



Sep 28, 2020

PRESS CONFERENCE: Impact of COVID-19 and budget cuts on the next generation of EU researchers

Written statement from the Young Academy of Europe (YAE)

We are grateful to the Initiative for Science Europe for giving us the opportunity to report here today on the tangible impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the research and careers of excellent young scholars across Europe.

The Young Academy of Europe is a bottom-up initiative aiming to protect and improve the future of young researchers in Europe, and to provide an independent voice by young scholars in European science policy. We currently have over 150 members across Europe. Our membership largely consists of researchers who have recently gained independence through prestigious European funding to lead and establish their own research vision. These researchers are at a critical point in their careers, and what happens at this stage will very much determine their futures in research and academia. They got here because the necessary resources were available to enable them to push the boundaries of scientific knowledge. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic has put much of this progress on hold. It should be noted that many researchers at this stage have temporary positions, even when holding ERC or other prestigious grants, even when leading their own research group. A delay in their research and/or a freeze of research investment can block their career progression, and this damages science as a whole, not just the individuals.

The YAE has been gathering data on the impact of the pandemic on early career researchers through a survey that has been running since the end of June. The results are, predictably, quite disheartening. Let me share some data with you:

- So far we have had a total of 123 respondents
- 71% are within the first 10 years post-PhD award
- 86% said that the pandemic significantly delayed their research or publication progress
- Levels of stress have increased: during the pandemic, about 37% have been very stressed or even stressed to the point of burn out (when compared to the time from before the pandemic)



- Levels of motivation have decreased: about 73% answered that due to the pandemic they feel less motivated, less able to focus, or that the pandemic was a trigger for them to re-think their careers significantly
- One of the most striking findings is that the pandemic has **exacerbated inequalities**. Those worst affected by the pandemic are women, people with children and caring responsibilities, and researchers in small institutions.
- For example, 17% of women versus 7% of men considered quitting their careers due to difficulties faced during the pandemic
- Finally, we have also seen that effects of the pandemic on researchers depend on country (different lockdowns, different policy responses to the impacts of the pandemic on research), and on research field (lab-based vs theoretical).

Taken together, it is clear that the shutdowns caused by the pandemic have generated a great deal of professional and emotional distress to young scholars. Having to worry about whether their contract will be extended or they can get a new job in the near future, on top of an unsettling amount of uncertainty around their research being on hold, adds additional mental strain for this group, who are already at a stressful career stage. Back in April, when the pandemic was emerging, YAE Board Member Arild Husby and myself published a [letter in Nature](#) to highlight that early career researchers were at particular risk following the COVID-19 pandemic. We called for stronger and more explicit commitment from European institutions to guarantee costed extensions to early career researchers in order to secure the delivery of their funded research programs. Extensions would be tailored to each case, as we have seen from the survey that different groups have been affected differently. We are well aware that the situation we are facing is equally unprecedented for institutions and funders. However, supporting ECRs, who are the future of our research landscape, will ensure the prosperity of European research portfolios in the post-pandemic world. This is why we strongly encourage research funding bodies to candidly engage with and support ECRs during this difficult time.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Dr. Gemma Modinos
Vice-Chair
Young Academy of Europe

Our survey can be found following this link: <https://yacadeuro.org/covid-19-impact-survey/>