in brief...

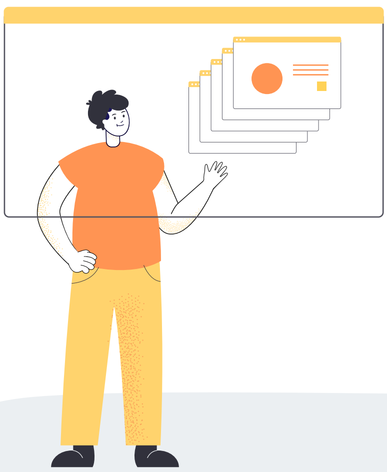
Women economists benefit when seminars go online

The rise in working from home and the fall in business travel during the pandemic prompted a huge increase in remote meetings. **Marcus Biermann** looks at who benefitted from the shift to online research seminars in economics.

Many people have to travel as part of their job. Before the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020, the average chief executive at a large manufacturing company spent about 8% of their working time travelling (Bandiera et al, 2017). The pandemic disrupted travelling, forcing people instead to experiment with software such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. According to the American Time Use Survey, the share of adults working from home almost doubled from 22% in 2019 to 42% in 2020.

As working from home is likely to persist to some extent, my research asks who benefits from remote work instead of travelling for research seminars in economics. The advantage of studying this setting is that a large fraction of seminars are published online and travel is observable. Furthermore, productivity is measurable – for example, in terms of publications.

I collected data on seminars from 270 institutions worldwide including universities, central banks, research institutes and international organisations. Overall, the sample contains observations on more than 12,000 seminars from the autumn of 2018 to 2020. The data on seminars are complemented by speaker characteristics such as their work experience, gender, proxies of productivity and workplace location.



The analysis compares the same seminar series before and after the adoption of online seminars brought about by the pandemic. The vast majority of institutions explicitly report that they held their seminars online, therefore the effect of the Covid-19 shock is identified by estimating the difference in 2020 to the pre-Covid-19 period.

At the same time, the pandemic increased the need for childcare and housework. Research shows that this burden was disproportionately borne by women among academics (Barber et al, 2021). To control for age- and gender-specific pandemic-related changes in time use, I compare seminar speakers who have the same gender and graduated at the time.

I find that there were 12% fewer seminars overall and 15% fewer individual speakers after the Covid-19 shock. So how did the allocation of seminars change among different types of speakers? I have three main findings.

More productive economists gave relatively more seminars

My first finding is that more productive economists gave relatively more seminars. The share of more productive economists increased when looking at rankings at the individual level. For example, the likelihood that a speaker is from the top 1% in terms of recent research output increased by 3.6 percentage points or 28.3% of the pre-Covid-19 mean.

In addition, I find that speakers from the institutions with the highest number of publications crowded out speakers from institutions with the lowest number of publications. This is consistent with a more significant decrease in the opportunity costs of giving a seminar for high productivity speakers. As the time required to present in a seminar decreases, they are more willing to accept invitations from institutions of lower average quality.

The share of women speakers rose markedly

My second finding is that the share of women speakers rose markedly. The likelihood that a seminar speaker is a woman increased by 7.5 percentage points, which is quantitatively important, as the pre-Covid-19 average was 21.8%.

The increase in women speakers is more pronounced for medium-length distances (between 1,500km and 5,000km or 930 and 3,100 miles). This suggests that the requirement to travel to give a seminar could be a barrier for women. As women, on average, contribute more to childcare and housework, it may become more difficult to substitute these contributions for longer trips.

My results contribute to a debate about why women are under-represented in high-paying occupations. In economics, women have historically been under-represented relative to other research fields. My study highlights that more flexible job arrangements, such as reducing the requirement to travel, could increase the representation of women in these occupations, thereby potentially narrowing the existing gap.

The distance between host and speaker institutions increased

My third finding is that the distance between host and speaker institutions surged by 32%. The increase in distance is more pronounced for speakers from better ranked institutions. For example, the estimates suggest an increase of about 42% for a speaker affiliated with a top ten institution.

The likelihood that a seminar was given by a woman increased by 7.5 percentage points when talks went online

Which continents are driving the increase in distance? The only continent combination that increases in absolute terms was seen in seminars held by speakers from institutions in Europe hosted by institutions in the Americas, by about 65%. The number of seminars held by speakers from institutions in the Americas hosted by institutions in Europe decreased less than the overall number of seminars suggesting a relative increase.

There were relatively more seminars across geographical borders. The likelihood of seminars across national borders increased by 4.7 percentage points, which is a rise of about 10% in terms of the pre-Covid-19 average.

This article summarises 'Remote Talks: Changes to Economics Seminars during Covid-19' by Marcus Biermann, CEP Discussion Paper No. 1759 (https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1759.pdf).

Marcus Biermann is an assistant professor at Bielefeld University and an associate in CEP's trade programme.

Further reading

Oriana Bandiera, Stephen Hansen, Andrea Prat and Raffaella Sadun (2017) 'CEO Behavior and Firm Performance', NBER Working Paper No. 23248.

Brad Barber, Wei Jiang, Adair Morse, Manju Puri, Heather Tookes and Ingrid Werner (2021) 'What Explains Differences in Finance Research Productivity during the Pandemic?', *Journal of Finance* 76(4): 1655-97.