

Report on the 1st Early Career Researchers' Roundtable for Information Access Research (ECRs4IR 2022) at CHIIR 2022

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Abstract

The *First Early Career Researchers Roundtable for Information Access Research Workshop*, in conjunction with the *Seventh ACM Conference on Human Information Interaction and Retrieval (CHIIR) 2022*, looked into the future of research, collaborations, and self-development to ask the following. *Where are the opportunities for researchers in a (post-)pandemic environment, especially for Early Career Researchers (ECRs)? What do we need to do to get there? Which practical implementations can the broader CHIIR community support?*

The workshop started with an invited talk. Instead of conventional paper presentations, the attendees discussed the lessons learned from working in a pandemic. This report, co-authored by the workshop's organisers and its participants, summarises the discussion.

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This report aims to provide the broader CHIIR community with feedback on the workshop and foster ideas *raised by ECRs to support ECRs*. Two primary outcomes are (i) ECRs are often enthusiastic about taking on roles within a community, but formal validation and recognition are needed for their efforts and (ii) that the role of a conference needs to be reevaluated optimising the benefits of attending the event.

Date: 14 March 2022.

Website: <https://sites.google.com/view/ecrs4ir/home>.

1 Introduction

The *First Early Career Researchers Roundtable for Information Access Research Workshop*¹, in conjunction with ACM CHIIR 2022², aimed to provide a platform for an open discussion about what researchers—especially *Early Career Researchers (ECRs)*, learned from working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of the workshop was to brainstorm, crystallise, and disseminate which practical implementations can support current and future ECRs within the CHIIR community [Trippas and Maxwell, 2022].

There was considerable interest from the CHIIR community regarding this workshop. A total of 27 people signed up to attend the workshop, which took place online (using *Zoom*) during a two-hour window on March 14th, 2022 at 21:00GMT.

The workshop included a welcome and brief overview. This was followed by a keynote talk by Professor Justin Zobel of the University of Melbourne. The talk covered the advantages of research and highlighted the ability to work on big problems with independence and authority. Furthermore, the talk suggested looking beyond contributing to academic research but also to broader research areas that help the economy, society, environment, or culture. His take-away message for the attendees was to ensure that they learn to understand their strengths, define themselves broadly, and be open to opportunities.

It was emphasised that this workshop was highly interactive, with participants having to engage with other attendees through group work. Workshop attendees were informed that participation in the workshop included a collaborative writing part and that this would lead to a *SIGIR Forum* submission, similar to previous workshops [Olteanu et al., 2021; Spina et al., 2021]. As such, everyone who actively participated in the activities and write-ups are co-authors of this publication.

The collaborative part of the workshop was structured as shown in Figure 1. Participants were divided into groups in which they were asked to introduce themselves. Each group was given access to a specifically created shared template as a starting point within a *Google Drive* directory. This template prompted groups to think about obstacles they had encountered while working during the pandemic and the opportunities they saw. These ideas drove the discussion on how we as a community can move forward into a (post-)pandemic research environment.

Of the five main steps, the workshop consisted of two main phases: one where ideas were brainstormed within groups, with the second phase where groups reported back to write up this final report. The next section of this report focuses on the discussion.

¹<https://sites.google.com/view/ecrs4ir/home>

²<https://ai.ur.de/chiir2022/home>

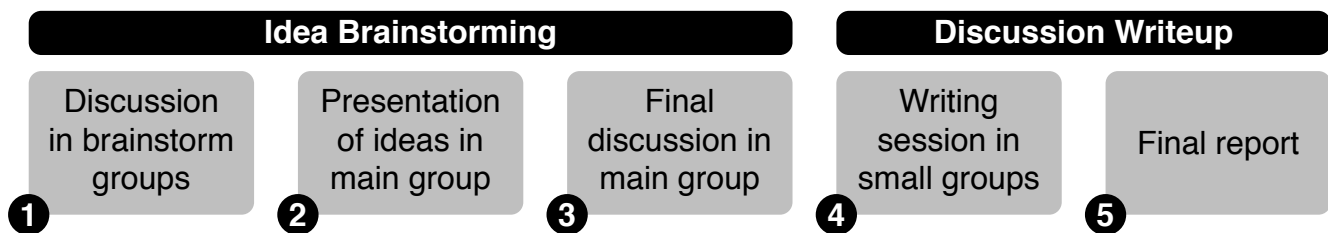


Figure 1: Workflow of the main activities that participants undertook during the workshop.

2 Statements

Participants who had signed up were instructed to prepare *statements and responses* that discussed what they each believed to be the major challenges and opportunities regarding working in academia in the changing world that the pandemic has brought. They were asked to share their own *do's* and *don'ts*. Participants were provided with guidance on what a short statement could include, including the following pointers to help develop their thoughts.

- **Where are the opportunities for researchers in a (post-)pandemic environment, especially for ECRs?**
 - *Who is it that has an opportunity or problem as to how research will be conducted on information access in a (post-)pandemic world? Describe a situation. (Examples include: supervisors; masters students; participant recruitment agencies; etc...)*
 - *What are the opportunities or problems? Please give as many examples and details as possible. (Examples could include: a more relaxed working environment by working from home, or flipped, distractions from non-work commitments while working from home; a communication breakdown due to proliferation of collaboration tools; limited ECR recognition; etc...)*
- **What do we need to do to get there?**
 - *What can the research and CHIIR community do to help?*
 - *What are practical examples or strategies that helped you overcome the problem, or strategies you could employ to overcome it?*
 - *What are your needs to excel in your position?*
 - *What self-development activities would you recommend to your peers?*
- **Which practical implementations can the broader CHIIR community support?**
 - *Which steps do we need to take to succeed in the opportunity?*

We extract five key themes from these responses that we report on in this paper. The remainder of this section expands on the statements that the participants created.

2.1 Creating and Maintaining Connections

One of the most frequently cited problems with the (post-)pandemic world is that of *creating and maintaining connections*. Making these all-important connections—both on professional and social levels—has been a major challenge, leading to many ECRs feeling isolated from the research community. This topic is broken down into three subtopics (i.e., *networks*, *collaborations*, and *communication*) and its proposed solutions.

2.1.1 Networks

From early 2020 until recently, developing in-person connections has often been made difficult by COVID-19 restrictions imposed in national and local laws. This has created many obstacles, especially for ECRs who are often new to the field, have limited existing networks, or have research experience to share. The major challenge for ECRs to engage together is the need for constant involvement and effort to maintain and organise networking activities. However, providing CHIIR ECRs with the necessary network opportunities and support platforms may help overcome these difficulties.

The goal of investing in networking for ECRs is that it will strengthen the ECRs' profile and foster a greater belonging to the CHIIR community. Networking aims to enable strategic collaboration and connection among ECRs, senior members or mentors, and the industry. Networking will facilitate forming groups and support systems. Furthermore, networking can also allow ECRs to communicate beyond conferences, thus expanding the CHIIR network, benefitting everyone involved.

Identified steps to enhance networking opportunities include the following.

- **Organised informal interactions** for peer-to-peer networking before and during conferences for ECRs—both online and in-person.
- **Structured mentorship from senior members** to introduce new attendees or graduate students to the CHIIR community.
- Coordinated **industry introductions** by senior members specialising in ECR employment opportunities.
- **Social events** not connected to conferences, potentially similar to HIPstIR [Dietz et al., 2021].
- Create or promote a central platform to share **networking resources** (i.e., Slack³).

2.1.2 Collaborations

The pandemic essentially stopped the possibility of chances for organically meeting like-minded individuals to generate and discuss research ideas. While many established researchers were able to continue collaborating with their peers remotely, ECRs without these connections reported struggling to find suitable collaborators to work together on research projects. While supervisors and mentors have attempted to help, ECRs reported that communicating with established researchers over online platforms was awkward, as they: (*a*) feel self-conscious about their junior position;

³The workshop organisers have attempted this, but often the momentum has been lost if a Slack Channel was organised around a conference. Discussion on this point is provided in Section 3.1.

and (b) find communicating with people they have not met in person online to be mentally very taxing.

CHIIR’s role in enhancing collaboration and connections for ECRs can be achieved through facilitating group and support systems. Established researchers should be encouraged to join when they can to introduce themselves and, in a sense, help ‘break the ice’—or challenge the belief held by many that their junior status holds them back from being able to collaborate with others.

Proposed steps to support collaborations within the CHIIR community include the following points raised by this workshop participants.

- The community should develop a centralised **repository with researchers open to collaboration** and in which research area.
- Promote special **schemes to visit research labs**, this could include maintaining a list for specialised funding and grants for research visits. Alternatively, ACM CHIIR could create CHIIR ambassadors who receive special competitive funding to visit labs.
- Structured **collaboration symposiums** aimed at connecting ECRs with senior researchers.
- Open calls to **collectively work on research problems** such as *TREC*-style research challenges relevant to the CHIIR community.

2.1.3 Communication

Much of the CHIIR community has shifted to remote and online interactions. These online interactions have brought both opportunities and problems concerning communication. For example, financial barriers to attending conferences are no longer an issue. Furthermore, with all its ecological, time, and economic costs, long-distance travel is not required to attend conferences, workshops, or tutorials. Online platforms and tools such as *Gather*, *Zoom*, *Reddit*, and *Twitter* have been developed or adapted for use in the scientific community. Similarly, attempts have been made at roundtables and chatrooms in the aftermath of the *PhD Journey Workshop* at ACM CHIIR 2021 [Trippas and Maxwell, 2021].

However, since these are purely social ventures and are seen as “*having fun*”, ECRs need to make room for them in their busy schedules, and these meetings are often the first to go if ECRs are stressed or have deadlines. Consequently, although ECRs may express a desire and willingness to participate, attendance drops off very quickly in reality. Furthermore, the “virtuality” of the meeting makes it less formal and more accessible to opt-out, compounding the issue of poor participation. The purely virtual connection can also be perceived as more superficial, as it does not build as much on shared real-life experiences—such as after-hours at conferences or when meeting personally during research exchanges. It remains to be explored what the best format to establish social connections amongst ECRs is using an existing social network or establishing designated communication channels.

Communication and networking are essential to ECRs. Often ECRs are still making connections, and building networks in our community, which can support them in becoming better researchers, whether within academia or industry. A worthwhile goal is to provide sustainable opportunities for networking and connection amongst ECRs, both for research, collaboration and opportunities that arise from this, as well as for social connection and the possibility to support each other as people in a similar stage of our professional life.

Possible steps to reach better communication are listed below.

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- Periodic **meetups for ECRs** (available to different time zones).
 - **Q&A style platform**, such as *StackOverflow*, to ask questions about research, research methods, or career advice. Such platform will also enable to make fellow researchers “findable”.
 - Shared **forum or blog** to discuss research and support asynchronous communication opportunities and thus catering to different time-zones and levels of communication comforts.
 - Create **communication mechanisms** such as Slack for support and (job or grant) opportunities.

2.2 Remote Research

The pandemic has made in-person work problematic and impacts how we conduct research. Many researchers took advantage of technology, and much of the recent work has been done remotely. In the (post-)pandemic era, these methods may still be relevant, and the community should share these experiences and best practices for running research projects virtually. This will provide ECRs with learning opportunities to inform their research design and activities.

The goal of this opportunity is to guide to continue research even if it cannot be done in person. Furthermore, it can help understand the impacts, limitations, or strengths of different research environments (remote or in-person). Ideas discussed include the following.

- Ways to **share uncommon research methods** and lessons learned.
- Practical **guidelines and recommendations** for research in a remote environment similar to the shared document “*Doing fieldwork in a pandemic*”⁴.
- Shared **remote research participant repositories** or platforms to recruit participants.

2.3 Visibility of ECRs and Early-stage Research Projects in the CHIIR Community

Having ECRs and their work “seen” within the CHIIR community is crucial and often positively helps one’s career trajectory. Even though it has become easier to connect with people worldwide through online connections, building meaningful and memorable connections, beyond communication (Section 2.1.3) has become more challenging.

As previously discussed, approaching individuals on online platforms (such as *Gathertown*) that people have not met in-person bears several barriers. It is harder to anticipate whether people are in a confidential conversation, in another browser tab, away from their desk, or if their internet connection is stable. These barriers particularly impact ECRs who are not yet embedded within the research community and cannot rely on existing relationships to bridge uncomfortable moments. Consequently, it becomes harder for ECRs and their work to be seen in the community. Supporting alternatives to showcase the research of ECRs would also allow feedback to improve study designs and support regarding technical standards.

Building a multi-modal platform for inexperienced researchers to share their early results in a semi-professional setting, both in written and spoken form, could serve to practice scientific

⁴<https://bit.ly/SIGIRforum2022>

writing and presentation skills, increase ECRs' confidence to speak in front of more experienced researchers, and stabilise ECRs identity as researchers. In addition, it would increase the visibility of early work and ECRs among each other and for more experienced researchers.

Especially in (post-)pandemic times where it is often impossible to meet in person, such events are necessary to foster relationships and collaborations between (early stage) researchers.

Potential ideas to alleviate these issues include the following.

- Collaborative **ECR platform** such as a blog or newsletter to showcase their research.
- Frequent **topical discussions and presentations**.
- Create a newsletter in which ECRs **interview senior scholars**, thus providing ECRs with a role and scheme to make them more visible. Interviews could include pieces on how these senior scholars work or insights into what worked for their careers.
- Encourage and incentivise CHIIR researchers to **include ECRs on CHIIR submissions**.

2.4 Address Workplace Structural Issues

The pandemic has made research move slowly for many ECRs, and therefore many ECRs have reported limited progress in their research work. Additionally, the current set-up for ECRs working agreements or contracts can be prone to abuse and may not provide security. Looking forward, the community can advocate for ECRs by transforming the workplace environment and resolving structural issues. The expectations and work conditions vary across disciplines and countries, but the community can lobby for or provide a work environment in which everyone thrives.

- A **CHIIR community advocate for ECRs** providing support, including funding or workload advice.
- **Awareness campaign** and senior contact points for information on work rights.
- **Negotiation workshops** to empower ECRs to address workplace issues within their institution.
- Systematically **include ECRs to supervision teams**.

2.5 Flexible Work Arrangement

ECRs may have other (family) commitments, making moving to take up temporary job positions complex. The goal of highlighting flexible work arrangements within the CHIIR community is to strengthen the awareness and thus future opportunities for CHIIR ECRs. Furthermore, this awareness can also help avoid reinforcing the idea that it is compulsory to change institutions to be successful. Instead, awareness of other opportunities such as long-term research stays at different institutions to diversify can be promoted.

Some steps around supporting and embracing flexible work arrangements include

- CHIIR community members can provide **flexible working arrangements** for their junior staff, including remote or partially remote work arrangements and flexible working hours.
- Create **best practice guidelines** as to how to support flexible work arrangements.

3 Discussion and Conclusions

The *First Early Career Researchers Roundtable for Information Access Research Workshop* at ACM CHIIR 2022 explored which opportunities or gaps can be addressed moving forward from our (post-)pandemic world, specifically to support ECRs. We elicited ideas on supporting early career researchers with a set format. As seen in this report, the workshop resulted in a list of ideas that can be implemented to make a more inclusive research environment. The discussion resulted in five major opportunities the participants identified they would like to receive support for:

1. Creating and maintaining Connections
 - Networks
 - Collaborations
 - Communication
2. Remote research
3. Visibility of ECRs and early-stage research projects in the CHIIR community
4. Address workplace structural issues
5. Flexible work arrangements

3.1 ECR Recognition

One reoccurring comment from the workshop participants was that they would organise events such as networking or shared repositories for research methods. However, more importantly, a recognition mechanism for their community work should be implemented, acknowledging their efforts. The workshop participants were generally keen to take on organising and leadership roles, but incentivising those roles would be essential. These roles would further enable and prove ECRs' organising skills, helping them enhance their CVs. Even though the suggestions are possibly skewed towards people already involved at CHIIR, we believe there are valuable suggestions to act on.

ECRs are an essential group of researchers within the CHIIR community. They will be the future CHIIR leaders, and investing in them now will enhance the community's longevity. Indeed, recognising ECRs and supporting their leadership skills development will greater the prospect for CHIIR researchers to secure funding and grants from their government or home institution. This then contributes back to the CHIIR community.

3.2 Rethinking the Role of Conferences

The workshop also highlighted rethinking the value and role of the ACM CHIIR conference. Instead of relying heavily on academic, scholarly, and scientific contributions, broader investments and initiatives to support creating meaningful connections were suggested. For example, it was mentioned that conferences contain an overload of research information, and thus limited knowledge will be taken away from conferences. Therefore, lowering the scholarly information by attending talks, it was suggested to emphasise the social connections.

Other initiatives to enhance the participation and interactivity within conferences could be *TREC*-style research problems or special research challenges (e.g., hackathon-style research or

design challenges [Tomitsch et al., 2009]). Lastly, ACM CHIIR could be at the forefront to support “collaborative and community lead research”. That is, researchers can pre-register a research initiative. This initiative must include at least a percentage of ECRs and a set number of different research institutions worldwide. When the research proposal is accepted as part of the initiative, this guarantees that any outcomes are presented at the following ACM CHIIR. Outputs of such initiative include publications that will benefit research and enhance the sense of community.

The workshop aimed to generate ideas on how to support ECRs going forward. We acknowledge that some ideas in this report can be implemented easier than others. Furthermore, the ideas generated are from ECRs who have been working during the pandemic. The next generation ECRs may have different ideas or needs to be supported. We anticipate that these needs will change over time and suggest this is a reoccurring exercise to measure if an intervention has made a change for ECRs. Furthermore, many of the identified supports will require assistance from supervisors, mentors, and the ECRs’ institution. This report again stresses that supporting ECRs is a collective effort. Lastly, even though the people who attended the workshop identified as ECR, it was not always an easy exercise to brainstorm ideas. Often it seemed challenging for attendees to think beyond the existing structures or traditional support offerings, suggesting that continuing with brainstorming activities can expand the pool of intervention ideas.

With its ideas to support ECRs, we hope this document can be used within ACM CHIIR, ACM SIGIR, the wider research community, and research institutions.

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