

# How research funders are tackling coronavirus disruption

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As lockdowns force scientists worldwide to put their research on hold, funders are introducing measures to minimize stress.

**Emma Stoye**

While science is crucial to the fight against COVID-19, researchers confined to their homes and unable to carry on with grant-funded work are becoming increasingly concerned about how the coronavirus pandemic will affect their funding.

The disruption — such as the closure of labs and universities — means researchers face challenges in completing projects by their deadlines and might struggle to pay lab members when grants run out.

“If this situation lasts for more than two to three months it will be impossible to finish the projects on time,” says Juan Astorga-Wells, a biochemist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. He is involved in two projects supported by grants from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research programme, with collaborators in four EU countries. “This is problematic, since most salaries and materials are being paid for using these grants.”

The increasingly likely prospect of a long-term economic downturn also means science funding could face longer-term impacts, says Mark Harrison, research director at the Borneo Nature Foundation, which conducts ecological research in Indonesia. That could reduce the amount of funding from direct donations as well as government and charitable grants, says Harrison.

*Nature* spoke to the world’s major research funders to find out how they are adapting their funding policies in response to the pandemic.

**Horizon 2020**

Researchers funded by the European Union's flagship research programme will be allowed "maximum flexibility", according to [guidance released in mid-March](#). Researchers can ask to extend the duration of Horizon 2020-funded projects by up to six months, and are allowed to reallocate funds budgeted for research, training and networking to meet the costs of working remotely, or to help pay the salaries of researchers who are unable to continue with experiments because of lockdowns or lab closures.

Projects can also be reoriented towards research on COVID-19 or coronaviruses — requests will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Christian Ehler, a member of the European Parliament who is involved in coordinating research policy, told *Nature* that the [deadlines for all open funding calls](#) in Horizon 2020 have been extended.

In addition, the EU is funding several new research projects related to the pandemic.

## **US National Science Foundation (NSF)**

The NSF says it will process daily grant payments to recipients without interruption during the pandemic.

On 19 March, the funder introduced a [series of measures to provide "administrative relief" to researchers affected by COVID-19](#). These include extensions to due dates for project reports, and the ability to charge costs to grants that would not normally be allowed — such as when events and travel are cancelled, or research activities have to be paused and restarted.

Recipients can apply for no-cost extensions to their grants following the normal procedure, and some [deadlines for submitting proposals](#) have been extended.

The NSF is also accepting proposals for new non-clinical research aimed at understanding the SARS-CoV-2 virus and developing strategies to respond to the pandemic.

## **US National Institutes of Health (NIH)**

The NIH is implementing [similar measures](#) to the NSF.

It says that institutions affected by COVID-19 can continue to provide stipend payments to fellows and trainees who may be unable to work as a result of COVID-19. It will also be "highly accommodating" of late grant applications submitted until 1 May, and recognizes that the situation will lead to unavoidable delays in submitting progress reports.

Where plans for active research projects are disrupted, the period covered by the grant can be extended for up to 12 months beyond the original completion date.

Non-refundable costs associated with grant-related travel that has been cancelled because of COVID-19 can be paid for by the NIH award if they would have otherwise been allowable.

## **US Department of Energy (DOE)**

In a [13 March statement](#), the DOE said that it will consider requests for extensions to grant applications, letters of intent and progress reports if the lead principal investigator or the applicant's institution are subject to a quarantine or closure.

Researchers do not require approval if they need to reallocate funds because of meeting cancellations or changes to travel plans.

## **NASA**

Like other agencies, NASA is open to the possibility of extending grants if research has been disrupted by the pandemic.

"We know that progress on funded research may slow and in some cases even stop due to necessary telework implemented by universities, for example and other research institutions," said Thomas Zurbuchen, associate administrator of NASA's Science Mission Directorate, during a [virtual town hall meeting](#) on 20 March. "We're looking at shifting some due dates and implementing a lenient 'late' policy on a case-to-case basis. We want to serve the community the best way we can, encouraging all of you to continue to pay graduate students, post-docs and lab staff." [Due dates for various funding proposals](#) have also been extended.

"While we know this situation presents a number of difficulties for our missions, we are confident there is no team better prepared for doing hard

things,” NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine said in a [statement](#) on 18 March. “Teams across the agency are well-practiced in responding to mission contingencies and reacting to unforeseen challenges.”

## **UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)**

“During the coronavirus pandemic, UKRI has two priorities: the safety and wellbeing of our workforce and, as far as possible, the continuation of our business as a national funder of research and innovation,” UKRI chief executive Mark Walport said in a statement on 23 March. UKRI is working to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and plans to continue its funding programmes. It will also identify specific calls for funding or research disciplines that might be affected by the pandemic.

In [online guidance](#) for grant recipients, it says deadlines for funding calls will be reviewed and extended if required. It also says it plans to allow no-cost extensions to existing grants where work has been disrupted by institution closures or social-distancing measures.

On 9 April, UKRI announced that final-year PhD students it funds whose work has been affected by the pandemic will be given [costed extensions](#) — an extra six months and additional funding to complete their research.

UKRI has put out a [rapid-response call for coronavirus-related research proposals](#), with £20 million (US\$25 million) in funding available. It has also issued guidance for researchers who want to repurpose their grant funds to focus on studying COVID-19.

## **UK Royal Society**

A [statement on the society’s website](#) says it will aim to minimize the effect of the coronavirus on funded activities and that it will provide “pragmatic support” to researchers who are funded by one of its fellowships or grants. It is working with institutions and the UK government to ensure that appropriate support is in place. Funding programmes and calls remain open for applications, without changes to deadlines, interview dates or decision dates.

## **Wellcome**

The UK biomedical-research charity says [it will support scientists it funds](#) who are unwell, need to self-isolate or have caring responsibilities for someone affected by COVID-19. It will supplement grants for the cost incurred by a

researcher's employer paying their salary while they're away, minus any recoverable statutory pay.

For grants due to end between 1 March and 31 December this year, Wellcome says it will provide an extra six months' funding for staff salaries and PhD stipends. For grants due to end in 2021, it will provide an extra three months' funding.

It will also pay the running costs and salaries of anyone employed on a grant, as well as extending the grant, if a grant holder is called away to work on the coronavirus response for a month or more — for example, if clinicians are drafted in to assist the National Health Service.

Wellcome-funded researchers who have incurred costs for an event or travel which has been cancelled can claim these costs against their grant if they can't be reimbursed or claimed for under insurance. The charity also says that all of its funding schemes and calls remain open for applications. It has extended the deadlines by one week for any schemes with an application deadline up to the end of April 2020, but won't consider requests to extend deadlines further. All other application, shortlisting, interview and decision dates will not change.

## **Cancer Research UK**

The UK-based cancer-research charity will [offer increased flexibility](#) to researchers it funds, to minimize the impacts of institution closures or clinicians being redeployed. Recipients can delay the start of their grant by up to six months, or apply for a no-cost extension. And researchers are free to reallocate funds where there is underspending — for example money that would have been spent on travel could be used to cover other costs incurred as a result of the pandemic.

Grants can be used to fund paid sick leave when staff or students are unwell, self-isolating or caring for someone affected by COVID-19.

## **Australian Research Council (ARC)**

The agency says its [grant guidelines already allow applications to be submitted late](#) in exceptional circumstances, which would cover coronavirus disruption. It also says that grant agreements allow for variations to research projects if circumstances change after the grant has been made.

“Should you need to vary your research, to either seek an extension or change its scope, we can do that later in the year when there is a more complete understanding of the impact,” said the ARC’s chief executive officer Sue Thomas in an [open letter to researchers](#) on 23 March. “Researchers will be affected in different ways by the ongoing events and we wish to assure you that we will approach any extensions with understanding.”

The letter also stated that the ARC has extended the closing dates for applications to some schemes, and that it is looking at ways to minimise the administration of projects. Three-month extensions to the submission of final reports will be automatically granted on request to researchers who have been directly affected by the pandemic.

## **German Research Foundation (DFG)**

The DFG says it wants its funding activities to [continue as smoothly as possible](#).

If projects are interrupted, DFG-funded scientists can transfer 2020 grant money to 2021 without paperwork. They can also ask for extra support to cover costs that arise from projects being delayed or derailed, for example staff salaries or cancellation fees.

## **French National Agency for Research (ANR)**

[Deadlines for a number of funding proposals](#) have been extended. Following a ‘[flash call](#)’ for proposals and a streamlined application process, the ANR has awarded funding for 44 urgent new research projects related to COVID-19.

And on 19 March, the French government announced that it will increase its research budget by €5 billion (US\$5.4 billion) over the next ten years. One-fifth of this will go to healthcare research to prepare for future outbreaks. It will also contribute €50 million to an emergency fund for coronavirus vaccine research.

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