

Presidency Summary of the Informal High-Level Videoconference of Research Ministers Brussels, 7 April 2020

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented challenge for Europe and for the whole world. The number of people suffering and losing their lives to the novel coronavirus is still in increase. This requires a continuation of an urgent and coordinated action at EU, national, regional and local levels.

On 26 March 2020, EU leaders recognised research and innovation as one of the five main strands where efforts and investments need to continue in order to help overcome the crisis, and called for coordinated efforts within the European scientific and research community in order to maximise the full potential across the EU.

On 7 April 2020 EU Research Ministers supported a first set of actions which could be implemented immediately at the EU level and exchanged views on priority actions and necessary policy measures in research and innovation in order to address the crisis in the medium and long-term.

Main messages

Ministers acknowledged the efforts done so far by the scientific community, with the support of the European Commission and the Member States, primarily in the development of vaccines, treatment and diagnostics.

They called for further efforts in all research areas relevant for addressing the short, medium and long-term effects of the crisis. New knowledge and solutions are key for addressing this and possible future pandemics, as well as for understanding and addressing their impact on our society and economy.

Ministers called for a united, coordinated, comprehensive and effective contribution of all stakeholders as important to establish a sustainable and scientifically based response to the crisis.

In this regard, research ministers welcomed the 10 actions allowing for an immediate and coordinated R&I response at EU level to be undertaken in the coming weeks as a joint EU response to COVID-19 pandemic:

1. coordination of R&I funding against the coronavirus,
2. extending and supporting large EU wide clinical trials,

3. new funding for innovative and rapid health-related approaches for responding to coronavirus and deliver quick results,
4. increasing support to innovative companies for COVID-19 relevant projects,
5. creating opportunities for other funding sources to contribute to R&I actions on coronavirus,
6. establishing an “ERA corona platform” as a one-stop-shop for coronavirus R&I funding,
7. establishing an advisory Task Force on the coronavirus,
8. enabling access to research infrastructures for researchers working on the coronavirus,
9. creating a European data exchange platform, and
10. organising a pan-EU Hackathon to mobilise European innovators and civil society.

The actions are building on existing structures of the European Research Area and will be updated regularly in a coordinated manner between national administrations and the European Commission services. Ministers stressed the importance of regular updates of this set of actions, thus allowing for an efficient coordination at EU level, and called for an inclusive approach during the implementation.

In line with the title of these 10 actions, ERAvsCorona, several ministers especially stressed that the future European Research Area needs to be more dynamic and developed in a way which will ensure R&I-supported societal preparedness, allow mechanisms for fast and coordinated response at EU level, enable enhanced dialogue with citizens and encourage science-based decision-making. The incoming Trio of Germany, Portugal and Slovenia will bring this work forward during their Presidencies of the Council of the European Union.

Joint scientific efforts, collaboration within Europe and beyond, complementarity with running international activities (WHO, OECD, UNESCO etc.), synergetic and complementary use of all available EU programmes and funds, as well as simplification and flexibility in their use were stressed as important. Further, access to research infrastructures, as well as open science, sharing of research data, results and information will maximise our chances to combat this virus and overcome its effects on the long-run. Several ministers called on the need to strengthen existing networks and activities, including partnerships with the private sector. In the same vein, they called for further support to the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI). Several ministers stressed the need to strengthen European own production capacities following the development of vaccine and in general the need to develop long-term reponse mechanisms.

The Ministers and the European Commission will make sure that the best scientific talents from across Europe know about these measures and make use of them.

They stressed the importance of working closely with researchers in the coming months, also in informing citizens about scientific progress and combatting fake news.

The discussion of Research Ministers held today reflects the need to continue supporting investments in research and innovation and to base decisions on scientific-based advice.