COVID-19: Challenges and action perspectives for inclusive universities

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Introduction

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, academia is now mostly working from home, and the curriculum has been quickly transformed into online lectures, practicals, and exams. Wonderful, according to some: no more endless commutes, no more distraction from fellow students or colleagues, and fewer meetings. Indeed, recent research indeed shows that social isolation has positive effects on mental and physical health and for the environment as well[1]. Furthermore, for many it is characterized with an increase in productivity[2].

Problematic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis

Despite these positive effects, it is necessary to emphasize the different challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis. Now that an acute phase of the crisis has subsided, it is essential to think about the medium- and long-term impact of the crisis and how we can support both employees and students who experience practical or personal problems. social isolation can have adverse emotional effects such as an increase in feelings of fear, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and trauma [3,4,5,6,7,8,9]. At home, there can also be multiple barriers, such as a lack of day-care and extra informal care tasks for family members[10,11], or relational problems and domestic violence[12]. Furthermore, the substantial economic impact of the crisis has resulted in reduced job security[13]. Even though the consequences of the pandemic affect the population in general, it is evident that some groups will be disproportionately affected by the adverse effects of this crisis[14].

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Disproportionally affected groups

For instance, the crisis appears to increase gender inequality in the academic world: couples tend to fall back on old-fashioned gender roles in which women take on more informal care tasks. A variety of scientific journals have already signaled that during the last few months, the number of academic articles that were submitted by women has decreased dramatically. At the same time, men seem to become *more* productive[15,16,17,18]. If we look at the recent COVID-19 *fast-track* grants of the NWO, we see that a large majority of grants have been awarded to men[19]. Furthermore, economic differences are amplified by the crisis[20,21,22]: students who depend on part-time work in healthcare will likely work extra hours and struggle to combine this with their studies. Furthermore, students working in the hospitality or catering industries have a considerable chance of losing their job, and with that, their chances to pay for their education[23,24]. In short, among both employees and students, some groups will fall behind, both in the short and the long run, because they can no longer live up to the high standards of the academic world. It is essential to realize that this is due to the social and economic circumstances of the individual and not to their academic qualities.

Identifying groups of concern

We need to support these groups to limit the damage of this crisis as much as possible. In the tables below, we offer an overview of groups of concern which we can find at any level of the university. These groups have a larger chance to encounter emotional or practical problems that interfere with their study or work (Table 1). Additionally, we offer an overview of different groups within the academic world for whom different themes related to the crisis affect their wellbeing and productivity (Table 2). It is important to note that individuals can be in overlapping groups. For example, someone who belongs to a general group of concern (e.g., single parents) can also belong to an academic group of concern (e.g., an employee with a temporary contract) and

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[18] Kitchener, C. Women academics seem to be submitting fewer papers during coronavirus. 'Never seen anything like it,' says one editor. https://www.thelily.com/women-academics-seem-to-be-submitting-fewer-papers-during-coronavirus-never-seen-anything-like-it-says-one-editor/
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therefore have an increased risk to experience negative consequences. Finally, we formulate policy advice with action perspectives at different policy and governing levels.

Table 1. General groups of concern and problems related to the COVID-19 crisis

Group of concern	Problems
International students and employees	It is likely that this group has a smaller social network within the Netherlands, which can lead to loneliness and other emotional problems. A language barrier can cause practical problems and added risks. For those who return to their home country, there might be extra obstacles to work from home (e.g., time difference, informal care tasks)[25].
Students and employees with a migration background	These groups often have a less secure place on the job market. In times of crisis, they have an increased chance to lose their job and a decreased chance to find new employment. Hence, it is likely that this group experiences larger negative economic and emotional consequences (e.g., stress, anxiety) than other groups[26].
Students and employees with informal care tasks	Because of a lack of assistance (e.g., day-care) these individuals need to spend more time on informal care, leaving less time for study/work. This group consists mainly of women, single parents, people with a smaller social network, and people with fewer financial resources[27,28].
Singles, single parents	Especially in times of crisis, these groups suffer more from loneliness and depression[29,30,31]. They often have less

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[31] Adamczyk, K. (2016). An investigation of loneliness and perceived social support among single and partnered young adults. *Current Psychology.* https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-015-9337-7

	practical, financial and emotional support to fall back on[32,33].
Students and employees with a physical or psychological disability	These groups will meet many practical problems (e.g., less accessibility to work and study facilities), which can lead to lower productivity and feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety[34,35].
Students and employees with an unsafe or troubled home environment	During the period of social isolation, many people have, out of necessity, moved in with family. In some situations, this can lead to problems (e.g., when family members have psychological or physical problems). The crisis is paired with an increase in substance use, aggression, and domestic and sexual violence[6,9,12,36,37,38]. It is likely that this affects some of our students and employees. This leads to emotional (e.g., anxiety, depression, trauma) but also practical problems (i.e., decrease in productivity)[12].
Students and employees with a (part-time) job in (mental) healthcare or with other front-line employment	These individuals will be exposed to larger health risks and will be more likely to be infected with the virus. They also are more likely to experience distress and exhaustion because of working over hours and the emotional nature of their work. This can lead to long-term negative effects

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	(e.g., burn-out, physical health problems) [39,40,41].
Students and employees with financial problems and a lack of job security	Many students are likely to lose their (side)jobs due to an economic recession following the crisis, and many employees with temporary contracts have an increased risk to not get an extension [42,43]. Additionally, both groups will have difficulties finding new employment. This can result in emotional (e.g., stress, anxiety) and economic consequences.

[39] Burch, K. (2020). Students on the frontlines of coronavirus pandemic struggle balancing school, work. *Concord Monitor.* https://www.concordmonitor.com/Students-on-the-Frontlines-of-Pandemic-Struggle-Balancing-School-and-Work-33961177

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Table 2 COVID-19 related themes that relate to specific groups of concern within Dutch universities, consequences, and policy advice

Themes	Group of concern	Consequences	Policy advice	Decisionmakers
Research evaluation: Research output will decrease, due to diminished access to research facilities, less time to write academic papers or research proposals because of practical or emotional difficulties.	**Academic staff**: This affects all staff with research tasks, but mainly affects employees with temporary contracts and PhD students in the last phases of their trajectory.	**Short term**: Delay in data collection and writing of manuscripts; stress **Medium term**: Fewer publications, negative yearly performance evaluations; **Long term**: Fewer chances on budget/successful grant applications, less job security (layoffs)	Evaluation-criteria (for performance but also for assessments on research output for grant applications) could be less strict, considering the circumstances of the individual; deadlines could be adjusted.	**National Level**: NWO **Local level**: Universities, faculties/school, managers
Teaching evaluation: A very quick transfer has been made to online education, which has been stressful for both teachers and students and might now be beneficial to the quality of education.	**Academic staff**: This affects all staff with educational tasks, but mainly affects teaching staff and novel employees with temporary contracts. Additionally, it is important to note that women often have more educational duties	**Short term**: Diminished quality of education, negative student evaluations, overloading of staff **Medium term**: Negative performance reviews, higher changes of burn-out **Lon term**: Less job security	Evaluation-criteria could be less strict. Also value the innovation of education: what went well, what work for certain groups and what could be done better? Invest in the further development of online education.	**National level**: VSNU, OC&W Ministry **Local level**: Universities, faculties/school, managers

	than men[44,45] and there is an existing gender bias in teaching evaluations, where women and other groups are systematically evaluated more negatively[46]			
Extending contracts/promotions: Employees with a temporary appointment and PhD students in the last phase cannot attain their goals within the time available	**Academic staff**: This affects new assistant professors, postdoctoral researchers, PhD students, student assistants and tenure track employees. It is important to note that in times of crisis, employers are more inclined to make "safe" decisions, where native, male employees are	**Short and medium term**: Loss of a diverse group of employees, especially women, non-Dutch, and people with a migration background, because the more often have temporary contracts and because of possible biases from managers **Long term**: Due to loss of the non-native employees, the work floor will become less diverse, going against	If possible, the temporary contracts and PhD projects should be extended[51]. Otherwise, it is important to maintain staff diversity by monitoring the diversity of the staff and act accordingly if necessary.	**National level**: VSNU, OC&W Ministry, NWO, LNVH **Local level**: Universities, faculties/school, HR-employees, managers

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	retained, and "risky" groups (e.g., women, people with a migration background) are not[26,47,48]. Analyses have already shown that mainly women and younger people lose their jobs because of the crisis[49].	principles of social justice, and in addition, will lead to less creative and diverse thinking, leading to lower quality of research and education[50].		
Balance between Study/work and private life: Workload has increased for both employees and students, often in combination with more stress and responsibilities at home	**Academic staff and students**: This affects all academic staff, but in particular the groups of concern mentioned in Table 1.[52,53]	**Academic staff**: **Short term**: Not attaining goals, stress **Medium term**: increased chances of burn-out[41], negative performance evaluations.	Easing of deadlines, a reduction in workload, and the ability to work flexible hours could help students and employees. In addition, it is important to offer more accessible practical and emotional	**Local level**: Universities, faculties/schools, managers, confidentiality counselors

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		Long term: loss of vulnerable employees and thus reduced diversity and lower quality of education and research [50] Students: Short term: Less study success, stress Medium term: Study delay, dropout Long term: Loss of students belonging to vulnerable groups. This has financial disadvantages for the universities and will also lead to a reduced diversity of the student population.	support for employees and students who need it.	
Recruitment and selection new employees: New online procedures are used throughout the recruitment and application process	Potential new academic staff: This mainly affects people with a disability or people who have an unsafe or troubled home environment. They are likely to experience problems with online meetings	Short and medium term: A decrease in diversity in the workplace, with a relative increase of native, male employees without disabilities Long term: The decrease in diversity goes against principles of social equity and has negative consequences on inclusion and social safety	Recruitment: it is important to use media and language that are accessible and attractive to a diverse group Selection: Awareness of bias in employers can prevent inequity in the way new staff is selected. Additionally, it is important to develop guidelines regarding the	Local level: Universities, faculties, HR, managers

	and education (e.g., via Skype, Zoom)[34,35,54]. Furthermore, in times of crisis, managers not only have a bias to retain native, male employees, but to also choose more native, male employees during recruitment and selection[26,47,48].	and on the quality of education and research[50]	selection of personnel of diverse backgrounds.	
Recruitment: New procedures are used to inform students about the different educational programs	**Potential new students**: This mainly affects people with a disability or people who have an unsafe or troubled home environment. They are likely to experience problems with novel online methods[34,35,54,55]	**Short term**: Fewer applications of students with physical, psychological, or familial problems **Medium and long term**: Financial disadvantages for universities, and a diminished diversity of the student population and a decreased sense of social safety and inclusion	it is important to use media and language that are accessible and attractive to a diverse group (i.e., people of diverse backgrounds; people with disabilities)	**Local level**: Universities, faculties,
Influx new students: The influx of new	**Potential new students**: This affects	**Short term**: Fewer applications of students with	At a national and local level, means could be	**National level**:

[54] Sklar, J. (2020). Zoom fatigue is taxing the brain. *National geographic.* https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/

[55] Li, E. (2020). Anything to not go home: Forced out by COVID-19, some students face unsafe conditions. *Daily Princetonian.* https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2020/04/anything-to-not-go-home-covid19-evictions-desperation-and-mutual-aid

students can be limited by financial and other obstacles (e.g., negative travel advice for international students)	mainly potential students who no longer have a (side)job and do not receive financial support from their families. They are less likely to sign up for a program[42,43]. International students possibly will no longer dare to invest in studying in the Netherlands[25]	a lower socio-economic status. This will be particularly noticeable at faculties where these groups are largely represented (e.g., economics, law, health sciences), fewer international (non-European) students[25,42,43] **Medium and long term**: Financial disadvantages for universities, and a diminished diversity of the student population and a decreased sense of social safety and inclusion	made available to reduce insecurities about financial consequences. Improving the online curriculum could stimulate international students to apply to Dutch universities.	VSNU, OC&W Ministry **Local level**: Universities, faculties
Study performance and study delay: Education has been altered for the short term, but expectations for good performance are still present. In addition, educational components, such as foreign exchanges and internships, have been postponed or cancelled.	**Students**: All students will have needed to adjust to the new situation, but mainly students from the groups of concern mentioned in Table 1 are likely to experience negative consequences[34,35,39,54,55].	**Short term**: Increased stress and dissatisfaction among students; lower study performance; dropout of students who experience a study delay and can no longer afford their study costs.[42,43] **Medium term**: Fewer students who graduate, more students with a study delay which increases financial	We advocate for leniency in assessing assignments and exams and considering additional resits; for usage of emergency funds or other national or local initiatives to support students experiencing financial difficulties. It is also important that the university offers accessible practical and emotional support to	**National level**: VSNU, OC&W Ministry **Local level**: Universities, faculties/schools, managers, confidential counsellors

		costs for universities and pressure on academic staff. **Long term**: Fewer opportunities for graduates, less diversity in universities and a reduced sense of social security and inclusivity.	students and employees who need it.	
Online education: Universities are forced to make use of online alternatives (pre-recorded lectures; interactive workgroups via Skype, Microsoft Teams or Zoom)	**Students**: Not all students are able to easily access online education. For instance, those who do not have a safe or quiet place to study, or those who lack the proper software and hardware, but also students with a disability (e.g., visual, auditory, cognitive) [34,35,54,55]	**Short term**: Increased stress and dissatisfaction among students; lower study performance; dropout among students who experience difficulty with this type of education, which leads to financial losses for universities. **Medium and long term**: Smaller and less diverse student population and a reduced sense of social security and inclusivity, with corresponding financial losses.	We could opt to increase the budget for online educational innovation, within which we consider the importance of a diverse student population. Extra practical and emotional support for students who need this is desirable.	**National level**: VSNU, OC&W Ministry **Local level**: Universities, faculties/schools, managers, confidential counsellors
Social security During a crisis, implicit biases increase. Specifically, this has already had negative consequences for Asian students and	**Academic staff, students**: All groups listed in Table 1 are at risk of losing the sense of inclusivity, but international workers	**Short term**: Increased loneliness and stress among vulnerable groups. **Medium term**: Problems with returning after social	It is important that the university offers accessible practical and emotional support to	**Local level**: Universities, faculties/schools, managers, HR,

employees, but also other groups are at risk of being excluded.	and students are particularly at risk.	isolation, increased chances for developing emotional problems. **Long term**: Increased study dropout among vulnerable students and employees, which leads to financial losses for the university and a decrease in diversity.	students and employees who need it.	confidential counsellors

Conclusions

The impact that the current crisis has on our society as well as the academic world is incalculable. The overview that we offer is not exhaustive, and how an individual is affected by the crisis depends on a complex interaction of different factors. A situation can be a positive and productive experience for some employees and students, while the same situation can have long-term negative consequences for others. An example of this is the increase of scientific output (i.e., publications, grants) among men and the decrease of scientific output among women. These differences are primarily due to circumstances (e.g., having to spend time on informal care tasks; stereotypical norms and values) and not (solely) to the skills or motivation of the individual.

Responsibility at all levels of decision-making

To prevent an increase in inequality, decisionmakers at all levels must take responsibility. On a national level, we can think about expanding the budget for extra educational support to relieve pressure on academic staff; financial means to extend PhD projects and other temporary functions; financial support for students who cannot make it otherwise; and to take into account reduced productivity during this period when assessing CVs for grant applications. On the level of universities and faculties, we can think about offering practical and emotional support for students and employees, and to be more considerate in how we handle delays and decreases in productivity. At each level, it is also important to be aware of biases and barriers that stand in the way of maintaining a diverse university. On an individual level, we should emphasize the responsibility to care for each other, to seek connections with student and colleagues, but also to make time for selfcare and to ask for help when needed.

A call to action

The COVID-19 crisis and its consequences have a huge impact on the entire population: everybody experiences obstacles, but some experience more than others. We call on all decisionmakers not to further disadvantage those students and employees who are struggling because of the current circumstances (e.g., because they have less access to financial, practical, or emotional means to cope with the situation) by, for instance, evaluating them more negatively, terminating contracts, and giving them fewer opportunities on the job market. Instead, we urge decisionmakers to support these groups in as many ways as possible.

We suggest that local decisionmakers start a dialogue with groups who have been affected most by this crisis, to conduct research on the most prominent and pressing problems, and to formulate advice for national initiatives. We call on national decisionmakers to pay attention to the voices of students and employees and to take action to support and improve the functioning and wellbeing of students and employees. Finally, we call on all decisionmakers to continue promoting diversity and inclusion, specifically in these difficult times.