VLIR-UOS and Corona

Measures and information – version 5 June 2020

Content

Purpose of this document ............................................................................................................................................. 1
General obligations of the public ........................................................................................................................................ 1
First contact point for your UOS-questions ......................................................................................................................... 2
Mobility planning and visa applications ............................................................................................................................ 2
  EU and Belgian government policy ................................................................................................................................. 2
  VLIR-UOS recommendation ........................................................................................................................................... 3
Travel related costs .............................................................................................................................................................. 3
  General guidelines ............................................................................................................................................................. 3
  Specific guidelines ........................................................................................................................................................... 4
Delay and underspending issues related to activity year 2020 ...................................................................................... 6
  A. Measures within the framework of the current FYP .................................................................................................. 6
  B. Measures beyond 31/12/2021 ..................................................................................................................................... 7
Overview of measures related to activity year 2020 ........................................................................................................... 8

Purpose of this document

Given the restrictions on (international) mobility and social interaction imposed by a multitude of stakeholders concerned (governmental and institutional authorities, airlines, travel agencies,...) on the basis of the Corona virus pandemic, VLIR-UOS wishes to provide information on measures related to mobility, events and costs in the framework of VLIR-UOS programmes, projects and scholarships.

The present version of this document is a general update, and also includes the information that was sent by e-mail to various target groups such as programme and project promoters on 12 and 17 March 2020 already.

General obligations of the public

  • We explicitly refer to every citizen’s general obligation to primarily consult governmental policies, both in the home country and in the country of destination, regarding social interaction and travel, and to act accordingly.
  • Additionally, please consult World Health Organisation’s advice for the public.
First contact point for your UOS-questions

For specific inquiries concerning your project, programme or scholarship activities, please consult the responsible academic (the project promoter) and institutional coordinators for development cooperation at the Flemish university (ICOS) or university college (GEO) first. They will refer to institutional policies and liaise with VLIR-UOS when necessary. In this way VLIR-UOS can involve all stakeholders and streamline communication.

The Flemish universities have created specific webpages with information regarding Corona:


Please do not send a direct email to VLIR-UOS without prior consultation with your responsible academic and/or institutional coordinator.

Mobility planning and visa applications

EU and Belgian government policy

EU

On 17 March 2020, EU Member States agreed on coordinated action at the external borders based on the [recommendation by the Commission](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/travel-and-transportation/travel-and-eu-during-pandemic_en) to restrict non-essential travel for a period of 30 days. On 8 April 2020 the Commission recommended an extension of travel restrictions to the EU+ area by another 30 days. This would expire on 15 May 2020. On 8 May 2020 the Commission recommended an extension of travel restrictions to the EU+ area by another 30 days. This would expire on 15 June 2020.

Member States and Schengen Associated countries are temporarily suspending all non-essential travel from third countries to the EU+ area. The “EU+ area” includes 30 countries: 26 out of the 27 EU Member States as well as the four Schengen Associated States: Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. Ireland does not currently apply the travel restriction.


Belgium

On the basis of the current Belgian government policy¹, from 15 June onwards, Belgium will open its borders for [travel to and from the European Union](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/travel-and-transportation/travel-and-eu-during-pandemic_en), including the United Kingdom and the four other Schengen countries (Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Iceland and Norway). However, it is up to each country to decide whether or not to open its borders. In order to know the situation in the country of destination, it is therefore advisable to consult the website of Foreign Affairs.

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¹ Security Council decision of 3 June 2020.
The conditions for travel from third countries outside the EU to the EU and vice versa still have to be determined in the light of the evolution of discussions at European level. Hence for these travels, the prohibition to travel might continue after 15 June.

For further information on visa, please consult the Belgian government’s official website. On 5 June 2020, this website states the following:

- For the time being and until further notice, Belgian embassies and consulates no longer accept any new visa applications and no longer issue visas, except in exceptional cases (essential travel). In most countries, the Visa Application Centres are also closed.
- The examination of visa applications already submitted continues. However, in the event of a positive decision, the visa will not be issued immediately, unless the applicant has an essential function or an essential need.
- If the visa was requested for a short stay, the visa may be issued after the situation has been normalised, provided that the applicant still meets the entry conditions.
- Finally, people with a valid visa are strongly advised to postpone any non-essential travel and to travel when the situation is normalized.
- The Immigration Office points out that a third-country national who is prevented from leaving Belgium for reasons of force majeure (quarantine, flight cancellation, border closure, etc.) may request authorisation to extend his/her stay and thus visa.
- In order to reduce travel and contact, this request may be sent by email to the municipal administration of the place of residence.
- In case of emergency, the request to extend the visa can be sent directly to the Immigration Office to the following email address: kv.opvolging[at]ibz.fgov.be (residence in a Flemish municipality).

VLIR-UOS recommendation

VLIR-UOS recommends all projects, programmes and scholarships to postpone all travels and mobility related events to and from Belgium in the framework of VLIR-UOS until at least the end of June 2020.

Some countries however are organising repatriation flights or are slowly opening their borders for returning nationals (e.g. Cuba, Kenya, Rwanda, Indonesia). In such a case, flight tickets can be booked and travel costs can be reimbursed. Evidently all preventive and follow-up measures need to be taken into account upon arrival in the home country. Please contact the embassy of the respective partner country in Belgium for more information on possible flights and the measures that are in place.

Travel related costs

General guidelines

We are aware that cancellation insurances are not likely to refund the costs of travels cancelled due to the Corona crisis, but nevertheless you are required to verify this.

Cancellation costs can only be imputed on your VLIR-UOS project budget after written motivation that there is a direct link between the cancellation and (one of the) Corona crisis linked policies concerned (on the basis of the planned dated of the activity) and proof that the insurance does not cover these costs.

Scholarship holders, promoters or project members who left Belgium who have been quarantined by the government in their home country, without that government intervening in the costs, can receive
a (partial) refund of these costs upon presentation of motivation and proof of these costs (government measure, government cost reimbursement disclaimer + bills). Refunds will be made according to the VLIR-UOS guidelines where applicable. For ICP and ITP scholarship holders, these costs should be imputed on the Flemish university's scholarships programme budget.

Proven inability to leave Belgium due to Corona and subsequent policies (governmental and or airlines) can be qualified as force majeure; costs of forced prolonged stay will be refunded, in principle on the basis of the VLIR-UOS guidelines. We repeat that prior consultation by the scholar with the Flemish university promoter and/or the ICOS/GEO and by the latter with VLIR-UOS is in any case required.

Should you make any bookings now for later in the year (earliest July 2020 – see above), please make sure these are flexible tickets, i.e. of which the dates can be altered without surcharge. We cannot allow tickets (and subsequent costs) purchased after 12 March 2020 but cancelled due to the Corona crisis, to be imputed on your programme, project of scholarship budget. Costs for tickets for repatriation flights that were organised after March 12th can be reimbursed.

The cost of a ticket purchased and paid in 2020 for a flight that will take place in 2021, is accountable to activity year 2020, as the ticket delivery is the service of the travel agency that was rendered in 2020. DGD could have a problem with this expenditure because when reporting on these 2020 attributed costs in reporting year 2021, the actual use of this purchase cannot be proven yet (only in the course of 2021, after the travel took place). But as DGD’s checks usually only start much later (2 years delay or more), there should be enough time in the course of 2021 to complete the supporting documents for this expenditure.

Specific guidelines

Furthermore, the following applies:

- For ICP and ITP:
  - Costs related to cancellation due to the Corona crisis that are non-refundable by insurance / travel agency etc can in principle be imputed on the ICP’s incremental funding budget (for incremental project activities), ITP budget (for ITP programme activities), or scholarship budget of the Flemish higher education institution (for scholarship holders – see also below), given a motivation is provided in the reporting.
  - If any costs would occur related to the scholarships, for example for those (ITP) programmes which had to postpone organisation and need to re-book tickets, accommodation etc., these costs can in principle be imputed on the scholarship budget of the Flemish higher education institution. Scholars are requested to consult the ICOS/GEO of the Flemish higher education institution. In principle they are not allowed to (re-)book or cancel their tickets themselves since this is organised by the respective programme.
  - Most activities and classes for students are cancelled or replaced by distance learning initiatives. It is currently hard to anticipate on the duration of this measure and the impact it will have on each study programme. We, however, trust that all universities are doing everything possible to limit negative impact on study progress and we are confident that all ICP scholars are well-informed on cancellations, postponements or alternative activities. ICP scholars are invited to consult the specific corona related websites that the Flemish universities have created (see above).

ITP scholars studying at a Flemish university college, are invited to check with the GEO.
o Since the travel bans were issued, it was not advisable for ICP scholars to return home. In case they chose to do so, they will have to cover all costs made and make sure to inform the programme coordinators on their plans. The latter is also stipulated in the individual contracts of each scholar.

o The scholarship allowance for master students is a lump sum totalling 12 (for the one year programmes) or 24 times (for the two year programmes) the foreseen monthly allowance. The allowance is paid to each scholar independent of the time of graduation. The scholars keep receiving their monthly allowance, given they commit to follow the programme through distance education and take part in exams, even if they would not be in Belgium. The scholarship will not be suspended in case a scholar decides to return home, nor will it be extended.

o If any costs due to cancellations or suspensions would occur related to the scholarships, for example for those (ITP) programmes who had / have to postpone organisation and need to re-book tickets, accommodation etc, these costs can in principle be imputed on the scholarship budget. Please contact the ICOS/GEO of your institution as soon as possible in case you are in such a situation so details can also be further discussed with VLIR-UOS.

- **VLIR-UOS PhD scholarship holders and Short Term Allowance grantees** staying in Belgium, are also requested to consult their Flemish university promoter and/or the ICOS/GEO, before planning any mobility or altering existing mobility plans by which costs would be incurred. Please note that all financial issues related to scholars / grantees are dealt with by the Flemish HEIs, not by VLIR-UOS directly.

  As a principle,
  
o Scholarship holders who left Belgium before the end of the period for which they had already received a scholarship payment, are obliged to repay the part to which they are not entitled;

  o Existing planning implying outgoing mobility from Belgium to the home country can be pursued after the outgoing mobility ban ends or in case repatriation flights are organised, and in any case by verifying home country policy (via home country embassy/consulate in Belgium) and, the availability of effective travel options.

- **For REI (travel grant) holders** the following applies:

  o Students who are **still in Belgium** but who cannot travel due to the travel ban and who already made expenses, can be reimbursed by the Flemish university (college) up to a maximum of 1.000 EUR – or lower: see your Flemish university (college) regulation. These expenses need to be accounted for, and a written motivation is to be provided in the reporting (in any case: insurance disclaimer).

  o Students who were **already in a developing country** but were forced to abort their stay and return to Belgium, are entitled to a maximum of 1.000 EUR – or lower: see your Flemish university (college) regulation as a lump sum contribution to the overall cost of travel and subsistence –, even if their stay abroad was shorter than 28 days. In case of premature return to Belgium, a written motivation is to be provided in the reporting.

  o **We assume that in some cases** the additional cost will exceed the 1.000 EUR limit and will not be covered by the insurance company. VLIR-UOS has asked the universities to provide information regarding the effective expenditures, so as to enable VLIR-UOS to map out this type of cases. This needs to be further verified with DGD, but in any case, if necessary, possibilities within the GM budget will have to be sought for each institution, i.e. via a still to be determined maximum contribution from those resources. On the basis of the mapping, VLIR-UOS will consult DGD on this matter.

  o For **any further questions**, REI students are requested to contact their ICOS/GEO.
Delay and underspending issues related to activity year 2020

There is quite some concern among several promoters that due to the Corona crisis the planned activities cannot be executed within the foreseen timeframe, which therefore could lead to the yearly spending ratio, if applicable, not being met in 2020, and even on the long run to project results not being achieved, with as consequence full budget execution and realization of project results also being jeopardized.

In preparation of the meeting of the Bureau UOS on 24 April 2020, VLIR-UOS had

- urged project promoters to reschedule their activities as much as possible and, for those projects that still have contractual extension possibilities within the framework of the current Five Year Programme (FYP 2017-2021), to look into these together with the ICOS/GEO, and link up with VLIR-UOS;
- requested the ICOS of the Flemish universities and GEO of the Flemish university colleges to draw up an overview of questions per intervention type in this respect;
- subsequently, drafted a proposal that was discussed by the Bureau UOS on 24 April 2020.

After the Bureau UOS meeting, 2 general categories of measures have to be discerned:

A. measures within the current formal framework (FYP 2017-2021) that can be taken by the Bureau UOS without prior consultation of DGD;
B. measures beyond the current formal framework (FYP 2017-2021) that imply the extension of that current formal framework are in principle not possible, but underlying questions and requests will be submitted to DGD in a broader request and in concertation with other actors of the non-governmental cooperation that are funded by DGD.

This distinction is elaborated below.

A. Measures within the framework of the current FYP

1. Flexibilisation of rules on duration

1.1. Postponement
As far as ITP is concerned, the UOS Bureau has already agreed by written procedure, due to the urgency of communication to selected fellows, to postpone some of the 2020 programmes to a later date in 2020 or to 2021 on the basis of a written request filed to VLIR-UOS. This procedure is open for use by all ITPs.

It should be noted however that, for ITPs selected for organization in both 2020 and 2021. Considering that the current VLIR-UOS Five-Year-Programme with DGD ends in 2021, a possible shift of the 2021 edition to 2022 is a priori not possible, but will be linked in a broader request to DGD to extend the current formal framework (see below, B.).

1.2. Extension

Projects with start-up before the current FYP
All TEAM 2016 projects are allowed to be extended by up to 12 months (activity year 5). Until further notice, the rules are such that an extension of x number of months with a maximum of 12 months is possible. The number of extension months was kept as limited as possible in function of the earliest
possible closure of this 'old' funding line to DGD, at the explicit request of DGD. This means that approved extension applications for the projects with current extension end dates between 30/04/2020 and 30/11/2020 can, if desired, be revised up to a new maximum end date of 31/12/2020. Any request to go further than 31/12/2020 is highly questionable due to the long life of these projects and the specific funding line that needs to be closed. VLIR-UOS will nevertheless submit the question to DGD (see below, B.).

Projects with start-up in the current FYP
The contractually foreseen possibilities for project extensions for ZI, TEAM and JOINT within the framework of FYP 2017-2021 mentioned in the overview are possible provided that the existing procedure for requests for extensions is followed, albeit substantially simplified (adjusted budget over respective activity years).

Moreover,

- JOINT 2018, SI 2018 and SI 2019 projects are allowed be extended by up to 12 months instead of the 6 months provided for in the contract.
- the 'transversal projects DR Congo' initiated before 2017 (continuation included in JOINT 2017 and closing at the end of 2020) will also be offered the possibility to apply for an extension of maximum 12 months instead of the contractually foreseen 6 months.
- the phase-out of the IUC programmes UCB (DR Congo) UNIKIS (DR Congo), UB (Burundi) can be revised by making the unspent budget of activity year 10 (2020) additionally available in 2021, meaning on top of the normal Phase Out year 11 budget (2021) (part of a separate Phase Out contract agreement) normally limited to a successful closing of the programme.
- the ongoing IUC Phase Out agreements of UNALM and UL can be revised as such that the unspent budget of year 11 (2020) becomes available in the closing activity year 12 (2021).

2. Flexibilisation of rules on spending ratio

- Programmes and projects are encouraged to think creatively about how the intended results can still be achieved within the maximum timeframe foreseen (i.e. before 31/12/2021), but in a different or adapted way, in line with DGD's e-mail of 9/4/2020: "We believe that everything that can be pursued should be pursued. Finding the right way challenges our creativity". We trust that the project partners, both in the North and in the South, will do their utmost to try to achieve the expected results as much as possible.
- The Bureau UOS has decided that the original spending rates for 2020 have been adapted as such that there is no minimal spending ratio, and as is already the case for TEAM-SI-JOINT projects within this FYP, all unspent budget of activity year 2020 is transferable to activity year 2021. However, as indicated above we do advise to reschedule project activities as much as possible given the exceptional circumstances. This measure is adopted for activity year 2020 only; budgets unspent in 2020 can only be spent in the remaining year 2021.

B. Measures beyond 31/12/2021

Until further notice, extensions beyond the deadline of 31/12/2021 being the final and overall deadline for all projects, is not possible. The Bureau UOS has mandated VLIR-UOS to submit a request to DGD to discuss possibilities of flexibilising the limits of the present FYP. This will be done in concertation with other actors of the non-governmental cooperation that are also funded by DGD.
### Overview of measures related to activity year 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of intervention and start-up year per period (in chronological order) – A. measures and B. measures</th>
<th>Extension subject to justified request</th>
<th>Spending ratio 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contractual possibility</td>
<td>Flexibilisation Bureau UOS 2020-04-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Before current FYP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAM 2016</td>
<td>Extension with Year 5 activity year (2020) up to max. 12 months after prior agreement of DGD</td>
<td>Extension with Year 5 activity year (2020) until end date 31/12/2020, after prior agreement of DGD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Current FYP: partner country programmes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAM 2017</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOINT 2017 ending end of 2020 (‘projet transversal RD Congo’)</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>1 year (simplified request)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI and JOINT 2018 and SI 2019</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUC and NETWORK</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUC activity year 10 (2020) (UCB and UNIKIS-DRC; UB-Burundi)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1 year (budget Y 10 added to Phase Out Y11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IUC Phase Out contracts (2020-2021, case of UNALM-Peru and UL-South Africa)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Current FYP: Belgium programme</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarships programme (ICP, ITP and phasing out ICP PhD)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Together Night</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICP</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITP</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>postponement (to 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSR</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Current FYP: costs outside the country programmes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORG</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Next FYP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

All questions impacting 2022 budgets and beyond will be submitted to DGD in May 2020.

### Notes:

- Considering the coordination costs (line E. in the budget/reporting format) are all budgeted on the basis of fixed amounts per activity year, the concerned coordination costs of 2020 are to be imputed as foreseen on the 2020 activity year budget, with the exception of the Scholarships programme and Global Minds where regulations are based on the real expenditure per activity year;
- The reporting deadlines for the activity year 2020, remain until further notice in the first trimester of 2021.