Early Career Researchers (A Dialogue)

MARTA F. SUAREZ (DIALOGUE LEAD) (iD)

DOMINIQUE CARLINI VERSINI (iD)

OLIVIA GLAZE (iD)

JENNIFER LYNCH (iD)

MARINA RABADÁN GÓMEZ (iD)

SANDRA STRIGEL (iD)

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ABSTRACT

This dialogue approaches the experiences and reflections of early career researchers (ECRs), that is, those academics who have completed their PhDs either recently or within the last 5–7 years. The dialogue brings to the forefront recollections of how the COVID pandemic changed research and teaching practices in higher education, emphasising, in particular, the challenges affecting ECRs, who often are on precarious contracts, are still developing their own pedagogical approaches, and have not yet built a network of support. These circumstances make the experiences of ECRs different from those of more experienced academics and university teachers. The dialogues aim to bring to the discussion how these experiences have shaped the way that ECRs engage with research and teaching. The dialogue brings interesting reflections on the way that the aftermath of the pandemic has brought more inclusive practices for participation, promoted collaborations, and inspired novel teaching approaches. However, it also notes how ECRs have been left in many cases to their own initiatives and without adequate mentorship or support, often overloaded by added challenges and feelings of isolation. Finally, the dialogue suggests improvements to current higher education practices and policies, which can significantly and positively impact the development of ECRs.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Marta F. Suarez
Dialogue Lead, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK
M.Suarez@mmu.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

The Early Career Researcher (ECR) dialogue included six participants who are considered early career researchers, that is, academics who have recently completed their PhDs and are usually engaged in both teaching and research. Some completed their PhDs during lockdown, some had just submitted the thesis by then, and a few were impacted by the pandemic and finished in the last couple of years. Yet all of us saw teaching and research impacted by the pandemic and what followed.

Setting up this dialogue was challenging. I had initially planned to have a group of 7–8 academics covering a wide range of subjects within culture and language. Finding ECRs who were willing to spend a few days discussing the state of their subject area proved to be difficult, and I received many emails declining participation because of workload issues and ECRs being overwhelmed with publication plans, teaching preparation and administrative tasks. The initial desire to generate a balanced dialogue with regard to gender, location and stages of career had to be modified as people started to decline the invitations. In the end, the dialogue was composed of six women, including myself, all at the very early stages of their careers. This composition highlights what other research has noted, that women tend to take on tasks that are not very clearly related to promotion (Barrett and Barrett; Ronksley-Pavia et al.) and those that relate to a higher focus on student satisfaction, learning and well-being (Deem). Indeed, the discussions highlighted great efforts to make teaching inclusive and relevant to students, while trying to balance this work with research, precarious contracts and childcare commitments. The days chosen to hold the dialogue were also affected by strikes, which forced us to postpone these to non-strike days. However, this also meant that most of us had many other tasks waiting for the strikes to end, and so we had to postpone once more. Finally, the dialogues took place during April 2023. I speak for all of us when I say it was a great experience. It felt dynamic and it was very enlightening.

The academics taking part in this dialogue are (in alphabetical order of surname):

Dr Dominique Carlini Versini, Assistant Professor in French at Durham University, whose research explores French women's writing and filmmaking. Dominique has extensive experience teaching French language and culture modules, having taught at Durham, Kent, Limerick and the University of London Institute in Paris.

Dr Olivia Glaze is AHRC Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, having previously taught Portuguese at the University of Oxford, where she also holds a Lectureship in Academic Skills. Olivia's research engages with contemporary Portuguese literature, film and photography in the context of colonial periods and their legacies.

Dr Jennifer Lynch is a Seasonal Lecturer at Liverpool John Moores, where she teaches subjects related to Japanese Studies. She researches aspects of Japanese art and visual culture across the centuries, including contemporary pop culture. Jennifer is a committee member and newsletter editor for Japan Society North West.

Dr Marina Rabadán Gómez is a Senior Lecturer in Spanish at the University of Liverpool. Her research explores new methodologies for teaching and learning languages, the use of translation and interpreting in language teaching, and the use of action research to support teacher training. She also holds qualified teaching status for Spain and the UK.

Dr Sandra Strigel teaches German at the University of Manchester and also at the Open University, where she works as an Associate Lecturer. Her research explores areas of linguistics and pedagogy. She was until recently part of the teacher advisory board on an Erasmus+ funded research designing a "Global Citizenship and Multilingual Competences toolkit". Sandra is also a qualified teacher for secondary schools.

Dr Marta F. Suarez, lead of the dialogue, is a Lecturer in Latin American Cultural Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research focuses on screen media and representation, both from Spanish-speaking countries and anglophone ones.

The dialogue explores questions around changes to research practices, networking, spaces for teaching and research, the use of digital tools, and the biggest challenges faced by early career researchers in recent and present times.

The questions included in this dialogue were:

1. Do you think that the pandemic has changed research practices? If so, how?

2. How has the pandemic affected social aspects of academia? For example, how has it impacted networking and attending conferences? Are there online tools that have allowed you to engage virtually with these activities?

3. Now that we have (mostly) returned to on-campus teaching, have you also returned to the office to do research? Have you changed the way that you work as a consequence of the pandemic?

4. Has the use of digital tools been innovative/creative for your research and teaching practices? Have you found any digital tools and social networks as a consequence of the pandemic and, if so, have they helped or created new challenges?

5. What do you think are the biggest challenges deriving from the pandemic that ECRs face at the moment? What would help to solve them? What can HE do to help ECRs in language subjects?

RESEARCH PRACTICES

QUESTION 1: DO YOU THINK THAT THE PANDEMIC HAS CHANGED RESEARCH PRACTICES? IF SO, HOW?

Jennifer Lynch

In terms of my own personal research, I would say it has, but at subtle levels. My work is mostly theory based, but being situated within History of Art, attending exhibitions and other similar events was a large part of my research process. That being said, with a focus on Japanese art, online exhibition and collection information were always a large part of my research, so reverting to this completely during the pandemic was not a major shift, especially as many museums/galleries spent the time updating their online presence and collection searches. Many even extended this to 3D virtual tours of their exhibition spaces – so in some ways this was a real advantage as I was able to explore exhibitions as part of my research that I would not have been able to physically attend.

I think attitudes towards research practice may have shifted as well. As people were forced to engage with online platforms etc., new ways of connecting and adapting research seemed to be accepted instead of a more "this must be completed in person" point of view. The need for breaks and time away from "research grind" seemed to be realised in some instances more readily as well – perhaps not being able to separate between "office" and "home" impacted research processes. Though being online, academic Twitter presented the other side of this, with others emphasising the amount of research outputs they were suddenly able to engage with by being "at home". As I was only completing my thesis during the pandemic, others may have wider research practice insights.

Marta F. Suarez

I have also found academic Twitter a great resource for maintaining networks. I was drawn to social media as a way to connect with others but also to find out about events and research that were happening elsewhere. Beyond that, I think one aspect that has changed as a consequence of the pandemic is that many libraries digitised more content and this has helped me do more research from home and rely less on having to go to campus.

Sandra Strigel

Similar to Jennifer, my (pre-)pandemic research experience is based largely around the completion of my doctorate, so others might be in a better position to comment on how the pandemic has changed research practices. However, one area where I saw the pandemic have an obvious impact in my discipline concerns some of the topics that were being researched. One of my key interests is classroom interaction in language learning, and it was interesting to see how quickly researchers responded to lockdown learning and began exploring interaction in virtual classroom settings.

I also agree with Jennifer that new ways of connecting have become more acceptable. I have found that this applies to the research projects/teams I have been involved with and where communication has been largely virtual. But it also affects how research is disseminated and shared. During the pandemic, for example, I was given the opportunity to present my doctoral research online to postgraduate students in my department and I was amazed at how many part-time students, who had previously struggled to come to such research seminars due to work and/or childcare commitments, were able to attend. This mirrors some of the observations related to attendance at online conferences. Going forward, it would be good if more inclusive practices were kept up in the research community.

Having said that, when it comes to other research practices, such as data collection and interacting with research participants, I do think that face-to-face engagement can be key to building relationships and trust. This of course depends on the research area, but I think there are some research procedures where virtual connection is not sufficient and a return to pre-pandemic practices is essential.

Marta F. Suarez

That is a very important point. Were there any strategies that you used or were aware of in the context of interacting with research participants online? Is there anything that we have learned from this?

Sandra Strigel

The research project I was mainly involved in took place after the restrictions were lifted, so face-to-face interaction became possible again. We discussed what would be the best way to run a survey and, in the end, decided to collect data both face-to-face and online. This was based on our pre-pandemic experiences that response rates can be higher in face-to-face settings. When I collected the data, I was reminded of how important rapport is when engaging with research participants – explaining clearly what the purpose of the research is, getting informed consent, answering questions, etc. – and this worked really well in the face-to-face setting. The same information was, of course, also provided in the online version, but I think it does make a difference to people if they can speak to someone who can answer all their questions rather than reading it by themselves. Still, it was also good to have the online questionnaire to reach a wider audience. In terms of online interaction, I did a follow-up interview with a participant on Zoom – but again, this was on the basis of face-to-face interactions that had happened previously, so it is difficult for me to comment on specific strategies used when interacting with participants solely online. Maybe some of the other contributors have more experience with this?

Marina Rabadán

My experience was similar to Sandra's. My own research project at the time of the pandemic was already past the data collection stage and I had been able to collect all my data face-to-face. However, I did take part in other research projects, either as an assistant or as a participant during these months, and the alternative was always an online questionnaire with a follow-up interview on Zoom. I was also once given the opportunity for a pre-questionnaire meeting with the PI to ask any questions I might have about the research project. I do not think many participants chose to do this, but I think that it can definitely help to build and maintain rapport with participants.

Olivia Glaze

As with Jennifer and Sandra, I was halfway through my DPhil when the pandemic started. Luckily, I was working on contemporary literature, so my research wasn't as disrupted as those who needed to do fieldwork, be in the archives, or handle older manuscripts. I benefited from libraries digitising their collections and this is something that I continue to benefit from. I'm currently working in Film Studies and have found it incredibly useful that so many archives have moved large parts of their film collections online as a result of the pandemic. Going back to the ever-present theme of ECRs and limited funding, this allows research to be done without having to make multiple trips abroad. I think a balance between online and in-person archival work is preferable – it would feel odd to be carrying out a project and potentially never make an actual

field trip abroad. But as has previously been mentioned, I think the key point of this newer, online archival access is that it gives researchers options based on their personal situations.

Marta F. Suarez

Absolutely, I have had the same experience and I think it is important that content is made available online, archives are digitised, and more material is available on open access.

Olivia Glaze

I agree with Sandra that most research dissemination is now online, and this has allowed me to attend far more research seminars, conferences and keynote lectures than before the pandemic. Sharing our research in this way also allows us to access a more international research community – which feels critical for the Modern Languages community! I have seen contributions from Brazilian, Mozambican and North American colleagues that I would never have been able to see otherwise. It will be interesting to observe whether our ability to collaborate online and engage with work taking place across the globe will help to "decentre" Western academia in the Portuguese field.

Marta F. Suarez

This is a very important point, on decentralising academia from the Global Minority (often referred to as Global North or Western countries) and bringing voices from the Global Majority (often referred to as Global South) into the discussion in a more balanced way. We are in the process of decolonising the curriculum in many institutions, and the ability to invite guest speakers from countries around the world can really contribute to enriching the subject's teaching and learning.

Jennifer Lynch

I agree, as Olivia said, that despite the advancement of online research outputs/access and the advantages that this brings, a balance with being able to still access in-person aspects of research, such as field trips, is very important.

Dominique Carlini Versini

My research experience was similar to the ones described above. Doing research in contemporary French Studies, I could carry out my research using online resources. It is, of course, a luxury that many researchers in other disciplines cannot afford. Unlike other contributors, I had already completed my doctoral studies when the pandemic struck. I had been contemplating the possibility of publishing my thesis as a monograph for a year, and I think it probably made it easier for me to work on the proposal and to obtain an incredibly fast response from the publisher, as we were all inside! This is not to diminish the difficulty and extremely negative impact that the pandemic had on other researchers, and notably on female colleagues with children (see, for instance, Viglione).

As noted by Olivia, the question of funding and accessibility is also central to understanding the impact of the pandemic on research practice. Although we are now moving back to more face-to-face interaction, it is good to see that many events are still accessible online or in a hybrid format. I hope that these inclusive practices will be kept in the future.

Marta F. Suarez

I completely agree. We are currently organising a symposium at my institution and we decided that it should be a hybrid event (online and in-person). This has increased the number of contributions and proposals that we have received, as well as the diversity of the presenters, who are from all over the world.

Marina Rabadán

Just as colleagues have noted, changes in relation to dissemination and accessibility brought in by the pandemic have been, I believe, in general quite positive, and I also hope that all forms of "digital access" are here to stay. I also agree with the point made that face-to-face interactions are valuable and needed, both in respect to establishing collaborations/networking and also in relation to data collection, whether it be field trips or interviews with participants.

Much like Sandra's, my research interests relate to actual teaching practice and therefore the changes in my area of study were immediate. Research analysing the responses to, and the effects of, those changes was quick, and I felt, on the one hand, incredibly lucky to have access to so much information and myriad possibilities to integrate in my own practice as well as new angles to shape my research. On the other hand, the sheer speed at which everything happened was sometimes overwhelming and I feel that it still resonates now, three years on. Partly because of those blurred lines between work and leisure time, partly because of the immediacy of accessing permissions, resources or data, it seems to me that we are now expected to complete research projects quicker, that we have lost some of that very valuable "idle" time which is so necessary for creativity and innovation to happen and that we were able to find when travelling or attending in-person meetings, training, etc.

Marta F. Suarez

Marina makes a great point here. I used to use my daily commute to think about and unpack aspects of my research, watch videos with interviews or international lectures, or just wind down after a long day at work. I do feel that we are losing the thinking time, which is so necessary to develop arguments, as sometimes there is an expectation that if it is your working day, you are available for a Teams call as long as you are not teaching. Students are also more likely to arrange a 1:1 over Teams instead of coming to the office, which means I am probably seeing more students now than I did before.

Jennifer Lynch

I definitely agree about the speed at which changes took place and how that has become such an integrated part of research/teaching life some years on. As Marina and Marta stated, the blurred lines have really impacted the time to think and consider a myriad of things. I, too, used the commute to catch up on the latest research from books to digital networks, whereas now I have to actively create time to do this around work, which can be tricky, as Marina and Marta have highlighted.

NETWORKING AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

QUESTION 2: HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF ACADEMIA? FOR EXAMPLE, HOW HAS IT IMPACTED NETWORKING AND ATTENDING CONFERENCES? ARE THERE ONLINE TOOLS THAT HAVE ALLOWED YOU TO ENGAGE VIRTUALLY WITH THESE ACTIVITIES?

Olivia Glaze

For me, the question of networking and conferences is multifaceted. On the one hand, yes, you lose the possibility of coffee break/lunch-time networking or discussions and the feeling of experts being together in one physical space sharing ideas. Yet, on the other, conferences have often been a bit of a nightmare for ECRs. There is never any real funding to help you attend, and when you're fighting against short-term contracts, periods of unemployment and gig economy salaries, travelling around to national or international conferences is a cost that many just can't pull together. That's before we even get into the discussion of the accessibility issues of most pre-pandemic conferences. Many ECRs who might have a disability or carer responsibilities were certainly feeling the inaccessibility of conferences long before the pandemic hit. So, in many ways, online conferences have encouraged us all to think about the accessibility of our events more generally and have in fact opened up the space to allow more ECRs to attend and share their work, where they perhaps wouldn't have been able to otherwise. With many then sending a quick email to a colleague who they'd like to connect with afterwards. I often wonder if this notion of the in-person conference being a haven for networking is a bit overplayed… We often want them to be far more than they actually are.

With socialising in general, I think the pandemic has definitely affected the amount of access that we have to our own ECR peers. Not from the point of view of professional networking, but more just to make friends and be around people who are going through similar struggles. Due to the pandemic, I think the expectation for ECRs on temporary contracts to up sticks and relocate every one or two years is changing. This is a welcome relief to many, but the flip side means you have fewer ECRs actually on campus.

Sandra Strigel

I agree with Olivia's point above that the pandemic has sharpened the focus on accessibility and that it has been easier for ECRs to attend and present at online conferences. With regard to the networking opportunities at online conferences, I attended a German teachers' conference recently, which used SpatialChat as its platform, and this successfully managed to recreate some of the social and networking aspects that we are used to from face-to-face conferences. SpatialChat allowed attendees to easily move around the virtual room for introductions and informal chats in small groups and time was factored in for coffee breaks with designated chat rooms, which made networking and meeting colleagues much easier than at other online conferences that I had attended previously and which had used conventional breakout rooms.

Jennifer Lynch

I completely agree with Olivia's points above. Before the pandemic, I attended as many in-house conferences as possible, as PGRs were encouraged to do so, and they were usually free for those studying/working at the institution at the time. It was mainly a way of connecting with PGR and ECR peers, as at the time I was completing my PhD thesis while getting some presenting experience in different settings. However, I only attended non-LJMU conferences if I was accepted to present, due to the costs of attendance and travel. They were great experiences but also quite anxiety-inducing as they were much larger events!

I found that online conferences or lecture series events have been quite successful in allowing more people to attend or take part. They allow interaction in different ways through chat functions, but also access to talks from all over the world that beforehand were very restrictive. I haven't presented at or attended a full online conference, but I have presented papers online for other non-academic events and found them to be enjoyable experiences.

From a socialising aspect specifically, I again agree with Olivia. I was moving through the write-up phase of my PhD as the pandemic hit and went from being on campus at least three days a week, surrounded by peers, taking part in different levels of social interaction and work, to completely online from home. At first, efforts were maintained to set up online meet-ups, etc., but as workloads increased, and it became clear that this would not just be a short-term lockdown, socialising between PGRs/ECRs became a more difficult endeavour. For me, having completed my PhD, this has continued as I am no longer tied to an office space to share experiences, research advice or general conversation about work with fellow ECRs.

Dominique Carlini Versini

I completely agree with the point about access to pre-pandemic conferences for ECRs made by Olivia. It was never easy in the first place!

In terms of social aspects, I also agree with Olivia and Jennifer. Like Sandra, my experience of networking in breakout rooms has not been particularly positive. However, thanks to the UCFL Special Interest Group (SIG) for Early Career Academics (ECA) that I co-chaired during the pandemic, I was able to form and engage with a real network of researchers, which has been a great source of support (https://university-council-modern-languages.org/early-career-academics/). In addition to organising events to support ECAs, we also held a monthly social, the "ECA coffee mornings", which gave us the possibility to connect and chat about our research, but also about our everyday lives. The SIG has its own mentoring scheme, with many senior colleagues who volunteered to offer their help and guidance. During lockdown, I used the scheme to discuss an article I was writing with a mentor, who read my article and advised me on how to tackle the revisions. These various networks of solidarity that emerged during the pandemic have been very helpful, both in terms of my research and to keep a sense of community alive during extremely challenging times!

This dimension of online solidarity and care networks is also something I am exploring in my research following the pandemic. In 2021 I co-organised the conference "Feminism(s) in the Age of Covid-19 and Beyond". The online event, and the forthcoming publication resulting from it, show that the pandemic triggered the emergence of new online solidarity and care networks formed by female activists and researchers to support each other.

Marta F. Suarez

The ECR social group sounds interesting. How did you come up with the idea? Was it a consequence of the pandemic? Was it something that you had thought about before and then the pandemic created the perfect environment for it? Did you know the people who formed the network or did you have to "recruit" for it? What do you think are the challenges in setting up this kind of group and how have you solved them?

I was administrating the BAFTSS (British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies) PhD and ECR Facebook group, which gave me a bit of a platform to meet other people and see what other events were happening elsewhere. Unfortunately, I have not been able to participate in many social events, as it was a challenge to complete the PhD, work full time, and attempt the home-schooling that was happening at the time. I think, in general, most universities have a very outdated expectation of PGRs and ECRs' profiles, where they might expect that they are available full time, with no other work and certainly no caring responsibilities of any kind. I think there needs to be more support for ECRs and PGRs who are juggling family, work and studies. So I have struggled to join social events or just attend campus for a coffee, as I am often on the go.

Dominique Carlini Versini

The special interest group mentioned above was founded by Charlotte Hammond and Daniel A. Finch-Race, who were both precarious early career academics in French Studies at the time. They created the group with the support of UCML (University Council of Modern Languages, now UCFL) and with the intention of drafting a Code of Best Practice in relation to ECA employment that Modern Languages schools could adopt. Although it was founded in 2020, it was not a consequence of the pandemic, but of the very dire situation of early career academics in Modern Languages in the UK today. They launched a call for participants to join the group, which is how I initially took part. Shortly after the group was created, Charlotte and Daniel sadly had to quit chairing it due to their struggle as ECAs in British academia, which, I suppose, ironically highlighted the importance of the group. I took over from them with my co-chair, Hilary Potter, who was based in German Studies at the time (she no longer holds an academic role). Liam Lewis, another ECA in French Studies, also took a very active role as our rep on the executive committee. We chose to adopt the term "ECA" at the time, to be more inclusive of all career paths represented in the group. I think what you said about the pandemic creating the "perfect environment" is exactly right. The move online not only provided us with the opportunity, but there was also a need to organise online workshops and socials, so it became more than writing the Code of Best Practice, although it was one of our main projects, which we did complete and launch in 2022 (see Code of Best Practice for ECA Employment in the tools list). Now we need Modern Languages schools to adopt it!

I didn't know the people who formed the group. We recruited them using language area mailing lists and with the help of UCFL networks. We also created a Twitter page, which was used to promote the group as well as anything of interest to ECAs in Modern Languages.

I would say that one of the main challenges we encountered is that the very reason why the group exists, the precariousness of the job market in our fields, also makes it difficult to recruit people to engage with the group actively and over a sustained period of time. Many early career academics move to other countries or leave academia, so it is not always easy to run long-term projects. At the same time, workload issues that are so pervasive in academia represent an additional difficulty. We didn't really have a solution for these problems; we simply accepted that they existed and tried to give flexibility and support to our members. And in my opinion, this is the greatest success of the group; it provides a sense of community and belonging to ECAs in Modern Languages, which we desperately need at the moment.

Regarding outdated expectations in relation to ECRs' and PGRs' profiles, I certainly agree. Although there are currently a lot of welcome discussions around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in British universities, I think there is still a real struggle to turn them into concrete actions.

Marina Rabadán

I agree with much of what has been said. In terms of accessibility, for ECRs especially but also for many academics (not everyone who has been a [language] lecturer for years is on a high [even decent!] salary), having the possibility to attend and present online has expanded the scope of conferences we can attend and the opportunities for networking.

I am a member of the executive committee of the International Association for the Study of Spanish in Society (SiS), which has a focus on sociolinguistics in a very broad sense. Years ago it used to be an association with plenty of colleagues in America, both in the Spanish-speaking countries and in the US, where the field is very popular. During our last in-person conference in 2019 we observed that the number of colleagues coming from America or indeed from Spain had gone down. In 2021 our biannual conference was due to take place in Liverpool, but instead of organising a fully online conference, we organised a series of webinars throughout several months. This allowed us to reconnect with colleagues in other countries and we also made a conscious decision to put the focus on ECRs, by inviting ECR colleagues to give presentations and by dropping all fees for them. In 2023 we will host the first in-person conference since the pandemic, and although it is not designed to be a fully hybrid event, presenters have the opportunity to deliver their papers and attend keynote presentations online. We have noticed that with this simple change, the number of presenters who eventually end up pulling out from the conference has been reduced dramatically, as those who have encountered issues with funding or travelling have reverted to the online option.

Having said all this, I stand by my reflection above about finding a (head)space for creativity when attending in-person events which I definitely miss in online events.

Marta F. Suarez

I also miss some kind of creative connection, collaborative thinking, brainstorming, if you like. I personally feel that we have lost some ability to relax and connect with new people in more informal settings. I think we are getting it back, but I can also see a big difference in the way that my students connect with each other. Those entering this year, with no restrictions in place, have developed a bond that students in other years seem to lack. I think they lost the ability to just be in the same space talking about interests, and when they interacted it was for a specific purpose connected to a classroom task. I feel we have also lost a couple of years of that kind of interaction.

WORKING HABITS AFTER THE PANDEMIC

QUESTION 3: NOW THAT WE HAVE (MOSTLY) RETURNED TO ON-CAMPUS TEACHING, HAVE YOU ALSO RETURNED TO THE OFFICE TO DO RESEARCH? HAVE YOU CHANGED THE WAY THAT YOU WORK AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC?

Olivia Glaze

Pre-pandemic, I would never work from home, practically as an enforced rule. That obviously changed through necessity, and now I spend 95% of my time working from home. But I think this idea of "the office" is revealing from the ECR perspective. I'm based in London and am on a four-day-a-week, one-year research contract at Exeter, and so it was unfeasible for me to move to Exeter for just a year. Plus as the project is split across multiple universities anyway, the team supported my flexible working. Even though Exeter have provided a large shared-office space, because of the nature of my contract I can't actually use it. My flat and the British Library are my "offices", which brings up the question of the spaces ECRs can utilise when working remotely due to short-term/part-time contracts rather than as a personal choice. I'm very fortunate to be able to have feasible spaces to use as makeshift offices, but for many ECRs this isn't the case. Many hop from café to café or between public libraries. I don't know for sure because I was still doing my DPhil during the pandemic, but this feels like a more recent phenomenon to me. The lonely digital nomad ECR. I think the expectation pre-pandemic was that you would just relocate regardless, and encounter all the separate challenges that came with that, but I could be wrong. It seems to me that now, whether temporarily employed or not, lots of academics are coming into campus to teach and then returning home to do research and marking.

Sandra Strigel

My current situation is different as I work on campus most days. I finished my doctorate a couple of weeks before we went into the first lockdown and had therefore spent a considerable amount of time studying at home prior to the pandemic. At times, this had felt isolating and Olivia's point

about loneliness certainly strikes a chord with me. Towards the end of my doctorate, I began to miss the social interaction that an on-campus job brings. I was therefore keen to return to the office as soon as I found a post that provided me with the opportunity to work on campus. I also find that working from the office provides me with a better work–life balance as it is easier to switch off once I get home. I have two children, so working from home can be challenging.

Having said that, I know that I have been lucky this academic year to have a job that allows me to easily commute between home and campus and that provides an office space. As Olivia points out, this is not necessarily the norm for all ECRs. Since completing my doctorate I have been in mostly fixed-term posts, and for some of them I have not had the opportunity to use an office but have been completely home-based, with all team interaction being virtual.

It has been interesting to see how different institutions/teams have dealt with this. Some have proactively created support structures, for example through using various digital tools and/or (peer) mentors to help with the integration of new team members into virtual workplaces, which has helped to build professional relationships quickly. I think this is particularly important for ECRs who might have to change posts and integrate into new teams regularly, as such support structures can help alleviate some of the disadvantages of the "lonely digital nomad ECR" lifestyle described above.

Jennifer Lynch

I have definitely changed my research habits due to the pandemic. Before I was on campus at least three days a week (due to being a part-time PGR), working in a shared PGR office space. As lockdowns were lifted, I only returned to the office to collect belongings and continued to work from home, as I found this to now be a better way for me to work. Essentially, I had got used to working in my own space, and as the focus was completing the writing/editing of my thesis at the time, I felt that the commute took time away from this in a way that it had not previously. The fact that the PGRs I had shared the office with for years beforehand had completed and moved on during the pandemic was a factor in this I believe. Whereas before I knew there would be people I could share writing difficulties with or ask for advice, that network was no longer immediate in the moment of the space. It had moved online if I needed it. So, for me working from home remained my "go-to" for research. I only went to campus for "in-person" needs – such as when on-campus teaching was reinstated or to go to the library. Meetings remained largely online for me as it had become a more convenient means of connecting for my supervisors as well.

After completing my thesis, this has stayed the same. I currently have a sessional contract, but the majority of that work is conducted from home, with only a handful of on-campus teaching duties. Pre-pandemic almost all of my teaching duties required on-campus attendance, or museum/gallery visits with students. So, this impacted my research habits pre-pandemic; as I was already needed on campus, it was easier to do my research around this from the office space provided for PGRs. Now that I am an ECR, there is no specific office space for me to use on-campus, though if I was required on campus more regularly I am sure that there would be options made available.

As Olivia and Sandra point out, loneliness and isolation are factors that really impact PGRs/ECRs. It was something that other PGRs and I discussed and held events about pre-pandemic in order to help avoid isolation. However, the pandemic really impacted this and brought about an increase in loneliness and isolation for many people due to not having a shared space or on-campus space to utilise. I think because of this, the working from home/cafés/libraries mentality has just become a norm for many people that beforehand we were trying to negate. I know it has for me; despite having that experience of office space, the pandemic has created a mindset of "working from home is best for me", despite knowing that working in a shared office space was also successful.

Dominique Carlini Versini

I was used to working from home during my PhD, which I completed in 2018, so this is not a habit I developed as a result of the pandemic. Currently, I hold an assistant professorship at Durham, which is education-focused, so my ability to do research during term time really depends on my teaching schedule. I usually do not go to the office to do research, as I personally always found it easier to work from home, although it can come with the solitude mentioned above.

I have observed a difference in the way that colleagues and I work since the pandemic, in the fact that there seems to be an increased desire for social interaction between colleagues at the office. As a result, the office has been a particularly friendly and chatty place since the return to face-to-face teaching!

As Sandra notes, institutions and teams have developed various initiatives to adapt the way we work. In my school, we now have a mix of online and in-person meetings. In terms of teaching, all our lectures are recorded, which is very inclusive, but also leads to poor attendance, particularly for early-morning lectures! As for ECRs specifically, as observed by Sandra, I think it is crucial for schools to provide mentoring schemes, both online and in-person, to support new colleagues' work and integration, even more so in the current climate. This mentoring work needs to be recognised and properly workloaded so it can be fully beneficial for both junior and senior colleagues.

Marina Rabadán

I find Dominique's observation very interesting about the office becoming a more social and chatty place post-pandemic, as I have experienced the complete opposite! At my institution, or at least in my department, it seems that colleagues have got even more used to working from home than they used to do pre-pandemic. I think most people, myself included, tend to stay at home or go to libraries for research, while we all use our offices for the teaching and admin-related part of our jobs. With most of the admin being done online now (most notably meetings) and some of the teaching or supervision staying online, our corridors are definitely quieter.

Personally, I was not great at working from home before the pandemic, because I have always felt a change of scene helped me divide work and personal life and find a balance. I still prefer libraries for research work, but partly because of the pandemic and partly because I also finished my PhD during the lockdown periods, I have definitely learned to work from home and appreciate doing so at least one day a week now.

Marta F. Suarez

Several of you have commented on ECR mentoring schemes. Is this something implemented by your university or something that you have sought externally? At my institution, they have just made it a requirement that all ECRs should have a mentor and 20% allocation for research. I think this is a good move towards supporting ECRs. Beyond that, I was aware of mentoring schemes via AHGBI (Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland) and WISPS (Women in Spanish and Portuguese Studies), with also a "New Connections" scheme through BAFTSS that allows ECRs to visit institutions as guest speakers to talk about their research.

Jennifer Lynch

The Teaching and Learning Academy in my institution offers a variety of sessions to help enhance teaching practices and development. There is also a Coaching and Mentorship scheme with various programmes and initiatives for staff across the university, including links with the EMCC (European Mentoring and Coaching Council), Aurora Women's Leadership Programme (Part of Advance HE), StellarHE's BAME Leadership Programme and other sessions linked with the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team. There are also faculty-specific sessions/advice that are run/sent out by staff that I believe would fall under mentorship for teaching and research. There is also a mandatory requirement that all new academic staff with less than three years' experience in HE have a mentor, which is organised through discussions with line managers.

Dominique Carlini Versini

Similarly to what is described above, there is a mentoring scheme for all staff in my school, which is compulsory for early career academics. The Durham Centre for Academic Development also has a mentoring scheme for academics enrolled in the various stages of the Higher Education Academy fellowship programme. I am also part of the First Gen network, which has its own mentoring scheme. So I would say there is a lot of support available at Durham. As I mentioned above, the UCFL ECA SIG also has its own mentoring scheme, which is open to all Modern Languages ECAs. The scheme can be used as a one-off or as part of a year-long process. There

are also several subject-specific ones, such as the one run by the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France (ASMCF) aimed at ECAs in French Studies; or by Women in French US and Women in French Australia, which are open to early career academics working on Francophone women artists everywhere.

DIGITAL TOOLS AND ONLINE RESOURCES

QUESTION 4: HAS THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS BEEN INNOVATIVE/CREATIVE FOR YOUR RESEARCH AND TEACHING PRACTICES? HAVE YOU FOUND ANY DIGITAL TOOLS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC AND, IF SO, HAVE THEY HELPED OR CREATED NEW CHALLENGES?

Sandra Strigel

For me, the pandemic has challenged me to rethink how I embed digital tools into my teaching and, overall, this has been a very positive experience. Pre-pandemic, I often used digital tools as an "add-on" to my face-to-face teaching, for example as part of a VLE resource bank with additional digital materials for students to use during their own time. But when teaching online, I had to rethink how to integrate the technology in a way that would help recreate or at least support the interactive nature that is so important in a language classroom. Like Olivia said, Padlet was really useful for this, but I also used other tools such as quizzes/polls and began recording my own video/audio material and asked students to do the same. Through this, I also learned more about editing – I mainly used Audacity and YouTube Studio for that – which has since come in very useful, for example when recording presentations for job interviews or conferences. The development of my digital skills has also led to further employment opportunities for me; I continue to be involved in distance tuition and until recently worked as a research assistant on a project aimed at creating open access digital learning materials for learners of German (see German Conversations OA materials in the resource list). As part of this project, I used H5P, a tool that allows the creation of interactive materials that can be embedded in VLEs and websites (https://h5p.com/).

I continue to use digital tools to add interactive elements to my face-to-face teaching post-pandemic. However, some students seem to have become tired of using digital tools. For example, a group of students recently told me they prefer "old-fashioned" methods of writing down/revising vocabulary rather than digital flashcards, which I found interesting. Some students also seem a bit overwhelmed by the amount of material that is now accessible to them and need quite a bit of guidance on what digital tools/resources might be particularly useful for them.

It was interesting to read that my colleagues have found Twitter so useful. I do have a Twitter account, but I now realise I do not use it often enough. This has been a good reminder to get back on there!

Jennifer Lynch

Sandra, that is an interesting point. I spoke with a friend recently about their language learning habits and techniques, and they also mentioned flashcards, but in the "traditional" sense of physical cards alongside digital means. Is this preference a rejection of digital-only from the pandemic years, or is it a mindset of "physical" for study is the "best way" due to the overwhelming amount of digital tools/resources that we now have access to, as you mention? I have noticed a larger shift in digital notetaking with laptops etc. in lectures/sessions since on-campus teaching was reinstated, but still a lot of students are opting for "traditional" notebooks and pens.

I think digital tools can really elevate study and teaching when used effectively as you have been discussing, so this is something I will be examining further for my own teaching thanks to your and Olivia's discussions!

Sandra Strigel

That is an interesting question. I am not sure what the reasons are either, maybe a combination of both? For some of my students with specific learning and visual needs it can be quite difficult to read on the screen, so they prefer physical cards to digital ones. I think this is something to

be aware of with a lot of the digital tools. For some students the use of such tools can be more challenging than for others. As teachers/lecturers we need to bear this in mind.

Olivia Glaze

I have had students rave about using Anki for digital flashcards and say that this really helps with vocab learning.

Jennifer Lynch

Thank you both. Based on this, I think training and support for students using digital tools etc. is just as important as staff training/access, so they are aware of alternatives and what works best for them. Alongside this, more training options for staff to be able to support this is essential.

Marina Rabadán

Jennifer, I have also noted an increase in laptop notetaking, but at the same time have had the same experience as my colleague Sandra when students have told me that they prefer to make their flashcards using actual paper cards! Some continue to use Quizlet and some are moving to Anki. I think the takeaway is that we have all discovered new ways to do the same old (useful) stuff and that there is a bigger variety of resources now for students to choose from. I also fully agree that we need to be mindful of the need for training for lecturers as well as for students – the "digital natives" concept is often confusing and confused – and to avoid overwhelming them and ourselves with too much screen time.

Olivia Glaze

I was teaching during the very early stages of the pandemic, and I have to say at that point I was focused more on getting through the week and checking-in with the students than being particularly innovative in my teaching! But I have always found Padlet to be useful both in classes and workshops with students, and meetings with colleagues. You essentially send out a link and everyone can type their own comment, which are then all shown in individual, anonymous boxes on your screen. It's an easy way to get a quick temperature check of student understanding or to quickly collect ideas in a visual way. It also helps avoid that tumbleweed silence after you've asked a question, and no one wants to answer…! The anonymity seems to take the pressure off. I also use OnceHub for scheduling workshops or one-to-one sessions with students. This really helps avoid the back and forth of emails suggesting times and dates, and it creates an automatic Teams link when needed. It also sends the students a reminder 24 hours before, which never hurts.

I'm not reinventing the wheel here, but I have found academic Twitter to be a really useful way to meet new colleagues during and post-pandemic. I have made some valuable connections that I certainly wouldn't have made otherwise. I think we can all agree that job adverts, funding calls, calls for papers and so on can often be quite badly advertised, or only advertised in very specific places. Twitter has been really useful for me in finding opportunities, or even just interesting events to attend – I always wonder how I haven't come across them, but for some reason so many things still seem to fly under the radar. It also lets me stay up to date with interesting research that colleagues are doing in a very easy way – you don't have to wait until the article or book is actually out.

Jennifer Lynch

I have not utilised many digital tools in my teaching, as my teaching duties shifted heavily during the pandemic. Beforehand in some sessions we had used things like word-cloud or polls to try and encourage interaction with quieter groups, but most of the classes I was involved with had fewer than ten people, so discussions were easier to instigate without additional tools. There were also a lot of site visits to galleries and museums, so most of the time digital tools didn't really factor in (beyond those integrated into the museum/gallery setting already). During the pandemic I tried to make sure the VLE had as much content as possible around the areas I was in charge of, with texts, documentaries etc. being updated constantly. I linked to

a lot of virtual tours of exhibitions, especially as the last sessions I had been involved in before on-campus teaching was shut down were small group exhibition tours/talks. A large group tour and discussion was cancelled due to the pandemic, and would have been the last of the academic year for me. The exhibition was turned into a virtual tour quite quickly, so that was linked to students instead, but in an "in your own time" way, as online teaching was still being established (this was the same week official lockdown was instated in the UK).

Researchwise, I agree with Olivia. Social media, particularly academic Twitter, was vital for keeping up with research in ways mailing lists couldn't. I saw so much more research taking place, evolving, connections being made in real time through Twitter than I did through conferences or calls for papers. I found so many of the PGRs/ECRs I met pre-pandemic through Twitter and was able to keep up with their work this way; it was much better than email in many cases! Also, possibly more importantly, academics from other countries who couldn't necessarily attend UK-based conferences posted about their work, conferences and books so regularly. I might never have found some of these texts or events if it were not for these academics online!

Dominique Carlini Versini

I don't have much to add except that I'm very impressed by the open access digital learning materials shared by Sandra! Like Olivia, I was trying to cope with the move online and to make my classes as engaging as possible on Zoom, so I didn't experiment with many extra digital resources. I did use discussion boards on Learn Ultra as a tool to foster conversations about homework activities during the pandemic, with limited success. This year, the language assistants in the French language first-year module I convene have managed to generate much more interest in discussion boards. They use a video or an article as a prompt each week and ask students to share their opinions and impressions about them via the discussion boards. The exercise has proven very successful, encouraging the shyer students to contribute, and receiving up to 57 replies (out of a cohort of 124) during one of the weeks of the first term!

Although, as mentioned above, the digital allows unprecedented access to resources and events, including for our students, as Sandra notes, students seem to be experiencing a form of fatigue with the number and wealth of resources available. This is something I have observed while co-organising a creative writing contest for undergraduate students. With my co-organisers, we set up a series of free online writing workshops to help students with their submissions last academic year. As the year progressed, attendance at the workshops decreased and we had to cancel the final one. Thankfully, students still engaged with the contest itself and we received excellent proposals. We have also run a series of free online workshops to support teachers in introducing creative writing in their classroom. The recordings of the workshops are available on the French embassy platform IFProfs for colleagues to use (IFProfs toolbox).

In terms of my research, I wholeheartedly agree with everything that has been said about Twitter! This is the main social network I use professionally, and it has been an invaluable tool to find out about research conducted, grants and events.

Marina Rabadán

In my research, I have not added any new online tools that I wasn't using before, but in teaching and presentations, also at conferences, I have become more experienced with tools such as Padlet, PollEv, Mentimeter and Kahoot. In terms of video conferencing for teaching the preferred tool in my department was Zoom, and for meetings, Teams or Zoom also. I think we've all become proficient users of breakout rooms by now!

I have also learned to use my institution's VLE more proficiently. We have Canvas and its own Studio tool for video recording, and together with the Quizzes tool, these have been lifesavers.

Post-pandemic, my department has moved to a video catalogue of subjects for students to choose from, using Canvas Studio or Zoom to record these. In terms of assessment, we have also incorporated online/remote options. This is a whole new topic and one that lends itself to plenty of debate, but I wanted to note that in relation to assessment, online options have also had a generally positive impact in terms of accessibility. For example, I coordinate the extracurricular and public-facing languages programme at Liverpool, and doing exams online has meant that international students do not need to come back to Liverpool for just one exam after Christmas.

Marta F. Suarez

I will have to check out some of those tools, as I was not aware of many! I have used Padlet effectively and I also like Mentimeter for showing, in a dynamic way, answers to a question. I use Google Docs quite a bit with my students as a way to choose slots for presentations or tutor hours, as that way they can take charge of rescheduling, swapping or cancelling an appointment. Calendly has been useful to arrange meetings, as it integrates with Outlook and the student has complete control of rescheduling and cancelling.

For both teaching and research, I use Microsoft To-Do quite a bit, as a place to dump all the tasks and thoughts that pop up during the day. It works seamlessly with Outlook, so I just right-click on an email and make it a task in my to-do list, or quickly type a few words to remind me to complete a task later on. That way I can go back to whatever I was doing and not lose too much focus.

I think the biggest change was the use of video-conference tools and video-recording for teaching sessions. I was certainly not confident about recording myself delivering a lecture at the time, for example. Now I feel at home recording videos as back-ups for online conferences, or I might decide to upload a video explaining a concept that we could not see in class. I think being forced to use video has helped me develop skills in this area and I am now working with video-essays as a form of research outputs!

I have started to use LinkedIn for networking a lot more. It is probably more of a way of connecting with leadership and management in my university than other academics, but I find that it often tells me more about the direction and strategy of my own university than the all-staff emails. One of the networks that has helped me navigate the world of academia has been WIASN (Women in Academia Support Network), which started on Facebook and grew into the thousands within a couple of days through word of mouth, which speaks to the importance that these networks have. I think you still need to be invited in and answer a few questions about your institution and stage of career. The discussions that happened there around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion really helped me to shape my current role as EDI lead in the department, for example. I also got really good advice on preparing for interviews and online presentations. Reading about other academics' experiences in academia also helped me see what issues are endemic to HE and which ones might just be institutional.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS TO CURRENT ISSUES AFFECTING ECRS

QUESTION 5: WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES DERIVING FROM THE PANDEMIC THAT ECRS FACE AT THE MOMENT? WHAT WOULD HELP TO SOLVE THEM? WHAT CAN HE DO TO HELP ECRS IN LANGUAGE SUBJECTS?

Jennifer Lynch

At the moment I am still trying to work a lot of this out. I am only newly included in the ECR category in some ways, but the changes post-pandemic seem to be around funding and access. In Arts and Humanities, funding seems to be dropping steadily, and as a result work for ECRs seems to be more precarious. I have always been contracted as a sessional (i.e. only for a semester or for one course) for as long as I have been involved in teaching, so that is not new, but the amount of work on offer for ECRs seems to be reducing. This might not be the case, and it might just seem this way to me as I am changing from a PGR who teaches to an ECR. Others involved in the sector for longer may have different or more experience here, but the hours I have available as a sessional have dropped consistently over recent years.

I am not sure what can be done to solve these kinds of issues, or to help in these subjects specifically. I have been lucky that there is a lot of training and skills help in my institution, so if that is a factor in some places, perhaps more access to funding, events, training etc. would be a starting point.

Sandra Strigel

I agree with Jennifer; the precarious work situation is also the biggest challenge from my point of view. Many employment opportunities in academia are based around fixed term and/or zero hour/fractional contracts. I am not sure this is necessarily a consequence of the pandemic as

this situation has existed for longer, but when the pandemic hit, the number of job postings went down considerably, and that was worrying. I feel that this has picked up a little bit again, but it is still a concern. And yes, as Jennifer said, funding, support, training and access to mentorship programmes would be good.

Olivia Glaze

Echoing Jennifer and Sandra, temporary and precarious contracts, together with diminishing job opportunities, feel like the biggest challenges at the moment. Although not caused by the pandemic, I agree that they have been exacerbated as a result. Where universities have tried to recoup money lost during the pandemic, the funding for roles in Modern Languages, and in less common languages like Portuguese especially, has become smaller and smaller. I think I have seen three jobs for Portuguese so far this year, and all were focused on language teaching and were part-time and temporary contracts.

An additional challenge caused by the pandemic that I have noticed personally is the backlog of articles waiting for peer-review. I have multiple articles living in what I would call "peer-review purgatory" – some for over 12 months, and one has actually been 18 months. Perhaps I am just unlucky, but it feels like a trend, and the reason often given is that reviewers can't be found. Where peer-review is done for free, as workloads increase, the requests are very reasonably turned down. Combined with the extra stress and commitments caused by the pandemic, the peer-review process seemed to grind to a halt, and in many ways hasn't seemed to gain momentum since. All academics lose out from a slow peer-review process, but it is particularly detrimental for ECRs on the job hunt. ECRs are incredibly reliant on having a strong publication record for applications to very competitive jobs – I think we all feel a little haunted by the "publish or perish" mantra. I don't think I am the first, or the last, person to say that this process needs to be entirely rethought and academics paid for their peer-review time by publishers.

Dominique Carlini Versini

Indeed, precarious contracts and the neoliberal turn in universities are some of the most serious challenges faced by ECRs today. Universities need to discard the use of hourly paid contracts and we need to keep working together to achieve that. These contracts do not acknowledge the actual work of teachers, in terms of preparation and research, as well as summative and formative marking.

In addition to what has been said by Jennifer, Olivia and Sandra, I think advocacy for Modern Languages and working with schools can play a central part in helping ECRs in language subjects. It is important to make Modern Languages attractive to young people in post-Brexit Britain so that our discipline is sustainable at university level. Of course, this work cannot be done by ECRs alone, and senior colleagues/colleagues on permanent contracts need to actively take it up. Organisations such as UCFL, or subject-specific ones such as AUPHF+ (Association of University Professors and Heads of French) in my field, also play a crucial part in making ML visible and building bridges with partners outside the HE sector.

Olivia Glaze

I completely agree with what Dominique has said here about access and outreach work in schools. This is key to helping boost the dwindling number of students choosing to study languages at university and to understanding the value of these courses. I too see the majority of this work being done by ECRs or colleagues on part-time contracts, and agree that we need to see staff members on permanent contracts engage with this more fully.

Jennifer Lynch

I also agree with Dominique and Olivia's points here around outreach; there are a number of other staff involved in creating these links and additional admin is then required to sustain and develop these connections, which can be forgotten about. More support would lead to more access and increased interest in these subject areas. Also, in relation to the lack of acknowledgement around preparation time etc., I think this is a wider issue, but something that does seem to get lost in discussions around contracts and ECRs, and as such is an important point that Dominique has raised.

Marina Rabadán

I fully agree with Dominique's points – the marketisation of universities in the last decade is driving the quality of jobs down for those of us who have been around for a while, and even more for those entering the profession now. As Sandra points out, this is not particularly a consequence of the pandemic, but the increased workloads that we, mostly implicitly, agreed to during this time seem to have stayed. This seems to be related to universities going into "money-saving mode" at a time of great uncertainty, but there is no reason, from my point of view, to continue with this approach.

I agree with suggestions that have been made such as paying for peer-review work as well as reinforcing outreach participation. I do not have the experience, though, that ECRs are doing all the outreach work – at least this is not the case in my department. It is true, however, that when funding is available and outreach can be paid for (on top of one's contract) it tends to be offered to ECRs simply because they tend to be on fixed term or zero hours contracts. Obviously, the ideal scenario is that no one is on these types of contracts!

Finally, I have observed an increasing trend in Language Studies where ECRs are expected to teach language modules independently of their specialism, during their time as PGRs and beyond. I find this approach in British academia rather ignorant, as they keep assuming, in the twenty-first century, that anyone who speaks a language can teach the language. This stems from a much older problem which is the traditional disregard for specialists in language acquisition, learning and teaching, who are hardly ever seen as researchers in the UK, even if we have a PhD and are active researchers. This would require a bigger change in the system, but I am hopeful that it is one that will be achieved, so language specialists do not have to keep sticking to "teaching only" or in the best-case scenario "teaching and scholarship" contracts and are fully recognised as researchers.

Dominique Carlini Versini

I certainly echo Marina's final point about ECAs being asked to teach language classes regardless of their specialism. This is my experience as a specialist in contemporary women's writing and filmmaking who mostly teaches grammar and writing skills. In addition to the disregard for research in language acquisition noted in the previous section, it seems to create a division and even a hierarchy in departments, where the language teaching is done by "native speakers" of the language, who are often female academics.

REFLECTIONS

Marta F. Suarez

This dialogue has highlighted several key points throughout. While there are too many to summarise in a paragraph, there are some that kept reappearing. Although there are differences in how the pandemic and its aftermath have been experienced by many of us, there were some aspects that were perceived as mostly positive changes. The pandemic led to the development of many digital tools and virtual spaces, which allowed educators to bring better experiences to online teaching, more inclusive events, and new networking opportunities. New teams developed at the university to allow for training in online tools and their integration into teaching practices, at the same time that more resources were digitised and made available to all. Additionally, working from home has made some jobs more accessible to ECRs because they do not require moving city or long commutes.

The participants noted a shift in academic cultures. For example, there is less expectation of being in the office on non-teaching days, more opportunities to do research fieldwork remotely, and more ways to disseminate and announce outputs. The pandemic brought feelings of isolation and disconnection, however, and, to palliate these, many organised or joined networks of support and solidarity.

Some participants noted that while digital tools and environments opened participation to many who had been excluded (such as those with childcare responsibilities, disabilities or work commitments, among others), they have also created the expectation that one will be available during all non-teaching working hours. This assumption about availability has reduced the time required to develop and test ideas, as there is more pressure on delivery.

The need for meaningful breaks from the screen was noted across different topics. For example, while online conferences are more inclusive, the breaks are rarely used effectively for networking and they do not build the rapport and connections that a face-to-face interaction might do. Similarly, the range of new digital tools might have provided academics with many options for interaction and participation, but they might also create screen fatigue in students, and this ignores the needs of some students, who might have difficulties using technology or screens. Indeed, the notion that these tools are improving teaching and learning assumes that the students have digital skills.

The participants made some suggestions to counterbalance the issues that have arisen since the pandemic. Some have already been put into practice, such as the digitisation of archives and books, the mapping of spaces in 3D, or virtual tours through video. Some were innovative, such as the need to offer training in digital tools to students, so they can select the tools that work for them as part of their student life and not just ahead of completing assessments. Many participants reported emerging support for ECRs at their institutions, such as mentoring and training. Mentorship was highlighted as a very important factor after the pandemic in building an academic career in an environment with a high number of casual jobs and temporary contracts.

Indeed, many aspects of research have been affected by the pandemic and are a barrier to finding permanent and full-time jobs. For example, the increase in workloads has meant that the process of peer-review has suffered, as it has become increasingly difficult to find reviewers. When articles are in a peer-review queue for over a year, it has more impact on ECRs because they cannot show publication records on their CVs to continue their career progression. It was suggested that payments be made to peer-reviewers, so the reviews might be more quickly actioned.

Another aspect connected to the casualisation of contracts involves the way that universities are assigning native speakers to teach a language without considering their expertise in language pedagogy. This practice depreciates the work of those who are engaged in language education. Finally, there were discussions about the need for dedicated spaces for ECRs to meet and collaborate but also mingle and disconnect.

All in all, the pandemic has helped with employability and access to conferences, as it has become more common to work and participate in events remotely, so distance from the job or event is now less of an issue. However, the pandemic has increased workloads and precarity in other ways, by making research development harder, and outsourcing support to external networks and personal initiatives. Moreover, it has changed the work culture from presentism in the office to video availability and online participation in activities, which is taking away the time to develop ideas and process thoughts.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Dr Marta F. Suarez orcid.org/0000-0001-7205-0339
(Dialogue Lead), Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Dr Dominique Carlini Versini orcid.org/0000-0001-8609-9758
(Contributor), Durham University, UK

Dr Olivia Glaze orcid.org/0000-0001-5052-2593
(Contributor), University of Exeter, UK

Dr Jennifer Lynch orcid.org/0000-0002-5054-997X
(Contributor), Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Dr Marina Rabadán Gómez orcid.org/0000-0003-2188-0353
(Contributor), University of Liverpool, UK

Dr Sandra Strigel orcid.org/0009-0008-6692-9177
(Contributor), University of Manchester and the Open University, UK

REFERENCES

Barrett, Lucinda, and Peter Barrett. "Women and Academic Workloads: Career Slow Lane or Cul-de-sac?" *Higher Education*, vol. 61, 2011, pp. 141–55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-010-9329-3

Deem, Rosemary. "Gender, Organizational Cultures and the Practices of Manager-academics in UK Universities". *Gender, Work & Organization*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2003, pp. 239–59. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.t01-1-00013

Ronksley-Pavia, Michelle, et al., eds. *Academic Women: Voicing Narratives of Gendered Experiences*. Bloomsbury, 2023. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350274303

Viglione, Giuliana. "Are Women Publishing Less during the Pandemic? Here's What the Data Say". *Nature*, vol. 581, no. 7809, 2020, pp. 365–66. https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01294-9. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-020-01294-9

USEFUL RESOURCES

TOOLS AND APPS

Anki flashcards: digital flashcards that can be synchronised across devices, free. https://apps.ankiweb.net/

Audacity: open-source cross-platform audio software. https://www.audacityteam.org/

Calendly: scheduling platform that integrates easily with other existing software. Used mainly as an appointment tool. https://calendly.com/

Canvas Studio: collaboration tool, available to institutions using Canvas as VLE. https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Studio/tkb-p/studio

H5P: content creation for different VLEs, paid. Might be available through institutions, which often include it in the VLE editing tool. https://h5p.com/pricing

Google Docs: online word-processor that allows for collaborative writing, free. https://docs.google.com/

Kahoot: interactive applications, quizzes and learning games. Free options. https://kahoot.com/

Learn Ultra: dedicated VLE from Blackboard, paid. https://www.blackboard.com/learnultra

LinkedIn: professional networking website and app, free. https://www.linkedin.com It offers training through institutional subscription to LinkedIn Learning. https://www.linkedin.com/learning-login/

Mentimeter: real-time feedback presentation tools. Similar to Poll Everywhere in some aspects. Free options. https://www.mentimeter.com/

Microsoft Teams: video communication and conference system from Microsoft, free options. https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/microsoft-teams/free-video-conferencing

Microsoft To-Do: task and list manager that can be integrated with other Microsoft apps, such as Outlook. It allows collaborative work by assigning tasks to or sharing lists with different people. Free. https://todo.microsoft.com/

OnceHub: scheduling tool, free options. https://oncehub.com/

Padlet: collaborative platform where different users can post on a virtual bulletin wall and share ideas, documents, images, etc. Free options. https://padlet.com/

Poll Everywhere: platform with online polling, surveys, quizzes, word clouds, Q&A, etc. Free options. https://pollev.com/

Quizlet: learning tools such as flashcards, practice assessments, quizzes and matching games. Free options. https://quizlet.com/

SpatialChat: virtual office, classes and events video-conferencing system, with free options. https://www.spatial.chat/pricing

Twitter: social networking site and app, free. While Twitter was lauded by all participants as a way to connect with academics, it is worth noting that the dialogue took place before it was bought by Elon Musk, and critical changes have been made to the service since. It has been recently renamed as "X". https://twitter.com/home

Youtube Studio: application designed to support YouTube users in creating and uploading content to their YouTube channels. https://studio.youtube.com/

Zoom: video communication and conference system, free options. https://zoom.us/

NETWORKS AND WEBSITES

Association for German Studies in Great Britain and Ireland: http://www.ags.ac.uk/

Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland (AHGBI): https://www.hispanists.org.uk/

Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland (AHGBI), mentoring scheme: https://www.hispanists.org.uk/funding-and-support/mentoring-scheme/

Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France (ASMCF): https://www.asmcf.org/

Association for the Study of Spanish in Society (SiS): https://www.spanishinsociety.com/

Association of University Professors of French (AUPHF+), all stages of career, despite the name: http://www.auphf.ac.uk/

Aurora Women's Leadership Programme: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/aurora

British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies (BAFTSS), New Connections Scheme: https://www.baftss.org/new-connections.html

British Association for Japanese Studies: https://www.bajs.org.uk/

British Spanish Society: https://www.britishspanishsociety.org/

Code of Best Practice for Early Career Academic Employment: https://university-council-modern-languages.org/early-career-academics/code-of-best-practice/

Early Career Academics in the University Council of Modern Languages: https://university-council-modern-languages.org/early-career-academics/

ECA Support Network at UCFL Mentoring Scheme: https://university-council-modern-languages.org/early-career-academics/eca-support-network/eca-support-network-year-long-mentoring-scheme/

EMCC, European Mentoring and Coaching Council: https://www.emccuk.org/ and https://www.emccuk.org/Public/Events/SIG/Higher_Education.aspx

Feminism(s) in the Age of Covid-19 and Beyond: https://feminismsconference.wixsite.com/website?fbclid=IwAR1qvfRGS9 s7jnv4 s81XhZY6 LPR0hJHSerK-GNIrMGRINazq1Kw3MZEtfVY

French Embassy platform for Culture, Language and Education (Institute français): https://www.institut-francais.org.uk/

French Embassy platform for HE, R&I: https://uk.ambafrance.org/-Science-Tech-

German Conversations. Open Access Materials, developed by the Centre for Teaching Excellence in Language Learning at the University of Liverpool: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/centre-for-language-excellence/current-projects/german-conversations/

IFProfs, toolbox on creative practices in teaching French at university: https://ifprofs.org/uk/groupe/Boite-a-outils-sur-les-pratiques-creatives-de-l-enseignement-du-francais-a-l-universite/5fa2a02d9fd32

International Association for the Study of Spanish in Society (SIS): https://www.spanishinsociety.com/

Japan Society North West (JSNW): https://jsnw.org.uk/

Mailing lists (UK): https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/

StellarHE, BAME Leadership Programme: https://www.stellarhe.com/

UCML, University Council for Modern Languages, now UCFL, University Council for Foreign Languages: https://university-council-modern-languages.org/ and the related mentoring scheme: https://university-council-modern-languages.org/early-career-academics/eca-support-network/eca-support-network-year-long-mentoring-scheme/

Women in Academia Support Network (WIASN): https://www.wiasn.com/

Women in French (US, global): https://womeninfrench.org/

Women in French (Australia): https://womeninfrenchaustralia.wordpress.com/

Women in Spanish and Portuguese Studies (WISPS): https://www.wispsacademic.org/ and its related mentoring scheme: https://www.wispsacademic.org/support