

UK Research and Innovation,  
58 Victoria Embankment,  
London,  
EC4Y 0DS,

Sent via email

18 March 2020

Dear Sir Mark and Sir John,

I write to you today to let you know that our universities are absolutely committed to national efforts to address the threat posed by the COVID-19 virus, but also to highlight the challenges this crisis is posing to our research system, and to ask for your help in addressing some of these issues.

Our contribution to national efforts include the release of clinical academic staff to support frontline NHS services, the rapid ramping up of COVID-19 research activity and the provision of direct scientific advice to the Government on containment and other measures. Many of our universities are leading the UK's efforts to rapidly roll-out clinical trials for a vaccine and we will continue to prioritise these efforts, even as university activity is wound down or obliged to move to remote working.

As noted by UKRI, this is a continuously developing situation. Our universities have moved swiftly to prioritise activity in support of Government efforts, even as other vital research activity has had to be delayed or postponed. Professional support services are also predominantly moving to 'at home' working, which is reducing their ability to provide the support needed in the grant administration process.

This situation is likely to continue for many months. It will of course impact the delivery of research outputs, reporting and other activity. But more importantly, it is likely to be severely disruptive to the careers and training of the people who underpin the UK's research base.

We write now to ask **UKRI to urgently prioritise the needs of this workforce**. We understand that UKRI has indicated it will cover some additional travel costs where this is impacted; UKRI and other funders have indicated no-cost extensions to grants will also be allowed. Given the scale of the impact of COVID-19, neither of these responses will be sufficient over the next 12 months.

Staff on fixed-term contracts funded by UKRI's Councils, in particular early careers researchers, and PhD candidates supported by Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) will be reliant on UKRI funding over the coming months, even as their research is disrupted or staff are required to go on sick leave or enter self-isolation. This is a period of significant anxiety for these staff and students. Whilst our universities are of course seeking to support staff and student stipend costs (and indeed already cover the indirect costs of research), given the volume of research activity

*Continued...*

The Russell Group of Universities  
One Great George Street  
London SW1P 3AA  
T +44 (0)20 3816 1300  
russellgroup.ac.uk

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undertaken by our institutions, our members are unlikely to be able to bridge these gaps on their own, especially as Research Council funding meets only 72% of full economic costs. In the immediate future, our universities are likely to be further impacted financially by the delay or withdrawal of international students from our institutions.

Given the importance of research talent to the UK's ambitions for future growth and prosperity, **we suggest an emergency fund be launched by UKRI to cover the salaries of staff, stipends and other research costs during this period.** This fund could draw on those monies already set aside for R&D by HM Treasury at this month's Budget Statement.

Given the additional pressures on UKRI at this time, the mechanism for distributing this emergency funding should be kept simple and easily scalable. Within England, we suggest funds be released through the mechanism used to distribute QR funding. For the devolved nations, a release of funds from UKRI could be distributed to institutions directly, or via the relevant funding council. We would be happy to work with UKRI in estimating the additional costs that are likely to be incurred and would like to extend an offer to meet with your team to help them in considering responses to this unprecedented situation. Whilst there are other others with regard to UKRI funding, including around extending expenditure into the new financial year, we will take these up with Emma and Isobel separately and will work with them to find a mutually agreeable solution.

We hope you will agree that action is needed now to ensure the long-term sustainability of the UK's research base. We welcome UKRI's recent statement on its commitment to the safety and welfare of our staff, and hope we have put forward a solution which will enable us to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of these teams at this crucial time. Thank you for considering this urgent matter which we would be happy to discuss further.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Tim Bradshaw  
**Chief Executive, Russell Group**

Cc: Susan Moore  
Isobel Stephen  
Emma Lindsell