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Engaging Early Career Researcher Cohorts in a Digital Environment

Case Study



**University of
Nottingham**
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

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Background to the Workshop

U21 delivers annual workshops for the network's Early Career Researchers (ECRs) that aim to foster international networking, professional development and knowledge exchange, laying the foundations for global collaborative working among the network's community of young researchers. It is also an important opportunity to showcase the cutting-edge research conducted by U21's ECRs; for them to share and learn about international projects, perspectives and approaches to research.

These thematic, interdisciplinary workshops focus on UN Sustainable Development Goals and aim to help U21 member universities to build capacity in tackling current global societal challenges. The 2020 workshop 'Modern Slavery, Forced Labour and Human Trafficking: Research Roadmaps to 2030' was co-hosted online by the Rights Lab and the Researcher Academy at the University of Nottingham, and marked the UN's International Day for the Abolition of Slavery.

Stakeholders and Audience

Universitas 21 (U21) is a leading global network of 27 research-intensive universities that empowers its members to share excellence, collaborate across borders and nurture global knowledge exchange.

The Rights Lab is the largest group of modern slavery scholars in the world. Home to the world's leading academic experts on modern slavery, it underpins antislavery with an advanced research agenda.

The Researcher Academy is the network for researchers, and staff who support them, at the University of Nottingham. It works with researchers to promote a healthy research culture, to cultivate researcher excellence, and develop creative partnerships that enable researchers to flourish.

The key audience for this annual ECR workshop is early career researchers/junior faculty who are establishing international research networks and who are at the beginning of their career, i.e. within 8 years of their PhD being awarded.

Purpose of this Case Study

This case study is aimed at those running virtual events across universities, especially those trying to engage international cohorts of ECRs. The purpose of this case study is to share our experiences of turning a face-to-face workshop into a virtual event. We will:

- 1 highlight our key challenges and how we addressed them
- 2 present our brilliant successes and failures
- 3 provide reflections and ideas on how this format can be adapted for a blended experience
- 4 share resources and tools that we created for this event with the network

Challenges

In a face-to-face context, workshops and conferences are an opportunity for delegates to grow their network, gain new ideas and insights, and reflect on their own work. Live events are immersive, and delegates can usually focus on the conference without the distractions of work or personal responsibilities. Virtual events, where the majority of delegates are now 'attending' from home, present a new set of challenges and considerations that need to be addressed. ECRs have been grappling with the challenges of working from home, home schooling and caring responsibilities, living with lockdown etc. in addition to the usual pressures of undertaking research.

Adapting the Programme

Starting with the original programme, the team decided to focus each day on a specific theme or activity. For example, a day focused on networking, another on skills development, knowledge exchange and a further day for a joint reflective group activity so that participants can put into practice what they have learned. In the final delivery, these session formats were spaced out throughout the week to encourage diverse conversations between sessions.

The session topics were based on the specialist research conducted by the workshop participants themselves. Alongside keynotes by leading figures globally and a series of online sessions by ECRs on emerging themes, the workshop included:

- Pre-workshop task (research poster), optional task (lightning talk) and pre-workshop networking. The latter was great for cohort-building and engagement
- Sessions to jointly develop and pitch for seed funding to deliver new collaborative research projects
- Pre-scheduled academic 'match-making' sessions to establish potential collaborations on journal articles, funded projects and additional future work
- Joint sessions to develop ideas for co-authored articles
- Virtual informal networking opportunities
- Sessions focused on researcher development

The full final workshop programme can be downloaded [here](#).

Navigating Covid-19

In the early stages of planning for ECR workshop, the UK and a number of other countries, imposed travel restrictions with no indication of how long they would remain in place. With this uncertainty and the rise of cases globally, the coordinating team agreed to move the event online for the first time in its history.

This coordinating team saw this as an opportunity to develop:

- a testbed/'blueprint' for future virtual events (for the network as well as the University of Nottingham)
- institutional resilience
- U21's new connection platform 'U21 Community'
- skills building for coordinators
- a suite of resources for future ECR cohorts to access

For U21, this also offered the opportunity to engage with a wider community of ECRs in the network. The face-to-face workshops cap delegate numbers to four per member institution, however for the virtual event it was possible to increase the cap to ten members per institution. With no travel and subsistence costs associated with attending the online event, it was anticipated that more ECRs would register their interest.

Tools and Resources

The [U21 Website](#) featured the main call for participants and key information about the workshop. This ensured that universities had direct access to information from one source.

The coordinating team used Microsoft Teams to store shared working documents (e.g., registration details, guidelines and applications) and hold fortnightly catch-up meetings with each other as well as the supporting staff from the Researcher Academy and the Rights Lab. Again, having one central storage space for shared documents made it easier to collaborate and share ideas and created a momentum around actions.

Zoom was used for all of the workshop sessions. U21 holds an Education Plan meaning it could hold up to 300 attendees in each call. The features that were particularly useful included: video/screen sharing, the chat function and breakout rooms. Risks associated with unexpected technology failures were identified early on and a checklist and troubleshooting action plan was created to make sure we knew how to resolve a situation quickly. We also made sure to offer test calls with all speakers to reduce the potential of user error during a session.

The workshop was held via U21 Community, the network's connection and collaboration platform built to help members engage with each other in a virtual space. The platform is a Learning Management System (Totara) adapted to host events and meetings, store resources and enable registered users to communicate both synchronously and asynchronously via a forum, chatroom and an instant messaging function. The ECR workshop was the first event held through the platform.

Padlet is an easy-to-use web based virtual whiteboard that we used during our 'Sunburst' event to celebrate UN's International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. We posted a question on the Padlet and encouraged delegates to post their comments on it throughout the day. You can access the Sunburst event padlet [here](#).

Brilliant Successes

Ensuring the workshop was a productive use of delegates' time

The original face-to-face programme was scheduled to run over the course of 4 days and included a delegates dinner and multiple face-to-face networking sessions. For the virtual workshop, the sessions were more evenly spread over 5-days, to support a healthier work-life balance. It was not expected that the ECRs attend the workshop 'full time' as the cohort was spread across different time zones, from California to Melbourne, with a 16-hour time difference.

Over 90% of attendees felt that attending this workshop was a good use of their time and have since expanded their research network

The content was curated to allow a 'pick and mix' approach. All sessions were recorded and immediately uploaded into U21 Community to allow those that were unable to attend live sessions due to time zone differences, childcare or other responsibilities to watch the sessions 'on demand' at a more convenient time for them.

The main sessions ranged from 45-60 minutes in length to reduce 'Zoom fatigue'. This also challenged speakers to communicate their ideas succinctly in a limited amount of time.

The timings of the sessions were structured around the time zones that were the best fit for the majority of delegates. Most sessions included a Q&A afterwards to ensure that there was an interactive element and delegates had the opportunity to engage directly with the speakers and feel more involved.

The majority of sessions were set up as dialogues (between two or three speakers and a Chair) featuring the workshop participants themselves. This gave delegates the opportunity to become more involved in the workshop narrative and contribute to their professional development through experiential learning. The sessions were chaired by experienced researchers who shared questions and ensured we kept to time.

Effective networking in a virtual space

"The 'getting to know each other' sessions and the session about ECR careers helped to put my pathway into a perspective and meet people going through similar challenges."

Over 80% of workshop participants who responded to the feedback survey indicated that they plan to connect/collaborate with other participant(s) outside of the workshop

Networking time was purposefully built into the programme and delegates were provided additional communication tools (via chatroom, fora, instant messaging etc.) to easily connect with each other throughout the course of the workshop. Networking sessions were scheduled at different times of the day to ensure there were sessions that delegates from any time zone could attend as a live session.

An example of a brilliant success was the series of informal networking sessions with ice breakers, held four weeks and two weeks before the workshop began. The ice breakers were light-hearted and participants were invited to bring an item from their home country to show and tell, and to wear a hat. This gave delegates a chance to get to know each other on a personal level before connecting professionally. Participants were also encouraged to introduce their research interests and current projects and this created an inclusive and friendly atmosphere that helped to bridge the gap across screens. These sessions immediately helped participants to identify potential collaborators before the workshop started and sparked a number of connections. It was also apparent that participants from the same institution were often not aware of each other and were delighted to have been introduced to each other through these sessions.

Lightning talks and research posters were another opportunity where delegates came together to discuss their research and make meaningful connections with each other.

Incentives as drivers to engage participants

Seed funding proposals

The cost savings of hosting an online event were re-purposed to offer seed funding for the ECRs attending the workshop. A Dragons' Den session was devised to support projects that demonstrated international collaborations and experiential learning. Early Career Researchers participating in the workshop were invited to pitch for seed funding of up to US\$3,000 per project. There was a total of US\$15,000 available for allocation.

Proposals were in the form of 'Dragons' Den'/'Shark Tank' style presentations of no longer than 7 minutes to a panel of judges. The judging panel comprised senior academics working in the field of Modern Slavery, a senior representative of Universitas 21 and an early career researcher working in an interdisciplinary field related to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Time was scheduled within the workshop programme for participants to work collaboratively on their pitches and they were offered 'clinics' with experienced staff members, who could provide feedback on the proposals and pitches. The clinics were well attended and ensured all six of the proposals secured funding for their project. In total, 6 collaborative projects (involving at least two U21 members from more than two countries) were awarded seed funding, to the total value of US\$18,000

Presentation Opportunities

"...the breadth of topics covered in the dialogues/trialogues and skills sessions as well as the opportunities to speak with other participants in small groups were of greatest value."

To further increase engagement, it was important to give as many ECRs as possible the opportunity to share their own research through a series of dialogues/trialogues, optional Lightning Talks and research posters. Working closely with the Rights Lab Director, researchers were assigned to take part in a curated strand of themed dialogue sessions.

Call for Special Edition Journal Article Contributions

Workshop participants were offered the opportunity to contribute to a special issue of the Journal of Modern Slavery. A planning and information session introduced the idea for the article, the timeline and gave delegates the opportunity to ask questions. Following this session, a number of delegates agreed to work collaboratively on the special issue. As a result, 5 delegates are co-editing articles for the special edition of the Journal of Modern Slavery to be published later in 2021.

Brilliant Failures and Lessons Learned

Perpetuating a culture of overworking

"I would have found slightly longer breaks between sessions and lunch breaks helpful, just to have a bit more time to make a cup of tea and look at something else than the computer screen. It might also work to challenge the toxic culture of overwork in academia that tells us we shouldn't take breaks. Especially for an ECR workshop, I think this is an important message to send."

The workshop programme ran for full working days, Monday to Friday. The breaks allocated between sessions were between 15 and 30 minutes long. During planning the rationale for this was to prioritise and maximise attendee participation and engagement. It was not anticipated that attendees would in fact attend a full day, but 'pick and mix' between live and recorded sessions as appropriate for their schedule. Longer breaks and a message about time management would have been beneficial.

Not Managing Expectations

"I loved the workshop, but for those of us with a full-time teaching job, there were way too many activities (posters, different types of presentations...)"

Due to the amount of pre-planning and communications that had already taken place with a face-to-face event in mind, the online event was a fairly literal assimilation of the physical event and in hindsight there were some aspects of the face-to-face programme that didn't fit as well in the virtual space. For example, the research poster task and the Lightning Talks that, for some participants, felt more like a burden than a benefit. These tasks were communicated 4 weeks in advance of the workshop going live, but time was still a limiting factor, especially as ECR workload has intensified as a result of the pandemic.

Inclusivity

"Even though this workshop was advertised as interdisciplinary, it was not satisfactory enough from that perspective. From the sciences, I only met 2 other researchers."

"The time difference was a challenge. I am not sure what could have been done differently, but something to consider for future planning."

Inclusivity underlies the purpose of the workshop. Researchers from all disciplines are encouraged to take part to enable a multidisciplinary approach to problem sharing and problem solving. The ECR workshops are usually themed on a UN Sustainable Development Goal but on this occasion, the workshop was focused on an SDG target. This potentially narrowed down the spectrum of researchers who could have attended.

Timezones are forever a challenge for international online events but working with a UK-based co-host determined a rough GMT-based working day. In order to counteract this, sessions that were recorded were uploaded immediately for viewing. Tasks or discussion boards associated with each session will be considered for future events, to enable interaction beyond the live broadcast.

What next?

For the network this event represented a learning curve on how to engage with and establish an international online cohort. This workshop prioritised participant engagement with a supporting suite of incentives to encourage pathways and collaborations beyond the event itself. This has seen a significant shift and a move away from it being a one-off, standalone event, to a workshop that provides the foundation skills as well as real opportunities for ongoing research connections and collaborations. During unprecedented times, these connections have been essential in keeping the research endeavour alive.

Working closely with the Researcher Academy has highlighted the outstanding resources available at U21 universities and their ability to support their researchers during both normal and challenging times. With the ongoing suspension of travel, there is an opportunity here to build capacity within the network to create a joint online U21 Early Career Researcher programme that runs throughout the year, comprising contributions from various U21 members.

Resources

[U21 ECR workshop description](#)

[U21 ECR workshop guide for host institutions](#)

[Dragon's Den Outline for participants](#)

[Dragons' Den application form](#)

[Dragon's Den judging criteria](#)

[Journal of Modern Slavery](#)

Online Tools to support virtual conferencing

[Padlet](#) – free to use online virtual whiteboard

[How to use Padlet](#)

[Timeanddate.com](#) – online tool to help you schedule meetings across time zones

[Zoom - video conferencing tool](#)

[Zoom checklist](#)