



Message to the MSCA/REA

An online [petition](#) was launched by [MSCA](#) Fellows on the 23rd of March, which has now raised over 900 signatures. MSCA Fellows are asking the appropriate authorities to take responsibility for their Fellows' well-being and careers, and support them following the leading examples of the FCT, EMBO, and DFG.

The lockdown measures implemented in response to COVID-19 have led to a restructuring of personal lives as well as projects. This has created very challenging situations for many Fellows. A lot of projects heavily depend on laboratory, field, and/or archival work, that all have now been suspended. Central principles of the MSCA, such as training, mobility, and networking, have similarly been affected.

The MSCA first released a public statement on the 13th of March announcing “Consequences for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions” **[1,2]**. An e-mail to MSCA Fellows followed stating that “Projects could also be exceptionally extended, if necessary.” These communications led many to understand that (paid) extension would be a reality. By then, other European funding bodies announced extending the paid periods of their grantees. For example, the [Portuguese FCT](#), the [EMBO](#), and the [German DFG](#) have all openly announced extensions for their PhD or Postdoc fellows of one **[3]**, two **[4]**, and three months **[5]**, respectively (FCT and EMBO with a provision to revise in case the situation changes). Very recently, the Wellcome trust **[6]** and UKRI **[7]** also announced conditional extensions.

In contrast, the MSCA is offering no-cost extensions. Where institutional costs cannot cover salaries in the extension period, this could put Fellows in a position where they are asked to work without a salary, which would be against the [European Charter and Code for Researchers](#). The no-cost extensions have been reiterated by Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, stating that “[...] the maximum grant amount cannot be increased” **[8]**.

Furthermore, the MSCA mobility condition makes Fellows particularly vulnerable to the current situation. While some EU countries have announced measures to mitigate the job loss or interruption related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MSCA/REA must be aware that access to such social benefits are often not accessible to MSCA Fellows due to the mobility condition (having only worked for a brief period in a host country). Furthermore, even when they are accessible, Fellows might find it challenging to understand and navigate a benefits system that they are not familiar with.

Factors not considered in the MSCA/REA response that led to the current petition

While recognising that the MSCA/REA has made the correct decision not to suspend the Fellows' projects (and thus their salaries), the options being offered are, in the Fellows' perspective, inadequate solutions to a serious problem:

1. **Remote working.** Projects currently in a phase that requires lab work, field work, or archival research cannot be pursued through remote working. Also, many Fellows have been home-schooling, sometimes solo-parenting, making any remote working impossible for the past several weeks.
2. **Temporary suspension of the MSCA.** This has some serious implications. Firstly, a temporary suspension effectively equals a temporary salary loss in most cases, as Host Institutions do not have other funds available to cover the Fellow's salary. This is not an option for Fellows that depend on their salaries to pay rent, provide for their families, and meet other financial obligations. Besides, suspensions can in some cases lead to a mutual (temporary) termination of the work contract, often translating into loss of social benefits and/or residency permits, often tied to having a valid job contract as a researcher.
3. **Switching to the minimum work pattern of 50% (with 50% salary).** For financial reasons, this is simply not an option for a number of Fellows. Note in addition that this type of contract is not universally embraced by the institutions that directly employ MSCA Fellows.
4. **Using 'Research, training and networking unit' costs to extend contracts.** This is simply impossible for some projects with budgets that are already tight (resulting in incomplete projects) or that are beyond the point of having such a surplus to re-allocate.

MSCA Fellows ask the MSCA/REA to consider these points when taking measures. Further support is needed in order to maximize the chances for Fellows to pursue their projects and meet the ambition of the work they are doing, as well as to be able to continue their path as researchers. Failure to provide this support may result in loss of delivered projects that have already received considerable amounts of funding, in negative impacts on research continuity including on European priorities and in loss of resources in the form of highly skilled researchers whose research career may be ended prematurely.

About the Marie Curie Alumni Association

The [Marie Curie Alumni Association](#) (MCAA) is a global network with [14,000+ members](#) from over 140 nationalities open to any past or present researchers supported by the [Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions](#) (MSCA). MSCA is one of the European Union's flagship training initiatives and provides research grants supporting researcher's international and intersectoral mobility at all stages of their careers, across all disciplines. MSCA fellowships are among Europe's most prestigious awards, aimed to support the best and most promising researchers.

References

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