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Difficult beginnings: transitioning from PhD to postdoc during a global pandemic



- November 11, 2021



As research centres closed their doors, countries closed their borders and entire laboratories shut for many months, many of us tried to plan for one of the most significant transitions in our scientific path: **looking for the perfect postdoc lab.**

This is no doubt one of the most difficult decisions during anyone's academic career, but **how to do that during a global pandemic?**

In this ISEH blogspot, I explore how new postdoctoral fellows moving across the world to join new laboratories have experienced the pandemic and how this is likely to impact their future scientific careers.

Dawn Lin finished her PhD in Melbourne at the end of 2019, and right after, she started planning her future postdoc when COVID was about to take over the world. In November 2021, she had just began her postdoctoral position in the lab of Prof. Andreas Trumpp at the HI-STEM and DKFZ in Heidelberg, Germany. *“The pandemic has definitely changed my plan, and I decided to stay in Australia for a little longer. Initially, I was quite anxious about the move because Australia closed its international border, and the regulation for entering Germany was changing on a daily basis.”* However, after the worst moments of the pandemic in 2020, she finally managed to move. *“Getting a permit to leave Australia was very easy, and I was lucky enough to get fully vaccinated before leaving. This meant that I could travel with my vaccination certificate, and I did not have to quarantine upon arrival in Germany.”* Dawn joined the laboratory of Andreas Trumpp in mid-June 2021, at which point the restrictions in Germany started to ease. *“In-person interaction is definitely one of the most valuable aspects of both work and life that many came to realize because of the pandemic. I am very grateful that it was possible for me to meet many of my new colleagues in person at HI-STEM. I have set up one-on-one meetings with my new co-workers to discuss their work over coffee/lunch, attended a PhD student’s defense celebration and caught up with some of them outside of work for badminton and dinner. As a new postdoc, such interactions really help me to settle into a new country, build my network in the institute, foster new ideas and build potential collaborations down the track.”*

Giulia Orlando, a postdoctoral fellow in the Mead Lab at the Weatherall Institute of Molecular Medicine (Oxford, UK), joined her post just 8 weeks before the first lockdown started in March 2020. Having moved from London to a new city, she barely managed to meet her new co-workers and she hadn’t even started her experiments in the lab. *“Once the lab reopened, it was a completely different place to what I was used to with few people allowed in. The important face-to-face training was not allowed, so I relied on protocols sent by email to start lab work. But I did not even know where reagents were located, how to book and use equipment, and whom to ask. I must admit it was really daunting at the beginning.”* When she finally managed to start doing experiments, carrying them out became extra hard. *“Planning in advance all the steps required became really crucial. To do so, I relied on the kindness of my colleagues, whom I started to know either by email or on Zoom to answer my basic questions and help me navigating the institute without them being around. My boss and co-workers were amazing and made it possible for me to start in the lab. Having a WhatsApp group was also crucial to solve lab issues promptly, such as not finding a reagent or not knowing how to switch on a machine.”*

I was myself looking for a postdoctoral position in the US, having scheduled interviews for the beginning of March 2020 after submitting my PhD in October 2019 in the UK. I was lucky enough to physically visit the lab I chose to join in the US during an (now unimaginable) in-person interview. I even got to meet my future colleagues, see the lab space and experience the city I would be living in for at least the next 5 years. One

week after that, mid-March 2020, the world stopped. And now, in November 2021, it hasn't fully reopened yet. As a matter of fact, US borders (as well as many other countries) have just started to reopen for citizens from most nationalities, US Embassies in Europe operate on an 8-month waiting list, and I just got my academic VISA after 1.5 years of delays. I was fortunate enough to work on a well-funded laboratory that could extend my contract for another year, but that option was definitely not available for most recent graduates.

The impact of the COVID19 pandemic on postdoctoral researchers goes well beyond travel restrictions and challenging beginnings. Some labs run on greatly reduced capacity, there are less postdoctoral fellowships and overall less funding. Most of us have seen an incredibly high number of colleagues leave the academic path, or complete drop their scientific career. As the scientific community adjusts to this new "normal" way of doing science, we should reflect on strategies to tackle the incredible barriers postdoctoral researchers have found to progress on their careers during the COVID19 pandemic. Specific action points involve proactive communication with funding agencies to achieve yet more flexible funding systems, development of re-entry fellowships specifically targeting postdoctoral researchers who left the scientific path during the pandemic (inspired in the Daphne Jackson or Wellcome Trust Re-entry Fellowships, for example) and re-adjustment of timetables and workplaces to provide flexible and even geographically-relocated positions.

Blogpost contributed by Dr. Alba Rodriguez-Meira, a member of the ISEH Publications Committee.

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- [March 11, 2025](#)

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- *November 14, 2024*

Each month, Simply Blood spotlights a lab contributing to the fields of hematology, immunology, stem cell research, cell and gene therapies, and more. Get to know groups doing cutting edge research from around the world! This month, we are featuring the Vanuytsel Lab which is based out of the Center for ...

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