

1 **The challenges facing early-career researchers pursuing overseas positions during**
2 **the global pandemic**

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8 The COVID-19 global pandemic has disrupted research and restricted travel, threatening
9 valuable research opportunities for early-career researchers. Support networks are critical
10 to help overcome the challenges of relocation during this time.

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12 A few months ago I bid farewell to my loved ones in Melbourne, Australia, to pursue my first
13 post-doctoral research position in London, UK. Months of preparation and paperwork were
14 required to be given permission to leave Australia, which has pursued a strict closed-border
15 approach during the global COVID-19 pandemic. It was a daunting prospect. I said goodbye
16 to the place I had lived most of my life and headed off to the eerily quiet airport full of
17 excitement and nervous energy. At the time, the Australian border was closed indefinitely,
18 meaning there would be no certainty as to when I would be back or when friends and family
19 could visit. Except it turned out that those feelings were premature. I did not need to say
20 goodbye that day: a lab error delayed my COVID-19 PCR test result, stopping me from
21 boarding my flight and, instead, I was in the back of a taxi heading home to my confused
22 family. After hastily rescheduling my entire itinerary and psyching myself up for a second time,
23 I did eventually arrive in London several days later. The scientist in me that had tried to
24 carefully plan everything to make the move as smooth as possible, however, had quickly come
25 unstuck with the unpredictable nature of a pandemic-stricken world. Getting settled in a new
26 city is challenging at the best of times, let alone a city and research lab that was just beginning
27 to emerge from the depths of a global pandemic. Many people would ask me: why did you
28 move here in the middle of a pandemic? A question that I found myself wrestling with in those

29 early weeks. As a PhD graduate in Australia, many research opportunities are found far from
30 home as funding rates for research have dwindled and universities face financial hardship in
31 the wake of the pandemic. Pursuing the ideal project as an early- career researcher can mean
32 scouring the globe to find the right match for a highly refined skillset developed during a PhD.
33 Strict border closures and travel bans imposed by many countries have closed off many of
34 these opportunities for early- career researchers. For many young, early-career researchers
35 the window to pursue these opportunities might be narrow, as other life and family
36 commitments grow over time. For those already with such commitments, there is even more
37 risk and trepidation. The very nature of research has also become more uncertain. I work in
38 clinical research studying immune responses in patients with inflammatory bowel disease,
39 many of whom are considered vulnerable owing to immunosuppressant treatment.
40 Encouraging patients to take on research commitments is challenging, particularly as patient
41 care shifts towards more remote care. A positive COVID-19 test in the research team leading
42 to self- isolation could also disrupt critical experiments that have been planned weeks in
43 advance in anticipation of collecting clinical samples. Greater responsibilities must now be
44 placed on researchers, clinical staff and the institutions that conduct research to ensure it can
45 be conducted in a safe and secure manner for all involved. My story is not unique. Many other
46 researchers around the world are contemplating the same reality, making it critically important
47 that support systems are in place, especially for those working remotely. These systems can
48 be from research institutions, universities or affiliated societies, and I encourage anyone who
49 is facing difficulty to reach out to these resources. I have been fortunate to have the help and
50 support of many wonderful colleagues that have helped me to find my way. A few days ago I
51 collected the first preliminary data of my new project with a smile on my face, as the lab now
52 begun to feel like the homely place it had in the past. One of the greatest strengths of research
53 is that it brings people together from all parts of the world. Despite the challenges I
54 encountered during my move, I hope my story will encourage others to do the same.

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59 **Competing interests**

60 The author declares no competing interests.

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