

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on researchers and research

Wave 2 results

June 2021

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UK Research
and Innovation



Key findings

Context

Profile of respondents

Working hours

Time for research activities

Impact on research

External peer reviewing activities

Funder support

Health and wellbeing

Next steps



Key findings

Researchers experiences Feb - Mar 2021

- **At the time of the Wave 2 survey (Feb-Mar 2021), almost half of respondents had returned to pre-Covid working hours. However, there was still evidence of an increased distribution of working hours seen in Wave 1 survey (May-June 2020) with 30% working less hours and 25% working more hours compared to pre-Covid levels.**
- **Over 80% agreed that Covid-19 restrictions had forced changes to the way they do their research and made it difficult to plan. 58% reported finding it impossible to do the research they planned, while 40% were forced to change their research direction.**
- **The impact of Covid-19 restrictions on a wide range of staff responsibilities was negatively affecting time for research, particularly for those with teaching and administration duties, whereas a large minority (20-35%) reported no impact of other activities on their time for research. Overall, respondents reported that less in-person contact with research group members had had the biggest impact on their ability to undertake planned research, followed by lack of access to research facilities and resources.**
- **There was no evidence of any increase in workplace-based research activity since June 2020. However, there was evidence of less time being spent on research that could be done from home, which had halved compared to both pre-Covid and June 2020 levels. Respondents reported spending increased time on writing, peer review activities and teaching compared to both pre-Covid and June 2020 levels.**
- **Overall, researchers reported poor levels of wellbeing and mental health. Around 11% of researchers had experienced bullying and harassment over the last year, with two thirds of these reporting this was higher than before Covid-19 restrictions.**
- **There were mixed views on funder support with 45% agreeing and 33% disagreeing that their funder had provided clear information on how they would be supported. However, this balance had improved since the Wave 1 survey in June 2020 when only 33% agreed.**

Impact on different groups

- Although everyone has been affected by the lack of access to research facilities, **postgraduate researchers (PGRs)** report an average of 16 less hours per week on workplace-based research compared to pre-Covid, with **research staff** reporting 10 hours less, compared to other academic staff at 4 hours less. Half of PGRs had been forced to change their research direction. 73% of PGRs were worried about missing work due to Covid-19 and 55% worried about the amount of money coming in. 55% of PGRs did not believe that their funder had done all that it could to support them and this opinion had strengthened since Wave 1.
- Both PGRs and research staff, and to some extent mid-career researchers, had high levels of concern about their career prospects, with around a third of PGRs and a quarter of research staff anticipating a very negative long-term impact. 63% of PGRs and 51% research staff reported poor levels of wellbeing, higher than reported the SMaRteN / Vitae survey* in April 2020. 57% of mid-career researchers also reported poor wellbeing.
- **Mid-career** and **senior researchers** reported Covid-19 restrictions impacting on all their work activities, particularly institutional administration, teaching, doctoral supervision, line management and REF submission. They were more likely to identify lack of in-person contact as having the biggest impact on their ability to undertake planned research. For those engaged in peer review activities, around half reported increased requests to review research papers and between a quarter and a third increased requests to review research proposals.
- There were relatively **few differences by discipline**. However, respondents from REF Panels C and D reported that the effects of Covid-19 restrictions on their teaching and administration duties had a greater negative effect on their time for research than other Panels. Panel C was most likely to report Covid-19 had provided unexpected opportunities for their research. Panels A and B researchers were more likely to report being worried about missing work and long term impact on their career prospects than other Panels.

* Impact of Covid-19 on doctoral researchers and research staff, 2020, SMaRteN / Vitae
<https://www.smartenn.org.uk/covid-19-study.html>

Impact on different groups

- Unsurprisingly given schools were closed at the time, **researchers with caring responsibilities** (predominately mid-career and senior researchers; gender balanced) were more likely to have been impacted by Covid-19 restrictions than those without. They were also less likely to have returned to pre-Covid working hours, but had seen a considerable increase from their June 2020 working hours. 62% reported a negative impact of caring responsibilities on their time for research (cf. 9% without), while 66% reported it was impossible to do the research they had planned, compared to 52% without. Caring responsibilities were also more likely to be negatively impacting on their time for teaching, supervision and administration duties. These researchers were also more likely to be concerned about missing work and to predict a negative impact on their career prospects. There were no differences in levels of wellbeing compared to non-carers.
- Generally, few **gender differences** emerged. However, female researchers were more concerned about missing work and the long-term impact on their job prospects. They also reported lower levels of wellbeing than male researchers.

Future prospects

- With the exception of senior researchers concern about the long-term impact of Covid-19 restrictions on career prospects was high, especially from PGRs (89%) and research staff (88%).
- Three-quarters of researchers predicted a negative overall impact on their research over the next three years by not being able to plan their research or build collaborations, whereas, 24% reported that ongoing Covid-19 restrictions had provided unexpected opportunities for their research. Similarly, 25% predicted that it would result in positive impacts on the way they do their research.