

Putting the brakes on professional nomadism? Prospects for long-distance commuting in a post-pandemic world.

*Until now, academics have accepted that professional nomadism is part of the job. However, as the global pandemic puts a brake on unnecessary travel, **Dr Emily Yarrow** and **Dr Julie Davies** explore the challenges and opportunities that new working patterns mean for commutes, campuses and careers.*

For many academics, the journey to work is a long one. It may even require a budget airline flight a few times a month, or other low-cost travel, as well as overnight stays or more extreme forms of [academic nomadism](#). This is [certainly true of our context- UK business schools](#) where there is [typically high mobility](#) of academic staff between institutions. Recently, a professor called one of us to discuss a senior role in his local business school that he was considering applying for. He said, “I’m quite happy where I am in a business school three hours’ travel away from home. I’ve got a large research grant, so I don’t need to travel regularly to the campus and I don’t have any teaching. But after seven years of staying away in a hotel one or two nights a week, I’m starting to question whether it’s worth it in a pandemic with all the issues of health and safety”.

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Long-distance after lockdown?

Post lockdown, this landscape looks set to shift. The prospect of opening university campuses fully for face-to-face teaching is clearly exercising facilities and teaching teams in universities globally, even in countries like Sweden where university buildings never shut. There are intense [discussions](#) about block teaching and giving students options to study fully virtually, mainly [on campus](#) in ‘bubbles’, or by blended learning. While some faculty have been surveyed about how they are coping with remote working and how they feel about returning to teaching on-site, the realities – and genuine fears – of commuting to work, especially for faculty members who are used to long-distance weekly commutes, have probably not been fully discussed in many institutions.

Whilst the pre-pandemic norm of long-distance commuting may be welcomed as productive time for reading and writing papers and marking scripts, there is now [widespread fear](#) of travelling on public transport and staying away from home, a trend which no doubt applies to commuters outside London, and this may be exacerbated further still when academic [air travel](#) is considered. Indeed, the current pandemic is driving more of us to deliberate whether [international academic travel](#) should cease altogether.

For many workers, it is not only the commute which has become undesirable during lockdown, but the office itself with [some now preferring to work from home](#) most, if not all, of the time. In their book published in April, [Healthy Buildings: How Indoor Spaces Drive Performance and Productivity](#) Joseph Allen and John Macomber at Harvard University state that whilst risks can be mitigated, the risk of returning to offices can never be zero.



Clearly, in academia, many of us have been very fortunate in being able to continue working from home during lockdowns in different parts of the globe, despite domestic disruptions such as home-schooling and caring responsibilities. In expressing sentiments about university staff working at/from home but not being 'homeworkers', university leaders are indicating an openness to flexible working for those with caring responsibilities who are finding the lack of commuting convenient. This could be a real opportunity for new and different ways of working. There is also empathy for individuals with medical conditions that required them to shield during the lockdown.

The pandemic means that we might not only be shopping more locally in walking distance within our neighbourhoods and more on-line but also re-thinking where we work in the future, post-pandemic university. Colleagues have been recruited and inducted into new jobs virtually, seemingly without adverse effects, and the pandemic has accelerated greater uptake of technology to improve student engagement and satisfaction with reduced carbon footprints.

Who returns to campus?

However, tricky questions emerge as we establish new working patterns. Teaching a class of students who are both on-line and in person at the same time will be a real challenge. If an academic travels a few hours only to find a few students in front of them physically and most online, how will this be managed? As campuses open up, who might be most vulnerable or most [inconvenienced or disadvantaged](#), despite block teaching, by the prospect of in-person classroom teaching? [One controversial option](#) suggests 'a rolling age-release strategy combined with the current principle of social distancing.' In practice, then, does this mean that non-BAME women in their 20s without any pre-existing conditions who live in walking or driving distance from their universities should be the first back to teaching? This would allow BAME men over 50, who maybe some of the most [susceptible members](#) of society to contracting Covid-19, to teach from home. Should we let young adults and students re-populate our campuses and give faculty members, especially long-distance commuters a choice to continue to teach virtually?

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Hobson's choice or job swaps?

There is also a risk that those who do go into the office and campus will be more visible and plugged in, leaving those teaching virtually or those unable to come to campus because of health concerns feeling less included. Yet virtual working also means that academics can be beamed into each other's classes in all parts of the world for a [potentially] much richer experience, with little or less [environmental impact](#).

Another option would be to set up a new service, nationally or internationally, with a digital platform that plots where academics live and work and facilitates informal or longer-term swaps so that people can teach locally to reduce travel and reduce exposure to the virus. We wonder whether head hunters are already receiving requests from senior people who used to commute weekly between home and work, and who are now re-thinking where they work, even if they were very nomadic before.

Conclusion

In a world of increasing populism and drastically reduced air miles, it looks like we are all locals now. At the same time, we are being globally connected through online working. It will be interesting to see how university unions and management accommodate personal preferences within new forms of digital and in-person teaching delivery. While university employment contracts no longer stipulate that an individual needs to live within a 25-mile radius, we suggest that a conversation airing potential concerns about long-distance commuting faculty and safety could save unnecessary travel, environmental impact, – or even lives during a global pandemic.

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