

# Academics started working more hours during the pandemic: A new academic norm?

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Academics' work week became even longer during the pandemic. This is true of researchers from different countries, independently of their gender and specialization, an international research team with HSE University participation found. Their working time during the pandemic

was 51 hours compared to the usual 40. The increased number of working hours per week seems to have become part of the new academic norm. The results of the study were published in *PLOS ONE*.

The COVID-19 pandemic added ambiguity to many academics' working conditions. University scholars had to adapt to new forms of study, learn to work with online learning platforms, assess [student performance](#) and provide high-quality feedback.

A team of researchers from Russia, Portugal and Hong Kong carried out a study in 2020 to look at how the COVID-19 crisis impacted their peers' workload and distribution of time for work assignments. The paper itself was a result of the pandemic: the authors met only online.

The respondents were selected randomly out of the authors of academic papers (articles, conference abstracts, books, etc.) added to the Scopus academic database in 2019. The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire on their current workload, as well as on the time they thought they would spend on different research, teaching and administrative tasks, and the time they actually spent.

The respondents first filled out the questionnaire in May 2020, then again in November 2020. A total of 126,000 invitation letters were sent out, and 902 academics from all over the world took part in the first wave. The effective sample included 525 respondents. Most of the participants were from the U.S. (104), Brazil (49), and Italy (31). The [second wave](#) included 169 academics, and the same countries had the biggest representation again.

The scholars were asked to describe a specific academic task (such as academic supervision) and assess how much time they would expect to spend on it before the pandemic (as if the pandemic never happened) and during the pandemic.

They found that in 2020, university scholars worked on average three hours more a week than in 2019. The [working time](#) duration during the pandemic was about 51 hours compared to the usual 40.

The main reasons for the increased workload were teaching and, to a lesser extent, administrative responsibilities. The most difficult thing during the pandemic was adapting to new teaching methods. The teachers spent a significant amount of time transferring studies to the online environment and learning to use online learning platforms. The academics had to develop new methods to assess student performance and to provide feedback. The time of teacher-student communication also changed. While previously, teachers met with their students only during certain office hours, during the pandemic, they were getting requests from students at any [working hours](#) during the week. Answering these requests increased the load on teachers.

However, the time spent by scholars on research remained the same, independently of gender and the field of studies.

While most studies on the presumed effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic environment have been dedicated to opportunities for changing teaching methods and the pressure experienced by scholars during the crisis, the new study looks at the pandemic as an event that has reinforced existing trends of working extra hours in academia.

"Scholars already work more than the norm. And during the crisis, they started working even more in order to alleviate the ambiguity during the pandemic. This adaptive behavior only reinforced the long-standing trend. Such a strategy could have been both their personal choice and the result of pressure from their university or their co-workers," commented Anna Panova, Senior Research Fellow at the HSE Center for Institutional Studies.

"Working overtime makes researchers more and more susceptible to stress and burnout. During the [pandemic](#), a new norm evolved that saw researchers working even more. The questions are how sustainable this situation is and what its long-term consequences will be. This is particularly interesting, since other industries, by contrast, are looking into decreasing the number of working days and hours in order to improve performance and quality of life," said Maria Yudkevich, Director of the HSE Center for Institutional Studies.

**More information:** Hugo Horta et al, The adaptation of academics to the Covid-19 crisis in terms of work time allocation, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0273246](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0273246)

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