

What might the Covid Pandemic mean for the Early Career Researcher Network?

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The Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network is a multidisciplinary network with membership open to anyone conducting educational research at an early stage of their career. This includes for example, teacher researchers based in schools, Masters and doctoral students, post-doc researchers, teaching fellows and lecturers. A wide range of research areas are represented, including early years, internationalisation, inclusive education, teacher education, digital education, and education policy. Although our membership is diverse, and this should be acknowledged, we offer this position paper from the perspective of three ECRs, based in Scotland, who work within higher education and convene the network.

We therefore begin by highlighting key challenges facing ECRs studying and working within higher education and consider these within the context of Covid 19. We then reflect on what the network can do to address these specific challenges.

CHALLENGES FACED BY ECRS

The 'neoliberal turn' in universities in the UK, and the implications that this has for those working within them, has been well documented (e.g. Addison, 2016). Market practices promote competition and accountability (Olssen and Peters, 2005); academics are under increasing pressure to 'perform'. ECRs are not immune from this (Thériault et al, in press). At the same time as learning how to navigate this environment, ECRs are often faced with a number of additional challenges, such as a precarious job market, feelings of 'imposter syndrome' (Breeze, 2018) and experiences of isolation (Hemmings, 2012).

We can expect that these challenges have only been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Recruitment freezes have contributed to a shrinking academic job market. The emergence of funding calls for Covid-19 related research invite researchers to adapt plans and develop new expertise. University campuses have closed and ECRs have been unable to access working space, informal networks and face-to-face communication with peers, supervisors and mentors. Conferences and seminars have been cancelled worldwide leading to significant reductions in opportunities to network locally and internationally.

A multinational study conducted by Fakunle et. al. (2019) found that conferences provide learning sites for ECRs to share their work and access research and networking opportunities for their academic development and career progression. Recently, Fakunle (2020) highlighted the impact of ECRs missing conferences: missed opportunities 1) to meet academics that can provide input to further enrich their work 2) to network with their peers and more experienced academics, 3) serendipitous encounters that can lead to future collaborations and career advancement. She further suggested that ECRs draw on their experiences at conferences to enrich the community of practice at their home institution.

Covid-19 has led many institutions and conference organisers to move their events online. Online events could provide an accessible (cost-related, e.g for travel) and inclusive (e.g. for those with disabilities) forum for ECRs. However, it remains to be seen if online conferences will afford similar or different benefits to ECRs.

The challenges outlined above underscore the need for our network to be innovative in supporting ECRs to explore opportunities to enhance their academic skills, publish their work, and expand their networks, nationally and internationally.

WHAT DO WE ENVISAGE THE FUTURE ENTAILS FOR THE NETWORK?

Within the context of Covid-19, we aim to continue to develop creative online platforms for SERA ECRs such as, webinars, symposiums, online retreats and social media, allowing ECRs to connect, learn together and share their work. We envision that online spaces and social media provide an effective communication medium to 1) engage with SERA ECRs 2) promote the work of our ECRs 3) stimulate conversations and highlight issues in academic work and careers.

In sum, given the ubiquitous impact of Covid-19, our ongoing and future work in the network will entail a blended approach that incorporates face-to-face and online engagement. Our wide-ranging research interests and areas of commonality create possibilities for interdisciplinary collaborations. We aim to work together creatively and innovatively to strengthen the connections with and between our members. Our overall goal remains to support ECR professional development and career progression.

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