

## Challenges that ECRs are facing during the Covid-19 pandemic – the report for Slovenia

This report is based on the experience of the Management Board and Supervisory Board of the Young Academy of Slovenia, as well as of 8 members of the society who responded to our call to share their views on the situation.

### 1) What are the main issues the Early-Career Researchers are facing right now?

Before listing the issues, we would like to emphasize that most Slovenian research institutions took good care of their staff, including early-career researchers. In general, Slovenian research institutions promptly reacted to the situation and quickly organized work from home, including setting up remote access to the institutional intranet and lending laptops to staff limited to office workstations. The institutions kept their staff and students well-informed with regular updates on the situation. The access to the institutions was generally not completely prohibited but instead organized on a pre-arranged schedule with flexible working time and, in some cases, through rotation or shift work. This included specific infrastructure such as large, multi-owner research equipment, libraries, and institutionally owned agricultural facilities. Industrial collaborations mostly proceeded without interruption to minimize the loss of income. The institutions also provided their staff with face masks and hand sanitizer.

Some respondents emphasized that working from home brought advantages such as improved work/life balance, improved productivity (otherwise affected by cramped office spaces), and saving time otherwise spent on commute. It is worth noting that the experience of working parents was completely opposite, as will be detailed below.

As of May 14, our government declared the official end of the Covid-19 epidemic in Slovenia. Many research institutions have since been loosening the restrictions and are by now operating almost normally, while others decided to prolong the restrictions by the end of June.

The issues reported by our respondents are as follows:

- being cut from fieldwork for various reasons (institutional restrictions, municipal and state border closures, interruption of the studied subjects' activities);
- fearing that a crucial part of research data has been lost;
- uncertainty whether the Slovenian Research Agency will compensate its [Young Researchers](#) for this interruption of research activities by an extension of funding and/or the deadlines for progression through the doctoral program and thesis defence;

- working parents were struggling with combining work and daycare of young children (as all kindergartens and schools were closed), especially those working on short-term projects that could not be put on hold;
- some researchers, mostly working parents, missed progression deadlines of already acquired research projects as well as the deadlines for applying for new projects, therefore jeopardizing future funding;
- one respondent with three children reported that her partner, a freelancer, lost all his income during the lockdown because he stepped in and helped her with childcare and household chores;
- working parents were feeling overloaded, exhausted and burned out;
- researchers who are employed as university teachers report difficulties with teaching labs (which cannot be learned only theoretically), being overburdened after loosening of the restrictions because they want to catch up on missed research whilst teaching, and having to carry out the experiments for undergrad students who are restricted from accessing university facilities for their BSc and MSc thesis research;
- decreased concentration, discipline and productivity when working from home, especially in the first few weeks of lockdown when the respondents spent most of their time following news outlets;
- negative effects of working from home on mental health (low mood, trouble sleeping), breakdown of the daily biorhythm, and restricted possibilities of physical exercise;
- fearing job loss after the pandemic.

## 2) What are the main concerns of your National Association?

The main concern of The Young Academy of Slovenia is that our current government and policymakers will respond to the post-Covid-19 economic crisis by undertaking similar austerity measures as they did in the period of 2011–2016, when the most affected sectors were science and culture. With [drastic R&D budget cuts](#) on top of already [below-average government budget appropriations or outlays on R&D](#) in that period, Slovenian science experienced a blow it still has not recovered from. With potential repeat R&D budget cuts, Slovenian science risks further regression both nationally (relative to the most prosperous year in the history of Slovenian independence, 2010) as well as internationally (relative to those European countries that recently announced [increased government spending for R&D in the next few years](#), such as Germany, France, and Spain). As we learned during the post-2009 recession, this means layoffs, increased unemployment of recent PhD graduates, increased precarity, aging of research equipment, brain drain, reduced international competitiveness, and a negative effect on economic development. This fear was most pronounced by our

respondents from social sciences and humanities, who are often considered redundant by politicians and a part of the STEM community.

Our second greatest concern is that the Slovenian Research Agency will again postpone the results of the yearly national project tender. The Slovenian Research Agency is notorious for not adhering to its own schedule, and rumour has it that the results of this year's call, which are scheduled to be announced in June, will be postponed for at least 6 months. Effectively, this means that those researchers who lack stable funding and depend on projects for their survival in academia will be deprived of at least 6-month worth of funds. This includes early-career researchers, who can contend for either postdoctoral (up to 3 years post-PhD) or early-career (3–10 years post-PhD) research grants. The same situation happened in 2012, when the results of the 2011 project tender were announced in 2013 instead of in 2012 and Slovenian academia was deprived of 1-year worth of project funds.

Several of our respondents expressed concern that the epidemic would return in the form of a second wave and the lockdown would have to be repeated, which would severely affect scheduled working on research projects, applying for new funding, access to research facilities, fieldwork, and university teaching.

### **3) What Eurodoc can do (at the European level) ?**

The greatest role that Eurodoc can play is to prepare a Europe-wide overview of good and bad practices regarding the response of research and higher education institutions to the Covid-19 pandemic and, based on this overview, recommendations for improvement. In our experience, a top-down approach is usually more effective than a bottom-up approach; so, at least in Slovenia, we believe that any appeal that our National Association may address to the Slovenian Research Agency and research institutions will be considered better founded and more justified if supported by Eurodoc's data and recommendations.

### **4) What are the main challenges to collect these 3 pieces of information?**

The members of the Management Board and Supervisory Board of the Young Academy of Slovenia regularly find that our members are afraid of expressing their views, not only publicly but also by sharing them with us, their representatives. They are afraid of retaliation from their supervisors, bosses, and other superiors higher up the academic hierarchy, such as the members of scientific councils who handle their appointment and promotion requests, for expressing even the slightest disagreement with current practices – and, in our experience, justifiably so. This is reflected in the meagre response to our call for opinions regarding the Covid-19 consequences, which we sent to over 1000 researchers subscribed to our mailing list – only 8 replied. Luckily, the responses of these 8 individuals were substantial enough that we were able to prepare a well-supported report.

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In the name of the Young Academy of Slovenia:

dr. Tea Romih, President

