

A lost generation? Early career researchers and the pandemic

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*A year ago the potential impact of COVID-19 on precarious early career researchers (ECRs) looked bleak. Reporting on findings from the longitudinal Harbingers 2 project, **David Nicholas** suggests the effects of COVID-19 on ECR researchers have been varied internationally. Where pressures from the pandemic have been felt most acutely, particularly in the UK, US and France, it has often aligned with perceptions of ongoing structural issues within academia.*



In a [blogpost](#) from this time last year, I introduced [Harbingers-2](#), a longitudinal qualitative research project, which seeks to understand the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the early career researcher (ECR) community. One year on, halfway into the project, it seems appropriate to revisit the oft-heard ‘horror’ scenario: the prediction that ECRs will become a generation of academics lost to research. Basing our appreciation of the situation on data gathered in two repeat rounds of depth interviews with 177 ECRs from eight countries (China, France, Malaysia, Poland, Spain, Russia, UK and US) held about seven months apart in 2021, we can report on how far this scenario has played out. Have ECRs been disproportionately affected by the crisis to the detriment of their research careers?

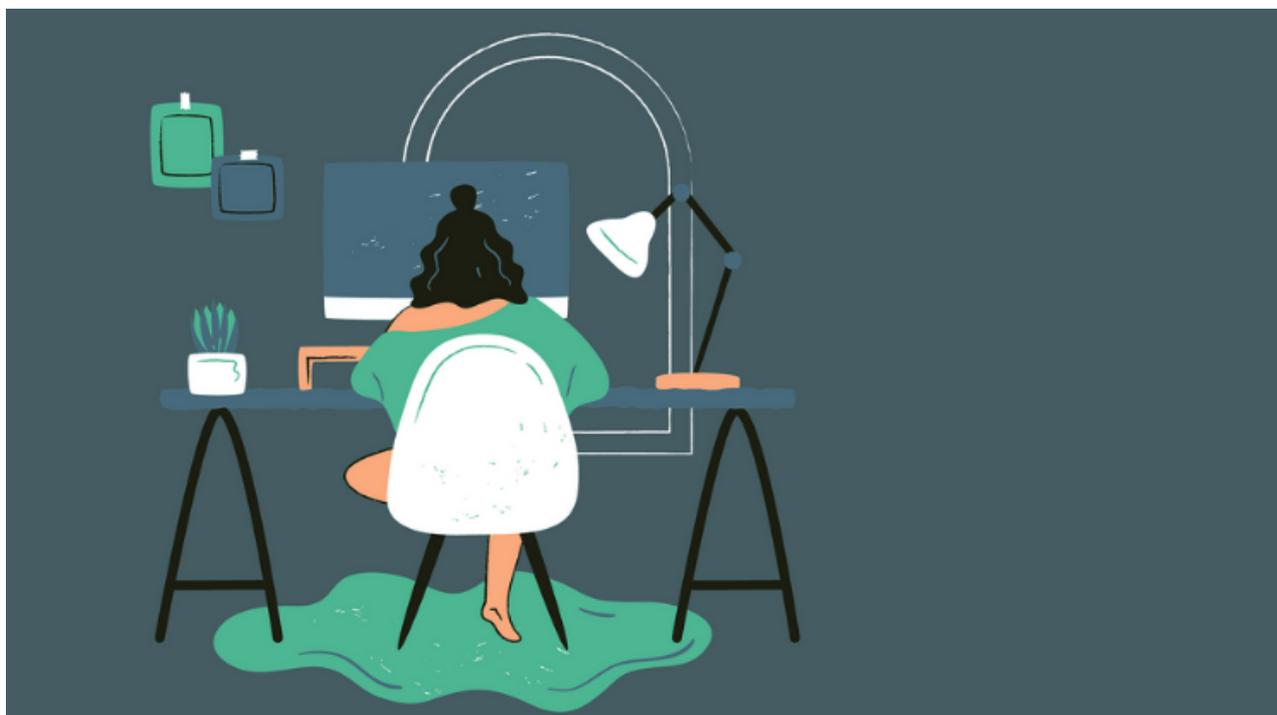
Plainly, the concerns that ECRs might be particularly prone to burnout and loss of motivation, to the point of leaving their chosen career trajectory, are not divorced from reality. Indeed, [reports from Australia](#) suggest ECRs have clearly suffered as a result of the pandemic. As recent entrants to the academy, ECR career trajectories are characterised by precarity. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Not yet tenured, ECRs are more exposed to hiring freezes, layoffs and a dearth of job openings resulting from the pandemic. They are more affected by the pandemic’s detrimental impact on productivity, collaboration and cooperation. Carrying a hefty teaching load, they are also hit by the increasing workloads entailed by the [shift to remote teaching](#). Young people as they are, with various caring responsibilities, ECRs face particular challenges achieving a work-life balance.

However, there is little evidence of burnout among our interviewees and most of them do continue to see their future in academia, and even when they do not, it is not entirely because of the pandemic. Indeed, vulnerable as ECRs might be, they are also highly resilient, even seeing opportunities arising from the new realities, such as the ability to ‘attend’ more conferences now they are held online. It is this resilience, coupled with their commitment to their chosen vocation, which is likely to prevent them exiting academia. No doubt coupled with the coping strategies adopted over the years of academic hard-grind.

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The data obtained from the interviews leaves little doubt, although as we shall see, this picture varies internationally. Thus, in round one of the interviews only 6 out of the 177 ECRs interviewed reported to actually having experienced what can be seen as burnout. Even the data from the second round of interviews, in which we experimented with asking about burnout more directly, actually mentioning the term rather than leaving ECRs to volunteer it or just describe its symptoms, generally, lends support to this finding.

True, ECRs may have avoided the term itself because, as one interviewee mentioned, *'Burnout is for the medical profession facing the pandemic...'*. Also, by the time we interviewed them for the first time, 9-12 months into the pandemic, our ECRs had gotten more used to the situation. Perhaps, things got somewhat better, perhaps, they just became more familiar, in any case, participants were likely to say something to the effect that *"if you had interviewed me last spring, some of my responses would have been very different"* (i.e., more negative).



Only the US and France reported significant cases of burnout. In the US, by the second interview two-thirds of ECRs said that they had experienced some sort of 'burnout' or depression (or both) at some time during the pandemic. The more direct questioning seems to have provided a 'launch pad' for them to share the kinds of sentiments related to burnout, anxiety, stress, etc. However, the real outlier were French ECRs. While none of them actually mentioned the word burnout (even though the English form is widely used by the general population), many had real concerns and mentioned some of the symptoms, such as feelings of isolation, tiredness and anxiety. Elaborating on the possible causes of these feelings, they mentioned finding themselves stuck in tiny flats,

having to work in isolation; the lack of social interaction; the inability to work efficiently from home, which made them feel a failure; the general uncertainty as to when pandemic would end, and the impact this had on their own work going forward.

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With burnout far from being endemic among ECRs, the prediction of their becoming the 'lost generation' of scholars by being forced to leave academia did not seem a likely scenario either. In fact, in some countries there are strong signs that the pandemic (and its resultant insecurity) might have actually drawn ECRs closer to academe. Thus, for example, in China a university position is now the ideal job to have, as is the case, too, in Malaysia and Poland. This is largely because academic jobs appear secure relative to the insecurities seen elsewhere. In most of the remaining case-countries extant problems of the academic job market might have been aggravated at least to some extent during – if not necessarily directly by – the pandemic, as best exemplified by the cases of the US and Spain, where few changes of career tracks have taken place.

However, in the case of France (half of all ECRs) and the UK (well over a third of ECRs), there is clear evidence that disturbing numbers of ECRs are indeed quitting, or at least considering the possibility. Given the indications of widespread burnout in France, it is perhaps not very surprising that French ECRs are thinking of leaving academe, but this did not appear to be wholly down to the pandemic. Rather, reinforcing the significance of national differences, it is government reforms, which ECRs believe will result in a reduction in academic status and low salaries, which feature strongly. In fact, in their case the pandemic seems to be the straw that broke the camel's back. The explanation for the UK is more clearly pandemic related, as working from home seems to have been focussing minds on where they stand and where they want to be, whilst also making them feel overworked and insecure. The absence of good career advice does not help matters either. They were not sure where to get good career advice from within their institutions, indeed, they felt that in the university sector there is an absence of any career help. Sometimes talking to more senior ECRs was their only option.

If there is a main theme to emerge from this investigation of how ECRs stand up to the main challenges of a pandemic-riddled scholarly world, it is their adaptability and commitment to their research, in conditions that have been hard even before the pandemic. Indeed, the grim scenario of a secondary epidemic of lost early career scientists, whilst not wholly off the table, seems unlikely to materialise as predicted. They have weathered the storm, but whether COVID-19 is finished with them and how it will exacerbate existing trends, is something we will be in a better position to know after the third and final interview in six months' time.

Readers can learn more about the Harbingers project in their recent report [Harbingers-2: Taking the pulse one year on.](#)

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