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# Resilience, advocacy and scholar-activism: responding to COVID-19 in Kenyan, Mexican and British universities

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**ABSTRACT**
Based on in-depth interviews, surveys and autoethnography we explore ways in which staff responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) based in Kenya (University of Nairobi), Mexico (El Colegio de la Frontera Sur) and the United Kingdom (University of Leeds). HEIs are dependent on staff's resilience and goodwill to "get through the tough times". This is evident when we examine the effect universities' lack of support had on staff during the first months of lockdown in 2020. HEIs were not able to provide adequate IT equipment, training, and wellbeing support for staff yet we were still expected to "perform" to high standards. We analyse the challenges faced to quickly get acquainted with online teaching without any reflection on how this transition impacted our pedagogy, particularly for those of us who identify as scholar-activists. Added stress of learning new ways of delivering teaching coupled with caring responsibilities, isolation, bereavement, a decrease in living wages and cut to staff pensions has had a long-lasting detrimental effect on staff's mental health. At the same time, university staff and students have pushed back as a community to advocate for better teaching and learning conditions. We discuss the wider impacts of COVID-19 on staff's commitment to social justice within and outside the traditional university setting.

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Higher education; community; scholar-activism; critical pedagogies

## Introduction

The World Health Organization classified the coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic in March 2020, and by late April, 166 countries had implemented nation-wide education sector closures affecting 84.5% of all enrolled learners worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). In most countries, COVID-19 has created a new normal for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by redesigning curricula, reshaping teaching, learning, and assessment models

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and revolutionising the online learning landscape. Nevertheless, the pandemic has also highlighted structural and systemic problems already embedded in Higher Education (HE) (Sultana et al., 2020; Vlachopoulos, 2020). As this article demonstrates, rapid transition to online teaching under the neoliberal model of education (see further down) has had a negative impact on staff in diverse areas such as inclusivity and equality, workload, mental health and access to a decent living wage. Through in-depth interviews, surveys and autoethnography we explore the ways in which staff responded to the pandemic from three geopolitical landscapes: Kenya (University of Nairobi), Mexico (El Colegio de la Frontera Sur, ECOSUR) and the United Kingdom (University of Leeds). We critically analyse how colonial legacies, government budget cuts, and the current neoliberal model in HE affected universities' response to COVID-19. In particular, we examine (1) the effect transitioning to online teaching has had on teaching staff. Secondly, (2) we focus on the ways in which university staff and students advocated for better teaching and learning conditions. Finally, (3) we discuss the wider impacts of COVID-19 on staff and students' ways of organising and mobilising around social justice issues in and outside HEIs.

There is emerging literature on the wider implications of the pandemic on HEIs (Dhawan, 2020; Peters et al., 2020; Sultana et al., 2020; Vlachopoulos, 2020; Xue et al., 2020). Some important findings show online teaching has provided more flexibility for students with learning disabilities (Rapanta et al., 2020) and more innovative ways of delivering teaching (Peters et al., 2020). Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) evaluated the impact of the pandemic on the teaching and learning process across the world. They found teachers globally were required to "shift gears" immediately to respond to students' and families' needs with synchronous and asynchronous virtual instruction. Teachers literally responded overnight to teach in new modalities. Findings have highlighted challenges such as the weakness of online infrastructure, the limited exposure of teachers to online pedagogies, the information gap, a non-conducive environment for learning at home, and inequality in many countries (Jones & Kessler, 2020). Mohan Gupta et al. (2020) assert the pandemic can be regarded as a major environmental disturbance for educational institutions, highlighting social inequalities. Students from socially vulnerable groups have been more affected by the pandemic in terms of emotional life and personal circumstances (Oliveira et al., 2021).

One way in which academics have proposed to respond to the ongoing crisis brought on by the pandemic is to redesign and develop policies around the needs of a very different educational environment from the conventional campus-based setting and its acculturation among stakeholders, including senior academic administrators, faculty members, support staff, and students (Naidu, 2021). Chang (2021) discovered many of these policies are inadequate for an increasingly open and flexible learning and teaching environment that encourages a culture of sharing, cooperation, and collaboration. To a lesser extent, academics have had to reflect on equality issues such as online harassment and racism towards racially minoritised staff and students (Bali & Sharma, 2014; Kolko et al., 2000; Vander Valk, 2008) as well as the impact transition to online teaching has had on our pedagogies, particularly around social justice issues (see "Building alternative communities outside university constraints" section).

The pandemic presented an opportunity for several universities to implement organisational changes which have resulted in advocacy to modify policies which govern administration and pedagogical practices. While these transformations may be presented

by some as a welcome addition to address the impact of the pandemic, they have been contested by critics who argue the majority of historically disadvantaged students and staff – who may be unaccustomed to remote forms of teaching and learning – experience further marginalisation and isolation (Pires, 2021). Given this scenario, it is essential to think about strategies that foster collaboration among lecturers, students and the wider community to mitigate and seek material transformation across HE. Many of us turned to advocacy and scholar-activism to respond to the challenges that emerged during the ongoing pandemic, while at the same time trying to prevent total shutdown of students' access to education. In order to explore the above points, we first lay out the methodology used to gather data. We then explore the role of the university in (re)producing colonial power relations. This will allow us to have a better understanding of the relation between the neoliberalisation of HE and marginalised students and staff prior to the pandemic. For the following section, we analyse the challenges staff encountered because of rapid transition to online teaching. Finally, we reflect on the impact of the pandemic in our pedagogies and our scholar-activism.

## Methodology

We are four academics located in different stages of our careers – a PhD student, an Early Career Researcher, a senior lecturer and the Head of a postgraduate degree. Two of us are Global South scholars living in the UK, one of us lives in Mexico and another one in Kenya. Three of us are active members of the Racial Justice Network (RJN), an anti-racist charity based in the UK. We have worked collaboratively on different occasions sharing experiences of our journey as scholar-activists. We consider ourselves to be scholar-activists, inhabiting spaces within HEIs as acts of resistance to challenge power relations by creating "mutually beneficial research projects directly linked with the concerns of activist groups as well as the debates in academic journals" (Taylor, 2014, p. 308). We seek to disrupt the function of the neoliberal university – from within – which often operates with the mentality of profit before community wellbeing (Kezar et al., 2011). Some of us do not have the luxury of separating our activism from our roles as educators and the pandemic has only reaffirmed our commitment to create alternative forms of being and learning in the communities we are part of (see "Building alternative communities outside university constraints" section). Colonial legacies are ingrained in every fabric of society and therefore continue to impact and affect the different roles we play in the universities we are part of. Due to this and particularly when one is conscious of the factors at play and agitating for social change, we are unable to "switch off". It would be disingenuous to contribute, consent and support the existing colonial legacies in our education systems even when our colleagues and institutions continue to do so. The move towards creating and supporting alternative forms of education is to allow global majority, non-academic perspectives and knowledges to be embraced and recognised as equitable and valuable epistemologies.

Our research is based on participant activism, specifically created by merging participant observation techniques with the philosophical underpinnings of Participatory Activist Research (PAR). Participant activism: "requires cycles, during which time the scholar or activist role may be emphasised. Like any method of inquiry that draws on the naturalistic paradigm, participant activism involves acting in multiple roles simultaneously – as both

scholars and activists – and at all times" (Rodino-Colocino, 2012, p. 546). This is reflected in the rest of the article.

Data collection in all three case studies was done independently of the others but with a participant activist methodology. In the Kenyan case, a survey was answered by staff and students from 5 of the 30 public universities. Most of the students enrolled in HE in Kenya attended public universities for the 2019–2020 academic year, making up a total of 442,000 students (Statista, 2020). The survey was launched at the beginning of lockdown with the intention of understanding the impact the pandemic was having on students and staff in Kenyan HE. A small number of teaching staff were subsequently invited by Dr Khahigi and close collaborators to do follow-up interviews to further understand the University of Nairobi's staff experience of rapid transition to online teaching during the pandemic.

The research at ECOSUR (Mexico) is based on several issues raised at the beginning of the pandemic by staff and students around well-being, lack of physical infrastructure, inequity in internet access at home and the use of equipment and suitable software to continue working and educating remotely outside the five university campuses that ECOSUR has in southeast Mexico. The postgraduate team then launched two structured exploratory questionnaires using Google Forms to further explore these issues (ECOSUR, 2020a, 2020b). The first questionnaire was answered by 84 students at a postgraduate level, and the second on Information, Communication and Technology tools (ICT) was answered by 141 students. To complete the process, two virtual conversations on Teams were held with staff and students. There was an open invitation for all ECOSUR staff and students to join the meetings. There were also chats, forums and e-mails, in which the community reflected on the complex situation of postgraduate studies on different electronic platforms and asynchronous moments. All data collection was carried out between March and July 2020. Our findings show a panorama of postgraduate education in times of COVID-19 in the south-east of Mexico, which represents one of the most deprived areas in the country in terms of social and economic development, educational and digital connectivity.

The data collected at the School of Geography (SoG) by Dr Loyola-Hernández was part of a research project required to obtain the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) at the University of Leeds. A mix of surveys, interviews and participant activism was employed. Data were re-collected using the JIS survey system from April to June and again in October 2020. The survey involved three closed questions and three open questions. In order to invite participants, colleagues were emailed, with the permission of the Head of School. Overall, the survey obtained 17 responses from lecturers and PhD students with teaching responsibilities. Three follow-up interviews with teaching staff were carried out in June 2020 to explore some of the initial issues coming through in the survey. Between January and March 2021, ten in-depth interviews were carried out by the Racial Justice Network team with community advocates from migrant communities in Bradford, Leeds, Wakefield and Halifax (UK) as part of RJN's report on migrant-led responses to COVID-19 (RJN, 2021). Some of the community advocates interviewed were also students and/or working at the University of Leeds.

All four authors complied with the ethical guidelines and procedures of our respective institutions. Given that we are "insiders" in the communities we interviewed, we had to consider the diverse power dynamics involved in interviewing more senior colleagues and

students about working and studying conditions in our universities (Alcalde, 2007). Therefore, confidentiality was crucial given some of the issues explored. All names have been changed to assure participants' confidentiality in the quotes. No specific characteristics such as gender or nationality are mentioned. Informed consent was given at the beginning of the surveys and interviews online for all three case studies. Through 2020, all four authors shared our experiences of teaching under lockdown with the intention to learn from each other, and find similarities and differences in our journeys. When the opportunity for this special issue came up, we decided to collate our experiences into a single article.

## Legacies of colonialism in Higher Education

We understand the neoliberal model in HE as the global push to privatise learning (less public money and more private investment) in which education (a human right) is commodified via tuition and accommodation fees. This model turns students into consumers of a product delivered by staff. The goal then becomes: "to develop efficient, creative and problem-solving learners and workers for a globally competitive economy leading to the neglect of its social and developmental responsibilities" (Tett & Hamilton, 2020: n/p). HEIs become complicit in the neoliberal agenda, which is to create students focused on regurgitating dutiful learning to achieve "good" results and focus on the capitalist system of employment. Beyond this, the neoliberalisation of education carries philosophical underpinnings which encourage individualism and competitiveness above creating community belonging and collective care among staff and students. This reflects a Western-capitalist approach where the needs of the individual supersede the community's. This discourages outside of parameters thinking that can lead to social justice transformation for students and staff. It also incentivises giving praise and opportunities to those who are more aligned with neoliberal models of education, which ultimately excludes and marginalises those of us who challenge universities' role in (re)producing colonial power relations (Curiel, 2007; Espinosa Muñoso et al., 2014; Esson et al., 2017; Paredes, 2014). The imposition of Western thought is symbolic violence as non-European cultures are sub-valued (Miranda, 2018). According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), there was an explicit point of action of colonisers to erase and disrupt indigenous knowledge and practices as a form of submission (epistemicide). A key tool used to annihilate other forms of knowing and understanding the world was enforcing Western education systems across the globe while simultaneously delimitating who had access to them.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues imperialism, culture and language have been key in subjugating colonised people by making them feel ashamed of their native language, epistemologies, traditions and cultures. For example, fluency in English language or having studies in "Western universities" is valued more in comparison with someone who does not speak English, did not attend university but has a wealth of knowledge (Mendoza, 2010; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010; Walsh, 2013). Racist and colonial discourse and practices in HEIs inform and shape the mainstream social narrative about marginalised students and staff and their place in universities (Albayrak-Aydemir, 2020; Loyola-Hernández, 2019). They determine who has value; what counts as knowledge; what issues are worthy of study; the way in which educational topics need to be addressed and how HE measures intellectual, social, economic and political progress (Manzoor-Khan, 2019). Most importantly, these discourses and practices have shaped policies

which have limited who has access to universities and created hostile places for marginalised staff and students in HEIs (Arday & Safia Mirza, 2018; Bhambra et al., 2018; Curiel, 2010; Johnson, 2018).

This makes our job as educators more difficult as: "Those of us who stay, who continue to work to educate for the practice of freedom, see first-hand the ways that democratic education is being undermined as the interests of big business and corporate capitalism encourage students to see education solely as a means to achieve material success" (hooks, 2010, p. 16). We must not see students as consumers but as equal partners in this learning process. Yet, this is increasingly difficult to do as those of us working in HEIs will only be able to implement a "bounded" social change which is a "social change that is imaginatively bound by the constraints of the students' immediate environment: the neoliberal university" (Connelly & Joseph-Salisbury, 2019, p. 1037). In other words, we are restrained by metrics, surveys, assessments, and the pressure to compete amongst colleagues for funding and publications (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2022). Understanding the colonial roots of university spaces allows us to comprehend how the neoliberal structuring of HEIs was a major contributor in exacerbating inequalities in the three case studies during the pandemic.

## (Re)action to the pandemic: transitioning to online teaching spaces

All three countries implemented national lockdown measures in March 2020 which affected our way of life. UK, Kenyan and Mexican governments imposed several guidelines, legislations and laws following the global crisis. Among the measures, commuting between different counties was deterred/minimised, public institutions and establishments were closed, wearing of masks in public places became compulsory, schools, colleges and universities were shut and students/pupils and educators advised to learn/teach from home.

In the UK, migrants and those from lower income backgrounds were particularly hit by digital inequalities and restricted access to government support. Many migrants including international students who taught and are often on insecure contracts lost their jobs during the pandemic and consequent lockdowns. They and those with lower paying jobs had little income so most could not afford to buy gadgets such as phones and tablets that would allow for study to continue. Digital inequalities and limited access to teachers has meant a widening of the attainment gap in these communities. This will have implications for those who wish to continue their studies in HE in the future. The below quote represents some of the ordeals faced by those working and studying in HE during the pandemic who are also migrants. Mehari is a PhD student at the University of Leeds. Mehari spent most of lockdown supporting people seeking asylum and refugees across the UK. This was done while also working and studying full time and being a parent of young children:

> Refugee parents who have school age children because of the lockdown, have to do the classes over Zoom. And as a parent, you want to sit with your children and see what they're doing, see how they're doing. Encourage them, but you need to know how this works. You need to know the language; you need to know to communicate with their teachers. But you can't do that because you have a very limited language skills, and I've seen that sometimes people call us for help for advice and how they can install and play Zoom (Mehari, community advocate, PhD student, Leeds, interview 2021).

This quote demonstrates our sense of community goes beyond traditional settings such as the university and the nuclear family. This is what we mean when we say we cannot separate our activism from our roles as educators. For many of us it was impossible to continue to study and work at our universities while our fellow migrant community was struggling. Those of us who had IT skills or informal networks to crowdsource digital devices or money for mobile top-ups were key in supporting migrant parents and their children as well as students who were attending classes at local colleges or universities. As demonstrated below, this meant the burden fell to individuals or grassroots initiatives rather than authorities, including HEIs.

In the case of Kenya, the government adopted remote teaching to support distance learning and online education for students using radio, television and internet. Universities in Kenya were able to negotiate with internet service providers for discounted packages, hence staff and students were given data bundles for online teaching and learning. This is a vast contrast to the UK and Mexican contexts where such facilities where not provided. Despite Kenyan HEIs negotiating internet packages, access to online learning still proved difficult for leaners from vulnerable households as they had no financial muscle to access these mediums of learning. This worsens inequality in access, relevancy and quality of education (Kenyan Ministry of Education, 2020). According to a report by the Kenyan Ministry of Education (2020), 17% of students own a smartphone and computer, 26% own a smartphone or computer, 40% own a phone (no internet access), and 17% do not own a stand phone or computer. This shows there is still a huge population who are technologically disadvantaged. Most of this population are of low socio-economic class and living in rural areas. A similar situation occurred in Mexico, where digital courses were the immediate response to social confinement brought on by the federal government's decree of national lockdown. Without a government strategy to address the gaps and technical difficulties, students fell further behind in their studies. The National Survey on the Availability and Use of Information Technologies in Homes (INEGI, 2020) reported that 43.6% of houses had no access to the internet in Mexico. Of those households, 85% of them are from lower income backgrounds. For the case of ECOSUR, the postgraduate office designed surveys to understand the digital inequality among students and staff. The survey results showed that despite 9 out of 10 students having a place to study and internet at home, only 4 of them had a stable connection. This reflects wider connectivity issues in southern Mexico which tend to be of poor quality. The uncertainty of internet connectivity provoked distinct challenges to adopt and tolerate diverse incidents that occurred in the first months of online classes.

The structural delay of the south eastern region of Mexico in terms of digital technologies and internet connectivity resulted in different obstacles for staff and students belonging to marginalised groups. ECOSUR loaned computers to students to help mitigate such limitations. The federal government launched three funding schemes of the amount of 5000 Mexican pesos (235 US dollars) for equipment updating or purchase of internet connection time addressed mainly to indigenous female students. This is very relevant as Chiapas – the state where ECOSUR is located – has an indigenous population of almost 30%. These supports were not extended to teachers and administrative staff in ECOSUR. Being responsible for a course implied specific challenges with regards to connectivity which was a source of anxiety for many, as expressed by an ECOSUR staff member:

> In my case, network failures are a problem. Although I had internet at home, it has been failing a lot so I had to hire an additional backup service; so when one falls I switch to the other. […] My next course is in August and it would help a lot to know if I am going to teach it in person or remotely. […] It would be very useful to receive guidance on strategies and alternatives for teaching distance courses (Lecturer, ECOSUR, interview 2020).

Another downside of online teaching has been that students from lower income backgrounds who fail to raise fees on time cannot access the system to sit for exams. This is a wider reflection of the effect of the neoliberal agenda in HE (discussed previously) which puts profits before people. This was the case in Kenya, where in face-to-face exams, students would have the opportunity to negotiate with the administration for a payment plan in instalments and be allowed to sit for exams. However, the same arrangements were not offered when exams were moved online. In the case of the UK, during the pandemic, international students were forced to go to food banks because of No Recourse to Public Funds – a government restriction which limits people on visas or undergoing the asylum process the ability to access government funds or help – or were threatened with deportation for not being able to pay their tuition fees on time (BBC, 2020; The Guardian, 2021a). In all three case studies, we saw policies put in place by governments to slow the transmission of COVID-19 meant reprioritisation of their budgets towards health and social protection in the short run.

We can see measures taken by university leadership in the three HEIs discussed made it possible for teaching and learning to continue online, but many students from lower income and marginalised areas missed out. Institutional responses in all three countries went through decision-making where it was thought they would guarantee equity, legal security and transparency for all groups involved in the distance educational process (García-Peñalvo et al., 2020). However, as we will explore in the following section, what the ongoing pandemic demonstrates is in reality, many institutions made decisions with little to no data, experience, infrastructure and personnel to face the crisis (Díaz et al., 2020).

## Teaching during COVID-19 lockdown

HEIs relied heavily on staff's ability to be resilient towards change, in this case transitioning to online teaching, with little regard to the effect the pandemic was having on our work and personal experiences. According to Bento et al. (2021), resilience highlights adaptation processes characterised by an interplay of previous experience and emerging new knowledge. The onset of COVID-19 tested staff's resilience to the fullest. Folke (2006) conceptualises resilience as a system's capacity to rearrange its structures and the emergence of new patterns of behaviour. García-Izquierdo et al. (2017) define academic resilience as the process which involves the school being a place where the ability to solve problems can be acquired with the collaboration of educational agents. As we demonstrate in this section, despite the gains made in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) integration in education, training and research in all three geographical landscapes, there were inadequacies in internet connectivity, capacity among educators, digital content, as well as ICT standards and guidelines for use in content delivery which tested staff's resilience. Furthermore, unreliable power supply, attitude, and rapid change in technology are other constraints staff encountered.

In all three countries the impromptu necessity to cancel face-to-face teaching obligated HEIs, and consequently teachers, to use an incompatible multiplicity of ICT with an emergent response attempting to accommodate millions of students of all levels. These new digital offers faced limitations and ethical questions regarding access to digital platforms (see previous section). Not having access to internet, equipment and/ or a digital pedagogy had an immediate impact on the quality of education. During the first weeks and months of confinement, students in all three HEIs had no tech support which allowed them to engage properly with online material. In many cases, it was left to student communities and teachers to help resolve connectivity issues and access to hardware (computers, microphones, cameras, tables), evidencing: "strong inequalities between subsystems, private universities with more experience, public federal and state universities without structures and legislation in the digital sphere, technological institutes, normal schools and newly created state universities" (Lloyd, 2020, p. 118).

Staff who had to teach in the first months of lockdown had to learn how to use multiple platforms including Teams, Zoom, Padlet, and other digital platforms, as well as learn how to record, edit and upload lectures. Trial and error meant spending considerably more time on teaching preparation than usual. This was often done with poor internet connection and IT equipment in kitchen tables, bedrooms, and other personal and intimate spaces. It was heart-warming to see our communities and colleagues rally in a quick way to support each other. Nevertheless, in our experience, most of the burden fell on individual colleagues who had previous knowledge of online teaching to support peers. Fernández et al. (2020) recognise institutions who transitioned better to online teaching were those who already had previous experience using this type of technology or who implemented hybrid models of online with face-to-face teaching prior to the pandemic.

ECOSUR promoted intense teaching training campaigns to help teachers translate their face-to-face programmes to online. It promoted online seminars and platforms between students and teachers to reflect on the crisis and think of community forms of support. From that moment on, actions were taken that prior to the pandemic were unthinkable, such as having online vivas and examinations. This coincides with what occurred at the University of Nairobi, where the university senates had to convene to change some statutes to legalise conducting online examinations for the first time in the history of HE in Kenya. Changes were made to allow students to sit for supplementary examinations twice due to challenges of connectivity and IT literacy when sitting for online exams. In the UK, undergraduate examinations were mostly cancelled for Level 1 and Level 2 students in 2020 and Level 3 students were given extra support to be able to finish their degrees on time. However, limited support was given to staff in the first months of lockdown.

Teaching staff in all three universities were called upon to write e-learning modules as a matter of urgency, to be uploaded for use in online teaching, in some cases with very short notice. In the University of Nairobi, this transition was done in spite of the Open Distance E-Learning project having been put on hold for lack of finances earlier, delaying the start of online teaching after using a lot of money on training staff. Colleagues responded positively without raising issues of payment for each module written. The most recent programs in IT were purchased, such as a version of the Moodle e-class platform which

enabled lecturers to reach over 500 students at a time for lessons. Science students were introduced to Esoma-KE: A Kenyan Learning Online Platform for primary and secondary schools which enhanced connectivity for practical lessons, and sports and athletics departments switched to virtual sporting. Instructions to guide staff were received by the entire staff via emails, and the ICT Centre was available to offer online guidance to the university community on how to use the tools through online support.

The University of Nairobi increased online training for staff to build capacity, though to some it was a struggle, as the majority of teaching staff, especially seniors, were trained in traditional methods and had no basic IT skills. Younger staff more familiar with digital technology had to heavily support more senior staff in converting materials into digital formats. This required a lot of patience and time. Students trained but the majority originate from rural areas with no internet connectivity and faced serious challenges. In a number of cases, attempts to communicate with some of them to join the training was unsuccessful. Some students in remote areas in Kenya needed to move far from home to areas with internet and electricity. This would be a problem too when joining online lessons and later sitting for online exams. Reports indicated that some students were so desperate that lessons were taken from inside bars. Cases of loss of connectivity in the middle of exams were experienced, causing a lot of stress to the candidates. This coincides with what students in ECOSUR dealt with, having to use public spaces like cyber cafes near home:

> Since the contingency began and until the 1st of this month, I had no internet, as the [broadband] service had problems that were not resolved by the contingency, fortunately in recent days it was resolved. This situation forced me to look for an alternative internet source to take the classes online, which caused me to leave my house and have no privacy to take the classes (Master's student, ECOSUR, interview 2020).

This scenario shows the kind of inequality in terms of sharing of educational resources, which only widens education gaps. This continues to have a major impact on the way in which we teach and students learn. In many contexts, the problem was the internet connection which caused work to accumulate as time was not optimised and the isolation between the university community became wider. In the case of the SoG at Leeds, several students reported poor connectivity in their accommodation, which meant they were losing parts of a lesson or unable to turn on their cameras or microphones. This ultimately affects teachers' ability to connect to students at a deeper level as expressed by a SoG staff member:

> Very disconcerting … it's like talking to the outer space and not knowing if anyone is really listening (Lecturer, University of Leeds, interview 2020).

Although the use of digital environments was an improvised strategy to contain the first months of class interruptions, it did not prevent the greatest dropouts and non-enrolment in the new school year in the Mexican and Kenyan cases. In the UK, however, there was a record number of students enrolling in HEIs. The above allows us to have a snapshot of issues emanating from digital connectivity which marginalised staff and students in all three geopolitical landscapes. We also found that all three HEIs had not considered the effect online teaching had on us as educators. Of the negative impacts, colleagues and students from the three case studies felt that there was no clear line between home

and work and study space. This created unhealthy and unsustainable learning and working conditions:

> Terrible for family life, for my mental health. Having to work from my living room, on the table where we have our meals. The fact that we have an office space, how important […] this is. I need to know that I can leave the house (Lecturer, University of Leeds, interview 2020).

> The Internet crashes on some occasions, I imagine that because we are all now communicating with this medium, not having a computer with good capacity that allows several programs to be open and doesn't crash. I have a five-year-old girl who requires attention and having my own space to study has become a bit complicated (Master's student, ECOSUR, interview, 2020).

This was heightened for those with caring responsibilities who were now also having to deal with childcare; including continuing their children's education while working and learning themselves at the same time. Not having clear physical boundaries proved difficult for many staff and students. In all three universities we saw emails being the number one medium students used to communicate with staff. The number of emails directed at staff skyrocketed, adding an extra layer of workload which had not been considered by our institutions. To a lesser extent other forms of communication such as Teams chat, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter were used. Hence, students expected an instant response and accessibility to staff members, easily blurring lines between professional and personal space and having to work outside normal hours. The most common topics we had to respond to via emails were with regards to student mental health support and grief counsellors despite the fact we do not have formal training in these matters. Another frequent topic within student emails was how to access financial hardship funds and hardware equipment to continue their education.

This section has shown how teaching online during the pandemic was a source of stress and anxiety as individual staff members took on institutional roles with little to no support or offers to provide mental health counselling for staff. There was also no account for an increase in workload. Despite these obstacles, staff and students were able to carve out spaces of joy and community during the pandemic.

## Building alternative communities outside university constraints

In this section we reflect on the impact transitioning to online teaching had on our pedagogical practices and our commitment to social justice issues in and outside university spaces. For many scholar-activists, we see pedagogy as a key element in our activism within the neoliberal university (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2022). We view pedagogy as "a moral and political practice that functions as a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge, values, and identities are produced with particular sets of classroom social relations" (Giroux, 2013, p. 461). Critical pedagogy seeks to use education as a liberating tool for marginalised people against their oppressors (Freire, 1996). As seen in previous sections, the impact of the neoliberalisation of HE means there is progressively more interest in students being able to transfer skills to being employable rather than seeing education as a tool of sociopolitical transformation (Giroux, 2013; Lambert et al., 2007). As scholar-activists we try to defy this bank-teaching approach through our teaching and create a learning community where teacher and student learn and teach together

to create: “a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not for” (Freire, 1996, p. 30) students. The pandemic has brought on serious questions with regards to our pedagogical practices. How can we support marginalised students to acknowledge their experiences, their stories and interest and at the same time challenge our privileged students to be uncomfortable, to contest a system from which they have benefitted in an online setting? Furthermore, how can we deal with complex topics around racism, colonialism and feminism in a nourishing environment when not everyone is in a safe place to engage in these conversations due to being in abusive situations, worrying about finances, not having a stable connection, adequate hardware or having to share rooms with family members or other people? How can we nurture a sense of belonging and community when we can no longer be in the same physical space? Many of us focused on increasing our one-to-one support for students, especially disadvantaged students, during this time as part of our pedagogical practices.

Our research shows that small online groups and one-to-one meetings had the biggest and most positive impact in supporting and connecting with students during lockdown in all three geographical locations. For example, staff at the SoG at Leeds found their tutorial (small groups of less than eight students) experience had been of better quality than previous face-to-face. They declared they were able to offer more pastoral support to students than prior to lockdown and found this experience really rewarding. Teaching staff admitted being more “hands on” regarding pastoral support than before in part because of students feeling isolated. Some teaching staff went out of their way to contact students to offer pastoral support. For example, one colleague made the point of sharing personal experiences of trauma related to COVID-19 in order for students to relate better:

> Students are going through a very traumatic experience so I’m going to make myself available. As available as I can, as available as I wouldn’t be at other times. … It helped me to get to know the students better … . It is an ethical responsibility for me, it is part of my politics of being in academia (Teaching staff, University of Leeds, interview 2020).

In this sense, this staff member reflected at the beginning of lockdown on the best way to support their students, linking it to their wider pedagogical practices. This is much in the sense of what bell hooks (2010) calls “building a learning community” where students and teachers learn together beyond the curricula, creating a community of hope in which student and teacher reflect on their role in the wider community outside academia. This was one of the reasons one of us (Dr Loyola-Hernández) founded the Black and Student of Colour Network at the SoG in Leeds during lockdown: to foster a sense of community, support and help overcome isolation already felt by racially minoritised students in geography, an overwhelmingly white discipline (Mahtani, 2004). Other colleagues at the SoG chose to take a different approach. One staff member emphasised not sharing personal negative experiences as they had to be the person that provided some type of stability under these uncertain times. One interviewee made an important point by stating there is a limit as to how much we can interact and support students if they are unwilling to engage with staff online. There was a consensus among teaching staff that while tutorials seemed to work better within an online setting, this was not the case for larger teaching scenarios such as seminars and lectures mainly due to students not being assessed for their classes or “not getting what they paid for”. A number of staff reported students felt cheated from their university experience and some had even

"asked for a refund". This reflects issues with the neoliberal model in HE as expressed by a SoG teaching member who is putting themselves in students' shoes:

> I [a student] am paying for my education and what do I get in return? … This is more of a systemic issue … crazy tuition fees. If education was free there wouldn't be like … oh we are moving online but what about my education. I'm paying for online education, what am I getting in return? (Teaching staff, University of Leeds, interview 2020).

Our pedagogical practices weren't the only thing affected by COVID-19 lockdown. For many of us, our work was severely impacted by the inability to do fieldwork because of travel disruption, having to focus on supporting our students online and/or the increase in workload due to learning new technologies to deliver online teaching. We were *all* affected by the pandemic, not just students. Staff were also sick, dealing with bereavement, long COVID, financial insecurity and for those of us who are migrants, the inability to support our families in our home countries while navigating immigration systems. The height of lockdown also saw a number of global protests irrupt as a response of the murder of George Floyd by police officers in the United States. We saw a number of HEIs worldwide put out statements in support of Black Lives Matter with little to no real change. How were our Black students and colleagues supposed to continue with their learning and working as if nothing was happening?

Even in the cases where certain institutions have adopted measures to address the impact of the COVID educational crisis on their staff and students of colour, these changes were a response to staff initiatives. Very few universities in the UK actually acknowledge the trauma these world events were having on racially minoritised, especially Black colleagues and students. A noteworthy exception was Loughborough University who granted two weeks pre-approved compassionate leave to Black and Staff of Colour who had been impacted by racial and COVID-19 trauma. This was achieved after several activists, union members and staff pushed for this change as a bottom-up initiative (Loughborough University, 2020). Another notable exception was Goldsmiths University who became the first UK HEI to recognise racial trauma's detrimental effect on students' education, allowing for assessment extensions (The Guardian, 2021b). This was made possible because of the hard work and long-term campaigning by Black and Students of Colour activists (Goldsmiths Anti Racist Action, 2019). This was not a senior management initiative. While small actions made by HEIs to address the impact of COVID and wider social injustices during lockdown are welcomed, we must call for systemic and wide change which should include dismantling institutional racism and improving learning and working conditions for students and staff.

In Kenya, the decrease in government funding had pushed the financial burden onto parents and students. This not only increased student debt but prevented students from poorer backgrounds accessing HE. With COVID-19 eating into resources that were already not enough, the University Vice Chancellors in Kenya proposed a hike in school fees to raise funds. Kenya's National Treasury backed proposals by vice-chancellors to triple university fees to keep the institutions afloat, with National Treasury Principal Secretary Julius Muia telling parliament that reviewing fees was part of policy options to ensure financial sustainability in universities. However, the idea was withdrawn after students were able to mobilise virtually and held protests from different parts of the country even with the lockdown. Another idea to stop funding programmes that were considered not to be in

tandem with the country's economic needs or those with very few students enrolled was made public in November 2020. There was an uproar over the proposal to selectively fund courses which the government considered a priority, with stakeholders saying all programmes are important. The plan was said to be mooted by vice-chancellors to reduce the cost of running the universities after the government cutting the budget. However, private universities and vice-chancellors of a few public universities criticised the proposal that would limit funding to learners enrolled in select courses. In the same vein, there was an attempt to lower salaries of university staff in two public universities in Kenya, citing inability to raise enough money to pay them. Professor Mwonya, Vice-Chancellor, Egerton University, sent a circular, dated 13 May 2020 to all staff members about the pay cut, stating: "Due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected the entire country, the university is not able to generate enough funds internally to be able to pay salaries for the month of April 2020". She said the fund shortage might remain for the duration of the pandemic. Professor Akama, Vice-Chancellor Kisii University, sent a circular on 11 May 2020 to all staff saying that Kisii University was not able to pay full salaries for April 2020.

The role of unions has been key in supporting workers in their struggle for decent living wages in Kenya and the UK during the pandemic. The Universities Academic Staff Union in Kenya has taken the vice-chancellors of the two universities mentioned above to court over cuts in lecturers' salaries, which had been previously suspended by a judge. University and College Union (UCU) represents academics, researchers, lecturers, academic-related and professional staff and teaching postgraduate students in HEIs across the UK. UCU members have been in an ongoing dispute with employers over pension cuts (USS dispute), and pay increase, workload, casualisation and pay gaps (the Four Fights) since 2018 and 2019, respectively (UCU, 2022). UCU members have engaged in industrial action over the deterioration of our working conditions which have been severely impacted by the pandemic. The activism shown in the Kenyan and UK cases demonstrate the devastating effect neoliberal practices have in HE. In the case of ECOSUR, the union's role at the beginning of lockdown was limited to sending obituaries of the staff or relatives who died because of COVID. However, during the same period of time, the union modified its general working conditions to accept academics in its union, and not only administrative personnel. This is an incredible achievement which means 60% of ECOSUR staff is now unionised.

We found that staff in all three case studies joined mutual aid groups to support the wider community beyond the university space. As scholar-activists we found it necessary to support marginalised communities who have been most hit by the pandemic as we need to tackle systemic and structural inequalities beyond the university space. Closure of community spaces that act as social and informal learning spaces, particularly for people who have migrated and have no immediate family, had an impact on mental well-being as well as triggering those who had escaped persecution or militia and lockdowns before in their home countries. What emerged out of this inequality was creativity, resourcefulness and resilience among these communities. Marginalised communities started groups teaching one another computer/online skills, informing one another of new guidelines, conducting social activities online and learning new skills in a short space of time. The communities despite multiple barriers showed resilience but also found ways to connect, support and celebrate each other.

## Conclusion

The pandemic has thrown up many challenges and questions about what is required from HE in the future. There have been positive changes that need to be implemented in future professional practices, such as investing more time in pastoral one-to-ones and providing lecture capture and online recordings for students with diverse learning and mental health issues. Furthermore, this transition has provided a sense of community and support among staff and students who have rallied in support of each other through this difficult time. Nevertheless, there are still many issues to be considered such as increased workload, management of stress levels, caring responsibilities, staff with learning disabilities and/or chronic illness and finally, equality issues.

The neoliberal model of education where students are seen as consumers and teachers as products to be sold to the highest bidder have caused damage to our pedagogical practices (Giroux, 2013; Millican, 2014). Some people are now unemployed which makes them unable to afford to study or to provide for basic needs. Lack of resources and support from the government means that many staff and students have slipped through the cracks. Nevertheless, marginalised, often unheard staff and students became active agents and advocates in their universities. The sense of urgency and agency through grassroots organising ensured that their perspective and position were being considered by education authorities. Ultimately, staff's advocacy for their students shows resilience among the academic community and different ways to build community outside the traditional constraints of university life.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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