

It is rare for world leaders to take a lead as the high-level panel has done, and they must be commended for their pledge to manage the ocean sustainably. But governments change. The panel's members know that, one day, they will need to pass on their responsibilities. In some cases, their successors will want to continue their policies, but in others, they won't – as we know all too well.

That is why we need a mechanism to monitor pledges according to agreed data, tested by a consensus of the research community. Researchers stand ready to play their part. But to help ensure that these vital pledges are kept, sustainable management of the ocean needs a sustainable system of governance, too.

Postdocs urgently need funders' financial support

The first year of the pandemic has seen postdocs left high and dry. Society will pay a high price if this neglect continues.

The first ever *Nature* survey to focus on postdoctoral researchers at universities paints a gloomy picture. As we reported in September, half of respondents revealed that they had recently considered leaving academic research, in part because of concerns for their mental health.

This week, we report on other aspects of postdoc life covered by the survey. It revealed a generation of researchers who are worried about projects being shut down, having insufficient funding to support themselves for the duration of the pandemic, and the steep drop in job vacancies.

In the wake of these findings, we approached around ten funding agencies and postdoctoral support organizations in the United States and Europe – home to the overwhelming majority of the survey's self-selecting group of 7,670 respondents. We asked what they are doing to address these concerns. Those we contacted included the European Commission, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the US National Institutes of Health and the US National Science Foundation.

Earlier in the year, many funders agreed to extend deadlines for research projects halted or delayed by the pandemic – but fewer offered extra funding to cover this period. Worryingly, most of the funders we approached still have no concrete plans to provide such additional financial support to postdocs. Many postdocs are not eligible for the government salary subsidies, or furlough schemes, that have been made available to many workers during the pandemic. Expanding access to such schemes is arguably the one intervention that could do the most to

ease pressures at this time.

Financial struggles and insecurities are contributing to postdocs' anxiety and distress, *Nature's* survey reveals. Postdocs are almost always employed on short-term contracts, and the survey's comments section featured many accounts of day-to-day struggles. Postdocs say that they are barely managing, but the urgency of their plight doesn't seem to be getting through to decision makers.

It's not that nothing is happening. In addition to agreeing to extend project deadlines, some funders have said that they are looking at other ways to support postdocs and their career development.

The European Commission's funding body for postdocs told *Nature* that it is providing grantees with access to careers advice – including advice on non-academic careers – a crucial service at a time of widespread layoffs and hiring freezes at universities. The commission says that it is also trying to find ways to make it easier for postdocs to obtain funding from other EU sources.

The United Kingdom's main research funding body, UKRI, has previously said that it is providing some grantees, including some postdocs, with funding extensions during the pandemic. However, it was unable to respond to our request for an update on its policy by the time *Nature* went to press.

The United Kingdom's research system is powered by its 45,000 postdocs – for comparison, the United States has around 80,000, but the country's population is five times larger. UKRI is also a signatory to the 2019 Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, an agreement that sets out ways to support career development and improve research culture.

The Howard Hughes Medical Institute, a philanthropic organization based in Chevy Chase, Maryland, told *Nature* that it will continue to pay postdocs even if labs remain shut during the pandemic. The organization has given postdocs extra time to complete projects, and has provided extra paid leave when necessary. The funder has also increased the minimum annual salary for postdocs from US\$50,000 in 2019 to \$51,000 in 2020 as part of an annual review.

Worldwide, the approach taken by this institution is the exception, not the rule. And although at the start of the pandemic some public funders and universities did urge governments to allow researchers to be compensated as part of furlough schemes, those calls went unheeded.

As a consequence, the research world is facing a situation where the futures of many of those in its most precarious community are hanging by a thread. As one survey respondent, a physicist in Denmark, told us: "The lack of stability in a postdoc position is a huge source of anxiety and depression."

Governments and research funders must recognize that this urgent situation demands an urgent response. Postdocs are the future of science, and the lifeblood of the research workforce. If they don't receive some extra financial help soon, research – and society as a whole – will bear the consequences of denying a lifeline to the next generation of researchers, inventors and innovators.

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