

# HARBINGERS-2: TAKING THE PULSE ONE YEAR ON

University of Tennessee Knoxville/CIBER Research

Early career  
researchers: scholarly  
communication  
trends, work life and  
impact of pandemic.  
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## INTRODUCTION

The eight national interviewers were asked to reflect on the past 12 months in regard to the impact the pandemic has had on their own universities and, where possible, generally also in regard to universities in their country, and answer the following questions:

- Has your university has gone back to pre-pandemic arrangements or are you carrying some COVID ones still? If, so which ones continue and is there a timeline when these will disappear?
- Presuming COVID will not come back in greater force, will universities in your country be different next year from what they were before COVID. That is, will things that have changed, become permanent?

## CHINA

In general, the whole country is in the so-called "new normal of the pandemic" situation. However, China is currently experiencing the third wave of the pandemic with more than 20 cities locked-down and it still has the world's strictest locked-down rules (also, called zero-tolerance policies, featuring mass testing, targeted lockdowns and travel restrictions). International travel for everyone is now rare, from once being very common and highly popular; domestic travel, too, still has many restrictions, e.g., vaccines and health certifications are needed. All this has inevitably disrupted local economies, with the leisure and tourism sectors that were struggling to recover particularly hard hit, as well as people's lives.

Against this background, universities have not gone back to pre-pandemic times at all. Today hybrid teaching (both online and face-to-face) is the norm intended to accommodate students/teachers who are quarantining. Most academic (physical) meetings and events have been suspended or transferred wholly online.

The timeline for restrictions disappearing is unknown, with many believing they will in fact become permanent. People are saying that the whole world has been irretrievably changed. And most people believe that the pandemic has now become a new normal. Even if COVID does not come back in force, the university (as exemplified by Wuhan university) will need a relatively long time to recover. The shrunken budget has affected universities in many aspects; for example, non-COVID 19 related research obtains less funding and there are fewer tenure positions for ECRs. Salaries of staff have been cut.

China, the first country into the pandemic has clearly been impacted.

**FRANCE**

High vaccination rates meant that academe could go back to normal as early as June-July 2021. Some university administrative staff can now work remotely at home for a few days, but all academics have eagerly returned to their labs, offices etc., which is the sign of a real return to normal. However, masks are mandatory even in face-to-face meetings.

The interesting aspect of the pandemic-induced change is that all the tools used for distant teaching and distant meetings have been retained, thus, creating a hybrid academic world. Some meetings are kept distant and some workshops are organised face to face, but offer a distant option. The “distant option” is welcomed by most and ECRs are appreciating the increasing accessibility of going to more meetings, more seminars as these are offered distantly. As one ECR pointed out, face to face meetings are kept for deep discussions and distant meetings are used for technical issues. Most importantly, this hybrid world seems to allow a wider and a more diverse scientific discussion. The big change going forward, then, is hybridisation, which will clearly remain for meetings and many workshops.

There are positives here in respect to the pandemic, as a hybrid world might be a better academic world, especially so for ECRs.

**MALAYSIA**

The situation in Malaysia has not yet returned to pre-pandemic standards, but academic life is slowly returning to normal. However, social distancing and associated rules remain very much in place. The University of Malaya (and all those universities under the Ministry of Higher Education ecosystem) has ruled a 100% attendance rate for fully vaccinated staff (and students) to be working on site starting from Oct 2021, after a period of more than a year when they had to work from home. As for now: a) Physical enrolment, teaching and learning activities commences through either online and hybrid modes; b) Students can obtain permission to travel (local and abroad) for participation in official activities; c) Professors have started to travel abroad for research visits; d) The main library is open, with social distancing restrictions; e) Labs are open to research students, with restrictions; f) Meetings, conferences and seminars are generally still online, but departments/committees have started meeting face to face.

It is not clear whether things that have changed will become permanent, but the suspicion is that online teaching, consultations, meetings, conferences will remain. Although many ECRs feel that lectures online are not as effective as face-to-face ones (as one ECR pointed out “simply delivering course materials through digital platforms and talk on Google Meet is not the best way to teach”) and this is particularly true for laboratory work and programming courses and such, they are comfortable and are experimenting with various tools and technologies to make teaching work. Staff who have no intention to

receive the vaccine are not allowed to work from home, and not allowed to enter office either.

Government here clearly instrumental in returning universities to some kind of normality, but that does not mean that things will be the same and here again a hybrid future is on the cards.

## **POLAND**

Probably, when it comes to publicly funded universities, from where most of the ECRs in the Polish sample come from, it seems that the impact of the pandemic has less strongly felt in Poland than in other countries. There are few signs of redundancies for faculty staff, compulsory paid leave, postponing of hires, cancelling of temporary hires, postponing or cancelling of replacement hires. In fact, none of the participating ECRs have lost their jobs, all of them have had their contracts extended, some for an indefinite period; the doctoral students are paid doctoral scholarships from government funds and thus relatively secure. However, this does not mean that all Polish scientists feel wholly secure in terms of employment and it does vary from university to university.

However, universities in Poland have not quite returned to pre-pandemic arrangements. For example, at the host University of Warmia and Mazury, while labs work as before and staff can work in their rooms at the university, large lectures are conducted remotely, although small group exercises are conducted face to face. Masks are worn in classes by students and faculty. If there are COVID cases then a particular group of students has to work and be taught remotely for two weeks or longer, if necessary, even until the end of the Winter semester. The situation is changing dynamically, especially in the light of a new wave of the pandemic hitting Central and Eastern Europe (November 2021).

There is no timetable for when these restrictions will disappear. The Minister of Education in Poland recommends remote teaching only in exceptional cases. Each rector decides in consultation with the authorities in their region, so the situation may vary from one university to another.

As for the future it seems that some arrangements may remain even after the pandemic, especially those for the large lectures for 100-200 students, which will remain remote. It also seems that conferences and meetings could be organized in a hybrid format. However, so far there are no official arrangements on these matters.

Thus, universities seem not to be hit financially so hard, but COVID arrangements remain much the same as in the rest of Europe.

**RUSSIA**

Russia is not quite back to normal, although almost all employees, other than those over 60, have returned to work. There are still restrictions, most notably in respect to teaching, where all lectures are held online, but practical classes and lab work are conducted face-to-face. Conferences and other meetings are now both face-to-face and remote. There are the standard impositions in respect to wearing masks, social distancing, shift work, and temperature control. Due to spikes in contagion, remote working and teaching/studying was re-imposed recently, from November 1st to November 15<sup>th</sup> 2021.

The timeline for restrictions disappearing is unknown; officially it will be when “herd immunity” is achieved due to vaccination. Each university decides for itself how to organize the educational and work process within common laws and restrictions. When the situation returns to normal, it is likely that conferences and other meetings will be both face-to-face and remote, and it will be more customary to combine work from home with face-to-face work. The rest of the activities will return to the in-person format.

Arrangements will probably be flexible, combining working at office / lab and home, which may well benefit researcher productivity, although most ECRs are expected to turn-up at their workplaces sometimes. The prevalence of video conferences will provide both opportunities and limitations: opportunities in the sense that it allows for easier contact for finding out what others are up to and limitations in the sense that ECRs do not consider that Zoom and the like are suitable for establishing collaborations, which is only possible face-to-face.

To sum up, hybrid working modes are very much coming to the fore and there are indications of greater flexibility in working arrangements.

**SPAIN**

Because of high rates of vaccination things are becoming more relaxed in Spain. At the universities, face-to face teaching has returned (before that individual universities had hybrid models or only taught remotely) and all academic services are open, including libraries. However, there are still some restrictions: 1,20 cm social distancing between students and masks are compulsory inside buildings. Some of the meetings are face-to-face and some are online, depending on the availability of spaces bigger enough to permit separation by one empty seat. In the longer term, face-to-face meetings will still be the norm, but many faculty members will work more from home than before pandemic times. During the academic year 2020-2021 there were big differences between universities.

The main long-term benefit for ECRs of the pandemic will be flexible working - combining office/lab and home – because this may benefit productivity as at the university it is very easy to lose concentration as there are too many interruptions and urgent minor or not

really important tasks that you perform if you are there. Most academics waste a lot of time. Videoconferences will improve collaboration outside institutions and it will save time and money travelling to meet other researchers, which can be invested in working, in experiments, open access fees, translations, etc.

The main downsides will be the loss of the possibilities of going abroad which is at present compulsory for doctoral students and very interesting for postdocs and conferences. For making new connections and networking face-to-face conferences are much better than online conferences and there is a lot to be lost here.

A hybrid and more flexible world being established, too, in Spain.

### UK

Vagueness resulting from a still problematical pandemic situation means that each university had to determine its own policy. One generalisation, however, can be made, which is that all universities have allowed researchers back into their labs/offices and back to field work. This does not mean that normality has returned: offices are still quiet and teams in labs have mostly, but not entirely, got together again. Many ECRs are spending one day a week at home suggesting that one aspect of the new normal will be work flexibility. Lab talks were almost entirely virtual and so were conferences. Not many ECRs have got back to the sort of travel routines normal previously among researchers, not just conferences and face to face seminars but also lab visits.

The UK national interviewer does not work for a UK university so we have additionally, used a university of one of our ECRs (University of Sheffield) to obtain more specific information. At this university teaching is largely back to normal (face-to-face, no social distancing) with prevention methods all based around ventilation and encouraging vaccination/mask wearing etc. Research faces more restrictions on, for instance, maximum room occupancy and most of meetings/seminars are still online and mask wearing/greater social distancing etc. more adhered to.

It is still unclear as to what the future holds. Permanent changes are likely to be more online meetings, at least the short ones where there would be travel involved. More online talks/seminars also. Hopefully, also better online content for teaching.

Although some UK ECRs (a small minority) felt that they could handle the end of face to face without difficulty most thought less travel and fewer significant face-to face meetings in their fields would minimise networking and cause problems for them moving forwards. The fact that it was easier and cheaper to go to "events" because you need only Zoom those bits you knew you wanted to see did not make up for the loss of face-to-face with its trust connotations.

The new normal appears that what we have seen in other countries, but there is a sense that it has not been established yet and is still in a state of flux.

### US

The University of Tennessee (the host university for the US national interviewer) has gone back to having students on-campus and most classes are face-to-face. However, all interactions that are indoor require participants to wear masks. Faculty and staff may choose not to wear a mask in their workspace and to decide if they wear masks in small meetings with other faculty/staff. There is no vaccination mandate for faculty, students and staff unless they are paid by federal dollars, although vaccinations are encouraged and we have lots of programs in place to make it easy to be vaccinated. Across the US there are campuses that are still mostly online.

It is not known when the wearing of masks indoors will end – it is based on health department recommendations nor is it known what the future status will be regarding being inoculated with the COVID vaccine. Regarding other US universities – there is no cohesive answer, although from observing events you can see that many universities are providing the full student experience.

Some work changes from the COVID experience are likely to be retained into the future, such as increased use of software to support remote meetings, more online class offerings for students, and new ways for faculty and staff to work in a mixed modality (maybe desk hoteling etc), although it is too early to know. Some changes of data gathering methods (i.e., online/virtual data gathering) by researchers who work with human subjects may continue and be permanent, or supplementary/additional, or both. Work from home may continue for a while or be supplemental for some who do not teach or do not work in a lab. And, maybe, for a few ECRs (research assistants/associates), it could be permanent.

Many universities experience transformative change, though not all the change was positive.

### CONCLUSIONS

Academic and research life has returned, albeit subject to COVID protocols. The new normal appears to be a more flexible and hybrid scholarly environment, but it is still early days to say whether that will benefit ECRs in the long run.