



EUROPEAN RESEARCH EXECUTIVE AGENCY (REA)

REA.A - Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions & Support to Experts  
**Head of Department**

# **COVID-19 questionnaire for the MSCA beneficiaries**

**Analysis  
June 2021**

The **European Research Executive Agency (REA)** launched the **COVID-19 questionnaire** on 29 January 2021 with a deadline on 21 February 2021. It was sent to all MSCA coordinators<sup>1</sup> whose projects were running in January 2021. Coordinators have been asked to also forward the questionnaire to their current MSCA project beneficiaries.

The main aim of the questionnaire was to learn more about the difficulties that the institutions managing the MSCA projects have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to find out whether the measures taken so far by the European Commission (EC) / REA have been sufficient in order to ensure appropriate support in any similar future situations.

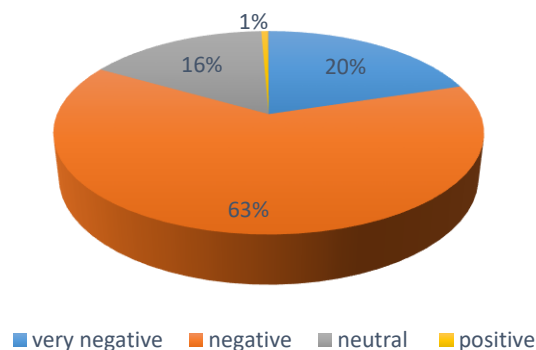
This questionnaire is part of REA's continuous engagement with the project coordinators / beneficiaries in the framework of the project monitoring process.

The questionnaire contained eight questions. By 23 February 2021, **2548 beneficiaries<sup>2</sup> had replied to the questionnaire**. The results of the survey are presented below.

### Question 1

*From your experience, what impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on the results of your MSCA research project?*

*Impact of COVID-19 on MSCA project*



The majority of beneficiaries - 83% responded that the COVID-19 pandemic had negative or very negative impact on their MSCA project.

### Question 2

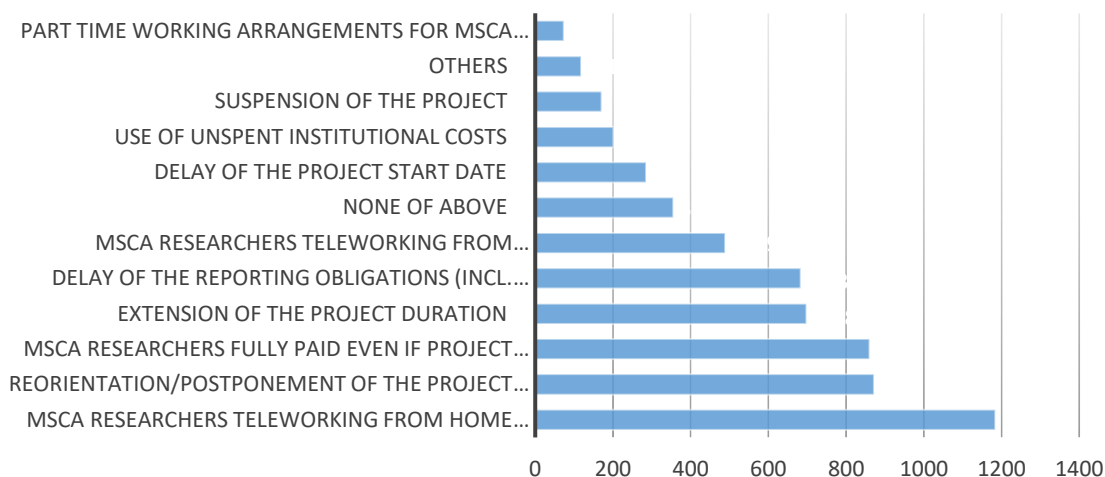
*Due to legal and financial constraints, there is no possibility to increase the maximum grant amount under the Horizon 2020 framework. Therefore, the European*

<sup>1</sup> The contractual obligation is between REA and the coordinators only

<sup>2</sup> Please note that beneficiaries may have filled in the questionnaire more than once, due to their involvement in different MSCA.

*Commission / REA have put in place a wide range of ad-hoc flexible measures to address requests from the beneficiaries and researchers / staff members of the MSCA. Have you made use of these flexible measures in the framework of your MSCA project and if so, which ones?*

#### *Use of flexible measure offered by EC/REA*



When responding to this question, the beneficiaries were able to select more than one option. 46.5% of all respondents reported that their MSCA researchers opted for *teleworking from home (at country of Host institution) instead of the Host institution premises*, and 20% of all respondents replied that their MSCA researchers were *teleworking from a different country*. The use of the telework option was thus extensively used by researchers to continue their research while confinement measures were imposed. In addition, 33.8% of beneficiaries responded that their *MSCA researcher(s) was (were) fully paid even if they were not able to work and their project could not continue as planned*<sup>3</sup>.

Almost 35% of respondents used the *possibility of reorientation and/or postponement of the project activities*. Two options - *Delay of reporting obligation (including deliverables and report)* as well as *Extension of the project duration* were used by close to 27% of beneficiaries. *Delay in the project start date* was chosen by more than 11% of all respondents. Almost 8% of beneficiaries used *unspent institutional costs to support their MSCA researchers*. Nearly 7% of beneficiaries used the *Suspension of project* option whereas 3% opted for introducing *part-time working arrangements for their MSCA researcher(s)*.

It must be noted that almost 14% of all respondents replied that they had not used any of those options. From the comments provided by this group, many beneficiaries stated that the flexibility measures were not needed as they were still able to access their laboratories or/and work premises, albeit for a reduced time, or because their project had just started.

<sup>3</sup> These three options were applicable only to ITN, IF and COFUND researchers.

Several RISE beneficiaries reported that the possibility of virtual secondments would be very useful in such a situation, as they would allow the RISE researchers to finalise their work that was started before pandemic.

However, since physical secondments are the core activity of the action, online secondments are not possible. In addition, the top-up allowance comprising travel, accommodation, and subsistence costs is linked to the physical staff exchange<sup>4</sup>.

Others reported that the research part of the project is running well, but specifically the secondment obligations are impossible to fulfil, as these involve travelling. For the training obligations, the online formats were extensively used and were considered appropriate. However, for actual secondments the online format is not an option.

Some beneficiaries reported that their researchers did their best to adapt to the circumstances, including adjusting their individual research plans. Other respondents reported that researchers were encouraged to follow training in soft skills. However, not all training opportunities are available online and if they are, they are not always as effective as live trainings. Some others reported that the face-to-face contact that is a standard during the meetings between project beneficiaries and between MSCA researchers themselves was very much missed in this period.

There were many positive comments, noting that all MSCA researchers did their best mixing remote and in situ work, (when possible) with very good results in terms of papers published and work carried out. The "flexibility" offered by the EC/REA was considered as the key element.

Some project coordinators reported that the researchers could not start their work on time due to the delays in visa applications.

Several beneficiaries mentioned that although the option of project extension without increasing a maximum grant amount has not yet been used, they are planning to request it towards the end of the project, when the length of the needed extension becomes clearer.

In 15 cases (0.6% of all respondents) beneficiaries were dissatisfied with the fact that paid extensions were not possible and noted that they were necessary for researchers to finalise their work.

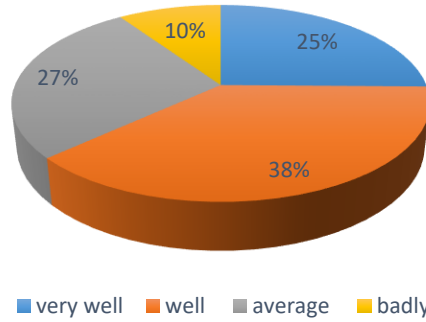
### Question 3

*These measures, listed in Q2, aimed to offer as much flexibility as possible in the implementation of MSCA projects. How do you rate the communication and the overall support provided by REA to the project coordinators in this respect?*

---

<sup>4</sup> With regards to this comment, it is to be noted that the unit cost structure of RISE action does not allow to continue payments when no secondments can be executed. The salary of the RISE researchers is not covered by the MSCA grant (unlike ITN, IF or COFUND researchers), only the travel and subsistence costs are covered during the secondment. Without a physical travelling no travel and subsistence costs could have been charged to the project and therefore virtual secondments would not be legally possible.

### *Communication and overall support to the coordinators*



63% of respondents replied that the flexibility measures have been communicated well or very well. This group of respondents reported that the communication was timely and appropriate, and that the project officers were very supportive.

27% of beneficiaries rated communication about the measures as average. From this group a high number of respondents signalled in their comments that they are not directly involved in the communication with REA since they are not the project coordinator.

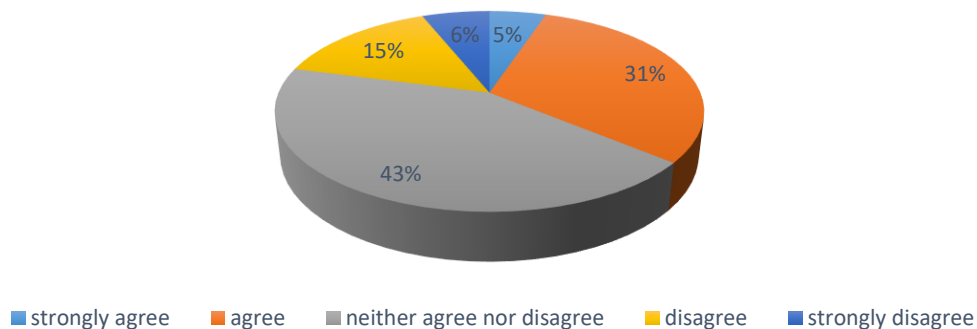
In several cases, the respondents noted that their projects had started after the summer in 2020 and they did not receive sufficient information. This suggests that there is a need for a more frequent communication on possible measures to promptly inform all newly started projects.

10% of the respondents rated the communication as not good and mentioned in their comments weaknesses in the information communicated by the project coordinator or by REA. In 11 cases, beneficiaries reiterated their wish to receive additional funding for their MSCA researchers.

### **Question 4**

*These measures have also been published in the form of FAQs on the Funding and Tenders Portal as of April 2020 and have been communicated to the National Contact Points (NCPs). Do you consider that this communication has been effective?*

### *FAQs and NCP support as affective measure*



36% of all respondents strongly agreed or agreed that FAQs as well as communication through the NCPs were effective means of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. 43% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

21% disagreed or strongly disagreed that these communication channels have been effective. The majority of these respondents commented that they were not aware of the FAQs as they do not have direct contact with the responsible REA project officer and they had not been properly informed by the coordinator. Many of these respondents considered that the FAQs were not a sufficiently effective tool of communication during the pandemic.

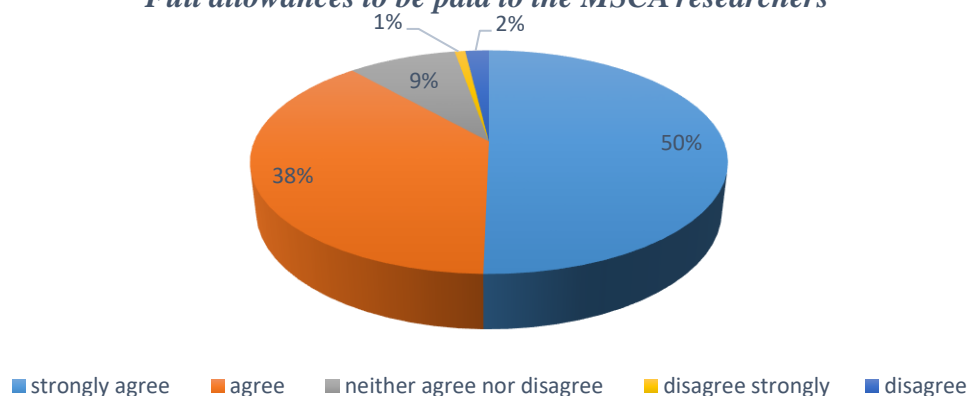
Several beneficiaries noted that they had been adequately informed by the NCP in their home country while around 4% of the comments suggested that a more active support from the NCPs would have been appreciated.

### Question 5

*The next question was applicable only to ITN, IF and COFUND:*

*In order to ensure the well-being of MSCA researchers in this difficult situation, the Commission/REA clarified at an early stage that all MSCA researchers must be fully paid, even during those periods where their projects could not progress as planned and/or if they could not access their institution's premises. Do you consider these measures appropriate?*

*Full allowances to be paid to the MSCA researchers*



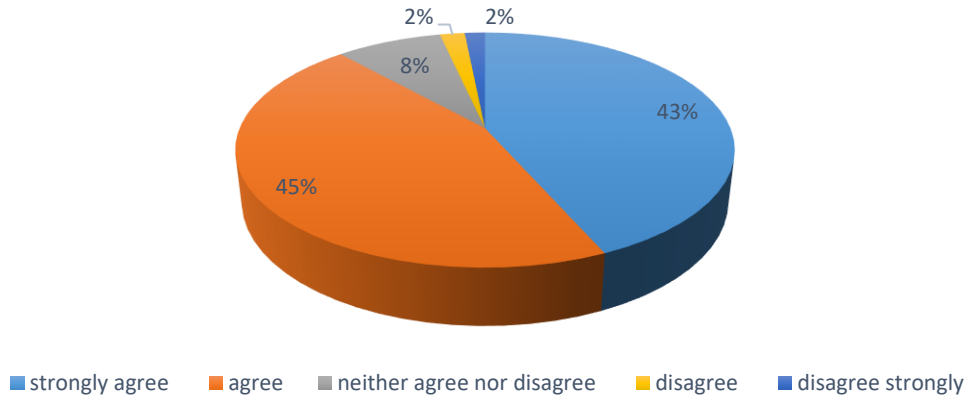
88% of all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the payment of the full MSCA allowances was an appropriate measure in cases where the researchers' work was partially or fully disrupted due to the confinement measures, including not having access to the premises.

3% of the respondents did not consider this measure as appropriate and out of them less than 1% of the respondents noted in their comments that additional financial support would have been the only appropriate way to respond to this situation.

### Question 6

*MSCA projects were informed that they would not be penalised in those cases where certain deliverables/milestones could not be achieved due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Do you consider these measures to be appropriate and sufficient?*

*No penalisation for not achieved deliverables and results*



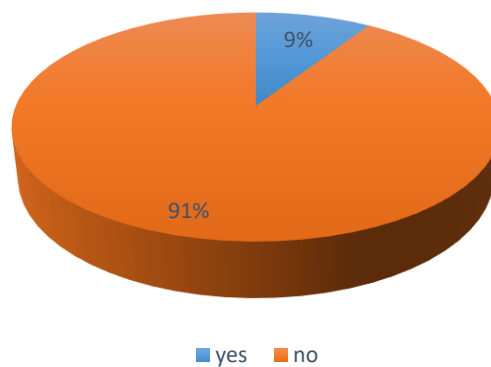
88% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that this was an appropriate and sufficient measure, 8% neither agreed nor disagreed and 4% of beneficiaries disagreed with the appropriateness of this measure.

Several RISE participants noted that virtual secondments would have helped them to finalise the work on the project, however, as stated earlier, the virtual secondments are not possible. Some of them mentioned that while this measure is appropriate, it was not sufficient. As in the previous case, 15 respondents (less than 1%) said that the paid extension would be the only appropriate option for the MSCA researchers even if they were fully paid and they would not be penalised for not achieving their project goals.

### Question 7

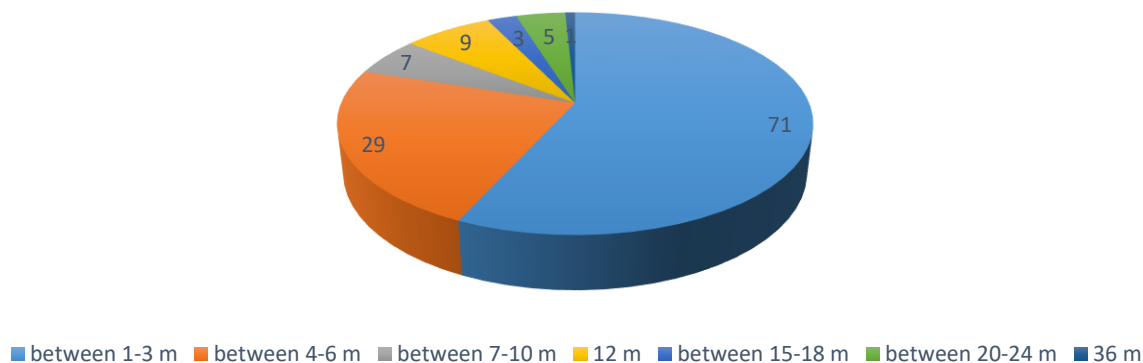
*Was your organisation able to provide any additional financial support from other sources to complement the MSCA funding during the pandemic period?*

*Financial support from other sources*



91% of all respondents were not able to provide any additional financial support from other resources to their MSCA researchers. 9% beneficiaries responded that they were able to find additional funding for the MSCA fellows to cover different periods of time:

*Length of additional financial support  
(in months)*

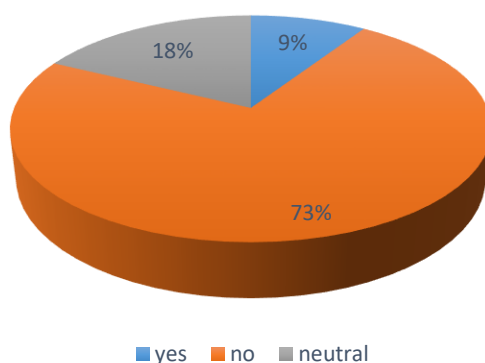


Out of 124 cases that provided details regarding the length of the additional financial support (see the above chart), 70 beneficiaries reported that they were able to support the researchers with an additional amount ranging from 1000 Euro and the amount corresponding to the full monthly allowance specified in the Work Programme. The remaining respondents were able to provide much lower amounts that were limited to ad-hoc payment for internet, travel, food, etc<sup>5</sup>.

**Question 8**

*We are fully aware that the COVID situation may have had a very negative impact on the daily lives and research work of MSCA researchers. Do you believe that it has created a situation whereby MSCA researchers have been treated differently when compared to other (i.e. non-MSCA) researchers at your institution?*

*MSCA researchers treated differently*



<sup>5</sup> The pie chart shows one case supporting researcher from other resources for the entire duration of the fellowship 36 months, regardless the pandemic length.



73% of the respondents reported that the MSCA researchers were not treated differently during the COVID-19 period compared to other non-MSCA researchers in their institutions.

Only 9% (233 beneficiaries) reported that their MSCA fellows were treated differently (either more or less favourably). Part of these beneficiaries, representing 6% of all the respondents, considered that MSCA researchers were treated less favourably compared to other non-MSCA researcher at their institutions. In several cases, they commented that the difference in treatment was due to local PhD researchers/post-docs being eligible for additional funding from national funding agencies, whereas MSCA researchers were not eligible for this funding. Others noted that MSCA researchers did not have an automatic access to all the institutional facilities while local researchers did. In addition, many commented that the less favourable treatment was due to lack of social contact and feeling of loneliness since MSCA researchers did not have sufficient time to create social connections.

In 26 out of these 233 responses, the beneficiaries stressed that MSCA researchers were treated much more favourably than the local researchers, especially due to the high salary level compared to the local researchers. This was also the case because MSCA researchers have been fully paid while the salary of the local researchers and staff was reduced by up to 30%. In addition, MSCA researchers had other advantages such as paid absences for up to 30 days.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, the findings in the questionnaire demonstrate **very positive outcomes**. The vast majority of responses suggest that the **proposed flexibility measures were correct, appropriate and effective**, and the respondents were mostly able to make use of these measures under the current restrictions and constraints.

The fact that the **MSCA researchers** in COFUND, ITN and IF could be **fully paid** even if they could not work in the host institution premises was considered as a **very positive measure by the majority** of the beneficiaries.

**The great majority** of respondents considered **the extended flexibility in terms of the project deliverables, milestones and reports** as **very appropriate**.

**While most beneficiaries were not able to find additional financial** resources to support the MSCA fellows beyond their fellowship duration, a **small proportion of beneficiaries were able to offer the MSCA researchers additional financial support**, even though in most cases it was for a very short period or small financial contribution.

**Most of the respondents believe that the MSCA researchers were treated the same** as their local researchers. A very small proportion noted that MSCA researchers were treated less favourably, due to fewer possibilities to access additional national funding, to access some special institutional premises or due to the loneliness during the lockdown.

**In terms of communication**, the respondents pointed to some weaknesses and indicated that there is room for improvement from the side of REA, NCPs and the coordinators. To address these weaknesses, **REA project officers will increase the communication with their coordinators and monitor that the communication between the coordinators, beneficiaries and researchers** is more effective. In addition, **REA's online**

**communication channels will be improved in order** to also reach out to all the other beneficiaries (not only the coordinators, as stipulated in the grant agreement) and individual researchers, to ensure that the necessary information can reach all the parties involved in the MSCA projects without delay. Moreover, REA/EC will ensure that the **support from NCPs and FAQs published on the Funding and Tenders Portal are promoted in a more efficient and effective way.**