

The Coronavirus pandemic: reflecting on challenges for early career researchers

by Jennifer Bansard

The coronavirus pandemic and the measures taken to reduce its effects are disrupting life as we know it all around the world. It put a halt on our physical interactions and demanded a sudden shift in work practices.

Academia is comparatively well positioned to accommodate these changes, as a fair share of our work can be done remotely. In many ways it even prompted changes that had long been called for: faced with this grand challenge, institutions responded with sudden flexibility and openness for innovation.

Calls to replace many face-to-face meetings by video conferences had grown stronger over the last few years, with advocates notably pointing to the positive effect in terms of reduced travel-related greenhouse gas emissions. Cautious voices then invoked the irreplaceable value of personal encounters, and this will remain an issue to reflect on in the future. But another obstacle should now be overcome for good: Many institutions so far considered virtual meetings incompatible with formal decision making, such as in the context of search committees or faculty councils. Even in instances where university statutes allowed remote participation, this was typically limited to contributing to the discussion only, not the final voting. Faced with the threat of coming to a complete halt, many universities are now frantically revising these rules.

The same applies to digital teaching formats. We've witnessed an incredibly quick move towards reshuffling entire semester plans to accommodate online teaching – with universities acquiring licenses for tools to facilitate this. Tools that early adopters of such formats had long been calling for, and are now being made available at record speed.

And even the most reluctant bureaucracies now seem to be accepting digital signatures, when two months ago they still pointed to fax machines as the only alternative to hard copies sent by snail mail.

There's good hope that some of these positive changes will remain in place after the crisis recedes.

But while this pandemic has pushed slow-moving institutions to take a welcome leap forward in many areas, it has brought a whole new set of challenges upon all. Moreover, it has exacerbated existing inequalities.

This holds true for society at large, where inequalities – for example in terms of livelihoods or access to medical care – put some communities at greater risk than others.

It also holds true within academia.

Some challenges affect all, regardless of their status. And others disproportionately affect early career researchers and, more broadly, those in already precarious situations. So here's some food for thought, including personal stories shared with us by early career researchers.

Working from home can be challenging for many reasons – not counting the underlying risk that your health might be compromised by the pandemic. You might lack the infrastructure. You might have caring responsibilities. You might have mental health problems.

With universities closed down, some will have to work on the only table they have in their apartment. The one they also have breakfast and all their other meals on. They will have to use their personal IT equipment because they didn't have time to fetch their work laptops before the shutdown. Or because their university doesn't provide them a laptop to begin with. They might not have the software they need on their personal computers. Their internet connection might be slowed down because they are sharing it with several other people.

With schools and daycares closed, they might have to care for their children. They might have to care for relatives and loved ones who need special assistance. And you might have heard before that [care work disproportionately rests upon women](#)?

You might also have heard about the disproportional prevalence of [anxiety and depression among PhD researchers](#)? Limited interactions with other people and having your normal routines overthrown certainly do not contribute to one's well-being.

For some, this will prove to be a time of great productivity, where they had the opportunity to concentrate on their research and "get manuscripts out." For others, the opposite will be the case. As one early career researcher from the Earth System Governance network put it: they might be juggling to find hours to get some work done.

Lack of access to the field or the lab also means research schedules have to be adjusted, for example to postpone field research to when the lockdowns are over. Researchers working on several projects at the same time, typically more senior academics, might be able to accommodate such changes relatively easily, as not all projects will be in the same phase. PhD students however might see their entire dissertation at risk. Depending on the research question, some might be able to adjust the research design and conduct their data collection virtually. [Crowdsourced resources](#) are popping up on how to do so. But this nevertheless means they have to get familiar with a whole new set of methods. Which takes time. And it clearly is [not suitable](#) for every research question.

Academic life has been further disrupted by conferences being canceled. Early career researchers will be especially affected by the non-reimbursable expenses they possibly incurred and that are not covered by their institutions. And they are **missing out on networking and mentoring opportunities**, which is crucial to set foot in academia. Individual initiatives are emerging to specifically address this, with the Environmental Studies Section of the International Studies Association holding a virtual speed mentoring session or individual senior researchers offering to provide feedback on papers that would have been presented at a cancelled conference. The lockdowns and travel restrictions also mean that visiting researcher trips and invited lectures are being cancelled, which is again especially detrimental for those still "building their academic CVs."

Preparing for **online teaching takes time**. And time is running out for those on temporary contracts. Getting an overview of resources, strategies, and tools for online teaching takes time. Recording lectures takes time. Finding ways to ensure that online, asynchronous teaching is didactically sound and engaging takes time. And all this is taking more time away from research than was expected and contractually defined. Admirably, initiatives are sprouting to cope with this increased workload: through sharing recorded lectures (see for example [here](#) and [here](#)), offering to [guest teach](#), or making other [relevant resources](#) available online.

Let us also not forget about the increasing **emotional labor** that is required to address students' insecurities in these challenging times. Students in difficult personal situations. Students trying to navigate an online-only university. Students who no longer have accommodation. Students without the necessary equipment to follow classes online. International students who have had to travel back to their home countries, or, in some cases, want to go back home but can't. Students who, for all sorts of reasons, will have an even higher need for guidance, understanding, and slack than usually. This again will disproportionately affect women, especially early career researchers, who are seen as [more approachable](#).

PhD researchers in the late stages of their dissertation are further confronted with a very specific challenge: they might see their final **defense put on hold or conducted online**. Both of which can be very frustrating. Frustrating for those left hanging in the air, waiting to be formally awarded their PhDs – a step that can keep them from applying/getting certain follow-up contracts/scholarships. And frustrating for those who see years of work culminate in a, let's say "somewhat unceremonious" defense. Some make it work out well, have family and friends tune in to the online event. Others are confronted with shaky internet connections leading to low quality audio, or, and this is not a joke, the need to [manage trolls invading and disrupting their defense](#).

Finally, **funding** is a fundamental issue for those on temporary contracts and precarious working arrangements. And **employment prospects** are more dire than ever. Scholarships tied to stays abroad are being put on hold. Some funding lines are suspended altogether until further notice. Some universities, as we've seen in the UK, are [laying off staff](#), sometimes on extremely short notice. This will prove especially challenging for those living abroad and with visa requirements tied to their employment status. One PhD researcher confided that they lost the part-time job that was securing their livelihood during their dissertation time. Another early career researcher emphasized how lucky she felt that her "short-term casual research contracts" did not fall through. Universities are suspending job searches, even at very late stages in the hiring process. Corona-related downfalls in productivity and grant setbacks are threatening those whose access to tenure is up for assessment. Some universities are addressing this by offering to "extend the tenure clock," with some even making this [extension automatic](#). Many on the tenure-track are however left hanging. And this does not address the hardship of other early career researchers.

In this time of crisis, where many are stepping up to keep the system running, we need institutions and individuals in decision-making positions to also step-up to ensure fair working conditions for all.

Academia needed reforming long before this coronavirus came. But now is an essential time to rethink how the system works.

Call your postdocs. Talk to your PhDs. Check-in with student assistants. Ask how they are doing. And how you can help.