The challenges facing early-career researchers pursuing overseas positions during a global pandemic

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The COVID-19 global pandemic has disrupted research and restricted travel, threatening valuable research opportunities for early-career researchers. Support networks are critical to help overcome the challenges of relocation during this time.

Image courtesy of Ingrid Green, UCL Eastman Dental Institute, UK.

A few months ago I bid farewell to my loved ones in Melbourne, Australia, to pursue my first post-doctoral research position in London, UK. Months of preparation and paperwork were required to be given permission to leave Australia, which has pursued a [strict closed-border approach](#) during the global COVID-19 pandemic. It was a daunting prospect. I said goodbye to the place I had lived most of my life and headed off to the eerily quiet airport full of excitement and nervous energy. At the time, the Australian border was closed indefinitely, meaning there would be no certainty as to when I would be back or when friends and family could visit. Except it turned out that those feelings were premature. I did not need to say goodbye that day: a lab error delayed my COVID-19 PCR test result, stopping me from boarding my flight and, instead, I was in the back of a taxi heading home to my confused family. After hastily rescheduling my entire itinerary and psyching myself up for a second time, I did eventually arrive in London several days later. The scientist in me that had tried to carefully plan everything to make the move as smooth as possible, however, had quickly come unstuck with the unpredictable nature of a pandemic-stricken world. Getting settled in a new city is challenging at the best of times, let alone a city and research lab that was just beginning to emerge from the depths of a global pandemic. Many people would ask me: why did you move here in the middle of a pandemic? A question that I found myself wrestling with in those early weeks.

As a PhD graduate in Australia, many research opportunities are found far from home as [funding rates for research have dwindled and universities face financial hardship in the wake of the pandemic](#). Pursuing the ideal project as an early-career researcher can mean scouring the globe to find the right match for a highly refined skillset developed during a PhD. [Strict border closures and travel bans imposed by many countries](#) have closed off many of these opportunities for early-career researchers. For many young, early-career researchers the window to pursue these

opportunities might be narrow, as other life and family commitments grow over time. For those already with such commitments, there is even more risk and trepidation.

The very nature of research has also become more uncertain. I work in [clinical research](#) studying immune responses in patients with inflammatory bowel disease, many of whom are [considered vulnerable owing to immunosuppressant treatment](#). Encouraging patients to take on research commitments is challenging, particularly as patient care shifts towards more remote care. A positive COVID-19 test in the research team leading to self-isolation could also disrupt critical experiments that have been planned weeks in advance in anticipation of collecting clinical samples. Greater responsibilities must now be placed on researchers, clinical staff and the institutions that conduct research to ensure it can be conducted in a safe and secure manner for all involved.

My story is not unique. Many other researchers around the world are contemplating the same reality, making it critically important that support systems are in place, especially for those working remotely. These systems can be from research institutions, universities or affiliated societies, and I encourage anyone who is facing difficulty to reach out to these resources. I have been fortunate to have the help and support of many wonderful colleagues that have helped me to find my way. A few days ago I collected the first preliminary data of my new project with a smile on my face, as the lab now begun to feel like the homely place it had in the past. One of the greatest strengths of research is that it brings people together from all parts of the world. Despite the challenges I encountered during my move, I hope my story will encourage others to do the same.

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