

# Academic work and the (unequal) impacts of COVID-19

“Universities will never be the same after the coronavirus crisis”, stated the headline of a news feature on *nature.com* in June 2020 (Witze, 2020). The pandemic has forced universities to adopt new strategies and practices, and importantly, helped speed up changes that were already emerging pre-COVID. Shifts from office to home, from lecture hall to virtual learning, and meeting room to Zoom were already bubbling under the concrete of most university buildings. Efforts for speeding and opening up the processes of academic publishing were also taking place. With the pandemic, such tendencies became necessary immediately.

While new ways of doing academic work were perhaps inevitable or even imperative, considering their consequences for workers became acute as practices shifted overnight, and still shift with each new policy. Just like any human technology, the changes in the organisation of academic labour are not good or bad in themselves, rather they come with different affordances, which some people are in a better position to employ and embrace. For some scholars, working at a distance has helped speed up the work process and allowed for more time with their near and dear. For others, it has meant an upsurge in care work that significantly diminishes possibilities for thinking, writing and publishing. Yet others have become detached from the networks of support they need to strive—or even survive—in academia.

The consequences that the new ways of academic work have for scholars have been discussed in terms of gender and family life (e.g., Burk et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2020). Less attention has been paid to the ways in which academic labour in times of COVID-19 affects scholars at different stages of their academic careers. Yet it is well understood that gender, family life and stage of career often intersect. Notably, early career researchers often have young children or establish their families at the same time as they are establishing their careers. Thus the strain that has been put on academic parents—academic mothers in particular—by the pandemic and associated daycare and school closures has been felt particularly acutely by early career researchers.

However, the pandemic has also introduced other challenges in academic life that may impact early career researchers especially. One of these is data collection, in particular qualitative data collection. Despite the fact many researchers have successfully switched to using various types of video conference software for conducting interviews, this is not always ideal for building a trusting relationship with interviewees. In some cases it can also be completely impossible to collect data in a meaningful way during the pandemic. For researchers in the middle or early stages of research projects this may mean a substantial setback in terms of timing and thus career progression.

Even before the pandemic, there had been talk about a mental health crisis in graduate education (Evans et al., 2018; Woolston, 2017). It is well established that early career researchers, and postgraduate students in particular, report significantly lower levels of well-being, and higher levels of stress, anxiety as well as depressive symptoms than populations in general (e.g., Barreira et al., 2018; Levecque, 2017). Female graduate students appear to suffer from mental health issues more than males, and transgender graduate students are the most vulnerable (Evans et al., 2018). According to a qualitative literature review on doctoral students’ well-being, key stressors among doctoral students include peer pressure, high work

loads, a pressure to publish, uncertainty, as well as financial difficulties, all of which pose challenges to a healthy work-life balance (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). The pandemic has certainly not made balancing work and life any easier. Further, opportunities for collegial support, which has a large positive impact on early career researchers' well-being (ibid.; Byrom et al., 2020), have been hampered with the pandemic. Indeed, certain recent surveys suggest that the pandemic has further aggravated the mental health problems and well-being of early career researchers (Chirikov et al. 2020; Woolston, 2020). In Finland a survey conducted by the University of Helsinki's PhD student association HYVÄT (2020), raised concerns about the well-being of doctoral candidates in the COVID-spring 2020. At the time of writing, the Finnish Union of University Researchers and Teachers is conducting a survey on early career researchers. The results will be published in the spring 2021. However, it is already clear that the pandemic is not treating early career researchers equally. For example, international researchers living outside their home countries are more likely to face loneliness and struggle with mental well-being. Moreover, it is likely that gender and caregiving responsibilities affect also early career researchers well-being. (Byrom, 2020.)

In addition to the huge impact COVID-19 has on academic research, teaching and researchers per se, the pandemic also has a significant effect on research mobility (e.g., Shelley-Egan, 2020). Although conferences can be and have been arranged online, possibilities for personal interaction with international peers is something that even internationally mobile researchers worry about, as a recent survey by Euraxess (2020) shows<sup>1</sup>. In academia, research mobility is nowadays often considered an important building block of a researcher's career. For example, the Academy of Finland has since 2016 applied mobility requirements to researchers applying for funding for Academy Research Fellow and Postdoctoral Researcher, since having experience of working in different research environments is considered crucial. Thus, the pandemic can have a significant effect on the career prospects of young researchers, in particular, and institutions are forced to invent new ways to make the most out of mobility without physical mobility (Euraxess, 2020; see also Academy of Finland, 2020). The same applies to conferences as well. On the one hand, virtual conferences foster ecological and social sustainability as they decrease the environmental impact of conferences and help level out inequalities in participation. On the other hand, virtual conferences and seminars have to be designed carefully in order to be socially sustainable and genuinely open, for example, for early career researchers (Bottanelli et al., 2020).

Internationality, sustainability and the COVID-pandemic are themes that are strongly present in this year's volume of *Research on Finnish Society*. The volume includes articles from both Rectors of the Universities located in Turku, Finland. In the first of these two articles, Jukka Kola, the Rector of the University of Turku, describes the future prospects of the University of Turku. According to Kola, the future university has to be an internationally recognised high-quality research university, which fosters both well-being and sustainability. Turbulent times also require resilience from the universities. Moira von Wright, the Rector at Åbo Akademi University, underlines the role of universities as institutional cornerstones of societies. Von Wright reminds us that throughout history universities have been able to survive through massive global and national crises. 'The inner ethos of academia', along with its lasting and stable traditions are likely to help universities get through the current crisis within academia caused by the COVID-pandemic and to accomplish its core tasks.

The first article in this volume, written by Dan Sundblom, Mikko Lagerspetz, Liisi Keedus and Erle Rikmann, considers the processes behind the dissolution of voluntary associations in Finland and Estonia. The analysis highlights four different types of reasons behind dissolution and somewhat distinct processes depending on the function of the association (expressive versus instrumental). The research is also highly relevant in the current situation, where restrictions related to the pandemic situation have severely affected the opportunities for voluntary associations to continue their normal functioning.

The second article, written by Mira Kalalahti and Janne Varjo, analyses three decades of legislation and parliamentary discussion related to compulsory education in Finland from the perspective of universalism. Their results highlight how the principle of universalism has changed over time as the basic

education legislation has been revised. The authors argue that by the 1990s the devolution of power to the municipal level has led to multiple, more local conceptualisations of universalism.

We would like to thank all our readers, authors and anonymous reviewers, and wish you all good health. In addition, we thank our previous editorial assistant Sanna Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist for all of her work during the past years and welcome our new editorial assistant Iida Kukkonen.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Euraxess is a joint initiative of the European Commission and 40 countries participating in the European Union's Horizon 2020.

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