

Report on the Asia Pacific Virtual Regional Meeting of the Global Research Council (GRC)

The Asia Pacific Virtual Regional Meeting of the Global Research Council (GRC) was held jointly by Iran National Science Foundation (INSF) and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment of New Zealand (MBIE) on February 2, 2021. Participants of the three hours' event discussed issues related to the current pandemic in two sections.

1. Regional experiences in responding to Covid -19

Participants recognized four main challenges for their originations in facing the current pandemic:

Tackling the pandemic through research funding

Fast track national and/or international calls and funding programs focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic were the first response by participating organisations. It was mentioned that the majority of funding in the early stages of the pandemic has gone to clinical and biomedical studies, followed by studies on public and economic impacts later in the pandemic. These funding programs were either integrated into organisations' routine funding programs or were introduced as special call for proposals. Participants stressed that it has been vital for them to keep all their normal funding schemes open during the pandemic.

Participants emphasized on the significant role previously funded basic research has played in fighting Covid-19 and pointed out that they have not compromised funding for basic research during the pandemic.

Supporting the flow of ongoing research projects

Every participating organisation has experienced a degree of disruption in the continuity of their ongoing funded projects. Organisations have taken a variety of measures to tackle this: contract extension, postponing calls, reduced reporting requirements, remote site visits, allowing to use grant moneys outside the original framework, and extending eligibility period for early career researchers.

Adapting internal activities with the new normal

All participating organisations have to some degree shifted to virtual and online platforms in their day to day activities, from panel discussions and review processes to site visits. Participants believe that the new normal has helped organisations to save time and resources significantly and the new form of interaction with stake holders will stay in place in the post pandemic era. Facing the challenge, organizations that had previously experienced natural disasters and dislocation of researchers, navigated more confidently during at the onset of pandemic.

Engaging the public

Participants agreed that public awareness plays a key role in combating and containing the pandemic; without community engagement, any scientific response will be challenging. Some participants have invested heavily in awareness programs in different groups of community.

2. The future perspectives to combat global pandemics and promote international collaboration in our region

Regarding the international collaboration and combating future pandemics the participants agreed that:

- Pandemics are too big an issue to be handled nationally, and international partnership and mutual trust are key in collecting knowledge and expertise globally.
- The ability to rapidly respond to pandemics and reprioritize international funding programs is key in dealing with pandemics. As was the case for the current crisis, those organisations who have already long standing international collaborations and/or are active members of international funding platforms, have a better chance to swiftly establishing international funding schemes tailored for pandemics.
- Willingness to streamline review processes in international funding programs, and to facilitate dialogue among researchers from different countries through a variety of instruments can boost the speed in responding to future pandemics.
- Setting up shared databases and investing in open science can prepare the region to speed up future efforts in establishing international collaborations.
- The current pandemic has demonstrated the significance of investment in basic and multidisciplinary research. Regional participants need to continue to investing in these areas in their future collaborations.

The virtual regional meeting concluded with a report by GRC executive secretary and presentations on GRC knowledge products.

List of organisations participating in the meeting:

- Australian Research Council (ARC)
- National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC)
- Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB)
- Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI)
- Iran National Science Foundation (INSF)
- Japan Science and Technology Agency (JST)
- Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE)
- National Research Foundation Singapore (NRF)
- National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT)
- UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)
- National Research Foundation South Africa (NRF)