

Epistemic injustice, university bordering regimes and international postgraduate researchers

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Abstract

This paper outlines the findings of a series of interviews with international PhD students in the social sciences at Newcastle University. It aims to: 1) understand how the university, as a bordering institution, has shaped the experience of international postgraduates; and 2) interrogate how these students are experiencing the process of articulating and undertaking their research under layers of restriction vis-à-vis Covid-19 as well as growing regimes of digital/biometric surveillance, costs, restrictions, and bureaucracy. Epistemic injustice is used as a frame to understand the operation of interlocking forms of oppression wherein the university is seen as a site of harm through direct and indirect discrimination.

Keywords: University; postgraduate; epistemic injustice; thematic analysis; marginalisation; research practice; race; belonging

1. Introduction

The past two plus years (2020-2023) have required universities to make quick decisions around openness (both physical and symbolic), alternative forms of pedagogy, student health, and research practice. Universities, at least rhetorically, took care to attend to student wellbeing, teaching and learning, and offered supports to offset financial precarity (Elkhatat and Al-Muhtaseb 2021; Tozini and Castiello-Gutiérrez 2022). One group of students who have not been adequately taken care of were International Postgraduate Students (PhDs specifically) who faced a variety of distinctive barriers and difficulties. These included financial, social, and pedagogical pressures which were exacerbated by forms of Othering, racialised surveillance, and financial extraction that exposed “the systemic logics, institutional techniques, rhetorics, and epistemologies of violence and power that undergird the academy’s racial and colonial foundations” (Rodriguez 2012, 809). These events and decisions also impacted multi-year research projects – many of which had taken months to develop and gain permissions for and which traditionally set the stage for one’s academic career.

The project discussed in this essay emerged out of a two-fold desire to: 1) understand how the university, as a bordering institution, has shaped the experience of international postgraduates, students; and 2) interrogate how these students are experiencing the process of articulating and undertaking their research under layers of restriction vis-à-vis Covid-19 as well as growing regimes of digital/biometric surveillance, costs, restrictions, and bureaucracy. We requested and received funding from Newcastle

University for a pilot project to support this study which consisted of eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current international PhD students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science. Participants were compensated by a one-hour university work rate (just under £16).

As it stands, international students, inclusive of postgrads, enter the university with a very different set of rights as compared to home students, especially in the areas of housing, health care, privacy, and employment. As Ly Thi Tran and Trang Hoang argue, these students are also at higher “risk of discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation in dealing with the local community, healthcare providers, migration agents, real estate agents, landlords, employers, and education providers” (Thi Tran and Hoang 2020, 606; Pejic 2012). Covid-19, we argue, intensified experiences of marginalisation and affective non-belonging. While this project focused on examining the nexus between the university as an institution and the experience of PhD students with respect to their research practice, it also sought to unpack the context in which the experiences of our interviewees took place. This included interrogating the disjuncture between overarching political discourses that embrace globalization and the free movement of goods and capital on the one hand, and, on the other, the rootedness of universities in imperial logics aimed at producing desirable subjects and reproducing Western epistemologies (Mamdani 2012; González, C. and Hsu 2014). We return to several of these themes below.

We situate our analysis in the context of higher education in the UK specifically. As such, it is important to begin with an understanding of the UK as a colonial state that has been enacting and violating borders for centuries. This has occurred transnationally and nationally through overt forms of policing and covertly through practices of bureaucratic delegation to institutions like the university. It is also important to point out that UK universities depend, for their financial stability, on the outsized tuition paid by international students. This is particularly the case for universities that opened after 1992 for whom a market model has led to an over-reliance on international fees, but is increasingly the case for pre-1992 universities as well. It includes both postgraduate and undergraduate students for whom a degree from the UK still holds promise of employment, familial uplift, and personal development. It is also significant that for postgrads, PhD programs in the UK often take 3.5 to 4 years (full time) rather than the average of 6+ years in the US, Australia, and Canada. We contend that international PGRs have been made to endure interlocking forms of epistemic injustice wherein the university acts as a site of harm through direct and indirect discrimination (Fricker 2017). Miranda Fricker’s popularisation of the phrase ‘epistemic injustice’ captures the ways in which women and other marginalised groups are seen as having diminished capacity as “knowers” under the constraints of an unequal patriarchal society. The dual experience of testimonial injustice, not being heard or recognised as a speaker, and hermeneutical justice, where one’s social experience is delimited on a societal level, permeates the experiences of the students interviewed in our study. These classes of wrongs, for Fricker, are strictly about discriminatory acts experienced directly and indirectly and in order to be addressed, requires “sufficient social equality in general, to ensure that new areas of ... marginalization do not keep re-emerging with new patterns of unequal power” (Fricker 2017). Also significant is Kristie Dotson’s (2012) work which expands the remit of epistemic injustice to include injustices that are hidden or ones that are contributory in the sense that the speaker is unable to contribute to a community’s shared epistemic resources. This is particularly important in the context of a scholarly community of which international PGRs are ostensibly a part.

These harms are made manifest in the first instance by bordering practices that delimit student movement, capabilities, and agency while also reinscribing hermeneutic and testimonial injustices by severing as the conduits through which inequitable experiences are communicated and addressed. Specifically, international PGRs have been made to endure practical and epistemic harm in the form of: 1. curtailed communicative capacity (for fear of jeopardising their visas, for example); 2. the undermining of their status as knowers and researchers as a result of the transactional nature of the university-student relationship (as well as restrictions on the ability to carry out research); 3. impaired confidence and intellectual courage (which a more materially and affectively supportive environment might foster); and

4. the failure to properly cultivate an environment that includes the development of intellectual virtues (which ostensibly is the primary goal of the university as a pedagogically oriented institution).

We argue that this framework and the interview methodology we employed helps to make “sense of the lived experience of injustice” experienced by these students. It does so in ways that not only demonstrate that these injustices have always existed, but also the ways in which they have been amplified by the pandemic, economic austerity, and stricter border regimes (Fricker 2017, 8).

In our analysis, we draw on Elizabeth Anderson’s (2012) more structural understanding of epistemic injustice as requiring an institutional, policy driven response which can then filter into more local forms of change. This approach shifts focus from individual virtue to more macro sites of concern. As Anderson argues, hermeneutic injustice is structural and thus it is institutions like the university which play a important role in the marginalisation of oppressed groups (Anderson 2010). Interpersonal transformations thus occur as a result of the fact that policies necessarily must “gain the support of those living under them” (Christman 2012, 16). It is thus only through the transformation of policies and structures that individual behaviours are likely to change. Anderson further distinguishes between transactional and structural forms of justice and injustice in support of this framework and calls for justice for and within institutions which is something we support as well.

Thematically, our analysis and approach is informed by research in the areas of bordering (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy 2019; Richardson 2006), border regimes/border imperialism and higher education (Walia 2014, Walker 2014; Gahman et al 2019, Dear 2018), belonging (specific to higher education) (Glass 2018; Tran and Hoang 2020), student migration flows (Mosca and Wright 2010; King and Raghuram), and the intersections between anti-colonialism and anti-racism (Deckers 2014; Dei 2010).

While there is a rich body of scholarship on borders in a number of disciplines (Ong 1999; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Hummer and Simpson 2014; Hokowhitu 2016; De Genova 2002), in this study we draw on bordering as a process, an assemblage used to describe how power and space is (re)configured to exclude certain bodies and, as Murphy argues, how “the perceptual inertia of the territory-sovereignty link works together with certain on-the-ground state-based powers to influence understanding and practices [inclusive of bordering], and to shape what is possible in the political arena” (Murphy 2022). This practice in the university context requires circumscribing the experiences of international students in accordance with economic logics (i.e., capital inflows) balanced against autochthonous understandings of belonging wherein the ability to stay can be revoked by the state at any time. This power has been delegated to the university and has engendered a kind of vulnerability and precarity that came up consistently in our interviews.

Bordering is a central and elastic mechanism of enforcement and is the primary means through which sovereign borders are maintained (Brunner 2022; Sharma 2020). This can be overt, i.e., policing, or covert, via norms and bureaucracy. Either way, bordering is aimed at restraining and shaping Otherness in ways that are racialised. Research in this area sees the university as an institution that acts as a soft border – as border-er or gatekeeper that acts on behalf of the state but also in its own interests in maintaining the background conditions of racialised capitalism through high fees as well as surveillance, monitoring, and reporting (Dear, 2018). This framing has taken on elevated importance as a result of Covid-19 for which bordering practices have been used to determine ‘mobility deservingness,’ - for example, who can take advantage of travel bubbles and fast lanes (largely those with mobility capital), and who has to submit to racialised biometric surveillance and the assessment of pathogenic risk (Koh 2022). It is important to underline that these tools and techniques of administrative bordering are opaque, arbitrary, and aim at producing the ideal, compliant, docile student-migrant subject whose compliance may, or may not, warrant leave to remain in the country (Maury 2021).

2. Methods

Our in-depth, qualitative findings are explanatorily rich and sets the foundation for further research. We began by sending a general call for participants to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science and, after achieving a surprisingly high number of responses, set parameters in order to reach an acceptable level of gender, geographic, and racial diversity. We felt this was important methodologically, given our research, and the best means by which to elicit relevant insights from students whose experiences differ in important ways due to their intersecting subject positions (Collins and Bilge 2020; Crenshaw 2017).

Eight interviews were conducted - seven face to face and one on Zoom, based on the interviewee's preferences; all are included in the analysis for this essay. Interviews were semi-structured, and the questions were jointly de and re-constructed by investigators. Lines of questioning broadly focused on interviewees' experiences of obtaining visas for study, work and leisure; their experiences of travel; the impact of covid on their research; and their experiences of studying in a UK university as international students. All interviewees signed consent forms and their contributions were anonymised inclusive of their country of origin which we generalised to geographic region. This level of anonymity was important due to the sensitive nature of some of the disclosures which several worried might invite institutional retaliation.

The interview transcripts, generated using NVivo, were checked and then coded using an iterative thematic approach based on the work of Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) as well as Herzog, Handke, and Hitters (2019) whose emphasis on 'patterns of recurrence' and coder reflexivity we found useful in developing our own means by which to infer meaning from complex data. This involved several close readings of the transcripts and the identification of thematic consistencies related to the research questions (supported by shared codes). This allowed for robust meaning generation "within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices" (Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun 2017, 297).

As scholars steeped in extant literature and research in this area, we approached the data with a level of familiarity which aided in the familiarization and coding process through which we identified descriptive insights and meanings related to our research questions. Themes emerged quite organically around our codes and, after some sorting and re-organisation, began to tell a "coherent story about what is going on in the data, overall" (Braun and Clarke 2012, 65). During our analysis, we also paid particular attention to relations of power and experiences of oppression which, while not always part of thematic analysis, formed a critical dimension of our research practice (Cannella and Lincoln 2015).

3. Findings

The findings that emerged from the interviews were plenteous and spanned the following: disrupted and stressful travel – inclusive of less than ideal interactions with police, border guards, and embassy staff; the experience of prejudicial and stigmatising university regulations around establishing presence and 'output'; feeling that they had an inferior university experience (*vis-à-vis* 'home' students and particularly in relation to funding, engagement, and movement); differential access to healthcare (in light of Covid-19); insufficient supervision; the impoverishment of their originally envisioned research projects; overt racism and microaggressions; and the inability to find safe means of collective resistance and redress.

Given the focus of our research, in what follows we delve more closely into the themes of: 1. the effect of bordering and surveillance on student experience related to epistemic freedom; 2. visa regimes and travel limitations (in light of Covid-19); 3. capital and economic constraints; 4. impacts on research experience; and 5. support and belonging.

3.1 *Bordering and surveillance*

Bordering practices and surveillance of international PhD students has had multifaceted impacts on their epistemic freedom as well as the research and activities that they are able to undertake. The policing of international students, from the documentation required for student visas (which vary depending on their country of origin), the physical encounter of crossing the UK border, and the practices carried out by the educational institution itself, all impact the perception of belonging and autonomy that international students have. Several participants noted unpleasant and arduous requirements for gaining visas for entry, including having to travel to different cities in order to attend appointments at specific offices, having to go through highly securitised visa approval and processing (including the collection of biometric data, e.g. fingerprints), and difficulties in obtaining clear information on application requirements. These issues demarcate the international student experience as more complicated and time consuming than that of home students and may prevent some potential students from applying in the first place. Unnecessarily difficult barriers for entry leads to the curtailment of epistemic growth and exchange. Though we began this section exploring the state-enforced bordering regimes and their impacts on international students, we also want to provide reflections on the ways the University offers (or fails to offer) support in relation to these processes.

The encounter with 'hard borders' in the space of an airport (upon arrival) shapes feelings of belonging and conditional belonging within the university. These impacts have been reflected in the international PhD experience, with students becoming aware during their encounter with the 'hard border' that their presence in the country is dependent not only on the agreement of the state as an overarching force, but upon the state actors they encounter upon their arrival. It also marks the university as an institution in control of granting access to the country by means of a student visa and accepting students for study. Natalie, who is white and from North America, and thus possessing what is often seen as a 'strong' passport, noted that she would change her behaviour with border staff; she would become polite, timid, and avoid eye contact. She also remarked that she had rarely encountered any issues at borders and identified her privilege as a white North American as a reason for this. However, she said that it would also be easy to see how difficulties at borders would affect feelings of belonging in this country. Running parallel to this are the experiences of students from countries that do not have passports that are as 'strong' and encounter racialisation when entering the UK. Marcus, who had come to the UK to study from West Africa, noted:

They have this extra eye on you as someone from a minority community. I must genuinely say that. You could see it, you know that, you're being not treated very well. You have - your luggage is extra searched, and you - Yeah, there are so many things that are inevitably telling you even though generally, you know, yeah, legally, you are very much legally staying here or coming down in this country. You know why you are coming and all that. But you perceive that the level at which the, the eye is on you is not actually the same, were it the other way around. So that, that, that feeling is there, but when you know that like me, I know that I'm here, very genuinely, I'm here. I know why I'm here. I don't actually feel bad. But I know that, that feeling must be there like you're not treated fairly. When someone will like ransack your luggages looking for things that you - you will be like, what, what is this person looking for in my luggages? (Marcus)

Other participants also noted negative experiences at airports. The contrast between the experiences of Natalie and Marcus sets the scene for the differential treatment of international PhDs: all are subjected to the governing forces of the state, and some with a much less pleasant experience than others.

The surveillance that international PhD students are subjected to within the UK also creates additional work and pressure for international students. It is worth emphasising that the level of surveillance, like visa requirements and hard border encounters, can vary according to the specific background of the student. While most international students must meet specific requirements, such as having a BRP card and scanning their student cards in-person, only some international students are required to register at a

police station. Visa regimes were described by interviewees as “tragically uneven,” with some international students required to only show their passport, and others needing much more documentation. This heightened level of surveillance, and the disparity between requirements for students of different nationalities, has an impact on feelings of belonging within the university environment for many students. This, again, demonstrates how hermeneutic injustice begins at a structural level and then filters down to the interpersonal with institutions such as the university and state bordering agencies driving the process of marginalisation through policy (Anderson, 2012). Zain, for example, relayed that he found the police registration process (which was in place at the time of this research being conducted) alienating:

I thought that every student - every international student was doing that thing, but after, I figured out I was the only one (laughs). So like, just imagine like all of the international students, like, how many people we were - 14 international students ... I and one or two other students did that, others didn't, because they didn't have to. So it just kind of makes you feel like okay, we are potential criminals. And university doesn't do anything about it. It just - either do it for everybody, or just don't do it. Like if you do it for everybody, what do you lose? Nothing. But when you don't do it, you just unintentionally make your students feel like excluded. (Zain)

Zain also found one member of staff's attitude to the police registration process, namely ‘our country, our rules’, to be, at best, insensitive to the impact that having to register at a police station has on feelings of belonging within the university, creating epistemic injustice through exclusion from the scholarly community. Creating a research community is a crucial part of the postgraduate experience, and the insensitivity of staff to these exclusionary practices further enforces those exclusions and works to the detriment of students. It is therefore not only the practices of surveillance but also the attitudes of actors within the institution that can work against healthy, meaningful integration. This robs the student of positive experiences as well the opportunities that can come from engaging in a research community.

Furthermore, the university's own ‘soft’ bordering practices create conditions for international students that are inflexible, e.g. by demanding physical presence, and results in an adverse environment. Rachel, another participant from North America, told us that the requirement to be on campus in order to complete registration with the university seemed “ridiculous” and caused a great deal of stress. Due to visa delays, it was difficult for Rachel to arrive on time to complete her registration, which nearly resulted in her having to defer the start of her studies at significant cost (as she had already paid for a semester of accommodation). Natalie similarly relayed that the university had not been clear on when her start date was and neglected to convey the requirement that she must physically be at the university early on which meant having to “move heaven and earth,” at significant cost, to arrange travel and accommodation during the Christmas/New Year period. The creation of a ‘soft’ border through the physical demand that international students attend the university in person, so that their presence in the institution can take specific forms and be monitored, can work to limit international students' access to higher education. Moreover, the costs incurred again creates barriers to who can attend universities and access and contribute to the communities of research within UK higher education.

The outright racialisation and discriminatory practice of having only some international students register at a police station (although this has now been phased out), and the ignorance of staff to the effects of these practices, establishes the university as a site of harm through which discrimination, both direct and indirect, occurs (Fricker 2017). This creates a scholarly environment that inscribes (through the securitization and bordering) and reinscribes (through aggressions and microaggression) hermeneutic injustice.

3.2 Visa regimes and travel

Beyond navigating visa regimes for entry to the UK, many international PhD students also face constraints when arranging travel for other purposes, including leisure, conferences, and fieldwork. It is again pertinent to highlight the disparities in experiences between international PhDs in possession of

'strong' passports as compared to others. Little issue with regards to visas and access to other countries was highlighted by participants with strong passports. Once again, though we initially explore issues related to visa regimes as enforced by the state, we further reflect on how this plays out in a university context, how universities fail to support students, and the impact of this lack of support.

Zain, being from Central Asia, experienced several obstacles in trying to arrange travel. For leisure, he had been through two difficult, costly, time-consuming, and highly securitised visa applications for the US in order to visit his partner, but had been rejected on both occasions – including one where the interviewer for visa approval did not even ask him any questions. His experience of arranging visas for conducting fieldwork within the Schengen Zone similarly met obstacles:

I struggle a little bit for my fieldwork thing. Because, like, you know, we are living here, the closest Schengen visa place is in Edinburgh. I made an appointment. I went there once, and they said that they couldn't accept my documents because I thought I will go to Denmark first and then Sweden, but they told me that as I will stay in Sweden longer than Denmark, I have to apply for Denmark. Actually, they could still accept my document because the only thing that they need - Okay, Zain, just fill out the student form and come back in 10 minutes. I would definitely do that. But they didn't accept that thing. They just say no, okay, we will not accept your documents. So you have to book another appointment for that. And booking appointment is the hardest part because all the time it is extremely full and their website system is always crashing. So you have to check it everyday like I found my appointment on Sunday, 4pm. Like a Sunday. Come on. Like why? Yeah, everyday I checked like 10 times, more than 10 times maybe. That is the most - biggest problem. (Zain)

Zain was also only granted the exact minimum number of days to conduct his fieldwork, leading to increased stress and pressure for everything to go exactly as planned during his trip. This demonstrates the restrictive measures placed on international students that in turn restricts not only opportunities for leisure, but also the academic and research activities they are able to take part in. It also serves as a particularly salient example of restrictive measures enacted by the bureaucratic processes of the state that can hold researchers back.

Teo, who is from the same region as Zain, also reflected on visa regimes, stating that they were deeply unfair and discriminatory to people from particular regions of the world. The same restrictive measures were also creating pressure for him, as he is planning on applying to present at a major conference in the US and worries that there may be issues with his visa. However, he is reasonably confident that he will be able to get a visa if he is accepted for a major conference. This reflects how participation in the academy functions as a marker of prestige in navigating restrictions, but one that still may not be sufficient in the face of racialised and oppressive visa regimes. These barriers operates on multiple levels as a form of 'identity power' (Fricker, 2007: 14-17) in that Teo can use the prestige of the institution for international access, but is also limited by his national and racial background. Vis-a-vis epistemic justice, this also reflects a form of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007: 27) in that the bordering practices of the academy and state trace the different facets of Teo's identity and has the power to restrict him on these bases.

Further issues arise when the restrictions placed upon travel by the university hinder rather than aid the process. It is clear from Zain's and Teo's experiences that the university should position itself as a support system for navigating the travel restrictions and advocate for the ability to research and disseminate said research. However, the university as an institution frequently creates further obstacles that international students must navigate due to bureaucratic rules. These lead to delays in applications and restrictive and, in the view of some participants, poorly thought-out risk assessment and management practices that result in further costs for the students - especially when delayed approvals for travel lead to more expensive flights and accommodation. These procedures do not consider the time needed to apply for visas after travel is approved, demonstrating how the university does not adequately support the diversity of needs of its student population or understand the issues that the face when travelling. This also illustrates how the university can be dismissive of the obstacles facing the students it sees as peripheral to its core

community (home students), despite the high amount of money international students bring to the university via tuition fees.

3.3 Support and belonging

It is also important to point out that only a small subset of students with financial means and connections can access international programs (this might reflect economic privilege or the combined financial support of several family members and friends). Either way, this economic gatekeeping shapes the kind of students that can enter the neoliberal university – i.e., those most likely to responsibilise and surveil themselves in accordance with capitalist priorities. This works to ensure “a particular type of student...will be accepted on the territory...” and, at the same time, “the inhospitality of the “hostile environment” [in the form of bureaucracy, rules, and regulations] encourages them not to remain longer than is necessary” (Candappa 2019, 428-429).

The acceptance of a particular kind of student, from a particular economic background, is made clear through the affordability checks made on international students before they are accepted to study in the UK. One participant noted that their application for a PhD was made much easier due to them being sponsored by the government of their home country, which demonstrated economic capital and allowed them to receive an offer more easily than if they were required to undergo affordability checks. Other participants echoed these sentiments, noting that it is extremely difficult for self-funded students to sustain study amid the costs of visas, healthcare, living, and travel. This, again, reinforces Candappa’s (2019, 428-429) assertions around the economic gatekeeping of international student entry.

Participants also noted that student visas were restrictive in terms of the time they were able to remain in the UK very clearly delineating the amount of time seen as appropriate for the conditional belonging afforded to international students. In the face of Covid-19 delays to research, this has created intense pressure on some international PhD students who are unable to extend their visas but cannot complete their research projects on time. University support on this has been lacklustre, with some participants gaining information about possible (but unconfirmed) visa extensions through other, non-host university websites. This again restricts the epistemic and research freedom of international students through acts of hermeneutic injustice as a result of the university not recognising the barriers faced by international students and failing to provide the support they need. This reflects the university’s role as a soft bordering regime (Dear, 2018) through its passive acceptance and partial enforcement of these restrictive measures, even in the face of unprecedented obstacles faced by postgraduate researchers due to the pandemic.

Also of note in relation to Covid-19 are issues around healthcare access; healthcare was highlighted by participants as a major expense when initially arranged moving to the UK, and became a further issue during the initial stages of the pandemic. Rachel suggested that the university could have done more to support her (with respect to housing in particular) in her studies and during Covid, as she was at increased risk:

The fact that I am multiple months, if not over a year behind due to hospitalizations, and my undisclosed disability. It - it becomes quite problematic for me trying to manage workload and mental health and off, off time. To sort my stuff from my year two APR I, the last like few months, I was working like 60 hour weeks to manage to get all this stuff put together and... mind you I did write like some ridiculous piece of literature for the example (slight laugh), but still it was like - the amount of work that I had to undertake in that just to make up for what I had missed in the first year and a half because of not only hospitalizations and stuff, because of my disability stuff. And stuff related to that. But also because of having to move three times because of Covid because I was originally in one of the university housing and they shut down the housing or whatever. And while you could stay in the housing, I guess, if you made special arrangements, it was severely like suggested that you should go home and because of my vulnerability, I couldn't stay there and use a shared kitchen or whatever because of Covid. And apparently there was several instances of a outbreak sort of scenario of Covid in there. So it wouldn't have been safe

for me to be in the dorm at the time. And then additionally, I couldn't go home either. So I managed to be quite lucky and have a partner that I had just met like almost right before that and they were like oh just come live with me. Otherwise I probably would have like, like been on the street because the refunds for the housing as well if you didn't go didn't come in for another month or two. (Rachel)

University wellbeing services were highlighted as insufficient when dealing with the needs of international PhD students and the pressures they faced, particularly in relation to economic precarity and difficulties in conducting their research in a 'timely' manner. Again, these issues speak to the university's lack of understanding as it relates to the needs of those on the 'periphery' of what it deems to be the typical student despite the considerable revenue generated by international student fees (a frustration also voiced by participants).

An important insight we had was with respect to the levels of stress faced by students who were away from their family and friends, unable to engage in the full university experience, and facing financial difficulties (their own and those of their family's). Further, the sudden movement to online study due to Covid-19 led to increased isolation for international students (on top of an existing lack of socialising between international and home students):

I again arrange some sort of dinner activity with the - only the international students, only the international students came. Afterwards, we just - okay, we have a really good friendship - and then Covid (laughs). So like, I organise that thing, we get warmed to each other, like we kind of like 'oh, okay, you're a good person, oh, yeah, like I want to know your culture' and blah blah, and two weeks later, shut down. I was like - ugh, dammit ... at that time, you don't want to do that kind of socialising activities because they're just like, online and I attended a couple of them and it was like, you're just looking at the screen that kind of activities and it doesn't fun, it doesn't make you feel like okay, I am belonging here ... you have to do some stuff and you have to study and just stay inside of your room ... it was a dark time. (Zain)

Several participants also had to contend with the fallout of contracting Covid-19 (and for some, long-Covid), as well as pre-existing health conditions for which timely medical attention was difficult to obtain. The previous examples of the inaccessibility of support, as well as the wider pressures unique to international students, created further stress which highlights the severity and pressing need to provide adequate support for international students and remove the structural barriers that elevate stress and consequently undermine their educational experience.

Stress as a marker and instigator of ill health was not only heightened due to Covid-19, but as a baseline state is heightened due to economic precarity, surveillance, microaggressions, and isolation. Stress is also racialised (M'charek 2013; Sikka 2022), often referred to as racial weathering, and gendered vis-à-vis care work which disproportionately falls on the shoulders of women (Stalker 2014; Toffoletti and Starr 2016). The effect of this heightened allostatic load is reflected in processes of (mis)recognition wherein credibility is denied to speakers of a particular social type (i.e. international students). For Fricker, this results in the lowering of social and identity power in ways that impede self-development (Fricker 2017). This biological wear and tear of stress intersects with (often racialised) understandings of who is recognised as a knowledge producer, thereby heightening the struggles faced by international PhD students.

3.4 Impact on research experience

The obstacles international PhD students face also have an adverse effect on their research experience and the kinds of research they are able to conduct. This especially included issues with international fieldwork:

I respect that they want to be able to, in the event of another global disaster or even local disaster, to be able to tell where their staff is, that makes sense- and their students. That makes a lot of sense, but I think that the way that they go about it is just inefficient from all levels. I mean, I was talking with many

staff members as well and even they are like, at wit's end with it. So I understand in some level, but also I - sometimes it just doesn't make a lot of sense either. So for example, we can't stay in an Airbnb because they don't have the, the safety checks in place. And yet we could stay in a hotel that maybe is a dodgy one star hotel, you know, on a river front of a dangerous city, but that seems to be completely fine? Like it- there's a lot of like holes that you could poke in their arguments. And how if you push hard enough, you can get certain allowances. So for example, I've got a colleague who got permission to stay with a friend in like a private residence or whatever, it's just his house, to be able to save all that money. Yet that is equally as uncheckable in for safety regulations as an Airbnb is. So I think there's, there's just - I think they took Airbnb as a sort of catch all I think they just took it because it's something that they can like attack - not attack, but like hardline say, no we can't use Airbnb, but that just creates a lot of problems. But it I think the reasoning - the only reason I can think of is, is the issue of finding themselves in the midst of another disaster and not being able to find their students. And so that's something that I can definitely - and they don't want to be sued. (Natalie)

Participants such as Natalie highlighted the significant effects of Covid-19 had on the ability to conduct research which was then compounded by restrictive university procedures, regulations and bureaucracy, and a lack of university support in adjusting the parameters of research projects. Particularly impactful was the lack of flexibility or support afforded to international students with respect to their visas, signalling that the timeframe given for their conditional belonging in the university and wider country was non-negotiable.

The difficulties created by Covid-19, compounded by the limitations of visa regimes and university policies for international students, also required that creative changes had to be made to individual research projects. For example, some participants used innovative digital methods, such as digital ethnographies, which allowed them to navigate the constraints of Covid-19 as well as travel restrictions. However, some participants suggested that they did not feel their project or data was at the level they wanted it to be because of restrictions and a lack of support. We argue that the pandemic acted as a catalysing force that brought the barriers faced by international research students face, and the epistemic injustices they incur, to a head. Moreover, the structural limitations presented by university and state regulation intersected with the effects of the pandemic to create an intensified form of Fricker's (2007) testimonial injustice by denying the credibility of the research carried out by these students due to their restricted data (and findings).

Supervisors are also a key factor in research experience, and most participants spoke highly of the supervisors and their support. However, it is worth noting that some supervisors were not always understanding or helpful, and several seemed unaware of the considerable constraints faced by their students. Participants noted that their supervisors did not consider the intense time pressures they faced due to visa applications or the time limits on student visas. Because supervisors play such an integral role in the research projects and opportunities that PhD students can undertake, it is important to consider how not addressing these constraints can also lead to epistemic injustices through imposed limitations that affect research and, by extension, the career of the PhD student. This highlights the need to raise awareness of the constraints faced by international PhD students across the university and at all levels.

The concatenation of Covid-19, heightened techniques of bordering, feelings of unbelonging, and intensified forms of epistemic injustice also worked to reduce, and re-shape our interviewee's research projects, many of which were supposed to involve lively forms of engagement with human subjects, artistic works, archives, and events. These students had proposed innovative, critical, and transnational research projects that reflected their own interests and priorities, challenged entrenched systems of knowledge, and were also 'of value' to the university (including a number of projects that involved engagement with institutions internationally which would have raised the university's profile). We argue that one of the outcomes of Covid-19, alongside heightened forms of bordering, may have resulted in research that is attenuated and less likely to challenge hegemonic rules and knowledge hierarchies – what McKittrick refers to as epistemes that "unjustly organize human hierarchies in place and reify uneven

geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways" (McKittrick 2006: xiv; Jacqui and Mohanty 2010). This was demonstrated by a participant who noted that they felt a heightened sense of being surveilled, both generally and in the university environment, and feared having their visa revoked.

The modalities of epistemic injustice emerging from this, while experienced on an individual level by students who feel instrumentalised in their hermeneutic capacities, are built into the university system and thus must be dealt with on this level. This requires that we "consider what epistemic justice as a virtue of social systems would require" while also addressing how hermeneutic injustices are also present where there is a failure to support oppositional forms of knowledge-making found in innovative research projects - including those articulated by international PhD students (Anderson 2012, 163; Mason 2011).

4. Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this article, epistemic injustice permeates the lived experience of these students for whom so much depends on their success. This can also lead to wider identity prejudices wherein their research is marginalised due to its attachment to a subject whose very presence is put under question (Origgi 2012). Having one's "social experience obscured from collective understanding" can be painful, particularly when regulations, laws, and norms are presented as fair, colour-blind, and hegemonic (Nikolaidis 2021). Beyond epistemic justice, what is needed is the cultivation of collective forms of learning resiliency, community and multilocal forms of belonging, and decolonised learning practices that resists what Minghui et al (2021) call 'transnational academic capitalism.' Our interviewees offered their own suggestions including increased efforts on the part of the university to accommodate them not only as sources of economic capital and temporary residents, but as full members of epistemic communities that are offered support in their studies and in remaining in the UK. It was also posited that part of these efforts should include the facilitation of postgraduate communities of both international and home students (rather than the separate communities that often emerge), alongside clearer guidance and support in dealing technical/regulatory issues regarding state policy.

Our position is that given the rich narratives of these students; the history of the university as a neoliberal and colonial institution; the expectation that it will continue to enforce borders (and do so more intensely at times of distress - e.g. the climate crisis), we must take a step back and rethink the place of international postgraduate students in the university system. On a very basic level, this means attending to their material needs including lower tuition, increased financial support (including means to work), unimpeded access to health care, fair and affordable housing, and the elimination of targeted surveillance and policing regimes (Candappa 2019). Interlaced with these material exigencies is a very real need to view these experiences through the lens of epistemic injustice. Our approach makes implicit injustices explicit by demonstrating how robust, just, and boundary pushing knowledge, particularly knowledge that is anti-racist and decolonial, is undermined by an institution and state for whom policing and extraction are more important than human flourishing and imaginative scholarship. As Boni and Velasco argue, the "University as social entity has great potential to confront epistemic injustices by expanding epistemic capabilities" (Boni and Velasco 2020; 1), We contend, however, that this cannot take place under conditions of austerity and financialisation, bordering and neglect, and marginalisation.

UK universities engage in extractive practices through recruiting international PhD students for the financial gain from tuition fees and by capitalising on their research contributions, whilst simultaneously failing to support them in their knowledge production efforts and inhibiting their sense of belonging. This speaks to wider issues surrounding coloniality and epistemic injustice in academia regarding whose voices and perspectives are valued. Consequently, if universities are committed to becoming varied and diverse institutions, with researchers free to produce knowledge that they - as specialists - consider important, the university must work to facilitate this rather than reflect colonial power dynamics by imposing restrictions.

Universities should thus look towards facilitating community-building spaces that draw on the diversity of their entire student body; such spaces should avoid either an assimilationist approach (ignoring the cultural experiences and perspectives of international students) or a segregationist approach (building spaces for *only* international students). This could be through PhD and wider student body communities/societies, and increased opportunities for PhDs to engage with both staff and students in their departments and schools (particularly in the wake of Covid-19, which disrupted the availability of such opportunities). As our research has shown, international students exist in a particularly precarious and conditional space, leading to their voices being suppressed in terms of knowledge production as well whose research and knowledge is platformed and engaged within the context of UK universities.

Universities should also work harder to ensure the security and belonging of their international students, such as by removing bureaucratic measures and restrictions placed upon international PhD students. They must also work harder to foster an understanding of the difficulties faced by PhD students throughout all levels of the university in order to create a more inclusive space; in this way, different parts of the university (e.g. teaching/supervisory staff, administrative staff, other students) must work together to address some of the insecurities inflicted upon international students by the state. This will also enable institutions to go at least some way in addressing epistemic injustices despite the fact that universities may not be able to fully address issues surrounding visas that may emerge from Government/Home Office policy. They can, however, work towards creating an academic environment that endeavours to support international students *despite* wider policy issues, rather than *actively enforce them* as a bordering institution.

It should be noted that despite the adverse obstacles faced by international PhD students, they continue to show remarkable resilience and determination in undertaking their PhD research and participating in their research communities. The wealth of insight, perspective, and skill they bring to the academy, despite the institutional and economic structures that work against their wellbeing and freedom to carry out their research, should function as a call to universities to offer further support and work to dismantle the barriers they face.

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