

YERUN welcomes the EC decision to apply ‘force majeure’ and calls for ‘pragmatic flexibility’ in light of COVID-19



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As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities across Europe are faced with an unprecedented situation. They are working tirelessly to continue to guarantee services to students while ensuring the wellbeing of their entire university community. The Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN) is closely following the measures taken by the European Union (EU) institutions and by its member universities in adapting to this new reality.

YERUN welcomes the flexibility that the European Commission (EC) is applying when it comes to the management of ongoing Erasmus+ and the Horizon 2020 (H2020) Grants. In particular, YERUN members appreciate the prolongation of ongoing project deadlines and the EC's decision to allow Erasmus+ National Agencies to invoke the 'force majeure' clause. However, exceptional times call for exceptional measures. Stressing once more that this situation, although at varying degrees, is affecting everyone in the European higher education sector, YERUN calls upon the EC to consider the following measures:

Horizon 2020

YERUN calls upon the EC to provide beneficiaries of ongoing projects with detailed guidance on how to use Article 51 of the H2020 Model Grant Agreement (and FP7 Model Grant Agreement) and to simplify the Article 51 procedure within the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. In order to simplify the procedure for ongoing H2020 projects the EC may, for instance, remove the obligation of beneficiaries to formally notify without delay that the COVID-19 crisis represents a 'force majeure' situation, or at least reduce this obligation to a simple and short notification by the coordinator or Principal Investigator (PI). A more detailed description of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the project could be communicated later as part of the periodic reporting.

YERUN calls upon the EC to introduce an **automatic no-cost extension of up to 6 months** for H2020 projects that are due to end in 2020/2021. By taking this measure, the EC would in practice remove the need to provide a PI justification letter and, in doing so, considerably simplify the amendment procedure. Coordinators or PIs who would not need additional time could be given a simple choice to opt-out of this automatic project extension. At the same time, coordinators or PIs who demonstrably require longer extensions could still individually apply for them – these requests could be assessed by the EC on a case-by-case basis.

Erasmus+

YERUN welcomes the possibility to apply the 'force majeure' clause as well as the possibility to extend ongoing projects by 12 months. However, similarly to what was mentioned above for H2020 projects, the administrative burden of dealing with all individual cases of Erasmus students would also be significantly reduced with a general application of the 'force majeure' clause. We encourage the EC to consider the general application of this clause for all cases related to the COVID-19 emergency and echo similar calls already made by other organisations, such as the Coimbra Group and The Guild;

YERUN calls upon the EC to apply **pragmatic flexibility** in the use of the Erasmus+ grants already received by institutions, so as to allow the beneficiary HEIs – which due to obvious reasons, can no longer use those grants for students or staff mobility – to use them to adapt to these exceptional circumstances (e.g. to convert their activities to an online format). This would also be in line with the Erasmus+ objectives, as it would support and encourage HEIs to convert physical mobilities into virtual ones, minimizing disruptions in the students' curricula and continuing to enhance collaboration. With a view to the future, this could also be the beginning of a cultural shift, maximising the possibilities of virtual mobility and making Erasmus+ more inclusive and hence more attractive to a more diverse group of students (however, good online and virtual learning/teaching needs time and money invested into it).

Finally, a specific reference needs to be made to the deadline for the **Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)**. The application deadline has already been postponed to May 26th. However, preparing the application for the ECHE entails a number of strategic discussions within universities, which at the moment cannot dedicate the required time to this due to being very busy dealing with the COVID-19 consequences. If a further extension of the ECHE deadline is not possible, then the ECHE application procedure should be lighter than currently foreseen.

We reiterate our support to the EC in these challenging times. We encourage the EC to keep an open channel of communication with umbrella organisations, both regarding the impact of COVID-19 on current and future EU programmes as well as mitigation measures. YERUN offers its continued collaboration to jointly overcome this crisis.

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About YERUN

The Young European Research University Network (YERUN) is a cluster of highly-ranked young universities in Europe that strengthens and facilitates cooperation in the areas of scientific research, academic education and services which benefit society. In this context, YERUN members consider that adequate support to human capital is essential to foster the next generations of (European) researchers and innovators. Strong support for excellent early-career researchers is therefore a priority for all YERUN members.

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