fruitful way, as one might hope; on the contrary, teaching is sometimes seen as a type of work in which the time invested should be limited, in order to prevent it from impinging too much on scientific productivity.

The second reason for this difficult coexistence is the fact that the teaching staff (whether academic or scientific) is too small to cope with the growing number of students. The number of students has been growing continuously for many years due to the massification of higher education, without the universities following suit by hiring additional staff. This situation often leads researchers to develop individual strategies for managing the large combined number of students and the conflicts that sometimes arise between teaching and research. For example: favoring exams with multiple choice questions over open-ended ones; requiring written work to be done in groups rather than individually, decisions that save on marking time.

Apart from the fact that this situation has an impact on teaching quality, it also has an impact on scientists' working conditions, an issue which affects individuals differently according to their status.

Assistants are of course the scientific staff members who are most affected by this issue, because due to their status, they have to combine working on a thesis with teaching tasks. They generally find it harder to finish their thesis in time than scholarship holders do. The directives on the workloads of assistants³ take this reality into account, stating: «It is recommended that the average working time profile of an assistant, depending on the year, provides for a greater supervision load in the first year(s) and more research tasks in the last 2 years of the thesis. In any case, the assistant's work-load must be arranged in such a way that he does not perform any teaching-related tasks for at least 6 months, which may be split, with the assistant's agreement, into periods of at least three months over the 3 terms (excluding the period from July 10 to August 10)». However, this provision is often not observed. Either the department's course coordination (which should make it possible to reassign classes and teaching tasks) is inadequate, or there is simply no-one in the department who can release an assistant so they have time to finish their thesis.

The issue of teaching also affects scholarship holders, however. A scholarship holder is not an employee [Cf. «2.1. The multiplicity of scientific staff statuses»]. Subordination is what qualifies the relationship between an employee and their employer in labor law. In theory, a scholarship holder's status implies that they cannot be subordinated to their host institution, and can refuse to perform additional tasks it asks of them, such as teaching tasks. In reality, the situation is more complicated. The FNRS regulations mention, for example, for FNRS research fellows⁴ : «Administrative work or tasks relating to didactic supervision within the host institution may be assigned to Research Fellows up to eight hours per week on annual average.» This provision highlights the ambiguity of the FNRS status : it both is and is not subordinate. Supervisors/professors indeed sometimes ask scholarship holders to set practical work, supervise/mark exams or perform administrative tasks, work that scholarship holders are unlikely to be able to refuse in practice. This situation is all the more problematic given that university policies have largely relied on the increasing number of scholarship holders in the management of their workforce. Scholarship holders at the University do not fall within the institution's framework budget; their presence serves to compensate for the structural shortage of teaching staff at the university. In some cases, scholarship holders therefore combine the disadvantages of non-employee status (the lack of certain rights) with the constraints of employee status (subordination).

3 Université Libre de Bruxelles, «Coordinated text of provisions relating to the career of the scientific staff and academic staff».

4 FNRS regulations on the Research Fellow (ASP – Aspirant) position, adopted by the board of the F.R.S.-FNRS on June 23, 2020.

When faced with this kind of pressure, it can be hard to assert one's rights individually. Organizing collectively sometimes enables us to make concrete progress [Cf. «3. Organizing and standing up for ourselves: suggested tools»].

1.3. Identifying hierarchical relationships

In its operations, the university seems to promote a horizontal way of functioning, among peers, and thus breaks with the pyramidal model of traditional companies. In this way it blurs the power relationships at work within it. Because of this discourse and the multiple work and hiring situations (scholarship-holding PhD candidate or assistant; self-funded or externally funded contract researcher; teaching assistant (AEX); scientific staff or academic staff, etc.) as well as numerous levels of decision-making or non-decision-making power (rector, dean, program chair, supervisor, course coordinator, etc.), a large number of university workers do not perceive the hierarchical relationships that nonetheless structure their work relationships. Indeed, the organizational chart is so complex and un-clear that it can be confusing.

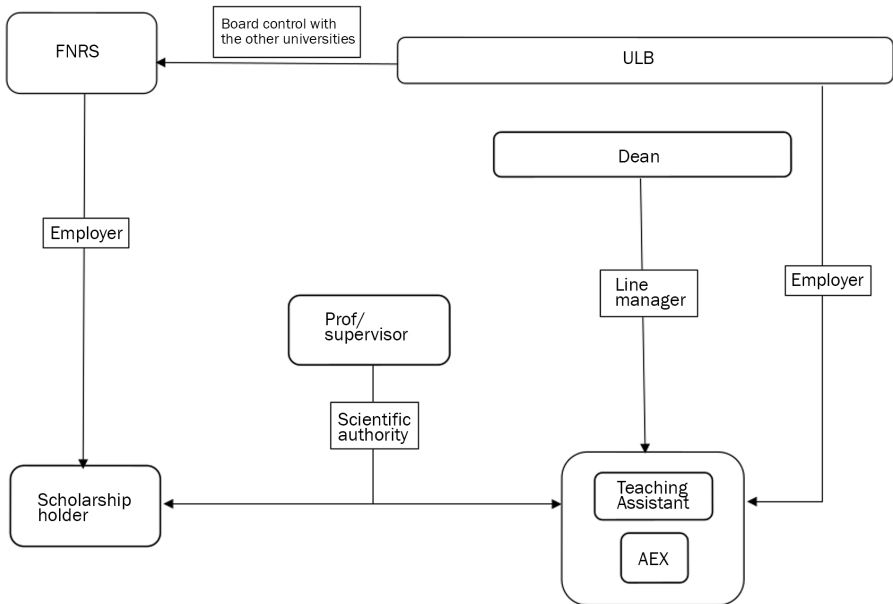
However, recognition and knowledge of these hierarchical lines is necessary in order to **fight abuses of power** and occupational stress⁵. All the more so since, in addition to these official hierarchical relationships, there is a whole series of unofficial relationships of domination, that is to say, ones that have no regulatory basis and are often subtle and trivialized. These include, for example, the unequal relationships between women and men, those relating to age or seniority, the relationships of domination between different statuses even when one is not directly under the authority of another... Onto which are overlaid all the other relationships of domination that structure society. For example, a professor asking a PhD candidate to supervise an exam. Nothing forces her to do it, but in practice, it would be hard to refuse. Also, at scientific meetings, an experienced researcher or professor will often speak for much more than their fair share of the time, leaving the next speakers with less communication time.

These hierarchical lines, whether more or less overt or largely concealed, are also to be questioned with regard to a certain context of production and university excellence: for example, while only a very small number of PhD candidates settle down at the university and pursue a career there following their thesis, during their few years of work there, they produce articles, research, field surveys, and statistical treatments that their supervisors will be able to appropriate. Knowledge therefore accumulates in the offices and departments, partly thanks to the comings and goings of new PhD candidates. The number of articles co-authored by supervisors is a telling illustration of this appropriation of work [Cf. «3. Organizing and standing up for ourselves: suggested tools»].

5 In May 2022 at ULB, the CGSP-ER will be running a campaign against occupational stress, and will be organizing a study day on the topic in question. For more information: <https://cgsp-er.ulb.be/souffrance-au-travail/>

In order to be able to organize sufficient counter power and balances of power, we felt it was essential to summarize the formal hierarchical relationships. The other power relationships, which are equally important to identify, are to do with balances of power or influence, but do not have any regulatory existence, which makes them more difficult to outline.

For clarity's sake, this diagram only shows the formal authority relationships to which researchers are subject. To be complete, it would need to take account of the effects of existing social relationships between individuals at university and elsewhere, based on gender, race and class, as well as age, seniority and many other factors.



1.4. Women: a difficult place to occupy

University is no exception to the unequal relationships between women and men.

ULB's report on the state of gender equality in 2018 drew a conclusion that is fairly commonplace but still worth remembering: the higher up in the hierarchy, the fewer women there are. For the 2017-2018 academic year, 60% of those graduating from the 2nd cycle at ULB were women and 40% were men. Yet the ratio reverses at the end of the PhD, with 39% of graduates women and 61% men. On 1 February 2019, 34% of teaching staff were women and 66% were men, and this imbalance becomes more pronounced during the course of a career. These figures are a result of structural tendencies that make women's academic careers more complicated than those of their male colleagues. Indeed, the excellence policies [Cf. 1.1 «Careers: a neoliberal employment factory?»] penalize women in particular by requiring stays abroad and an excessive work-load (all the more so as the university is underfunded) in order to be competitive on the research market. These demands are particularly difficult to combine with motherhood and the domestic work that our society still primarily allocates to women. In addition, the University gives little recognition to the invisible tasks of coordination and logistics (organizing symposia, managing meetings, etc.) that are more often assigned to women. Moreover, the organization of the work, which is characterized by very hierarchical and dependency-based relationships (particularly with regard to the supervisor), puts female researchers in a particularly vulnerable position with regard to harassment (including sexual harassment) by their superiors. Lastly, it is also interesting to note that the perception of inequality varies by gender. Thus, men are more likely than women to believe that gender equality has been achieved. Since the majority of those in charge of the institution are men, the gender issue will probably not be sufficiently taken into account in decision-making.



A sexualized assistant tumbling down the pile of administrative and organizational problems she has to manage for her entire department.

2. In practice

2.1. The multiplicity of scientific staff statuses

Scientific work at the university is characterized by a multitude of statuses: your close colleagues may fall under the status of assistant or teaching assistant, receive one of a number of scholarships or work on a research contract. Those who are commonly known as «postdocs» do not have a uniform status since they can fall under the regime of scholarships or that of contracts...

However, the legal status of remuneration is not the only difference between the statuses since opportunities to perform teaching and research tasks also vary greatly. These differences are worth looking into given their impact on labor and social security rights.

	Scholarship holder	Assistant	Teaching assistant	Contract researcher	Logistic Collaborator	Post-doc
Scholarship	X					X
Salary		X	X	X	X	X
Teaching	(X)	X	X		(X)	(X)
Research	X	X		X	X	X

PhD candidates hired with the status of assistant and teaching assistants are employees of ULB, even if they have not formally signed an employment contract. The letter of acceptance by the Board of Governors received at the time of hiring constitutes acceptance of the rules governing the status of assistant⁶. The fact that they are considered employees gives them the same labor law protection as an employee in any other company. Like the university, they pay social security contributions that entitle them to unemployment and pension benefits.

The scholarship is historically intended to enable a student on a course to meet their needs. Scholarship holders are therefore not considered employees. The money received is indeed a form of remuneration, but it is not taxed.

6 Université Libre de Bruxelles, «Coordinated text of provisions relating to the career of the scientific staff and academic staff», page 33.

This means three things:

- the employer pays only minimal employer contributions ;
- for scholarship holders, the withholding tax on professional income, which is a deduction from their pay to contribute to social security, is minimal. In other words, the gross salary and the net salary are almost identical ;
- at ULB, scholarship holders are not considered to be staff members and are not entitled to their advantages like reimbursement of public transport expenses, culture checks, etc.

→ *So? Are scholarships advantageous?*

For scientific employers (Universities, FNRS, etc.), certainly, since they enable them to spend nearly fifty per cent less money on hiring scientific workers.

Less so for the scholarship holders, however. While the system does not impact their pay at the end of the month, not being considered an employee means not being covered by labor law and its protections. To be more specific, the rules that apply to a scholarship holder are governed by a tax directive of the FPS Finance... We are a long way from labor law here.

What does it mean in concrete terms? First of all, there are no regulations on the amount of the remuneration and therefore no minimum remuneration requirement. So it is common for foreign PhD candidates hosted at ULB to be paid less than the minimum wage.

Another less advantageous aspect of scholarships is to do with employer identification. Indeed, the principle of scholarships implies that the university is not the official employer from the outset, although the scholarship holders operate in its research centers and on its premises, and work under the direction of supervisors employed by the university. Amongst other things, this can lead to situations in which the supervisor has the ability to stop a thesis even though they do not officially have hierarchical authority over the PhD candidate. This permanent vagueness around the recognition of the employer and the hierarchical authority creates confusion and prevents scholarship holders from clearly recognizing the hierarchical lines that frame their work, although the ability to do so is central to standing up to abuses of power [Cf. «1.3. Identifying hierarchical relationships»].

→ *Studentification: a PhD is a job*

The growing proportion of scholarship holders among PhD candidates also reinforces the idea that PhD candidates are still students. So what is the problem with that?

PhD candidates are above all **scientific workers**. They contribute to the economy of research that materializes in scientific publications, communications at events, appearances in the media, advice to public authorities, etc. In addition, they often perform tasks that are essential to the functioning of the university: exam supervision, pedagogical support, logistics for scientific events, etc. In this respect, it is problematic not to consider them as workers and to deny them the rights linked to employee status.

Another risk of this representation is that it opens the door to a devaluation of their working conditions. This is even more obvious if you look at their situation in the Anglo-Saxon world: the scholarship they receive is equivalent to about €800 per month (actually paid every three months); they work at home or in open spaces – the office being reserved for professors (you can imagine the effects that widespread recourse to remote working could have); they have to take courses and pass exams in order to continue with their PhD (the «intermediate test» recently introduced at ULB is a step in this direction).

→ *Union representation*

Like any company, ULB has social consultation bodies that bring together elected staff members (the union's side) and employer representatives (the ULB Authorities, the employer's side). Anyone holding an employment contract with ULB can vote and stand for election in the social elections. Another ambiguous aspect of scholarship holders' status: they can vote in the social elections at ULB although they do not have worker status and are therefore not subordinated to the institution. This is a contradiction. At ULB, this fight was won by the union in 2014; at other universities, scholarship holders cannot vote and are therefore not represented by union representatives.

At the FNRS, the OCN (consultation and negotiation body) is made up of co-opted union representatives and the Fund Authorities (i.e. the 6 rectors and the secretary of the FNRS).

2.2. What are our social security rights?

→ *A gross income that is highly unfavorable to scholarship holders*

In Belgium, the gross salary paid to a worker is made up of the net salary (roughly speaking, what is paid into the worker's bank account at the end of each month), the withholding tax on professional income and the social security contributions. [Cf. boxed text on social security] While the net salary may seem very similar between scholarship holders and other scientific employees of the university (assistants, etc.), this masks large disparities in terms of taxes and social security contributions. These contributions have a very big impact in terms of social rights.

Although a scholarship is not a salary, the legislation stipulates that scholarship holders are subject to social security (despite the fact that they and their employers hardly contribute to it). This means a scholarship holder has the right to unemployment or incapacity benefits if they lose their job or fall ill. However, most unemployment or sickness benefits are proportional to gross income. In this framework, scholarship holders are significantly penalized compared to assistants, since there is almost no difference between their gross and net pay. The scholarship amount, although very fair as a net equivalent, corresponds to a very low salary when compared to the average gross salaries. In fact, a scholarship holder who becomes unemployed or falls ill will receive minimal unemployment benefits, much less than an assistant would receive.

The savings made by the employers (FNRS and universities) via the «scholarships» system are therefore at the expense of the social protection of these workers.

A summary of social security

Insurance and solidarity are the basic principles underpinning social security. It is a form of insurance against social risks throughout a person's life. Risks that an individual insurer cannot or will not cover. The system only works because social security is organized collectively and many of us contribute to it. Workers forfeit part of their salary to be insured and receive something in return later on.

In the context of salaried employment, the salary is made up of the net salary (basically, what is paid to the worker at the end of the month) + withholding tax on professional income + personal contributions + employer contributions. These two types of contribution are what fund social security and in ex-change, grant the employee social rights (listed below). It can be seen as a deferred salary, to which the employee will be entitled later.

For employees, social security is subdivided into branches according to the risks covered or the income supplement concerned:

- Health insurance, which covers healthcare expenses and loss of income for health reasons (managed by NIHDI – National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance) ;
- Pensions (managed by the Federal Pensions Service) ;
- Unemployment insurance (managed by the National Employment Office - NEO). The payment of unemployment benefits is mainly subcontracted to the trade unions ;
- Time credits, end-of-career jobs, career breaks, parental leave, leave to care for seriously ill family members and leave for palliative care, are compensated for by NEO.

What types of aid exist?

→ *Unemployment*

It is undoubtedly a little depressing to think about unemployment when you are just beginning a PhD. However, in reality, many young researchers find themselves in this situation, whether they are finishing a thesis, because of a lack of positions in the scientific world (if they want to continue in academia), or facing a very tough job market in general (if they are looking for a job outside the scientific world). This is not a problem in itself: unemployment is a social protection system that prevents the loss of income during an absence of employment.

All researchers, whether scholarship holders or employees, are entitled to unemployment benefit when their contract comes to an end. As the unemployment benefit is based on gross income, assistants and scholarship holders receive quite different amounts. For example, an unemployed scholarship holder receives a monthly allowance of around €1,400 for the first three months whereas an assistant receives €1,600⁷.

Practically speaking, how do I apply for unemployment benefit?

Join the union. If you are not yet a union member: contact cgsper@ulb.be to join. You will have no contribution to pay if you are unemployed. If you have already joined, no further action is required. Contact the FGtB's «unemployment» office on this website : fgtb-chomage-bxl.be. They will explain everything you need to do and make sure your allowances are paid.

→ *Sickness*

All scientists, whether employees or scholarship holders, are entitled to sick leave. The disability benefit is proportional (60% for the first year) to gross income. In concrete terms, this means a sum of €1,400 per month for a scholarship holder. After the first month of illness, in which the remuneration is guaranteed, the FNRS does not supplement the mutual insurance company's allowances. PhD scholarships that are suspended due to illness for a period equal to or greater than one month are extended for a period equal to that of the suspension. Assistants whose thesis submission is compromised by a period of sick leave lasting at least three months may request an exceptional one-year renewal.

⁷ To calculate unemployment benefit: jobat.be/fr/art/calculez-le-montant-de-vos-allocations-de-chomage
To calculate net salary based on gross salary: www.fgtb.be/calcul-salaire-brut-net

→ *Maternity/paternity (leave and nursery)*

All scientists, whether employees or scholarship holders, are entitled to maternity/childbirth leave. Again, the compensation paid by the mutual insurance company is proportional to gross income, but the FNRS pays a supplement to the PhD candidate concerned to compensate for the loss of income. For maternity leave, the scholarship is extended by 3 months. These two measures do not apply in the case of prophylactic breastfeeding leave. At ULB, assistants whose thesis submission is delayed by maternity leave can request an exceptional one-year renewal. On the other hand, other situations impacting on work (such as distancing of pregnant laboratory workers from high-risk areas or prophylactic breastfeeding leave) are not provided for. Moreover, PhD candidates hired for fixed funding periods (4 years) are not always entitled to an extension.

ULB provides a nursery for its workers' children. However, the number of places there is limited. Those who are unsuccessful in securing a place at the ULB nursery or a public nursery are entitled to €50 in compensation. Motherhood has a significant impact on women's careers at the university (Cf. «1.4 Women: a difficult place to occupy»).

→ Pension

Scholarship holders do not pay pension contributions but their years are included in the calculation. This puts them in a much less favorable position than an employed scientist whose salary is taken into account.

2.3. Obtaining an extension for a thesis: researchers affected by the public health crisis

→ *In general, what is the procedure when you need to apply for financial aid or a contract extension?*

Unfortunately, there is no general procedure for contract extensions. It varies according to the funder and type of contract. Please refer to the regulations of the funders in question to find out what options are available and what the eligibility requirements are.

For all calls for projects offering financial aid, the platform to consult is Infofin⁸. Applicants are generally required to put together a more or less substantial file in support of their application. In theory, these calls may be relevant to PhD candidates, postdocs and academic, scientific, specialist administrative, technical and management staff.

→ *What aid is available to help researchers (PhD candidates and post-docs) deal with the impact of COVID?*

In December 2020, there was an «exceptional COVID-19 call for contractual staff (researchers and academic, scientific, specialist administrative, technical and management staff)»⁹. PhD candidates directly employed by ULB were eligible along with those receiving an FNRS scholarship. As this aid is considered inadequate (see COVID chapter), the fight goes on to expand the eligibility criteria, turn scholarship aid into an extension of the employment contract and lengthen the period covered. The deadline for this call was 12/7/2020.

In March 2021, a call entitled «Extension of scholarships and contracts for PhD candidates at the end of their thesis»¹⁰ was issued. It is only open to PhD candidates in the last year of their thesis. This call does not consider care duties, mental and physical health problems or an excessive workload for the purpose of ensuring continuity in teaching as explicit criteria justifying an application (see the link for details).

Even if the call only makes provision for a maximum of 3 months' funding (contract or scholarship extension), we recommend specifying whether the delay caused exceeded 3 months. The decision is announced to the applicants one month after they have submitted an application file. The deadline for this call is 12/15/2021.

8 infofin.ulb.ac.be

9 infofin.ulb.ac.be/?AC=400&VP=1&PID=3162

10 infofin.ulb.ac.be/?AC=400&VP=1&PID=3252

→ *What types of aid are available on a recurring basis?*

The «Prix Jaumotte-Van Buuren»¹¹ awards are intended for PhD candidates at the end of their thesis. This award has a value of €5,000 (these «awards» are a tax-free grant, with no social security contributions). Applicants must have been funded for at least two years of their PhD. The conditions and eligibility requirements are detailed for the year 2021 at link 3. A call for projects is issued every year (deadline in early May).

The «Prix De Meurs-François»¹² awards are for PhD candidates facing insecurity or hardship. To apply, the thesis defense must be expected to take place before September 30 in the year in which the award is given. The amounts that can be granted are generally in the order of €4,000 to €5,000 and are only awarded to 4 or 5 recipients a year. The conditions and eligibility requirements are detailed for the year 2020 at link no. 4. A call for projects is issued every year (deadline in early/mid-September).

Other calls also exist for end-of-year PhD candidates but are less systematic (i.e. ARES for PhD candidates from the South). To our knowledge, there is no recurring aid for postdocs.

11 infofin.ulb.ac.be/?AC=400&VP=1&PID=2310

12 infofin.ulb.ac.be/?AC=400&VP=1&PID=2110

Case study of a union struggle: the fight for financial compensation due to the pandemic

The public health crisis is a textbook case of a union struggle at the university. Although this fight may no longer be current at the time of reading this guide, it is helpful to understand how it unfolded as it may be relevant to future struggles.

Many research projects have been slowed down since March 2020 for multiple exceptional reasons resulting from the pandemic and lockdown (lack of field access, participant recruitment, caring for loved ones, childcare, sickness...). The ability of many PhD candidates to work on their thesis has been affected, as they have not been able to work in acceptable conditions. Postdoctoral re-searchers, also in fixed-term positions, have also experienced difficulties as a result, at a time of serious career insecurity for them. Assistants, whose work-load increased considerably due to remote and co-modal teaching, have also had to postpone their research.

So it is normal for theses to have been slowed down by the pandemic

In the light of various surveys (UCLouvain, Corsci ULB, CGSP delegations), we had estimated that PhD candidates and assistants might need, on average, additional funding for 4.9 months to finish their thesis. Despite these very concrete realities, it has been a battle to secure what meagre financial support exists. Indeed, the Board (ULB) of July 6, 2020 had to decide on the approval of a two-year renewable budget to finance 50 assistants and PhD candidates affected by the COVID-19 crisis, for a minimum period of 1 month, and a maximum period of 6 months. As the final proposal adopted by ULB in September 2020 was deemed inadequate, 7 of the 12 elected Corsci members sitting on the Board and the Academic Council resigned.

→ *The following was finally achieved:*

- Allocation of a tax-free award of €6,000 rather than a salary or a scholarship for some PhD candidates (those who asked for 2 and 3 months) ;
- Aid allocated as a last resort to FNRS PhD candidates, of up to €6,000 per research fellow ;
- PhD candidates who asked for more than 6 months would only be funded for 6 months.

It should be noted that any funding in the form of scholarships gives PhD candidates reduced social benefits and defunds our social security system, the importance of which now seems more crucial than ever. Exceptional renewal could offer a solution for assistants, almost without impacting the university's finances. Indeed, the university's regulations allow such a renewal in the event of exceptional circumstances justifying the non-submission of a doctoral thesis within the time limit. The official communication from ULB was careful not to point out this fact, only mentioning maternity and health problems. It also appears that our Rector is opposed to these renewals on the pretext that they would prevent the recruitment of brilliant new recruits. This argument assumes that the COVID-19 crisis is not considered a case of «force majeure»!

→ *The pandemic continued into 2021, as did the distress and need for funding*

At the end of 2020, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation announced that support of 3.9 million euros would be provided for PhD candidates employed by universities and the FNRS, including nearly 750,000 euros for ULB (an amount almost identical to that requested by the scientific staff in 2020, and brushed aside by the authorities). The measure makes provision for aid limited to a maximum of 3 months and dependent on restrictive criteria, which we deplore. Moreover, it takes no account of postdoctoral researchers at all. As a reminder, contract research staff received aid worth up to 6 months of their salary in 2020 and 2021, and the Administrative Council had voted for a similar measure for the whole scientific staff in May 2020, although the Board did not follow suit for budgetary (meaning political) reasons. The aim should be to ensure flexibility according to the difficulties encountered by each individual and allow aid to be provided for up to 6 months in the most serious situations. ULB had helped its PhD candidates in 2020. Similar aid has been proposed in March 2021 in the form of a call issued by Infofin, which is defined as the information base for research funding sources at ULB.

→ *The outcome of the power struggle*

July 2021. The academic year is coming to an end, along with the deafness of the University authorities to the demands of scientific and academic staff. Since a motion adopted at the General Assembly on October 28, 2020, which set out a list of demands, labor relations between the union representatives and the University authorities have been difficult. The CGSP Enseignement Recherche, supported by many Corsci members, had organized a demonstration on campus, to warn the authorities again.

At meetings for Corsci members held on Teams, many of us wanted to threaten to disrupt the smooth running of the University if the total lack of consideration for assistants and postdocs persisted. Indeed, without the work they do, the institution would grind to a halt! Several types of action were considered: an exam supervision strike, a grading strike, giving all students a grade of 20/20, a strike, period... It was important not to penalize the students or ourselves (as scientific work is evaluated by the task, not by the hour). The choice of action The lack of consultation finally resulted in the CGSP Enseignement Recherche filing a strike notice on April 21. The Rector and her team then seized the opportunity to «get out of the crisis through the top». Concrete progress was eventually made for the scientific staff: For assistants who had requested it, the health crisis was finally recognized as an exceptional circumstance entitling them to a one-year renewal. In addition, all scientific staff members funded by ULB are now entitled to enhanced aid: funding without time limits, instead of 3 months, significantly broadened criteria and the presence of a union observer during the processing of their files. We also negotiated two calls for contract researchers. For ULB postdoctoral researchers, a maximum of €10,000 in aid can be granted in the form of operating expenses or salary. For those funded by the FNRS, it will be a maximum of €5,000 for operating expenses or €6,500 for one month's salary.

ULB is committed to renewing this aid for cohorts affected by the health crisis, but not finishing in this academic year. We must closely monitor the situation to make sure this promise is kept. Finally, the negotiation of a collective agreement on distance learning (outside of the pandemic period) began at the beginning of the academic year to provide a framework for this practice that respects labor law, academic freedom and the quality of university education.

On March 8, 2022, during the extraordinary meeting of the Consultation and Negotiation Body (Organe de Concertation et de Négociation) - where unions and rectors of French-speaking universities meet - the FNRS announced that it would leave it up to the universities to renew the aid proposed in 2021 for PhD candidates finishing in September 2022. There will be a renewed specific call for FNRS postdoctoral researchers. Although the university was not able to help PhD candidates, the Chair of the FNRS Board announced that their case would be re-examined by the FNRS.

3. Organizing and standing up for ourselves at university

It isn't always easy to find your place in academia. Academic work can be extremely stressful. Around half of all PhD candidates do not finish their thesis. Indeed, contract researchers come and go, as do PhD candidates, and only 10% of PhD candidates will secure a fixed academic post. On the other hand, the appointed professors remain and make «their» researchers and «their» PhD candidates work on their research themes, following their methods. Consequently, they may appropriate part of the work accomplished and accumulate it in the form of publications, knowledge and legitimacy, which will be useful to them as they continue their academic career. For the 90% of scientific staff who will not be able to pursue an academic career, such publications will have no use or value outside of academia. In this sense, the professor/PhD candidate relationship is an exploitative one. This happens regardless of how well-meaning the professor is, due to the way the academic system works. Moreover, the general culture of competition among researchers and the pressure to publish and go on international mobility lead to heavy workloads and often intrude on private life.

In concrete terms, because of hierarchical relationships, and differences in age, experience and gender, it can be hard to talk about these difficulties and stresses. There is a need to be reassured and organize collectively to create a concrete power balance. Here we suggest a few methods for self-organization and organization among people sharing the same specific conditions: researchers, PhD candidates, young people, women. This is all the more important as academic work tends to isolate us. It is therefore important not to neglect informal relationships between colleagues (open door, sharing a coffee or a meal, buying lunch as a group, eating together, etc.) in the fight against isolation. However, it can be hard to form this kind of relationship given the frequent turnover, possible language barriers, frequent remote working situations... And very often, this is not enough to overcome some forms of isolation and organize collectively for better working conditions. Therefore, it really is useful to set up formal tools for self-help and resistance. This is what we will be discussing in the rest of this section. These are not magic words, but avenues to explore to improve cohesion and self-help among university workers; to oblige the hierarchy to be more transparent and respectful of our working conditions.

3.1. Regulatory tools

When a case of harassment or warning signs are reported, ULB has procedures allowing you to file a complaint and trigger a psychosocial risk analysis that will identify the factors responsible for the situation. These tools are regulated by a legal framework that goes beyond ULB. If you wish to initiate such procedures, contact CGSP ER. We can support you throughout the process!

More information: cgsper.ulb.be/souffrance-au-travail/

However, these procedures cannot always be implemented, due to the reality of hierarchical relationships at the university [Cf. «1.3. Identifying hierarchical relationships». For example, it can be hard to file a complaint against your super-visor when you are working on your thesis... That's why we offer other tools to organize collectively against situations of injustice at university.



A department head catches his
workers organizing.

3.2. *Non-mixed meetings*

→ *Meetings for researchers without professors*

These meetings are attended by contract researchers and PhD candidates, for example once a month or by special request. They allow them to take stock of their individual situations and the functioning of the department, without the professors. They are an opportunity to support colleagues who express difficulties with their work organization and to take collective decisions that will have more weight in the eyes of line management. Even if there is no agenda, they can still be convened and be quite brief, so those who have a problem can talk about it. Nevertheless, differences in seniority and gender can lead to a reluctance to speak up and even intimidation. Therefore, it can be helpful to organize meetings just for young people and/or just for women.

→ *Meetings for young people/PhD candidates for a reading group or «intervisions»*

These regular meetings (monthly, for example) allow young workers in the department (scholarship holders, assistants or contract researchers) to meet and discuss their experiences and working conditions without being in the presence of their supervisor or senior workers. These meetings can follow two paths, the first more formal than the second:

- As is the case for the rest of the department, the meetings may take the form of a reading group or an «interview» session for discussion and exchange on specific aspects of the work of assistants, young contract researchers and scholarship holders. As young workers, these groups have to deal with comparable difficulties and learning experiences. Intervisions can therefore be useful in the case of deadlines in the research work of certain participants (research report, submission of an article, participation in a colloquium, meeting with the supervisor, supervisory committee) or more broadly to discuss research methods or tools (how to respond to a tender? How to put together a research plan? What methodology to adopt in the field? etc.). In this way, interview meetings can be credited as part of the doctoral training (5 ECTS for example).
- The second crucial aspect of the interviews is that they provide a confidential space to discuss your relationship with the professors or supervisors, since the latter do not attend these meetings. Indeed, young workers' relationships with their line managers are relationships of domination and exploitation which can be underpinned by forms of researcher intimidation or isolation. It is therefore necessary that young people, through this type of meeting, on the one hand become aware of these particular relationships of exploitation, which are often not perceived as such at the university, and on the other hand, organize themselves together to deal with them.

→ *Women's meetings*

As with interventions for young people, it may be necessary in some departments to hold meetings just for women, in some cases excluding women in high-ranking positions (professors, supervisors...). Such meetings allow female workers to discuss the working conditions they share as women in a particularly male-dominated work environment.

→ *Exclusive/non-mixed mailing lists*

In addition to or prior to such meetings, mailing lists can be based on exclusive criteria (only for young workers; only for women...). They make it easier to organize meetings as well as discussing certain urgent points that cannot wait until the next meeting.

3.3. Meetings to manage our relationships with professors collectively

→ Contract meetings

Contract meetings are held monthly and bring together the professors, contract researchers and postdoctoral researchers of a given department.

→ The aim of these meetings is:

- to review the situation of all staff hired by the department in order to take stock of their contract;
- secondly, to draw up a list of prospective new contracts. The situation of each staff member in the department can be set out in a big table: What contract are they on? In what proportion of full-time equivalents (FTE)? Until what date? And then a summary of prospects: What new contracts are available? What tenders are we responding to?

Such meetings make line managers accountable to the community for their decisions, allowing others to have a say so that everyone's careers can be managed in a more collective and transparent manner. These meetings are also an opportunity to discuss the department's various organizational problems.

→ Requirement for a line manager to define the purpose of a meeting

It is possible to require that any request for a meeting be accompanied by a detailed and explicit definition of the purpose of the meeting in order to avoid a worker being asked to attend by their line management without knowing why (criticism of their work, refusal to extend a contract, additional workload...) and therefore without being able to prepare for it (arguments, e-mails, activity reports, etc.). It is advisable to bring a union representative or a fellow worker with you when attending this type of meeting. This allows someone else to witness the exchange and helps the worker to feel stronger in the face of the intimidation mechanisms that may be deployed during this type of meeting.

3.4. Joining the CGSP

Union membership is a precious tool for defending our rights and organizing. Being a union member means you have an organization to turn to in the event of a problem at work (conflict, dismissal, abuse of authority, poor working conditions...). You can ask for a representative to intervene as an external intermediary in the event of concrete problems. At ULB, the CGSP Enseignement Recherche runs a campaign against occupational stress, for example. To take things further, you can join the CGSP ER committee in order to be more concretely involved with the union and forward information to the other workers in your department.

The union can also be a place to meet people who share your concerns about how the university is run. It can also help you or advise you on how to set up these tools in your department.



Angry scientific staff taking action.

4. Resources and Useful links

Resources:

- The CGSP ER website:
cgsper.ulb.be
- The CGSP ER website about occupational stress:
cgsper.ulb.be/souffrance-au-travail/
- The Union Syndicale Étudiante website:
use.be
- The Désexcellents website:
lac.ulb.be/LAC/home.html
- « Manuel d'autodéfense universitaire » for French PhD candidates:
sans-nuage.fr/file/s/8WWFDDG7No32ACi#pdfviewer
- Levecque K. et al. 2017. Work organization and mental health prob. in PhD students. Research Policy. Vol. 46, n°4, pp. 868-879.
- Illustrations by Frans Masereel

Regulations:

- The coordinated text at ULB:
ulb.be/fr/documents-officiels/texte-coordonne
- Mini-ARC scholarship regulations:
portail.ulb.be/fr/documents-officiels/statuts-et-reglements/reglements-relatifs-a-la-recherche/reglement-en-matiere-de-bourses-mini-arc
- PhD regulations:
portail.ulb.be/fr/recherche/doctorat/reglement-du-doctorat
- PhD charter:
portail.ulb.be/fr/recherche/doctorat/mon-parcours-doctoral
- FNRS regulations:
frs-fnrs.be/fr/reglements-guides
- FNRS documents and human resources:
frs-fnrs.be/fr/documents-utiles-rh