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## Abrupt policy shift on foreign awards 'destroys NIH reputation'

By Sophie Hogan



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US funding agency tells RPN change of rules is “a top priority” for Donald Trump

The termination of all grant applications with foreign collaborators will “destroy” the reputation of the US National Institutes of Health among scientists, according to an agency insider.

After abruptly changing its funding policy for foreign researchers, the NIH told Research Professional News that its new model is “a top priority” for US president Donald Trump. The move is just one of a swathe of recent changes to US government support for research and universities that have left scientists reeling.

On 1 May, the NIH issued a statement saying US grantholders would no longer be in control of subawards to foreign collaborators, and those collaborators would instead have to apply to the NIH directly for grants.

An NIH staff member who wishes to remain anonymous told RPN that they and other colleagues were blindsided by the decision, which was not shared with staff before being made public, and that they feared the impact it would have.

“Those of us at my level are flabbergasted...I think scientists will definitely leave the US,” the employee said. “It destroys our reputation in global science...Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined we would be here.”

Joey Gaynor, senior research funding specialist at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland, whose remit covers NIH-funded collaborations, told RPN it will be a “wait and see” period until the new award structure sets in.

“In the meantime, this period of uncertainty is deeply troubling for our international research community and those of us who support them,” Gaynor said.

### **‘National security risk’**

The NIH said in its announcement that it expects the new structure to be fully implemented by 30 September and that it would immediately halt any applications for grants with foreign subawards. The policy also applies to renewals of existing grants.

The agency said there was a “lack of transparency” around foreign subawards and that the US government “has a need to maintain national security”.

A mechanism on the NIH’s website called the Foreign Award and Component

**Tracking System** does provide a way to “accurately track and report NIH investments in research (grants and contracts) involving collaborations in foreign countries”, as well as to process requests that require clearance from the Department of State.

But an NIH spokesperson told RPN that the agency “cannot currently track foreign subawards with accuracy—a serious problem that has been highlighted in Government Accountability Office reports, raised by Congress and identified as a national security risk”.

The spokesperson said that “unacceptable” data inconsistencies are “exactly why radical change is needed”, and that “the new foreign subproject model will bring greater transparency and accountability”.

“It is a top priority for the president and a necessary step to secure the integrity of the US biomedical research enterprise,” they added.

### **Grantholders left adrift**

One repeat NIH grantholder working at an institution in the north-east of the US, whose latest grant application has been terminated, told RPN that the agency’s reasoning amounted to the US government saying “lack of transparency is fraud”.

“It’s just another excuse to weed out foreign entities,” they said, adding that the impact to the reputation of the NIH is already being felt on the ground.

“Suddenly I feel like I’m coming to conferences and everybody is looking at me with pity. When people ask me how bad all this is, our answer is usually ‘it’s worse than you think’,” they continued.


The change in policy came after weeks of uncertainty among NIH grantholders who had been waiting for agency programme managers to review the foreign components involved in their grants.


Another grantholder at an institution on the east coast of the US, who has a collaborator in Europe, said they had been chasing the NIH for months. After the policy announcement, they said they are sure their grant has been terminated but have not received any official confirmation.

“It has really put us in a difficult mental state...I’ve had colleagues tell me they just

can't handle it any more," they said.

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