The University of Liverpool Evolutionary Anthropology Seminar Series: Transcending the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic

1 | INTRODUCTION

The University of Liverpool Evolutionary Anthropology Seminar Series is a long-running program of thematic talks for the Archaeology of Human Origins Research Group. The seminars explore the multidisciplinary research of those working within various subfields, brought together under the broad themes of human evolution and behavior. The seminar series was established in 2006 and was traditionally hosted on Thursdays at 1–2 pm, with speakers traveling to the University of Liverpool to deliver their talks.

The authors of this article took over the organization of the seminars in January 2020 and have therefore experienced the direct impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the series. In March 2020, the restrictions imposed by the UK Government, and enforced by the University of Liverpool, necessitated the cancellation of the seminars for the remainder of the semester. The series was then adapted to a remote format for the duration of the 2020–2021 academic year and was held on the Zoom Video Conferencing platform. The seminars were traditionally held within the hour time slot, with the talk lasting approximately 45 min and the remainder dedicated to a question and answers (Q&A) session. We retained this structure for the “webinars,” which were hosted predominantly in the same time slot as done previously, although this was changed to accommodate speakers from different time zones.

From October 2020 to June 2021, we hosted 31 guest speakers who presented on varied topics from Pleistocene rock art in Indonesia to tool-use in great apes. We have found that several benefits came from the reorganization of the seminar series into a webinar series, including a more diverse demographic of both speakers and audience participants, as well as a dramatic increase in participant numbers due to the accessibility of online webinars.

2 | DIVERSITY OF INVITED SPEAKERS AND WEBINAR TOPICS

As shown by Table 1, the Evolutionary Anthropology Webinar Series hosted 31 speakers from 24 different institutions in 11 different countries across four continents. Hosting researchers from around the world was an advantage of the online format, as it was previously unfeasible. The remote nature of our program also allowed us to invite speakers of varying career levels. Between October 2020 and June 2021, we hosted talks from three current PhD students, five Postdoctoral Research Fellows or Honorary Research Fellows, six Lecturers or Associate Professors, seven Senior Lecturers, Group Leaders, or Assistant Professors, and nine full Professors. This provided early career researchers with the opportunity to share their research in a webinar series with a global reach, but also enabled us to host world-leading academics from a diverse range of fields, thus giving our audience a chance to share in a variety of research. To gage the success of the Evolutionary Anthropology Webinar Series, we ran a survey through our mailing list and social media accounts after the final session. From the feedback provided by participants of the survey, we found that the majority agreed that our webinar program included a diverse range of speakers, both in terms of country of institution (87%), and career level (74%). We were also pleased to host an almost even ratio of male and female researchers, which we consider a success in a field that has been traditionally male dominated.

Evolutionary Anthropology, by nature, is an interdisciplinary discipline, which is reflected in the diversity of speakers and in the topics they presented. The Evolutionary Anthropology Seminar Series has always aimed to host a varied program of talks, but moving the series online enabled us to create an even more diverse line-up than was previously possible. Some talks provided general syntheses of the current state of human evolution research and drew from multiple fields of research, such as those given by Bernard Wood and Chris Stringer. Other speakers focused on regional case studies, such as Cecilia Padilla who spoke on language use and ethnolinguistic reasoning in the Yucatec Maya, and Charles Musiba speaking on conservation efforts and research at Laetoli, Tanzania. We also hosted speakers who presented research outside the remit of our department’s immediate research areas; for example, Lluis Quintana-Murci presented on the application of evolutionary genetics to the study of human-disease co-evolution. Such diversity highlights the multidisciplinary nature of the webinar series. 93% of survey participants agreed that the series covered a diverse range of topics, with participants praising the balance between different aspects of evolutionary anthropology across the program.

3 | AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHIC AND SIZE

Since the adaptation of the Evolutionary Anthropology Seminar Series into a programme of webinars, we have experienced a huge increase...
| Speaker                          | Date       | Institution                                   | Country         | Speaker career level | Talk title                                                                 | YouTube link (if recorded)                      |
|---------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Rebecca Wragg Sykes             | 01/10/2020 | University of Liverpool                       | United Kingdom  | 2                    | Summoning wraiths from time: writing about Neanderthals in the 21st century | https://bit.ly/2QoztjF                           |
| Chris Stringer                  | 15/10/2020 | Natural History Museum                        | United Kingdom  | 5                    | Some current issues in Middle-Late Pleistocene human evolution              |                                                 |
| Zanna Clay                      | 22/10/2020 | Durham University                             | United Kingdom  | 3                    | The evolution and development of empathy: insights from our great ape cousins| https://bit.ly/3tWMKc                           |
| Patrick Roberts                 | 29/10/2020 | Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History | Germany        | 4                    | A novel Pleistocene niche for Homo sapiens?: Comparing the ecological and environmental contexts of our species and its closest relatives. | https://bit.ly/3wTmA24                           |
| Carys Phillips                  | 05/11/2020 | University of Liverpool                       | United Kingdom  | 1                    | The convergent evolution of advanced cognition in hominid primates, cetaceans and proboscideans |                                                 |
| Cecilia Padilla                 | 12/11/2020 | University of Zurich                         | Switzerland     | 1                    | Strategic responses in language use and ethnolinguistic reasoning to changing socio-ecologies: Insights from the Yucatec Maya | https://bit.ly/3tdzpBW                           |
| Andy Herries                    | 19/11/2020 | La Trobe University                           | Australia       | 5                    | Human Evolution in southern Africa from the earliest occurrence of Homo erectus to the Acheulian to Middle Stone Age transition: insights from Drimolen Cave and Amanzi Springs | https://bit.ly/3ddvK1z                           |
| Jennifer French                 | 26/11/2020 | University of Liverpool                       | United Kingdom  | 3                    | From visitation to intensification: A new demographic history of Palaeolithic Europe | https://bit.ly/3mHR2r6                           |
| Davide Delpiano                 | 03/12/2020 | University of Ferrara                        | Italy           | 2                    | Using 3D scanning techniques to reconstruct cores from Neanderthal lithic assemblages | https://bit.ly/2PR8Q7r                           |
| Kathelijne Koops                | 10/12/2020 | University of Cambridge                      | United Kingdom  | 3                    | Ape origins of human technology: What makes a tool user?                    |                                                 |
| Berkay Dinçer                   | 17/12/2020 | Istanbul University                           | Turkey          | 4                    | Lower Paleolithic Dispersals or Extinctions?: Out-of-Africa into Europe through Anatolia? | https://bit.ly/3skNPPG                           |
| Bernard Wood                    | 07/1/2021  | George Washington University                  | United States of America | 5                    | A skeptic's guide to human evolution                                         | https://bit.ly/3serDGK                           |
| Gul Deniz Salali                | 14/01/2021 | University College London                     | United Kingdom  | 3                    | Applied cultural evolution: Health behaviours in hunter-gatherers and beyond | https://bit.ly/3apfTLF                            |
| Nicolas Wiggenhauser            | 21/01/2021 | Stony Brook University                        | United States of America | 1                    | The evolution of the brain and intelligent behaviour in mammals             |                                                 |
| Kit Opie                        | 28/01/2021 | University of Bristol                        | United Kingdom  | 3                    | Major transitions in evolution: when's the next one?                        | https://bit.ly/3da6Gse                           |

(Continues)
| Speaker                  | Date       | Institution                          | Country      | Speaker career level | Talk title                                                                 | YouTube link (if recorded) |
|-------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Lluis Quintana-Murci    | 04/2/2021  | Institut Pasteur and College de France | France       | 5                    | Understanding human infectious diseases through the lens of evolutionary genetics | https://bit.ly/3uluYzx      |
| Charles Musiba          | 11/2/2021  | University Colorado Denver            | United States of America | 4                    | Current research and conservation efforts at Laetoli paleoanthropological site in northern Tanzania | https://bit.ly/3sn5iqJ      |
| Rick Potts              | 18/02/2021 | Smithsonian Institute                 | United States of America | 5                    | Ecological disruption and the origin of Homo sapiens                        | https://bit.ly/3uRpaDX      |
| Sarah Mathew            | 25/02/2021 | Arizona State University              | United States of America | 3                    | The cultural evolution of cooperative norms                                 | https://bit.ly/3mLQ3GC      |
| Paul O'Higgins          | 04/3/2021  | University of York                    | United Kingdom | 5                    | Craniofacial development. Evolution and adaptation in modern and archaic Homo |                            |
| Robyn Pickering         | 11/3/2021  | University of Cape Town               | South Africa  | 4                    | Human evolution in South Africa: carbonates, chronologies and decolonisation | https://bit.ly/3mGOsBI       |
| Eleanor Scerri          | 18/03/2021 | Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History | Germany | 5                    | Current Research in West Africa and implications for human evolution         | https://bit.ly/3vsjWyx      |
| Adam Brumm              | 15/04/2021 | Griffith University                   | Australia    | 5                    | Pigs, popcorn, and the Pleistocene rock art of Sulawesi                      |                            |
| Ruth Mace               | 22/04/2021 | University College London             | United Kingdom | 5                    | The evolutionary ecology of religious beliefs and practices                  | https://bit.ly/3aLn68D      |
| Marc Kissel             | 29/04/2021 | Appalachian State University          | United States of America | 4                    | Peacefare and warfare in human evolution                                    | https://bit.ly/3e3O5Pa      |
| Rob Foley               | 06/05/2021 | University of Cambridge               | United Kingdom | 5                    | Signals in stone: what can we infer about hominin cognition and behaviour from loliths? | https://bit.ly/3ccSYDV      |
| Lauren Schroeder        | 13/05/2021 | University of Toronto                 | Canada       | 4                    | Exploring evolutionary processes in human evolution: lessons from quantitative genetics and mammal models |                            |
| James Blinkhorn         | 20/05/2021 | Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History | Germany | 3                    | Into the monsoon: Exploring the earliest expansions of modern humans into monsoonal Asia | https://bit.ly/3ibaP1P      |
| Tina Lasisi             | 27/05/2021 | Penn-State University                 | United States of America | 2                    | Hair and heat load in human evolution                                       | https://bit.ly/3yTDQ8d      |
| Alejandro Pascual-Garrido | 03/06/2021 | University of Oxford                  | United Kingdom | 2                    | Archaeology of the perishable: plant-based ape technology                   |                            |
| Suzy White              | 10/06/2021 | University College London             | United Kingdom | 4                    | The many forms of the Middle Pleistocene hominin browridge                  |                            |

Note: Career levels: 1—Current PhD student; 2—Post-doctoral Researcher, Honorary Research Fellow; 3—Lecturer, Associate Professor, Fieldwork Director; 4—Senior Lecturer, Group Leader, Assistant Professor; 5—Full Professor.
in audience participation, as well as in the diversity of audience members’ global locations. We began collecting data on audience numbers from the first online webinar in October 2020, and recorded participant location during the Spring–Summer semester of 2021 (April–June). These data was used to assess the relative popularity and global reach of the series.

As shown by Figure 1, audience numbers varied throughout the duration of the program period between October 2020 and June 2021. Each talk had at least 29 audience members present, with the highest number of participants reaching 167. Four webinars attracted over 100 participants: Chris Stringer on Middle-Late Pleistocene human evolution (167 participants), Bernard Wood on current gaps in human evolution research (129 participants), Zanna Clay on the evolution of empathy in primates (107 participants) and Rick Potts on environmental fluctuations during the evolution of *Homo sapiens* (105 participants). The total number of participants across the program was 1929, with an average of 62 participants per webinar.

During each webinar of the Spring–Summer semester, we asked our audience members where they were joining the webinar from. This poll showed that participant location varied considerably throughout the webinars though, unsurprisingly, 57% of our poll respondents came from the UK. Nonetheless, the webinars regularly attracted participants from around the world (see Figure 2 for details on attendance outside of the UK). The majority of overseas audience members originated from Western Europe (30%) and the United States (19%) according to our poll, perhaps reflective of the time zone in which the webinars were scheduled and the language in which they were delivered. Despite this, we attracted participants from every continent except for Antarctica, which would never have been attainable in the previous format. We also found that certain talks concerning specific regions of interest engaged participants from that area; for example, James Blinkhorn’s talk on the earliest expansions of modern humans into monsoonal Asia attracted the majority of our South Asian audience. Local participants often shared valuable insights and experiences during the Q&A, which was useful for furthering discussion and drawing attention to issues associated with the topics covered.

### 4 | ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY

The University of Liverpool Evolutionary Anthropology Webinar Series was free and openly accessible to anyone who registered. Webinars were advertised via a mailing list of predominantly Evolutionary Anthropology faculty and students at the University of Liverpool, which eventually expanded to participants from other institutions, and through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Our survey found that around 60% of participants followed updates of the webinar series via the mailing list, 30% via Twitter, 6% via Facebook, and 3% via word of mouth. Of those who answered our survey, 60% were external to the University of Liverpool, though this figure could be much higher based on audience numbers of certain webinars.

The process of open registration attracted a huge variety of people far beyond those within our immediate human-origins research group, who regularly attended the series in its previous format. For example, the online sessions welcomed members of the public, and many of these participants engaged in discussions with our speakers and other audience members during Q&As. We often found that these portions of the webinars ran over their allotted time, likely...
thanks to the accessibility of using Zoom’s chat function to ask questions. Encouraging public engagement with human evolution studies is vital, not only because much of our research is funded by the public domain, but also because our discipline covers subjects that should be of interest to anyone interested in humanity. Such topics include religion, language and symbolism, but also biological topics such as anatomy and genetics. We aimed to make the series accessible to everyone by asking our speakers to ensure that they cover both the basics of their topic as well as the scientific detail. Indeed, an anonymous participant praised the blend of specialist expertise with non-specialist material, and our survey confirmed that 93% of participants thought that the series was accessible.

We recorded 22 out of the 31 webinars and uploaded them to YouTube (see Table 1 for links to videos). Whilst speakers were free to opt out, we generally encouraged the recording of talks as it enabled viewers to watch the webinars asynchronously, thus further increasing the accessibility of the series. We received positive feedback from participants throughout the program that the recordings were beneficial and facilitated further engagement beyond the live sessions—70% of survey participants found having the YouTube channel useful for their research, studies, teaching and/or general use. Since October 2021, our YouTube channel has had 5202 views (as of 06/16/2021). Our most popular video is with Rebecca Wragg-Sykes on the process of writing her popular science book, “Kindred,” which has 981 views (as of 06/16/2021).

5 | CONCLUSION

The University of Liverpool Evolutionary Anthropology Webinar Series was transformed by the restrictions of the global COVID-19 pandemic, yet also benefited from the remote model of working that resulted. Thanks to the power of social media, the 2020–2021 webinar program became widely and regularly attended by people all over the world, with 40% of our participants in the survey attending over 10 webinars. Whilst virtual webinars on this scale never truly replicate the intimacy and interaction of smaller face-to-face events, we have found that the online format of webinars generally encourages inclusivity and the development of a more diverse speaker and participant demographic. The participant survey also suggested that 68% of participants generally prefer online webinars to in-person seminars, and 97% said that they would consider attending the Evolutionary Anthropology Seminar Series in an online (or partially online) format post-COVID-19. We therefore propose that webinars should remain a key part of research dissemination beyond the COVID19 pandemic, and complementary remote elements should be incorporated into future seminar series; this is an approach we are adopting for the future organization of the University of Liverpool Evolutionary Anthropology Seminar Series.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

N/A
