



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Cabinet of Commissioner Mariya Gabriel
Head of Cabinet

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Dear Dr Masia,

Thank you for your message of 8 December and your recommendations, which we have carefully reviewed.

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruptions to our societies and economies and adversely affected a large number of people, including MSCA fellows. For this reason, since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, the European Commission has adopted an unprecedented range of flexibility measures aimed at mitigating negative impact of related confinement measures on MSCA researchers.

Recruiting institutions were highly encouraged to continue the research training activities and to pay researchers during their remote work. In addition to their research, researchers could undertake supplementary activities to maximise their future employability by lecturing, or supervising students, as well as by following trainings. MSCA fellows have been encouraged to do desk research, take part in meetings or work on their publications through telework. Therefore, project tasks could be reorganised and postponed.

If researchers agreed, part-time working arrangements were accepted as long as their employment contracts were extended accordingly, to allow them to finalise their work. Researchers could also delay the start of their individual project or be absent for up to 30 consecutive days and still be paid. Hosting institutions were encouraged to use unspent institutional costs to maintain the salary of their researchers during mutually agreed suspension periods (i.e. in case they are prevented from implementing the project due to confinement measures) or could cover these expenses from national or own resources. The Commission allowed projects to continue even when laboratories were closed and researchers could not, due to the nature of their research, work in the host institution premises.

Thus, the Commission allowed MSCA fellows to be paid their salary even if they were not able to perform the planned project activities due to COVID-19-related restrictions or be absent for 30 consecutive days.

All these flexibility measures proposed by the Commission accompany and complement the respective host organisations' duty to care for their employees.

On 11 May 2020, the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) launched a survey to map more comprehensively the impact of COVID-19 on MSCA projects. The survey has

By e-mail: marco.masia@initiative-se.eu

Commission européenne/Europese Commissie, 1049 Bruxelles/Brussel, BELGIQUE/BELGIË - Tel. +32 22991111
Office: J-70 02/158 - Tel. direct line +32 22993925

Claire.MOREL@ec.europa.eu

been publicly available since then. By June 2020, 345 MSCA fellows participated in the survey. The Commission carefully analysed the feedback received from the MCAA and replied to it in writing. In those cases where the researchers indicated that their situation had not been adequately resolved as a result of their contact with REA, the Project Officers were instructed to contact the researcher and the consortium to again explain the flexibility available and to help find an acceptable solution.

Aside from the survey launched by MCAA, REA Project Officers have also been in contact with all MSCA researchers who reported difficulties because of the COVID crisis, and have suggested solutions adapted to their situation.

With respect to the possibility of paid extensions, it should be noted that the Commission is bound by the existing legal framework that does not permit increasing the maximum amount of the grant as stated in the grant agreement. The Financial Regulation allows for awarding a grant without a call for proposals in case of ‘duly substantiated emergencies’. The Commission has been able to increase the budget of a very small number of on-going grants for additional activities whose scope could immediately contribute to the efforts for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. The budget of these grants could only be increased not because they were affected by the COVID-19 situation (as is the case for the MSCA fellowships), but because they were directly looking for solutions to the COVID-19 situation.

In addition, the possibility of paid extension would need to apply to all running MSCA projects as of March 2020 on account of the principle of equal treatment. Consequently, it would not be possible nor adequate to award paid extensions on an individual case-by-case basis. The above-mentioned legal framework is applicable to all Horizon 2020 actions, including the ERC whereby the EU financial contribution to individual projects cannot be raised more than the grant amount stipulated in the grant agreement. It also should be noted that the Commission does not have additional resources at its disposal to satisfy requests for additional budget in view of extending contracts of the researchers involved in the implementation of projects.

In its recent preliminary findings related to complaints made by two MSCA fellows, the European Ombudsman also reaffirmed “that there are budgetary constraints and that any solutions proposed by the Commission to support these researchers have to be made within the legal framework of MSCA grants”.¹

Consequently, the Commission is not in a position to implement your suggestions for the reasons outlined above.

Yours faithfully,

(e-signed)
Adrienn KIRALY

¹ Preliminary findings of the European Ombudsman in the above cases on how the European Commission dealt with the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the work of researchers participating in the EU-funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/correspondence/en/136428>