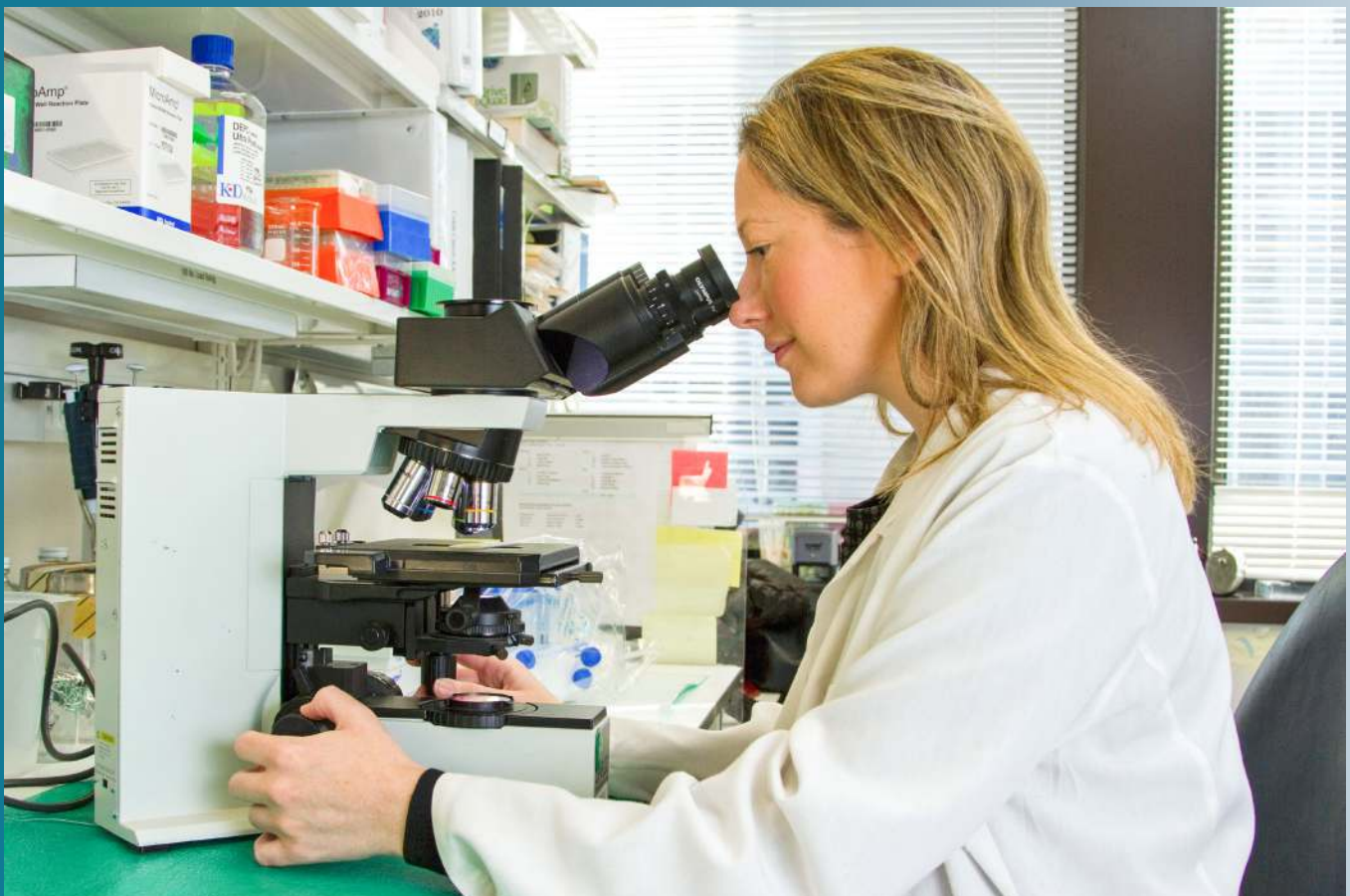


Locked Down, Burned Out

Publishing in a Pandemic:
the Impact of Covid on Academic Authors

15.12.2020



In response to our request to complete a short survey about how research has been impacted by the pandemic, a De Gruyter author replied:

“Dear De Gruyter team, I’m really sorry, but I can’t. Corona has exploded the amount of time spent on videoconferencing and student support to such an extent that I don’t even have 10 minutes left to complete your survey. It’s a very bad situation – but it reflects the new reality of the university.”

About De Gruyter

Headquartered in Berlin, Germany, De Gruyter is an international, independent academic publisher. Operating for over 270 years, the company publishes more than 1,300 new book titles each year and over 900 journals in the humanities, social sciences, medicine, mathematics, engineering, computer sciences, natural sciences and law. The company also offers a wide range of digital media, including open access journals and books. Visit degruyter.com.

Acknowledgements

This report has been published by De Gruyter, Genthiner Straße 13, 10785 Berlin, Germany. Both projects discussed in this report were led by Deirdre Watchorn and Dr Esther Heckendorf, Insights & Analysis Team at De Gruyter; insights@degruyter.com. The report was drafted and edited by Chris Smith of Prolifiko, proofread by Sarah Wolfe and designed by Krystianna Pietrzak. Thanks also to Caitlyn Nardozi, Alexandra Hinz and the Marketing and Communications team at De Gruyter.

Contents

- 4** Key Research Insights
- 5** Methodology & scope
- 7** A New Normal?
Foreword by Tom Clark, Vice President, Global Publishing, De Gruyter Publishing
- 9** What's behind the burnout?
- 11** Late-Career Privilege
- 12** Mid-Career Squeeze
- 14** Early-Career Stagnation
- 15** Conferences Collapse
- 16** Networks Shrink
- 17** Still Shut Out
- 18** Conclusion

Publishing in a Pandemic: the Impact of Covid on Academic Authors

8 Key Research Insights

- > Academics are facing disruption to their research productivity from three main areas: the demise of collaborative networks, the wholesale shift to online teaching and student supervision, and – crucially – the juggle of home working and domestic duties.
- > Late-career researchers remain relatively protected from the worst disruption caused by the pandemic. They are busier than before and have less time for their research, but in general they are less burdened by many of the challenges that impact their more junior colleagues.
- > Mid-career academics who teach are suffering from a ‘double whammy’ of pressures compounded by their life stage. They are severely impacted because they have to deliver online programmes and supervise students from homes at the same time as caring for others and educating children.
- > Mid-career scholars who teach and are women are suffering from a ‘triple whammy’ of challenges. They carry the biggest burdens by far as they also take on the bulk of domestic duties and caring responsibilities at home. The research finds a difference in how men and women at mid-career are experiencing the restrictions caused by the pandemic.
- > The burnout experienced by mid- and, to a lesser extent, late-career academics is having a negative impact on junior scholars. Early-career academics are not receiving the formal and informal support they need from senior peers to climb the career ladder. Worryingly, this could have an impact on diversity and innovation.
- > Online conferences are rated poorly by most academics. Scholars are particularly critical of the ability of online formats to recreate the highly prized social, networking and collaborative aspects that face-to-face conferencing provides. Attendance is dropping as a result – particularly among those academics with limited time.

- > The pandemic is having a devastating impact on academics' ability to collaborate, find co-authors and network. Scholars sorely miss face-to-face contact, with mid-career scholars again hit the hardest.
- > Humanities scholars are more busy and more limited in their work than STM or social science scholars. They are finding it difficult to continue working as normal the most because access to essential facilities is difficult and fieldwork is restricted.

Methodology

This report presents the findings of two surveys of academic journal and book authors in 2020. The first survey was performed early on in the crisis in May 2020, with fieldwork conducted from 5-18 May. The survey was emailed to a sample of over 60,000 book and journal authors and received a 7% response rate overall. A total of 4,150 respondents completed at least one question and 3,214 completed the entire survey.

The survey was conducted using Survey Monkey, scripted and hosted entirely in house and analysed by the De Gruyter Insights team using SPSS. The survey was fully anonymous, no personal data was recorded and participation was voluntary. Researchers from 103 countries took part (including 26% Germany, 50% rest of Europe, 11% Asia Pacific, 9% Americas).

Fieldwork for the second survey was conducted from 8-27 October 2020 and data collection and analysis was conducted in an identical way. The response rate was noticeably lower. A total of 1,473 respondents completed at least one question and 1,100 individuals completed the entire survey. Researchers from 78 countries took part (including 26% Germany, 47% rest of Europe, 10% Asia Pacific, 7% Americas).

Scope

The purpose of the survey was to understand how the pandemic was impacting scholarly authors both professionally and personally. It aimed to investigate how the virus was impacting their capacity to conduct research and where their pressures were coming from.

The topics in the first survey centred around whether the pandemic was impacting workloads – and, if so, what the main causes were. It looked at the impact on scholarly communications and how publishers could support researchers. It also examined what the most significant expected obstacles were for the second half of 2020 and whether there were any differences by gender or region.

The topics featured in the second survey replicated those in the first. In addition, it included further questions to aid understanding in a few key areas. The survey asked additional questions around the long-term implications of the pandemic on research productivity and included new questions surrounding such topics as mental health, conferencing, collaboration, career prospects, primary research, funding and publishing. These additional questions were of particular interest to develop an understanding of personal circumstances and whether gender and career stage were factors.

A New Normal?

By Tom Clark, Vice President, Global Publishing,
De Gruyter Publishing

When we launched our first survey in May 2020 examining the impact of the pandemic on our book and journal authors, we found nearly half said they were busier than before the pandemic began and lockdown restrictions started to bite.

As part of our commitment to understand and respond to the challenges of our authors, our research found that the pressures of lockdown were having a worrying and dramatic impact on many researchers' ability to continue as normal.

At the time, we didn't know whether these challenges were temporary or longer lasting. It was too soon to say. Uncertainty was everywhere. Many academic facilities, including archives, collections, labs and libraries, had recently closed their doors. Scholars were often locked out of university buildings and there had been a sudden shift - overnight in some cases - to online teaching and student supervision delivered from home.

Academics across the globe were having to quickly adjust to a 'new normal' and some were weathering the Covid storm better than others. However, while everyone was adjusting, some were able to continue relatively unscathed, while others were not. Those with inadequate working situations or who were locked down away from families and friends were suffering. Those with teaching responsibilities or with busy domestic lives were struggling the most. The pandemic was not impacting everyone equally - gender was playing a role.

Sadly, over the past six months, our research shows that academics have been under more pressure, not less. The challenges they were facing in May 2020 have continued unabated and have, in many cases, intensified. Few have declined. The pandemic is leaving mid-career scholars - and women in particular - feeling burned out and at risk of breaking point. This concerning situation impacts junior researchers, too, as they frequently depend on senior colleagues for career support, guidance and collaboration.

If there's one thing above all else that this research shows, it's that academia does not operate outside society - rather, it mirrors it. It should serve as a reminder that when it comes to the pandemic, we are not in the same boat - some of us have better boats than others.

As an academic community we need to reach out, not retreat. We must build a life raft of help and knowledge to support those floating adrift.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

What's Behind the Burn Out?

October's research finds that 53% of researchers feel far busier than before the pandemic began – more than in May. It also finds that they are producing less, with 48% of those researchers who conduct primary research saying their research has been held back or disrupted in some way.

The reasons why academics are so busy are complex and in many cases overlapping. While the second phase of the research finds that the obstacles preventing academics from conducting research are similar, they are impacting individuals differently.

The three most significant limiting factors to conducting academic research 'as normal' are:

1. The demise of informal and formal academic networks and collaborations.

Academia is a community of knowledge and the Covid pandemic is starving researchers of the lifeblood of their profession. The demise of conferences and restrictions placed on travel and physical meetings means that authors are struggling to make the vital connections they need with peers, academic communities and networks. While 29% of academics reported this as a problem in May, 43% did in October.

2. The ongoing excess of work caused by teaching and supervising students online.

The transition from traditional teaching formats to online is proving a disaster for academics who also have lecturing and student support responsibilities. 80% of survey respondents say that teaching and supervising students online is taking up more time than they expected. The isolation many students feel means that teachers are frequently providing more emotional support to their students, which is proving to be draining. The pressures of online teaching have remained constant between May and October, suggesting that early challenges are not mere 'teething problems'. 60% now say it is now the main obstacle limiting their research – a figure that has remained consistent since May.

“More time devoted to online teaching = less time for research = more work at the weekend = less leisure time = more fatigue and stress.”

“I now invest far more time in individual work with students, especially providing psychological support. I'm compensating for the fact that my institution fails to provide adequate support to foreign students.”

“Staying at home with remote activities, teaching included, may have had a psychological impact in terms of dealing with family during the day. The borderlines between job and private life have become so blurred.”

“Home schooling has doubled the time I spend on caring for my family and children.”

“I work much longer hours now in my role supporting student welfare - this has become a major burden.”

3. The location of new work arrangements - namely, from home.

Many of those who teach from home and have domestic duties are at breaking point. The majority of those academics who teach and provide student support online are doing so from home. This is causing an additional problem when they also have domestic responsibilities and caring duties, especially for small children. Respondents are finding it particularly challenging to juggle work and domestic activities and this is impacting those academics who bear the biggest brunt of responsibility in this area the most.

While many survey respondents might experience the same types of pressure, some academics experience these barriers more acutely than others. The research finds that the pressures academics face on their time, research productivity and mental health are not experienced or distributed equally.

Now more than ever, how far an academic author is impacted by the pandemic and how easily they can continue ‘as normal’ often depends on two crucial factors: their gender and where they are in their career.

Late-Career Privilege

The research finds that some respondents remain relatively protected from the impacts of the pandemic. These tend to be those scholars at a later stage in their careers – a finding consistent with the initial study.

Regardless of gender, the research finds that academics with more than 16 years of post-PhD experience have in many cases managed to avoid the worst work-related stresses and strains of the pandemic. 59% of the late-career academics in our sample are older than 56 and 76% are professors or heads of departments.

Late-career scholars do not emerge unscathed from their lockdown experience – far from it. They suffer with many of the same challenges as their more junior colleagues, but these challenges are not as acute.

- > 67% of late-career academics say the pandemic has had ‘minimal impact’ on their ability to get their work published.
- > 40% say their workloads have remained unchanged since the outbreak began.
- > 26% say their research plans have been entirely unaffected – they are able to continue as normal.

Compared to less senior academics, late-career researchers are more likely to be able to dedicate the same amount of time to their research as they did pre-pandemic. One question asked respondents what aspects of the pandemic were most concerning to them in relation to their work. The survey listed 25 topics, including mental health, grant funding, job security and budget cuts. Late-career academics were less concerned about every topic than their junior colleagues aside from one: restrictions that might impede international travel and career opportunity.

“Covid has had a positive impact on my productivity – since I can’t leave the house, all I do is write articles. I am also more in touch with colleagues and collaborators than pre-Covid.”

“I’m fortunate in being retired and having become a private or freelance researcher/writer investigator of subjects that interest me. I need only access to knowledge, paper, ink and a computer.”

“The survey seems to assume that ‘impact’ is negative. I am able to have MUCH MORE collaboration, albeit often at midnight in my time zone!”

Mid-Career Squeeze

“Nobody is talking about this, but the burn out rate has increased during the crisis. I experienced a huge paralysis for some time... it’s absolutely clear that female researchers with families are the losers of the pandemic.”

“I’m really suffering with computer tiredness and severe back problems – now I have problems with my eyesight.”

“Childcare has been a nightmare. It has definitely impacted my ability to do my job, be a mum and be a teacher for my school-aged children.”

While every academic author has been impacted by the pandemic in some way, some are impacted far more. The October study finds that the obstacles faced at mid-career are particularly acute and potentially most damaging. The research defines ‘mid-career’ as having six to 15 years of academic experience post-PhD.

The survey finds that scholars at a mid-point in their careers are having the hardest time of all as they are suffering from a ‘double whammy’ of pressures. The research indicates that these pressures are driven chiefly by a mix of home-based online teaching and student supervision and domestic duties.

Regardless of gender, 57% of mid-career scholars have spent less time conducting critical primary research than they would have expected in a typical year, with nearly three-quarters experiencing obstacles that are now directly limiting their research and writing productivity.

The shift to online teaching and student supervision from home is causing major problems for academics who also have caring responsibilities. 51% of mid-career researchers say they are now ‘severely limited’ from researching and writing because of caring for young children – compared with just 16% of late-career scholars.

Unfortunately, the situation worsens significantly for female academics, as women bear the brunt of these domestic duties. Female scholars who are also at mid-career stage are experiencing a ‘triple whammy’ of pressures because of the extra domestic load they are taking on.

Over half of the mid-career female academics surveyed say that the coronavirus crisis has ‘severely affected’ the number of hours they work. Just one out of three mid-career male researchers say the same. Both male and female mid-career researchers are busy with online teaching – and clearly, some men face domestic disruptions too – but the research overwhelmingly finds that female academics are getting busier, faster. The pressures on women are increasing while the pressures on men are declining. The gender differences are striking.

- > 53% of female academics say the hours they now have to work are having a severe impact on them compared to 33% of men.
- > 48% of female scholars are having difficulty staying engaged and productive compared to 28% of men.
- > 62% of female academics spend extra time supervising students and managing employees online compared to 40% of men.

As a result, there is a direct impact on what female academics can spend time on. Compared to their male colleagues, the research finds that mid-career women are spending less time on their primary research, writing less, reading fewer journal articles, applying for fewer grants, dedicating less time to research and publishing fewer articles – either through traditional channels or through open access. They struggle more to make time for collaboration, peer-networking and conversing with essential peer networks, work more hours than men and feel far busier.

37% of mid-career female academics now say their mental health and overall wellbeing is being ‘severely impacted’ due to the overwhelming mix of pressures, barriers and obstacles that they face day to day. Indeed, many appear to be burned out and at breaking point.

“I’m utterly exhausted – I work more than before and I haven’t taken more than one day vacation over the entire time of the pandemic.”

“In the next few months it’s most likely I will have to either take a major pay cut or lose my job. It’s back to square one after being mid-career.”

Early-Career Stagnation

“As an early-career researcher, who has just completed a PhD, I do not have access to career development support because everyone else is too busy to deal with their own careers, let alone others.”

“It is very difficult to get access to my supervisor physically, and all official academic activities are at a standstill. To continue with my research work has become impossible.”

“Finding a job abroad such as a post-doctoral position has become impossible. I receive no answer from European countries. I’m losing my time and motivation.”

“All our roles have changed and there’s been a huge fragmentation in what we have to do. As a young academic, there are large expectations that we must cope in areas that are entirely new to us.”

“My academic career has become even more precarious. The consequences of Covid will hit us heavily.”

While it’s clear that scholars at the mid-point in their careers – and women in particular – are being squeezed in terms of their time, focus and energy, this issue is having a worrying knock-on impact for scholars at an earlier stage of their careers. We define ‘early-career’ as academics with one to five years’ experience post-PhD.

The fact that mid-career – and to a lesser extent, late-career – scholars are feeling busier and more pressured could mean that early-career scholars are failing to receive the formal and informal support they need to advance their careers. If true, this would suggest that mid-point burnout has far wider implications.

The research finds that nearly 33% of mid-career academics say they are no longer able to build diverse teams of collaborators. This figure rises to 38% for mid-career women. In addition, a third of mid-career academics also say their ability to find new research collaborators and co-authors has been ‘severely curtailed’ over the past six months. A third also say their ability to stay in contact with scholarly networks has been significantly impacted because of the pandemic.

These are shocking figures. They suggest that new academic voices and fresh perspectives might not be being nurtured and encouraged in the way they once were by senior colleagues – not through choice, but due to time pressures and work overload. The research shows that junior academics fear they will be affected by university budget cuts the most and find it hardest to secure new roles, gain promotion and access grant funding. These factors might explain why the key concerns of early-career academics mainly relate to job security and career development.

The research shows that at a time when careers should be blossoming, many early-stage academics are stagnating, nervous about the future, poorly supported by over-busy senior academics and managers, locked out of research teams, passed over for jobs and struggling to get funding opportunities. If early-career researchers cannot find the collaborators they need to get their first step on the career ladder, their entire publishing output will be impacted – not just bad for them, but with serious implications for scholarship as a whole.

Conferences Collapse

Since the start of the pandemic, conference organisers across the globe have had to make dramatic changes to how their events are produced and delivered – with many switching to online formats and many others being delayed or cancelled altogether.

The research indicates that while some academics heartily approve of the shift to online and value the time saved on travel and administration, many more do not. It's clear that many academics struggle with aspects of the events and sorely miss the face-to-face contact considered essential for collaboration, career progression and job satisfaction.

While online conferences are considered acceptable for conveying hard information and learning about new scholarly discourse, they fail on every other measure of success. Scholars rate online formats particularly harshly around the 'softer' aspects of conferencing. It is well known that many academics place a high value on the formal and informal social elements of conferencing: the meetings over coffee, the peer-to-peer networking sessions and the discussions over dinner. Conferences serve a far wider function than just imparting information but current online formats perform poorly on these highly prized social elements.

Late-career academics see them as being unhelpful for conversing with colleagues and for joining in academic discussions. When they're not too busy to attend, mid-career academics find online an unhelpful format to find collaborators, while junior academics struggle to use online conferencing to make the kind of introductions and connections with senior colleagues that are so vital for career progression.

Perhaps an indicator that academics (particular at early- and mid-career stage) are missing the social aspects of conferencing is that the use of social media has rocketed over the past six months. The research finds that overall, 52% of academics are using social media more now to find collaborators and to converse with peers. Is Twitter becoming a new social network for academics and filling the gap that conferences have left?

“I can't participate in online conferences that take place while I have to teach (teaching load = seven courses at the moment).”

“There are no research positions or conferences abroad, which are crucial for junior researchers like me.”

“There have been incredibly positive impacts due to the global transition to virtual platforms for meetings – much more opportunity for cross-country engagement.”

“Online conferences are pointless. There's no discussion and I don't get the kind of questions about my research that I'd normally receive in a physical conference or workshop.”

“I miss teamwork, and despite what techno enthusiasts claim, remote team working is a very poor replacement.”

“[I miss] Less informal contact with colleagues (it’s important for workplace relationships and wellbeing).”

“It’s much harder to plan for the future when you’re finishing a PhD in a time of no physical networking. It’s incredibly difficult to keep those water cooler talks or corridor chats active online.”

“The fact that I no longer have the time and space to build trust and exchange views with colleagues cannot be overestimated. This has impacted all my scholarly activities and has already stopped my career progression.”

Networks Shrink

Alongside the demise of face-to-face conferencing, the pandemic has led to a broader shift in the way academics do – or not – communicate and collaborate around research projects. While many scholars – particularly established ones – might have long-standing networks to turn to, many others don’t. Lack of collaboration is now one of biggest barriers to research productivity, with 37% of scholars overall saying this is a significant limitation to their research – up from 29% in May.

But once again, some academics are suffering more than others – and for different reasons. Time pressures and domestic interruptions at mid-career are making it particularly challenging for them to collaborate with peers, find co-authors and build their academic networks. Time pressures also might explain why mid-career scholars are less likely to attend online conferences and networking events than their early- or late-career colleagues – compounding the issue further.

While attendance at conferences for early-career scholars is far higher than their mid-career colleagues, they are not viewed as being particularly helpful. Typically, junior scholars might attend conferences to network with and gain the attention of their senior peers – all of which is made far more challenging though an online format. Presenting at a conference is often a milestone for early-career researchers and marks an essential step along the route to publishing – any interruption in this process may hurt careers long term.

Still Shut Out

The restrictions brought in by the pandemic are still having a dramatic impact on some academics – particularly those in the humanities. Indeed, the research finds that 74% of humanities scholars feel hampered in one way or another with 55% still facing major problems accessing essential facilities and resources.

While STM academics suffered major problems through the closure of labs and medical facilities earlier in the year, many of these resources are now open and functioning. But for many libraries, archives, collections and offices, their doors are still shut or they are operating with restricted access. Academics who rely on face-to-face interviews or who gather data in the field also face significant limitations – many simply can't continue their research at all. The research shows a sharp jump in humanities scholars who say that the lack of collaboration is severely impacting their research. Indeed, the figure has doubled from 17% to 34% from May to October.

Some disciplines are also being disproportionately impacted by online teaching and student supervision. 84% of humanities scholars and 84% of social sciences academics are spending far more time teaching online than they expected to. In addition, humanities scholars are far more concerned than academics in STM or social science fields about their career development and the chances of promotion. They fear they might be first in line for university cuts and they worry about the international job market dwindling – or being completely out of bounds.

Relative to the other disciplines, humanities researchers also claim to have been impacted most in terms of hours worked, engagement in work and overall wellbeing.

“I can't conduct data collection and I can't do any participatory events other than online (with massively dropping participation numbers). It's a f***** disaster.”

“I cannot visit the university library because of the many layers of administration I have to complete to gain in-person access.”

“I am in dire need of meeting Indian colleagues in the field – our internet based meetings don't work.”

“I can't collect data face to face and Zoom doesn't work with some vulnerable groups, which is who we were researching.”

Conclusion

By Deirdre Watchorn, Insights Team DeGruyter and
Chris Smith, Prolifiko

Our research doesn't find that some academic authors are inherently more resilient than others. Nor does it find that some scholarly researchers are better suited to handling academic pressure than others.

This research shows that behind every academic author and researcher is an individual with their own unique set of problems, pressures and, yes, privileges.

Some academics are able to weather the Covid storm where others can't. Some are able to continue with little disruption to their lives, while many cannot.

Everyone has been impacted by the pandemic, but some have been impacted more than others. For many academics the pandemic has, and continues to be, a time of great stress, insecurity and pressure.

These are pressures that will cause career-defining damage that impacts the individual but will also have significant repercussions for scholarship, equality, diversity and research innovation.