

24 March 2020

Sir Mark Walport

Chief executive

UK Research and Innovation

Polaris House

Swindon

SN2 1FL

Dear Sir Mark,

On behalf of the University and College Union (UCU), I am writing to you about the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the UK research community, particularly with respect to fixed-term and early career research staff.

In the current situation the number one priority is the safety of the UK research workforce and, as a result, this has required changes to current funding policies and procedures. For example, we welcome the fact that UKRI is reviewing your call deadlines and considering extending or reopening calls in light of the impact of COVID-19. We strongly encourage you to adopt a flexible approach not only in respect to grant applicants but also for grantholders (for example, in relaxing current reporting rules).

Above all, the current disruption and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 is having a detrimental impact on the health, well-being and economic security of UK research staff. As in other sectors of the economy, the impact on precariously-employed workers remains a major concern to UCU as well as others in the higher education and research community. For example, in her recent advice to the sector on COVID-19, the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, Amanda Solloway MP has highlighted the fact that *"some researchers will be concerned about the delivery of their projects and about their employment terms and conditions in the short and medium term, particularly where research projects may not complete in the expected timescale"*. Similarly, the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan MP has called on higher education institutions to *"consider the impact of short-term and casual contracts, as well as those employed by outsourced services, on staff at this time."*

Additional government funding will be required to extend current research grants and guarantee the incomes of fixed-term researchers at their current level during this unprecedented crisis. At the same time, UKRI and other research funders have a key

role to play in supporting the continuing employment of precariously-employed researchers over this period. For example, one of the practical ways for research funders to support early career researchers and fixed term contract staff would be to enable Principal Investigators to redeploy any unspent direct costs such as on travel, conferences and workshops to extend researcher's fixed-term contracts during this current period. We believe that a more flexible policy in this area would offer some additional security to fixed-term researchers, particularly given the likely disruption to new funding sources over the coming months.

UCU, therefore, calls on UKRI to work with higher education sector and the Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy and other government departments to ensure the increased retention of fixed-term researchers during the COVID-19 crisis.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly informal style.

Jo Grady

General Secretary