

26 April 2020



## HUNGARIAN YOUNG ACADEMY

### Difficulties of young researchers under Covid-19 crisis

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has overturned the life of the whole world. Its sanitary and economic consequences are unpredictable. In addition to health workers, the **role of researchers is gaining more and more importance in tackling the crisis and in the search for solutions. Both public opinion and decision-makers expect them to provide reliable information, forecasts and support in the efficient control of the disease.** Jointly with the Communication Department of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the [Hungarian Young Academy](#) (HYA) organized a [Workshop on Science Communication](#) on 5, February, 2020, where HYA actively contributed to disseminating authentic information on coronavirus, and it also translated and published the pandemic-related [Statement of the Global Young Academy](#). Some HYA members and their laboratories take part in [massive coronavirus testing](#) while other members contribute to the fight [on the frontlines as doctors](#).

In the current situation young researchers face some specific challenges that we, as members of the HYA and its board, would like to point out and to recommend to the attention of decision-makers. Some of these difficulties are not linked to age, others hit only those with small children. However, **due to the particular vulnerability of their career situation, young researchers are increasingly exposed to the threatening changes of the economy and the labour market.**

1/ Some researchers working on a contractual/tenure-track basis of fixed duration are **finding themselves in an existentially uncertain situation.** From April onwards, their employers extend the existing contracts only for a duration of one month. There are institutions that limit the conclusion of contracts or link it to some specific permission procedure in order to preserve their liquidity, even if these contracts would be covered from resources independent from the central budget of the given institutions (e.g. grant resources).

2/ **Access to research resources as well as the activities of the participants are limited**, which hinders research work. Therefore the execution of the objectives undertaken in the applications is difficult from several points of view.

- BSc and MSc students taking part in the work are not allowed to enter the university buildings. Even the **work** of PhD students and young researchers **is hindered** because of the quarantine, primarily as far as researchers with small children are concerned.

- **Experiments requiring human contacts** between researchers and participants **had to be stopped fully** (with the exception of pandemic-related medical experiments). This is evidently another hindering factor.

- In several institutions **acquisitions** related to the research that should be covered from grant resources **have also been blocked or limited**. This means that the implementation and the planning of some experiments meets financial obstacles.

- **Study trips** (including those to international instrument core facilities), **research in libraries and archives, field trips** as well as **conferences** and workshops serving the dissemination of scientific information and achievements **have been cancelled** or indefinitely postponed worldwide.

- Blocking acquisitions and travels **in the case of projects ending in 2020 can impede the utilisation of the awarded resources** before the end of the project.

- **Transition to digital distance teaching requires extreme additional workload** from university teachers (preparation of new digital teaching materials, videos, auxiliary materials, exam modules for new digital platforms – in addition to giving online lectures).

- As for families with small children, and similarly to other workers amid this crisis, **child care, catering, and managing the children's digital learning constitutes also an important overload for young researchers** working from home on their research and teaching duties, particularly **for female researchers and those bringing up their children alone**. This middle generation is also taking care of the elderly family members (i.e. by shopping for them). All these cumulative tasks of young researchers impose irrational expectations and further increase stress. The effect of this phenomenon can be clearly seen on the **reduction of the number of manuscripts submitted by female academics** in certain areas during the pandemic.

We appreciate that with the agreement of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology the National Office for Research, Development and Innovation (Hungary) **has extended the deadline of the utilisation of the resources** in the case of several project proposals until the end of 2020. In other cases, the deadline of the utilisation of the resources **has been extended** until the end of the emergency period. Similar steps have been taken in the case of some projects run by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and the European Union (ERC) – the importance of such measures **has been highlighted** by the members of the **Young Academy of Europe**. As for the United States of America, the tenure-track reviews made by commissions in order to evaluate the career of young researchers and to make recommendations concerning their appointment for permanent positions have typically also been postponed for one year. This step also shows that in the current situation the professional development and the career-building activities of researchers are obviously unsustainable in the former rhythm.

Considering all this, within the context of the current pandemic, **we request the funding agencies and also the decision-makers to kindly enable the extension of the implementation deadline of the projects.** We would also like to ask for **information about any changes concerning the timing of the evaluation or the announcement of the winners** in the case of project proposals submitted in the first quarter of 2020.

We think that governmental measures should consider the difficulties of young researchers working in the research sector, and in addition to supporting the economic and innovation sector, they should **pay particular attention to the support of young researchers constituting the foundations of basic research and to the preservation of their jobs.** Our present experience shows that they constitute the intellectual and innovation potential the country can count upon in a crisis situation.

The HYA is a bottom-up scientific society operating in harmony with the public tasks of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS). Its objectives include cooperation with the bodies of the HAS, participation in the scientific activities of HAS and the representation of the community of Hungarian young researchers in Hungary and abroad. Its activities seek to promote the professional development of young researchers as well as the strengthening of the relations between research workers and society.