



16 November 2020

Recommendations about supporting EC grantees affected by the COVID-19 crisis

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PROLOGUE

We are grateful to the Commissioner's cabinet for asking for our feedback about supporting young researchers whose careers have suffered from the COVID-19 crisis.

The pandemic has been disruptive for society at large including for many researchers. In fact, due to lockdowns, their research projects have been delayed for the same reasons as other workers (children not at school), as well as for research specific reasons (no access to research facilities or research terrain), which in some cases has delayed work for up to 12 months. Thus, it has been very difficult for them to complete their research within the time available (during which they could receive the project related salary), and to gather sufficient quality data for publication (a key requirement to defend a high-quality thesis and obtain the next position or funding grant). The consequences are:

1. researchers with exceptional potential abandoning research due the increase of precarity conditions, leading to **negative impact on careers**¹;
2. failure to create an output on research (many research projects were terminated before finalization) and develop people, leading to **negative impact on the returns on the invested budget** (meant to enhance the future competitiveness of Europe).
3. high levels of stress resulting in **mental health consequences** in particular for the following categories of researchers: early career researchers, international, minorities, those with caring responsibilities².

The need for immediate support is clear; we cannot afford to lose part of our bright minds or increase the brain drain outside Europe due to the consequences of COVID-19.

Not only the need for immediate intervention is important for our knowledge economy, but we think that funders have the **ethical responsibility to act quickly** and support the researchers they fund. The work situation of these researchers who are employed on short term contracts is precarious. We believe that funders should not use budgetary or operational limits as excuses to avoid their ethical responsibility towards their grantees.

¹ The negative impact on careers did not affect only researchers with the ongoing research projects. It also influenced substantially those who have been planning to apply for the European Research Council's grants, the European Commission's top funding programme for scientists. For example, the European Research Council's Starting Grant accepts only applications from the researchers two to seven years after their completion of PhD. Because of the pandemic disruption, many researchers will not be able to apply for the grants in the forthcoming period.

² For more information, please check the following resources: CACTUS Mental Health Survey Report 2020 [[LINK](#) - last accessed 12 November 2020]. Eurodoc's articles about the categories affected [[LINK-1](#), [LINK-2](#), [LINK-3](#) - last accessed 12 November 2020].

We also think that, among all funders, the European Commission should lead by example in setting a high ethical standard, assuring that it has a high consideration of researchers and of their important work, and holding to European values against exploitation of the labour force.

After more than 7 months since the first wave of national lockdowns across EU countries, and in the midst of the second wave, we are concerned with the handling of grantees by the European Commission. To our knowledge, despite the harsh consequences listed above, **the EC has not yet put in place any policy, nor has it yet allocated a budget to support researchers.**

In this document, we provide a quick overview of the main issues we expect the EC to address with no further delays and propose a series of measures the EC should immediately implement. Finally, we provide an overview of good practices put in place by other EU funders.

MAIN ISSUES

Through the survey run by the Young Academy of Europe, and access to preliminary results of other surveys like for example the Dutch LNVH, we know that, in comparison to the time before the pandemic, a high proportion of researchers experienced moderate to high level stress, about half of them work more hours but can devote less time to research³, and a vast majority struggles with work-life balance. According to Eurodoc survey, ECRs faced obstacles in defending their thesis, reaching the requirement for achieving the doctoral degree, had problematic access to research resources and these problems lead to lower productivity and anxiety. Stress especially increases for those in temporary positions like PostDocs, in short-term contracts or tenure track/open-ended contracts.

There is intrinsically not a lot of difference between men and women when it comes to the impact of the pandemic on their work, but the largest difference is among those with caring responsibilities (kids, elderly parents, partner with health conditions) and those without. With children, especially those younger than 10 years old, who had to be home during the lockdown, stress and problems increase. We notice also that women with children are over-represented in more vulnerable positions, i.e., temporary positions, while the men are over-represented in more established and solid positions - with less stress about losing their job.

In addition, as access to laboratory facilities and field work has been impossible during long stretches of time, many researchers could not work on their research projects, which made it

³ In the Dutch LNVH survey about 50% can work about 10-20% less on all tasks (except teaching which costs more time). 33% experience psychological problems (more in detail 40% of ECRs, 25% for full professors). 70% in all career stages have difficulties balancing career life. In the YAE survey, about a quarter of researchers can spend less time on research related activities and only 14% claimed no negative impact on their research; more than half reported much higher levels of stress compared to pre-COVID.

impossible for them to complete their projects. This has resulted in significantly reduced career perspectives and lower return of the investment in research.

While most funders have immediately extended project delivery deadlines, few of them have provided sufficient funding to cover the salaries and the research expenses for the extension. This amounts to asking employees to keep working without compensation, which is in fact both unethical and unfair. We find it unacceptable to take advantage of young researchers' passion for their work in such a way. While most workers and businesses have received financial support from their governments to navigate the crisis, and rightly so, no additional funding has been made available to the universities and research institutes, and researchers have sometimes been asked to keep on working (and thus contributing new knowledge) for free.

In spite of Member States supporting their researchers in different ways, including financially, the European Commission has lagged behind and abandoned its grantees and the projects in which it has invested a large amount of money. Not only is it morally debatable that the highest EU institutions take this stand, but it shows a certain level of shortsightedness wasting the investment made on so many highly valuable research projects.

PROPOSED MEASURES

Following what has been done by other funders (see, for example, the list of good practices in the last section), we believe that the Commission could follow two possible routes to provide costed extensions to all of its grantees, independently from the funding scheme that they were affiliated with:

1. automatically extend the budget for all grantees and projects for a period of time that covers at least the length of the lockdowns;
2. a 2-stage process where the extent of support is assessed on a case-by-case basis assessment in collaboration with Host Institutions (which would perform the assessment), and then granted.

While the first might look more appealing for its operational ease, the latter would probably result in a more efficient and fair allocation of resources. To reduce its administrative burden, the process might be simplified by requesting the fellows to explain why and how their research has been delayed with just one paragraph application, and the option to request the time interval for the extensions.

In addition to financial support, it is important to provide career and psychological support to researchers suffering from mental health problems. The European Universities Association Council on Doctoral Education addressed the mental health consequences of the pandemic in its report "The new balance. Insights from EUA-CDE online sessions on doctoral education and the coronavirus crisis" [[LINK](#) - last accessed on 12/11/2020]. Many of the micro-level issues affecting the mental

health of junior researchers are best addressed by supervisors and institutions. We expect the European Commission to require the Host Institutions and Principal Investigators to put in place these measures with their grantees.

As for assessing the need and scope of costed extensions and support, we suggest considering the following recommendations:

1. Give priority to projects finishing in 2020 and in the first semester of 2021;
2. Develop a range of support measures based on evaluating the needs of individual projects;
3. Trust host institutions and beneficiaries (or their managers if necessary) to provide initial feedback about necessity for support;
4. Provide short extensions (up to 6 months) using a fast-track procedure based on few questions and only essential paperwork;
5. In programmes where a secondment is planned but cannot be carried out due to travel ban or other restrictions, allow a “virtual secondment” with tele-working.

We also suggest implementing longer term policies as:

1. Update the age limit requirements for MSCA Postdocs and ERC Starting Grants to acknowledge delays due to the pandemic.
2. Increase and promote Open Science, in particular Open Infrastructures and digitisation of libraries with a single access for European researchers, in order to reduce the difficulties to accessibility to research resources and promote science and networking even with lower mobility.
3. Foresee extra funding for emergency situations as the pandemic and the closure of some activities with guidelines for institutions, including the lesson learned during the previous wave of the pandemic.
4. Implement new policies for paid parental leave of MSCA fellows. At the moment, not all fellows can benefit from it due to local limitations of short-term contracts in some countries. The absence of paid parental leave has bad consequences on the fellow's (mostly female) career, and they are further amplified in times of crisis.

We understand that these measures entail a financial expenditure for the Commission, but we also think that it would mean only a minor dent in the overall EU budget with a greater return in terms of ethical standards, leadership, and possibly also in terms of quality of the research system.

Therefore, **we urge the Commission to find a solution to any legal or financial roadblocks and intervene quickly.**

Upon the start of the pandemic, we have witnessed how well the Commission has responded to it by mobilising resources to orient research and innovation activities towards measures addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand that this had a high priority in Spring 2020, but we also maintain that it is time to mobilise resources to take care of the research workforce (at all levels) that constitutes the backbone of the European R&I system. We think that the necessary financial

means should be found from different sources. In particular, we are aware of the availability of unspent budget from many programmes; we suggest that this could be a first source to recourse to. In addition, we consider that the Commission should be able to use part of the money used for the recovery fund to support the recovery of the research system and affirm its commitment to assuring an ERA Talent Pipeline through financial means.

GOOD PRACTICES

In the following list, we provide a non-exhaustive list of funders who have immediately supported their grantees. We hope that the Commission will use these examples as inspiration to design her measures in support of researchers.

1. European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO): provided an automatic 2-month extension to all grantees [\[LINK\]](#).
2. Wellcome Trust: provided up to 6 months of additional funding to its junior grantees [\[LINK\]](#).
3. France funded all extensions for up to twelve months of all temporary positions (PhD fellows, post-doctoral researchers, technicians or engineers) after a thorough evaluation carried out by supervisors, labs and doctoral schools. [\[LINK-1\]](#), [\[LINK-2\]](#)
4. Spain: extended the duration of non-tenure contracts for the equivalent of the time span of the national state of emergency [\[LINK\]](#).
5. Portugal: FCT has provided an automatic one-month extension of all scholarship contracts it funds [\[LINK\]](#).
6. Italy: MIUR provided 2-month extensions for PhD candidates (with additional funding) and postdoc contracts (without additional funding) [\[LINK\]](#).
7. Germany: AvH fellows can submit an application to extend their fellowship for up to three months under pandemic-related special regulations. [\[LINK\]](#). DFG provided an automatic extension of 3 months too [\[LINK-1\]](#), [\[LINK-2\]](#).
8. Luxembourg: FNR allowed for cost-neutral extension with the possibility of applying for a paid leave due to “family related reasons in connection with the coronavirus epidemic” [\[LINK\]](#).
9. UK: provided extensions on a case-by-case basis, for PhD extension only for researchers in their last year [\[LINK\]](#).
10. Croatia: the HRZZ (National Science foundation) has put in place different policies:
Ad1. So far, 4 projects were paused due to COVID-19 pandemics which is less than 1% of overall funded projects. More than 10% (58 projects) of project proposals have asked for adjustments of the financial or work plans of projects, mostly extension of project duration and restructuring of the financial plans.
Ad2.- Ad3 The HRZZ allows both no-cost and cost extension. Cost extension can be approved due to the salary of a young researcher (doctoral student or postdoc) employed on the project and these costs can be increased if the duration of the employment is extended. No cost extension can be approved for the duration of 12 months. Financial plan of the project

can be changed, and new costs can be introduced; however overall funding should not be increased. Extension of the duration of the project will be approved within one-month form request submitted by the researcher.

Ad4. The HRZZ provides additional funding via new programmes such as Infectious Diseases Caused by Corona Viruses and the Social and Educational Aspects of the Pandemic launched at March 2020. New COVID-19 programme will be launched in November. [SOURCE: Ms Sandra Milovanović Soldatić Department Head for Scientific Projects and Programmes @HRZZ].

11. The Netherlands: everyone can extend cost-neutral (i.e., no additional funds). 20M EUR have been allocated for scientists (esp. PhDs) in critical situations [\[LINK\]](#). This is unfortunately not extra funding for science and research and thus means less money available in 2021 for the National Science Agenda funding schema (the Dutch Funding Agency NWO has no funding available, which is not already earmarked by the government). The Dutch talent program (i.e. equivalent to the ERC) has softened the application criteria, extension of the application deadlines with 1 extra year) [\[LINK\]](#). Some universities have also made money available for PhDs and PostDocs in critical situations (very dependent on the university how much funding will be available).