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Ms Mariya Gabriel
Commissioner for Innovation, Research,
Culture, Education and Youth
European Commission
Berlaymont
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Extension of the Funding for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship Programme

Dear Commissioner Gabriel,

We hope this letter finds you well and wish you the very best for a full recovery.

Today we are writing you with great concern for the future of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship Programme (MSCA). Over the course of this summer, young academics and researchers repeatedly approached us. Many see their futures threatened by a failure to extend the funding for their MSCA fellowships. These recipients face enormous obstacles due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related shutdowns of laboratories as well as other research facilities. For example, one researcher told us that during the first lockdown, laboratory mice had to be euthanized due to the indefinite closure of the laboratory, prolonging research by six months at minimum.

While the Commission has showed flexibility regarding deadlines for MSCA research projects and has tried to implement a number of ad-hoc fixes within the current budgetary and regulatory framework, the overall issue of a funding shortfall remains. The ad-hoc approach is now exhausted and has not produced satisfactory results for all recipients. An impending second lock-down in many member states will likely only worsen this problem.

This is why today we call for your leadership to embrace solutions to safeguard current and future MSCA funding. We need to empower European high-level researchers to continue to do their important work. It is in the vital interest of the Union that the livelihoods of young academics do not fall victim to the pandemic.

We understand the regulatory and budgetary constraints that the Commission is currently facing. On the regulatory side however, we were pleased to learn that the Commission has enacted an exceptional circumstances clause to enable COVID-19 related research from continuing to receive funding. However, we cannot fathom why in other research areas, i.e. in the field of cancer treatment and diagnosis, such clauses have so far not been enacted. Illnesses like cancer kill millions of our fellow Europeans every year and it would be beyond comprehension to our constituents as to why funding for this vital research should be any less relevant than pandemic-related action.

We therefore propose to enact exceptional circumstances clauses for all Horizon 2020 recipients and thereby show that the EU truly cares about research and researchers. There is no such thing as irrelevant research; all MSCA projects have proven their value to the Union during the application process. This is a vital test for our credibility in the competition with North America and East Asia for the brightest minds of our generation. Regulatory inertia must not stand in the way of keeping the EU attractive as an employer to PhD students and post-doctoral academics.

On the budgetary side, we therefore ask you to explore ways to re-designate unused funding from your Directorate-General or other DG's or seek alternative forms of funding.

While it was unfortunate that you had other matters to attend to during our meeting yesterday, we were encouraged by the commitment of your staff to provide solutions on the budgetary and regulatory problems within the next 14 days. Time is of decisive importance: grants are running out and contracts for researchers are not being prolonged – in some cases they already have run out.

We urge you to work with us and the research community to sustain the MSCA fellowships and support researchers in this exceptional time.

Respectfully yours,



Sven Simon



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