

Call to Action: How can universities support doctoral and early career researchers during COVID-19 (and beyond!)

Authors: Nicola Byrom, Patricia Jackman, Amy Zile, Elizabeth James, Katie Tyrrell, Cameron J. Williams, Tandy Haughey, Rebecca Sanderson, Michael Priestley, Nicola Cogan

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK in March 2020, universities closed their doors with uncertainty over when they would reopen. In the early stages of lockdown, many doctoral and early career researchers (collectively, ECRs) felt their institutions had forgotten them.

Vitae and the UKRI-funded Student Mental Health Research Network (SMaRteN) surveyed 5,900 ECRs across 128 UK universities at the end of April 2020, to establish the impact of lockdown on their work. While almost two thirds of respondents agreed that their supervisor/line manager had done all they could to support them, only 38% felt the same way about their institution. A quarter of respondents identified that their relationship with their university had worsened since the pandemic began. Right now, a key question is: what can universities do to support their ECRs?

Our survey asked respondents for suggestions of how their supervisors/line manager and institutions could help them to work effectively during lockdown. We have worked with a small team of ECRs to complete thematic analysis on a representative subset of over 1,000 suggestions. We have taken an inductive approach to analysis and have worked at a semantic level with the aim to create a rich description of the dataset. All suggestions were double coded, and the research team worked together to develop themes from codes identified.

In summarising our results here, we present a simple set of recommendations for steps institutions and supervisors/line manager to ensure they are providing comprehensive support for ECRs.

1. Listen, acknowledge and understand

This is a challenging time; ECRs want institutions to listen to their experiences, acknowledge the difficulties being faced, and discuss the impact on their work and wider life. As COVID-19 has reduced employment options, ECRs need the opportunity to talk about career impact and financial concerns. Supervisors/line manager can help with networking opportunities, guidance around funding issues and navigating extensions. Their encouragement to prioritise self-care has helped ECRs to cope and manage guilt around struggles to maintain productivity. International ECRs have faced particular stresses, stuck between two regularity systems – those of the country where they are studying and/or working and those of their home country – not fully protected by either.

[My supervisor has] acknowledged it isn't business as usual and removed pressure to function as if it is.

2. Maintain regular contact and ask how your team members are doing.

Regular online meetings supplemented with informal catch ups are important for connection. Working online, communication can become impersonal. Closer supervision, with discussions around work structure, can boost motivation. A personable, supportive and reassuring approach is appreciated given the uncertainty created by COVID-19 and lockdown. Researchers have appreciated their supervisors/line managers being available, responsive and taking steps to enable them to ask questions easily and get rapid answers.



My supervisor has set up weekly meetings with me online... it keeps me motivated to keep on top of my work... and it also keeps me feeling connected to the University.

3. Information needs to be timely, clear, thoughtful, regular and relevant

While some researchers have been overwhelmed by the volume of communication from their institutions, others have felt there to be a deficit. Regular, clear and thoughtful information allays uncertainty. Where possible, information should be tailored to specific degrees and research areas.

Researchers want clarity around changes to institutional deadlines and procedures; revised expectations, assessments and deadlines; options for contract extensions and funding; and consideration for impact on progress.

The tone of communication has an impact; good humour, honesty and sympathetic messaging are appreciated.

4. Secure and offer extensions: Funding, contracts and deadlines.

Many respondents acknowledged that decisions around funding need to be made in discussion with funding bodies. While not without challenges, researchers would like to see their university lobbying on their behalf and have reassurance that senior leadership teams have not forgotten them. While extensions to submission deadlines for doctoral researchers are appreciated, these need to be accompanied by financial support. Clear information here is essential.

They could provide clearer guidelines/evidence of their concern relating to fixed term contracts and open-ended contracts subject to funding. Me and my colleagues feel like we've had to scabble around together ourselves to work out what each of the funding bodies are saying the options are right now.

5. Facilitate connectivity

Institutions and supervisors/line manager can play a role in facilitating peer-to-peer connection, providing the direction, virtual spaces and tools for connectivity. This may be through organising informal catch ups or academic seminars. Some supervisors/line manager have established buddy schemes within their teams, hosting 'online lunch,' or 'virtual wine and cheese evenings.'

My supervisor instigated a regular weekly coffee meeting for all the members of our research centre via Zoom, which for the last 4 weeks has been a very helpful thing.

6. Support revised goal setting, adapting and clarifying expectations

Support researchers to develop contingency plans and set new, revised, goals. There are real benefits in identifying small and short-term goals, as this can build a sense of achievement, thus sustaining motivation. Institutions and supervisors/line managers need to recognise the challenges that COVID-19 has created for work and revise expectations accordingly. Clear expectations are needed, so ECRs know what they should be working towards. Researchers have appreciated supervisors/line managers explicitly lowering expectations and providing clear reassurance that reduced productivity is okay.

7. Actively support your researchers to work from home

Check that your researchers have the equipment, resources and software that they need to work from home. Approximately a quarter of the survey respondents identified that they had reduced or no access to the software needed to support their research. One in five identified that working from home had reduced access to a computer. Half of respondents requiring assistive technology for their work reported having reduced or no access to this. Researchers would like support accessing resources, including journals, books, software and equipment. Advice and guidelines around effective remote working are appreciated. Institutions should be providing training opportunities online, to prevent gaps in essential skills development.

With thanks to funding provided to SMarTeN by UKRI

