

## Reflections

# How we have been productive when Coronavirus locked us out of University

ANDREIA NASCIMENTO & HUGO FERRINHO LOPES



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In the Covid-19 pandemic era researchers and academics worldwide have experienced an unprecedented phenomenon. In this context of uncertainty and instability, academia was not spared the consequences of the new Coronavirus that locked everybody out of university. However, research and academic productivity during these unprecedented times may not have adversely affected projects, students, and their supervisors. Building on the authors' personal experience this paper highlights some positive impacts of pursuing a PhD during a pandemic, focusing the reflection along two lines: 1) that work during social isolation may be better than ever; and 2) how open science has been crucial in this coronavirus era.

Keywords: university, PhD thesis, Coronavirus, academic productivity, open science

Andreia Micaela Nascimento (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3615-4768>) & Hugo Ferrinho Lopes (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7256-6180>), Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, Avenida Prof. Aníbal de Bettencourt, n. 9. 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal. E-mail: [andreia.nascimento@ics.ulisboa.pt](mailto:andreia.nascimento@ics.ulisboa.pt), [hugo.lopes@ics.ulisboa.pt](mailto:hugo.lopes@ics.ulisboa.pt)

## Introduction

Due to Covid-19, the world stopped, and societies have been forced to adapt and reinvent themselves. Within hours and without notice, a universal lockdown began, physically and emotionally, and forced people to reorganize routines and see the world only through an offline and an online window (Nascimento 2020).

Societies are still adapting to these new facts with social, cultural and economic implications. Services and companies have closed, work started to be performed differently and teaching has been conducted at a distance, through several digital platforms shared by researchers and academics, by parents and students, by teachers and educators, now all specialists in technology (Taylor 2018).

The rapid spread of the virus, from the beginning of the year, has forced thousands of higher education institutions from around the world to suspend all classroom teaching activity transferring them into the online environment. Over the past decades, researchers have shown the importance of technology and digital tools, studying how they can be successfully integrated into curricular activities. Nowadays these contributions have acquired a special meaning, since the educational systems have had to adapt to the current context as the school has ended, but the classes have continued (Zhou *et al.* 2020).

Despite the negative impact of the new Coronavirus on the daily academic lives of doctoral students, the following questions remain: did the isolation resulting from the preventive measures of Covid-19 accentuate the process of self-management to which thesis projects are normally condemned? Or, did this process benefit from the abrupt halt and consequent adaptation to the pandemic context?

Building on the personal experience of each author the main purpose of this paper is to highlight the positive impact of the pandemic crisis on their PhD thesis, focusing the reflection along two lines: 1) working during social isolation may be better than ever; and 2) an open virtual window helps to minimize the effects of the closure of higher education institutions and the constraints of insularity, especially when the roles of student, professional and mother are brought together.

The first part of this reflection presents how isolation and confinement was experienced by a PhD student in Comparative Politics, Hugo Ferrinho Lopes, when writing his doctoral thesis. The second one highlights the opportunities that arose regarding the open access to knowledge and how this has enriched the work developed by Andreia Micaela Nascimento, a PhD student in Sociology.

### **Could the working rhythm during lockdown be better than ever?**

Several researchers have had to face various constraints of being in lockdown during the pandemic era, such as, among other things, being denied access to data, the inability to do field or lab work, increased time spent on childcare, and decreasing working productivity given that home conditions are not equal for all. Nonetheless, working in the Coronavirus era while pursuing a PhD may shed new light on the focused writing of a thesis.

In Portugal, the National Government imposed, among other measures, the suspension of face-to-face courses and seminars from all universities. As a result, members of the academic staff and students have been forced to quickly reconfigure their work plans and adapt them to the pandemic context. Universities began to use a variety of online tools and digital platforms to try to mitigate the harmful consequences of suspending face-to-face teaching interactions. Despite these efforts, recent studies carried out in Portugal have shown that distance learning during confinement and quarantine has not achieved the expected results (Magalhães *et al.* 2020). Students in higher education experienced, in the first months of 2020, a variety of difficulties during their educational process: teachers with poor digital skills and students facing excessive hours and elements of evaluation, as well as the absence of face-to-face guidance that personal meetings allow, were aspects often emphasized as negative, particularly in undergraduate and master's courses.

With regard to the doctorate, a time when students are primarily absorbed by their concerns about academic work, the pandemic brought about specific dilemmas and constraints. The isolation they experienced during the pandemic, given that the courses, seminars, meetings with colleagues and/or supervisors, which took place mostly in person in an academic environment, were now being held remotely, has meant that the doctorate for many students has become a herculean challenge.

Regardless of all the benefits – which we do not call into question – of traditional PhD education, it implies financial, personal, and time costs that a distance learning doctorate, on equal terms among all students, does not provide. As far as our experience is concerned, lockdown has brought innovation and several advantages to doctoral work. First, there have been substantial decreases in financial expenses such as rent and travel. Second, maintaining virtual seminars, conferences, classes, meetings with colleagues, professors, and supervisors aids the spread of knowledge. Third, students do not need to waste time travelling inside and outside the university's city, either to attend sessions or to go home (even if only occasionally), which can lead to improved productivity.

Our situation is perhaps unique, and we note the complaints registered by colleagues from different areas of study and in different stages of the doctoral process in scientific and discussion meetings that have become virtual as a result of the pandemic. For us, during the Coronavirus lockdown, our thesis writing turned out to be a way in which we were able to minimize isolation and confinement. Anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity were offset by a writing process that flowed as the Coronavirus locked us out of University. A focused work schedule emerged due to minimum distractions that allowed for a significant improvement in the quality of the thesis with new routines for reading and writing, new ideas, better environments for concentration, and more time to make

decisions. Of course, this all relies upon a pleasant homeworking environment, which not all PhD candidates have with access to the internet and suitable technology. As such, we can only speak based on our experience, yet we can say that the rhythm of work during the lockdown has in fact been better than ever. For us this has been due to new avenues that have opened up while writing the thesis, for others this has been the result of an unprecedented access to knowledge, which we will discuss in the following section.

### **Time for science: open access to knowledge**

The suspension of face-to-face courses and seminars, despite having put us in an unpleasant, unexpected and unimaginable position, has forced the learning process to be quickly reconfigured and adapted to a new and unknown context.

Despite the difficulties that the pandemic has imposed on higher education institutions, their teachers and students, the virtual window that opened has helped to minimize the effects of isolation, a struggle that has long been assumed by higher education institutions farther from urban centers and their students.

Confinement as a measure to combat the pandemic has paradoxically been fundamental to unlocking life abroad, especially in the access to science. Although we are facing something new and unexpected, the situation is not unprecedented. The arguments for sharing data and promoting open science, and the consequences of not doing so, had already been emphasized by the Ebola and Zika outbreaks (OECD). In the context of a public health emergency of international concern like the new Coronavirus outbreak, there is an imperative to make any information available that might have value in combating the health, economic and social crises, as:

Open science efforts can increase the effectiveness and productivity of the research system. Increasing transparency and quality in the research validation process, by allowing a greater extent of replication and validation of scientific results. Speeding the transfer of knowledge [as] open science can reduce delays in the re-use of the results of scientific research. Open science and open data initiatives may promote awareness and trust in science among citizens. (OECD 2015, 18-19)

However, open science cannot be reduced to sharing data with the aim that the results of the research are in the hands of as many as possible and the potential benefits are disseminated as widely as possible. We would like to see open science going further by allowing (1) access to all peer-reviewed research, freely available at least for the duration of the outbreak, (2) free access to conferences, congresses, webinars and other scientific events normally organized internally and exclusively for its scientific community, and (3) the development of new ways of communicating, sharing and doing science.

As a researcher and a PhD candidate living in an island region with ultra-peripheral status, the Autonomous Region of Madeira, in Portugal, the quarantine and the Covid-19 pandemic allowed for easier access to science and knowledge, not only in terms of quantity but essentially in diversity and quality, as never before possible. Grappling with the PhD, an endeavor that started in 2016, it was possible after the Covid-19 outbreak that there would be an assumption that we now have more time to dedicate to the thesis and to its writing: "Now we are forced to be at home, we will be able to work like never before."

One of the main difficulties experienced in the last four years as a PhD candidate in Lisbon but living in Madeira, was distance. Madeira is 967 km away from the mainland Portugal, the equivalent of an hour and a half by plane. This distance has begun to fade away with online participation in meetings, workshops, congresses, conferences, discussion forums, general meetings, training and scientific meetings that have taken on this new hybrid format. This has never before been possible. The new online format allows for the participation of many researchers and specialists spread across the world and has ultimately resulted in this paper. The importance of this annual meeting of doctoral students, which already has six editions, as well as other opportunities available for discussion and sharing has never been so easy for those who are displaced.

The need to continue to live, study and work in the context of a pandemic has caused several higher education institutions and research groups to readapt and to very quickly open up in a different

way. Living and working (professionally and as a mother) in the outermost regions – places where often “there are no social sciences” – and doing a PhD at a distance has never been so easy. The few face-to-face meetings (always very brief and very expensive) at the university, the limited contact with teachers, colleagues and researchers in the classroom has always made things difficult for a student like myself. However, this was all that was possible before the Covid-19 outbreak.

Living and working abroad has limited the possibilities of contributing to the spirit of sharing, critical dialogue and mutual help that are generated during this kind of scientific event. Never before has it been possible for us to listen, although virtually, to experienced researchers, those who face the same challenges and issues, or even to see each other’s faces. We had not previously been given the opportunity to integrate in the way that these online meetings make possible, in such a fruitful research environment that makes us feel like an integral part of the scientific community.

The pandemic and open science has enabled us to participate in seminars, workshops, thesis project defenses and even doctoral tests at a distance. Moving from Lisbon to Porto, passing through Coimbra, Algarve or Azores in one day, to travel and get to know, virtually, European and International universities, their research centers and their journals that we now have open access to. As universities begin to use a variety of *ad-hoc* online tools and digital platforms, it has given access to an endless number of resources that allows for the enrichment of the doctoral thesis as well as professional and personal performances.

The Covid-19 pandemic was forgotten for a few brief moments. Knowing when to stop in the face of all the online opportunities that arose became the difficulty. It is imperative to continue to provide a hybrid format in the access and dissemination of knowledge. The natural rhythm of the thesis writing that we had become accustomed to did not benefit from the Coronavirus lockdown, but its quality will certainly benefit as a result of the online meetings and resources that it forced to be created.

## Concluding remarks

The main purpose of this paper was to highlight how nationwide lockdowns as a measure to prevent the spread of the new Coronavirus has impacted the authors’ doctoral theses. Focusing on the increased capacity for writing and access to scientific work, the authors write here a personal testimony of the impact of the pandemic on their PhD during the first months of the lockdown.

This is a time of trauma, individual and collective, whose consequences are not yet fully visible and/or measurable. Guided by the idea that adversity makes opportunity possible, this paper shows how the pandemic crisis may not have only adversely affected projects, students and their supervisors. The personal testimonies of writing a PhD during a pandemic, and the changes to the ways of working that have resulted are perhaps positive, as we have explored here. These may be exceptions, yet they exist.

While “this is a time of great challenge to the imagination, it is a time to risk new models and not simply to fold our arms and bow to a fatality,” as the Madeiran cardinal, Dom José Tolentino Mendonça notes, and these new models have been witnessed and experienced by the authors of this Reflection paper.

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