Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early career dementia researchers: a global online survey

C. Elizabeth Shaaban | Sara Bartels | Wagner S. Brum | Lindsay A. Welikovitch | Royhaan Folarin | Adam Smith | ISTAART PEERs PIA

Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has strained research around the world and has presented an unprecedented challenge to early career researchers (ECRs). The ISTAART Professional Interest Area (PIA) to Elevate Early Career Researchers (PEERs) works with worldwide dementia ECRs to attract, support, and retain them in dementia research. A key aim is to understand, bring attention to, and develop solutions for career challenges faced by ECRs. Our study objective was to understand the impacts of the pandemic on dementia ECRs.

Methods: We queried ECRs' pandemic experiences in a global online survey conducted from September 1, 2021, through October 31, 2021. The survey was shared through ISTAART membership emails and newsletters, social media, podcasts, discussion boards, and emailing lists. Participation was open to individuals who self-identified as ECRs (students through early career/pre-tenure faculty) presently working in any dementia-related research discipline or who left dementia research within the prior two years. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results: ECRs from 34 countries responded to the survey (n = 321; 68% women; 79% working in academia). Overall, 78% indicated experiencing research delays; 54% had to make project adjustments; 41% reported a negative impact on their career progression due to lack of funding or job opportunities; and 38% required additional or extended funding. Furthermore, 43% thought institutions/employers could have supported them better, and 20% felt their institutions/employers did not support them at all. We also noted 31% of respondents reported increased conference attendance during the pandemic.

Conclusion: We recommend: 1) funders and institutions provide additional sources of funding, both specific to ECRs and on which ECRs may be co-applicants; 2) principal investigators/supervisors and institutions support opportunities for ECRs to have enhanced research community participation online, such as networking, presenting their work in webinars, and online or hybrid conference attendance; 3) professional organizations maintain hybrid conference options in the future, given the expanded and more affordable access they give ECRs, especially those from low- and middle-
income countries; and 4) institutions and supervisors adjust promotion and tenure review requirements to accommodate inabilities to work in the same way during the pandemic. We also highlight resources specific to dementia ECRs.