
COVID-19 REPORT



**INEQUALITIES IN
ACADEMIA – IMPACT
ON EARLY CAREER
RESEARCHERS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK Women's Budget Group (WBG) is an independent network of leading academic researchers, policy experts and campaigners.

Our vision is of a caring economy that promotes gender equality. For over 30 years we have examined economic policy and asked 'who benefits?'. We produce robust analysis and aim to influence the people making policy. We also work to build the knowledge and confidence of others to talk about feminist economics by offering training and creating accessible resources.

The Women's Budget Group is independent and not-for-profit. We are grateful to our funders and members who have supported our work over many years. We are run by a Management Committee and have over 1900 members. If you want to become a member, you'll find more information and a sign-up form via our website.

This project was conducted and written by Emily Marsay, PhD Researcher at the University of Exeter, as part of a research placement with the Women's Budget Group and edited by Dr Sara Reis and Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson. This was organised through the South West Doctoral Training Partnership's Placement Scheme with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council and the University of Exeter. If you are interested in finding out more about this report, please contact our team at: **admin@wbg.org.uk**.

With thanks to our 20 interview participants and 205 survey respondents, without whom this report wouldn't have been possible. Many of the interview participants and survey respondents, as well as the report author are part of our Early-Career Network (ECN). The ECN is a place for feminist researchers in academia, policymaking and the third sector to connect with their peers and with established experts. Our ECN wishes to help foster the next generation of feminist economists and researchers, equipping them with the tools to influence public policy and contribute to a more gender-equal economy.

For more information about our Early Career Network, or to join, please go to: **<https://wbg.org.uk/early-career-network/>**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key findings and prior inequalities

Gender Inequality in academia before COVID-19

Prior gender inequalities in academia

- There are lower rates of women in professorships¹ and a higher concentration of women on fixed-term contracts,² especially in certain subject streams such as Politics.³
- Women professors and teachers are judged more harshly in student feedback, with words such as ‘brilliant’, ‘intelligent’ or ‘smart’ more often attributed to men while words such as ‘mean’, ‘unfair’, ‘strict’ and ‘annoying’ more attributed to women.⁴
- Women have been found to take on more ‘academic housework’ – roles that are not conducive to career progression such as admin, marking and being on committees.⁵
- There is a shortage of permanent positions that are part-time, flexible or job-shared which makes combining a family with a job in academia difficult.
- There is a persistent gender pay gap of 15.1% in academia, which is higher than in the labour market overall.⁶

Results from this report: How has COVID-19 interacted with gender inequalities?

COVID-19 has increased women’s paid workload

- Women reported feeling the need to take up extra work, such as unpaid COVID-19 research, during the pandemic to remain competitive. Reduced job opportunities available in the sector in future years have led to an increasingly competitive environment for Early-Career Researchers (ECRs).
- Women report missing out on promotions in the current climate of hiring and wage freezes. This has led to them being underpaid and undervalued for the work they do.
- Women find the sector increasingly difficult to work in and as a result, many feel that they can no longer continue in academia post-COVID-19. This is primarily due to an unmanageable workload and deteriorating work-life balance.

1 Male professors continue to outnumber females by three to one, or 15,700 to 5,700 in 2018-19. (HESA, 2020)

2 UCU (2020) Precarious work in Higher Education. Insecure contracts and how they have changed over time. (<https://bit.ly/3n5TJIZ>)

3 Wright et al (2020) ‘Equalities in freefall? Ontological insecurity and the long-term impact of COVID-19 in the academy’. *Feminist Frontiers*, 2

4 Schmidt (2015) Gendered Language in Teacher Reviews. (<https://bit.ly/36mQuRe>)

5 Macfarlane, B., & Burg, D. (2019) ‘Women professors and the academic housework trap’. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(3), 262-274

6 Times Higher Education (2019) Gender Pay: Universities report slow progress. (<https://bit.ly/3kXdoCM>)

- There is an increase in expectations from employers. This is related to the shift in online teaching which has fallen disproportionately on women's shoulders,⁷ as well as unpaid work related to supporting students emotionally and extra marking.

COVID-19 has increased women's unpaid (caring or household) workload

- Women are struggling to produce research due to an increase in unpaid work responsibilities in the home.
- Women report a lack of understanding by male colleagues about the challenges of juggling paid and unpaid working responsibilities.
- Post-Graduate Researchers (PGRs) have had to take on more of the caring responsibilities in the home due to the perception that their work is 'not real work' or is more flexible than their partner's job.
- Women are experiencing feelings of guilt due to having to make the impossible choice between looking after their children/relatives or working on their academic job.
- Women are working through the night to keep up with the demands of their paid job while also being full-time carers for children or elderly relatives.
- Much of the emotional labour related to COVID-19 has fallen on women's shoulders.

Uncertainty and Precarity in Academia before COVID-19

Prior challenges related to precarity

- Many PhD students are given zero-hours contracts if they work as teaching assistants. They have little certainty for the future and cannot financially plan.
- Lecturers and seminar teachers on casualised contracts are paid by the hour with only two hours of preparation time, when often this takes much longer.
- Part-time workers in academia are more likely to be on fixed-term contracts.⁸
- Women with caring responsibilities find it harder to move around the country often for new academic positions.
- Many unfunded PGRs rely upon teaching hours for their main source of income. They are put on the lowest pay band regardless of prior teaching experience.
- PhD students are paid 'stipend' funding which is not considered a real wage, so they do not have access to a pension, mortgage, tax-free childcare or labour rights.⁹

Results from this report: How has COVID-19 interacted with precarity in academia?

COVID-19 has decreased paid workload and increased uncertainty for ECRs

- The pandemic has exacerbated inequalities faced by those already in the most precarious working positions.

7 Women are more likely to be in teaching positions than their male colleagues.

8 Higher Education Statistics Agency (2020) Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2018/19. (<https://bit.ly/3jRqzUX>)

9 Pandemic PGRs and UCU (2020): 'Survey Summary report: GTAs are workers too'.

- There is a higher concentration of women on fixed-term contracts,¹⁰ meaning they have been the hardest hit by job-losses when contracts are not renewed.
- Because PGRs do not have a permanent contract they are not entitled to redundancy pay when they lose their jobs, regardless of the amount of time they have spent working for their university.
- Women with caring responsibilities during lockdown cannot perform their paid roles well and therefore will be less competitive than their peers when it comes to competing for available jobs and promotions in the future.
- There is a lack of communication regarding future employment, with many ECRs not knowing until the first week of term whether and under what conditions they would be teaching. Many still do not know if this employment will continue past December.
- PGRs from some universities report being sent ‘like cannon fodder’¹¹ back into university to teach face-to-face, unlike those on more permanent contracts who have the choice to teach from home.

Mental and physical health issues for ECRs before COVID-19

Prior challenges related to mental health in academia

- Post-graduate researchers before the pandemic reported rates of depression and anxiety that are six times higher than those in the general public. One report found that more than 40% had anxiety scores in the moderate to severe range, with nearly 40% showing signs of moderate to severe depression.¹²
- Young women are more at risk of poor mental health than the general population. Women between the ages of 16 and 24 are almost three times as likely (26%) to experience a common mental health issue as males of the same age (9%)¹³

Results from this report: How has COVID-19 interacted with mental health in academia?

COVID-19 has negatively impacted the mental health of women ECRs

The most commonly cited reasons that came up in our 200-participant ECR survey were:

- **Uncertainty of future career** was one of the most often cited reason for stress in the survey, with many despondent about a future in academia.
- **The impact of previous mental health issues:** Common answers highlighted the difficulties faced by those who had a history of OCD, anxiety, depression and eating disorders, all of which have been exacerbated and have combined to create a debilitating effect on researchers.

10 UCU (2020) Precarious work in Higher Education. Insecure contracts and how they have changed over time. (<https://bit.ly/3n5TJIZ>).

11 Quote from interview with ECR3

12 Evans, T. M., Bira, L., Gastelum, J. B., Weiss, L. T., & Vanderford, N. L. (2018) ‘Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education’. *Nature biotechnology*, 36(3), 282.

13 Mental Health Statistics England: (<https://bit.ly/3jnhoLK>)

- **Relationship breakdown:** Survey respondents were candid about the impact of COVID-19 on their relationships, with many citing breakdowns in relationships due to the pressure of the pandemic. This is likely to have an impact on concentration levels and affect the emotional resilience required to conduct research.

In the qualitative interviews, respondents highlighted the following drivers of poor mental health:

- Isolation and loss of office environment;
- Lack of time for self-care and blurring of boundaries between work and personal life;
- Anxiety about future employment and finances;
- Feelings of guilt;
- Stress of High workload and growing tired of balancing act;
- Lack of understanding from male colleagues.

Recommendations

In order to ensure Early-Career Researchers are supported during the pandemic and beyond and the immediate impact of this crisis does not unravel work done towards gender equality in previous decades, we need:

- 1) **A proper contract for PGRs.** Having a contract would regulate workload, reduce financial pressures and decrease uncertainty and for post-graduate researchers. It would also enable labour rights such as redundancy pay, pension contributions, union representation and government-funded childcare support.
- 2) **Reduce the demands of a high workload.** We recommend that PGRs are given a 35-hour working week, with a new approach to workload management and adoption of the Health and Safety Executive's Stress Management Standards, or equivalent.
- 3) **Extend the length of short fixed-term contracts.** This will reduce uncertainty related to future employment for early-career researchers.
- 4) **Gender / carer awareness training for supervisors.** This may help those without caring responsibilities to become aware of the difficulties faced by working parents.
- 5) **Availability of counselling and wellbeing support to PGRs.** A properly funded mental health service should be provided together by the government and university sector.
- 6) **Childcare support for those with caring responsibilities.** Making childcare support available to PGRs and increasing capacity of nurseries by investing in care.
- 7) **Encourage a support network to tackle isolation amongst PGRs.**
- 8) **Improved communication and respect for PGRs.**
- 9) **Actively support researchers to work from home.** Supervisors and management should check that researchers have the equipment, resources and software that they need to work from home.
- 10) **Hardship funds.** We recommend that government money towards hardship funds is extended, to reduce inequalities and to avoid the solidification of class divides.

