

# Considering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the evaluation of funding applications at the Fonds de recherche du Québec

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## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected and continues to affect many researchers and students. For some people, however, the pandemic has had a more significant impact, leading to a general slowdown or interruption of research or training activities, and exacerbating certain already existing inequalities.

Research and training activities may also have slowed down for personal, family or health reasons. The closure of childcare centres and schools, in particular, has led to increased parental workloads, often making it difficult to balance work and family life. In fact, in the early months of the pandemic, there was a decline in the number of scientific papers submitted by women, particularly those at an early stage in their career,<sup>i</sup> which is attributed in part to their greater share, on average, of domestic and caregiving responsibilities.<sup>ii</sup>

The illness or death of a loved one, loss of employment, or being part of a community particularly affected by COVID-19 may also have affected the ability of some members of the scientific community to undertake or complete projects. Similarly, people with disabilities, compromised immune systems or chronic illness may have faced particular challenges that slowed down their activities.

In addition, the inability to access a laboratory, to meet with people involved in a project or to conduct field research may have led to the modification, postponement or even abandonment of a research project. Likewise, restrictions on travel or gatherings may have led to the cancellation of an internship or conference presentation.

The transition to online courses also proved more difficult for faculty members less experienced with distance education technologies, as well as for many students, especially those with children or caring for an older or vulnerable family member. Other examples include students from low-income families, for whom the financial impact of the pandemic may be more severe; students who have returned to areas with limited Internet access; students working in the health care field, or who have lost their jobs or housing, etc.

## Description of the measure

A slowdown or interruption of activities due to the pandemic could unduly affect the competitiveness of an application and lead to inequities in obtaining funding. Considering the impact this could have on the careers of those affected, in the fall of 2020 the Fonds de recherche du Québec (FRQ) implemented a measure to consider the impacts of the pandemic on applicants' research and training activities in the evaluation of funding applications. This measure aims to avoid penalizing those for whom these impacts have been more significant.

Accordingly, applicants for FRQ funding have the opportunity, if they wish, to describe the impacts of the pandemic on their research or training activities (see [Instructions for applicants](#)). This information will be sent to the evaluation committees, who will be asked to take it into account when evaluating applications, to ensure that those whose activities were slowed down or interrupted by the pandemic are not penalized for the impact this may have had on the competitiveness of their application. Committees will receive specific instructions to this effect.

The decision whether or not to include a description of the pandemic's impacts in a funding application is entirely up to the applicant. **This section of the application is optional**, and its absence will not affect the eligibility of the application or its evaluation.

The Fonds de recherche du Québec reserve the right not to forward to the evaluation committees any section that does not comply with the program rules or presentation standards of the application. These may vary from one program to another and are explained on each program's Web page.

It is important to note that **the information provided in this section will not be used to determine the eligibility of the funding application** and that this section cannot be used to request accommodation from the FRQ. It will only be used to provide context for elements of the application during its scientific evaluation.

## Instructions for applicants (new procedure)

For the 2022-2023 competitions, most of which will be held in the fall of 2021, the impacts of the pandemic can be described **directly in the application form**. For applications submitted using the FRQnet platform, information on the impacts of the pandemic can be provided in the "Interruption or slowing down of research" section. For programs that do not use FRQnet, a PDF document can be attached to the application. In both cases, the text should not exceed 500 words.

In this section, applicants must:

- 1) Clearly explain how the pandemic has affected their research or training activities, indicating the type of activities affected, the period during which the activities were slowed or interrupted, and if applicable, an estimate (%) of the reduction in time spent on research and training activities during this period. Applicants may report any circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic that may have impacted the competitiveness of their funding application (see next section for some examples), but should limit themselves to those circumstances that had specific impacts on the application.
- 2) Indicate the specific impacts that the described circumstances had on their funding application (see next section for some examples). These impacts must be explained in a precise manner, clearly demonstrating the link to the elements considered in the evaluation.

## Examples of information to include

Some of the types of circumstances and impacts described in the applications submitted to the FRQ in the fall 2020 competitions are presented here as examples. ***These lists are not exhaustive.***

### Examples of reported circumstances:

- Limited access to resources, field work and laboratories
- Issues related to work-family or study-family balance
- Physical or mental health issues
- Increased time spent on teaching or other academic duties
- Difficulty recruiting students

### Examples of reported impacts:

- Delays in publications or funding applications
- Suspension, delay or modification of a research project
- Cancelled participation in a scientific event
- Extension of the duration of studies

### Examples of descriptions

The following descriptions are provided as examples to clarify the expected format and type of information to be included in the description of the impacts of the pandemic. They are therefore presented in an abbreviated format. Applicants are invited to include any information that could help the evaluation committees understand the circumstances and impacts they experienced. However, they are not required to provide details or information they consider confidential or too personal.

- Circumstances: Due to school closures in my area, I had to reduce the number of hours I spent on all my research activities by about ... % for ... weeks in April 2021, in order to supervise online school and look after my children, who were at home full-time. Impacts: I had planned to prepare a grant/scholarship application for Program X at Agency Y during that time, but I had to postpone preparing the application, which will ultimately be submitted in May 2022. As a result, it does not appear in my application.
- Circumstances: As the head of my department's master's program, I had to devote more time to these duties in order to coordinate the transition to an online model, in addition to redesigning the two courses I was teaching in the winter and fall 2020 semesters. My time available for research was therefore reduced by about ... % from March to September 2020 inclusively. Impacts: I had to give up writing a chapter on X that would have been part of Book Y, published in the summer of 2021.
- Circumstances: My children did not attend daycare from ... to ... inclusively. As a result, I stopped all research activities during this period to look after my young children full-time. Impacts: I should have submitted two papers as first author during this time, but I had to postpone writing them.

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<sup>i</sup> Vincent-Lamarre P., Sugimoto C. & Larivière V. [The decline of women's research production during the coronavirus pandemic](#), Nature Index, May 19, 2020

<sup>ii</sup> Frederickson, M. [Women are getting less research done than men during this coronavirus pandemic](#), The Conversation, May 18, 2020.