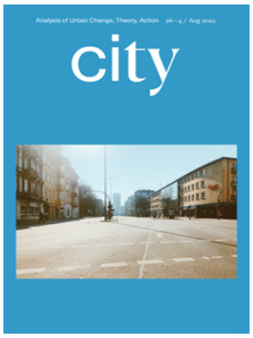

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Redefining the role of urban studies Early Career Academics in the post-COVID-19 university

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Redefining the role of urban studies Early Career Academics in the post-COVID-19 university

Urban ECA Collective*, Nabeela Ahmed, Alexander G. Baker, Akash Bhattacharya, Sally Cawood, Ana Julia Cabrera Pacheco, Mallo Maren Daniel, Matheus Grandi, Christian O. Grimaldo-Rodríguez, Prince K. Guma, Victoria Habermehl, Katie Higgins, Lutfun Nahar Lata, Minsi Liu, Christopher Luederitz, Soha Macktoom, Rachel Macrorie, Lorena Melgaço, Inés Morales, Elsa Noterman, Gwilym Owen, Basirat Oyalowo, Ben Purvis, Enora Robin, Lindsay Sawyer, Jessica Terruhn, Hita Unnikrishnan, Thomas Verbeek, Claudia Villegas and Linda Westman

We are an international collective of Early Career Academics (ECAs) who met throughout 2020 to explore the implications of COVID-19 on precarious academics. With this intervention, our aims are to voice commonly shared experiences and concerns and to reflect on the extent to which the pandemic offers opportunities to redefine Higher Education and research institutions, in a context of ongoing precarity and funding cuts. Specifically, we explore avenues to build solidarity across institutions and geographies, to ensure that the conduct of urban research, and support offered to ECAs, allows for more inclusivity, diversity, security and equitability.

*The Urban ECA Collective emerged from a workshop series described in this article which intended to foster international solidarity among self-defined early career academics working within urban research.

Keywords **postdoctoral research, international solidarity, decolonisation, neoliberal academy, ECRs**
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Introduction

As individuals experiencing multiple forms of precarity, Early Career Academics (ECA) across the world are being impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and responses in diverse, and sometimes damaging, ways. The global crises emerging from the pandemic have exposed and intensified long-standing inequalities and structures of oppression within the contemporary neoliberal university model[1] against which ECAs frequently wrestle. These include its colonial, racist and sexist underpinnings, entrenched hierarchies, and unequal concentrations of wealth (Ahmed 2012; Leisyte and Hosch-Dayican 2014; Tate and Bagguley 2017; Herschberg, Benschop, and Van den Brink 2018; Bozzon, Murgia, and Poggio 2020). The pandemic provides distinct challenges as well as opportunities to reshape ECA's working environments, research practice and career development opportunities (Croucher and Locke 2020; Jack and Smythe 2020; Nature 2020; Woolston 2020a). While our experiences as ECAs are geographically, institutionally and individually situated, common challenges converge across the global urban ECA community. This article highlights and addresses some of these challenges, drawing from a series of international workshops consisting of ECAs from across the world.

Aside from the uneven challenges that the pandemic has presented across broader society, surrounding, for instance healthcare, working environments, and care responsibilities, we argue that ECAs have experienced a number of additional impacts due to the nature of our roles. First, due to our precarious positions within the academy, ECAs typically bear the largest burdens of COVID-19 responses as many universities implement budget cuts. From the non-renewal of contracts, increased workloads related to pandemic-induced turbulence, the loss of research time, to a lack of available opportunities. The research funding landscape, critical in providing resources for potentially career-defining ECA projects, is rapidly changing as investments are strategically funnelled into research focused on emergency responses, infection control, and mitigating the socio-economic fall-out of the pandemic (e.g. Kanja, Flowe, and Cheeseman 2021; UKRI 2021a). Second, we must navigate the hierarchical structures of the neoliberal academy. Within the broad field of urban studies, ECAs are frequently located in, and move between, different departments (e.g. geography, urban planning, architecture, sociology, anthropology, etc.) and operate across disciplinary boundaries where contrasting identities, research approaches and norms must be negotiated (c.f. Bridle et al. 2013; Hein et al. 2018; Hernandez-Aguilera et al. 2021 on the challenges of interdisciplinary careers for ECAs). This lack of a clear institutional locale makes it difficult for urban ECAs to 'find a disciplinary home', exchange research ideas with colleagues, establish supportive research networks to enable progression through our desired career pathways, or build solidarity across institutions and disciplines. Third, the closure of international borders and 'red-listing' during the pandemic, most notably by countries in the so-called 'Global North' towards travellers from the 'Global South', has had a number of significant impacts, from causing existing ECA research projects to be redefined and methodological approaches adapted (Ahmed et al. 2020),

to increasing isolation, reinforcing knowledge, decision-making and funding hierarchies, and posing greater obstacles to obtaining employment overseas, in already competitive job markets. The need to give voice to, and share these challenges as well as potential solutions, was foundational to the international workshop series, elaborated below.

In 2018, the ECR (Early Career Researcher) Urban Studies Network[2] was founded by a senior academic within the University of Sheffield, UK, to provide a supportive space for inter-departmental ECAs working in the broad field of 'Urban Studies'. The network, with an evolving membership as colleagues come and go on fixed-term contracts,[3] has been meeting for the past four years. During this time, it has developed into a platform of knowledge sharing, peer support and solidarity. In the context of the current crisis, and with the increased availability of online video-conferencing platforms, we recognised the opportunity to facilitate an international coming together of urban ECAs, to share our research experiences, mark our terrain, raise our visibility and confront the structural injustices of our institutional contexts. With the theme of 'Redefining the Post-COVID-19 University', the UK-based network organised a series of international workshops for self-identifying urban ECAs, to collectively reflect upon and debate the implications of the pandemic for our research and position within our respective institutions.

Throughout the course of the workshops, as participants and facilitators, we shared the challenges we face from a variety of institutional and geographical contexts, highlighting both overlapping and context-specific insights and experiences. Our aims within this article are to voice the commonly shared experiences and concerns of this international collective of urban ECAs in the post-COVID-19 academic world. Over the course of the past two years, it has become clear that the notion of 'post-COVID-19' refers to the COVID-19 pandemic as a defining watershed moment, in that there was a time before COVID-19. It is clear that the pandemic continues and will continue to have a lasting impact and presence in reshaping the sector and wider world. Building on these thoughts, we reflect on the extent to which the pandemic offers opportunities to redefine Higher Education and research institutions to ensure that the conduct of urban research and support offered to ECAs allows for more inclusivity, diversity, security and equitability.

The next section describes our methodology, including the nature of the workshop series, and the shared process of authoring this document. Following this, Sections 3 and 4 are organised thematically in relation to the post-COVID-19 university, and address the place of the ECA within the neoliberal academy, and research methodologies and ethical issues. Section 5 concludes by offering reflections on possible collective actions to redefine the post-COVID-19 university.

Methodology: the international urban ECA workshop series

Between October 2020 to March 2021 the U- based urban studies ECR network facilitated a series of three international online workshops (of

two hours duration) to collectively reflect on and discuss the implications of COVID-19 for urban ECAs. To widen participation from varying time zones, the workshops were organised via the broadly grouped regions of Asia-Pacific, Europe and Africa, and the Americas. Seventeen discussants from the UK and non-UK institutions were invited to briefly present their personal situation, academic experiences and views, responding to the two following prompts.

Addressing power relations within existing academic institutions and research practice

In the context of renewed calls to consider how to 'decolonise the university' and to identify avenues for equal research partnerships and ownership of knowledge, particularly in international research, how can we rethink our roles in the reproduction/undoing of unequal knowledge production processes?

Revised methodological strategies and ethical questions

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed deep urban inequalities creating uneven risk profiles and exposure to the virus, and raising questions around the ethical implications of conducting urban studies fieldwork. How can we incorporate these concerns into revised methodological strategies?

Our methodological approach was based on the aim of stimulating exchange of ECA experiences, and exploring similarities and differences of these across different contexts, through an atmosphere of solidarity and trust. Rather than aiming to create a representative sample of ECAs in terms of world regions or countries, we sought to build dialogue with ECAs working in different career stages and trajectories, academic settings, and areas of the world. These accounts and contributions, which were often poignant, served as an entry point for broader discussion amongst participants, of which there were around 30 in each workshop. The discussions across these three sessions provided the basis for a draft collective document, synthesised by the UK network. Seeking to foster a reciprocal and representative process, this initial draft was presented back to workshop participants for feedback, edits, and comments in a fourth summative appraisal workshop. A group of UK members volunteered to integrate this feedback and lead the process of formalising this draft document into the intervention presented here. Through an iterative process, this task was equitably distributed across the group with labour being shared according to the varying time, space, and structured opportunities that exist for precarious ECAs week-to-week. The authors sought consensus as far as possible, while acknowledging the need for focus and the calibration to the variable workload of participants. Following this process, a final draft was circulated to the international participants to elicit a final round of feedback which was then integrated (directly by participants themselves, or by the Sheffield ECAs) into a final document sent for peer review. This approach to working collectively was maintained through the process of revising and finalising this intervention.

This article thus reflects a process of collective inquiry, structured by the international workshops. The workshop conversations and writing process

aimed to engage directly with both the diversity and commonalities present in our ECA experiences, confront the uneven geographies of power that structure research institutions globally, and ground our writing in the dialogue that emerged between authors from different geographic contexts.

We use 'Early Career Academic' as a broad term to collectively define ourselves, encompassing doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, individuals on fixed-term and/or precarious teaching and/or research contracts, but also academic staff hired on permanent contracts at the beginning of their careers facing institutional pressures due to their junior positions within university hierarchies. We recognise the limitations of defining our diverse experiences under a single term, as well as the problematic nature of centring our precarity and reifying our 'junior' position within the academy. We reject the framing of junior colleagues as 'less than', and instead champion our innovativeness, our disciplinary dexterity, our boldness in challenging established norms, and our resilience in engaging with an increasingly hostile academic landscape. We consider this a collectively authored work that seeks to bring disparate, invisibilised, and sometimes painful experiences together to find common ground and build solidarity at the threshold of institutions.

The position of the urban ECA within the (neoliberal) academy

The ECA has previously been defined as an individual within the first five years of academic or other research-related employment following PhD completion (Bazeley 2003). The term commonly refers to the period from PhD confirmation to an assumed postdoctoral appointment, tenure, and promotion to a permanent academic position. The idealised pathway is one of uninterrrupted employment and continuous research and/or teaching development. However, 'with academic work increasingly casualised, experiences of 'early career' are changing and definitions in use by institutions and research bodies do not reflect the lived experiences of early career academics' (Bosanquet et al. 2017, 890). The diversity of institutional arrangements that contemporary ECAs have to navigate include international contexts with contrasting higher education systems (public, private and hybrid universities), research funders, procedures and practices that range in levels of bureaucracy, types of work offers (formal and informal), contractual agreements (length, pay, roles and responsibilities), opportunities for training, networking and support, and prospects for permanent academic appointment and career advancement.

As already mentioned, the term ECA covers a diverse range of personal situations, roles, responsibilities and forms of precarity as a researcher, teaching assistant and/or lecturer within, or associated to, a formal academic/ research institution. The term is also highly situated, given specific education systems and academic pathways in a given regional context. Seeking to take account of these diverse situations and experiences we adopt a holistic definition of ECA that recognises the complexity, conditionality and uncertainty that international scholars face today following their PhD (Bosanquet 2017). We advocate

self-definition in identifying ECA status, and contend that this approach is richer and more accurate than temporal definitions (i.e. up to five years after PhD) or measures of research capabilities (e.g. number of journal articles, amount of research funding acquired). In our workshop series, this meant that ECA participants included: PhD researchers; postdoctoral researchers on fixed-term research projects; independent research fellows; researchers without affiliations and/or employment; permanently appointed lecturers, and more senior academics on casualised contracts.

Despite this diversity of situated career and research experiences, three sets of challenges proved common across geographies when considering the position of the urban ECA within the (neoliberal) academy: (a) precarious employment; (b) hierarchical structures in everyday working arrangements and (c) issues related to institutionalised racism.

Precarious labour

ECA precarity has long been considered an issue within academia (Wöhrer 2014; Bozzon et al. 2017; Herschberg, Benschop, and Van den Brink 2018; Byrom 2020; McKenzie 2021) but this trend has intensified with the impacts of, and responses to, the COVID-19 pandemic (see e.g. Cardel, Dean, and Montoya-Williams 2020; Levine and Rathmell 2020; Termini and Traver 2020). The pervasiveness of uncertainty and indecision about academic pathways and job security is often institutionally and culturally acknowledged as inherent to the ECA role (Bosanquet 2017). Across different geographic contexts, ECAs face increasing challenges to obtain long-term postdoctoral fellowships, tenure track positions and permanent posts. Experiences shared during the workshops revealed how the most precarious and informally employed ECAs can sometimes work for international academic institutions without formal affiliation, and with restricted access to facilities, benefits and support, for example in order to honour research partnerships or complete projects considered socially valuable, or as 'research experience opportunities' with little recourse to negotiate more equitable terms. ECAs on short-term or informal contracts are also commonly deemed ineligible to act as a principal investigator (PI) by funding bodies and universities, and are sometimes denied or marginalised in the co-authorship of research outputs. This results in a 'chicken and egg' situation whereby ECAs are unable to receive recognition for demonstrating these abilities and win subsequent funding awards or longer-term/permanent contracts. Even when there is the chance to apply as PI, the fact that fixed-term staff need to fund their whole salary creates a practical dilemma, where the salary and overheads eat up much of the research budget or are not even recognised as an eligible expense.

In the wake of COVID-19, reduced funding opportunities and a sectoral reliance on short-term research projects have been exacerbated by a reorganisation of the funding landscape, institutional budget cuts and hiring freezes (Woolston 2020a). For example, in the UK, policy changes and financial pressures as a result of COVID-19 led the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to significantly reduce funds previously made available for Official Development Assistance (ODA) (i.e. overseas aid) for

2021/22 (UKRI 2021b). The result saw UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) experience a £120 million gap between allocations including existing commitments to grant holders of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), Newton Fund and other ODA funds (UKRI 2021b), leading to widespread condemnation from the research community (Universities UK 2021). Layered on top of existing career and financial uncertainties, the reallocation of funding and pandemic measures (for example, requirements to social distance and restricted travel) have led to the postponement of empirical fieldwork, or the cancellation of entire research projects. With staff placed on the 'frontline of crisis risk management,' the pandemic context is being used as academia's 'shock doctrine' (Hall 2020; Kornbluh 2020), with the risk of these contracted business models, funding arrangements and precarious working practices becoming the new normal. Set against this unpredictable and turbulent socio-economic situation, some of us saw our employers failing to give reassurances that our contracts would remain in place or were offered extended affiliation without salary, and many saw our previously promised pay increments denied based upon budget cuts.

The highly competitive academic landscape necessitates individuals frequently working long hours on insecure, and sometimes low-paid, contracts, often leading to enduring work-related stress and ill-health (Teferra 2016; Aarnikoivu et al. 2019; Salihu Shinkafi 2020; Hernandez-Aguilera et al. 2021). ECAs are encouraged to demonstrate their commitment and capabilities across diverse areas: research (through publishing and delivering impact); lecturing and supervision (often with minimal support, or outside contracted responsibilities in order to gain vital experience); and administration/managerial work (such as taking on PI responsibilities in managing and coordinating projects and personnel). Such escalating academic pressures engender a pervasive sense of failure (Horton 2020), and mental health issues form a key concern across the sector (Caretta et al. 2018), particularly affecting ECAs (O'Neill and Schroijen 2018; Ysseldyk et al. 2019). Academic institutions, whilst making steady improvements, specifically in providing resources for acute needs, tend to shy away from meaningfully addressing or engaging with these issues (Woolston 2020c). Loneliness and isolation can be common to the ECA experience (Belkhir et al. 2019), and reduced human contact during COVID-19 has exacerbated this problem (Byrom 2020). The lack of support for care and social reproductive work has been highlighted by the increased pressures precipitated by the pandemic (Petts, Carlson, and Pepin 2021). The pandemic has also raised concerns over physical safety and working conditions for staff, including ECAs who lack power to challenge unsafe practices, for example in maintaining appropriate physical distance whilst teaching or carrying out lab work (Fazackerley 2020; Woolston 2020b) or field work which necessitates engaging in social customs such as handshaking. Precarity also necessitates academic mobility, whereby ECAs frequently have to change institutions for the next short-term contract. Aside from the impact that these relocations have on personal relationships and family (Wöhrer 2014; Balaban 2018), they demand continual adaptation to different institutional cultures, rules and norms, which can be stressful, particularly when these are unclear or implicit.

Finally, the neo-liberalisation of higher education taking place across much of the world, not only shapes the availability of employment, working conditions, and who has access to education, but reshapes the geography of where universities and research institutions are located and ranked (Shen 2022). Student fee hikes (across disciplines), and property speculation (for example, land acquisition by private universities) attest to the entrenchment of neoliberal principles within the university system, and the increasingly ambivalent role of universities as inclusive places of knowledge production (Engelen, Fernandez, and Hendrikse 2014; Thwaites and Pressland 2016; Webster and Caretta 2019). With many universities already running on a deficit, and demand of investors to see a good return unrelenting, the COVID-19 pandemic and its anticipated effects on student recruitment, saw many universities having to rethink their 'business model', with implications for the security of the ECA position (The Economist 2020). The diversity of situations and experiences shared by ECAs that participated in the workshops indicates a worldwide trend, which should be the subject of a broad debate regarding the nature of current academic practice and the nature of work and of the world of work in the twenty-first century (cf. Terkel 1974). The following vignettes offer examples of these issues in different national contexts, drawing on workshop participants' experiences.

Pakistan:

There exists very limited university-based research opportunities for urban researchers, with the academic landscape predominantly consisting of a few selected and scattered private institutes/bodies. With fewer vacancies and a culture of hiring based on social capital, this leaves a large number of aspiring researchers demotivated, confused and unemployed—with many opting for a change in field to enter the job market and other precarious non-academic jobs. Within academia, many job opportunities remain unadvertised or advertised with predetermined internal candidates, leaving little room for fresh aspirants. The COVID-19 outbreak has completely frozen the hiring process, affected ongoing grants and jobs and forced ECAs to agree to working on lower pay scales, making the situation grimmer than it was previously.There exists very limited university-based research opportunities for urban researchers, with the academic landscape predominantly consisting of a few selected and scattered private institutes/bodies. With fewer vacancies and a culture of hiring based on social capital, this leaves a large number of aspiring researchers demotivated, confused and unemployed—with many opting for a change in field to enter the job market and other precarious non-academic jobs. Within academia, many job opportunities remain unadvertised or advertised with predetermined internal candidates, leaving little room for fresh aspirants. The COVID-19 outbreak has completely frozen the hiring process, affected ongoing grants and jobs and forced ECAs to agree to working on lower pay scales, making the situation grimmer than it was previously.

Aotearoa / New Zealand:

Precarity, amongst other factors such as an increasing reliance on fixed-term academic staff, has accompanied the neoliberalisation of the university sector for some time. This precarity has been enormously exacerbated by the pandemic. In Aotearoa, closing the border disrupted the 'international education industry'. Losing one of its key revenue streams, universities used financial woes to justify terminating fixed-term contracts, hiring freezes as well as redundancies. This approach has hit ECAs particularly hard, especially in an environment which already possessed limited research funding opportunities.

Brazil:

*Brazil is currently led by an ultraliberal 'popular neo-fascist' government at the federal level. Many governmental actions within the academic sector are taking place in the name of fighting what ideologists claim to be the dominance of 'cultural Marxism' within public universities. In budgetary terms, the federal government has deepened neoliberal austerity policies and their budget cuts—which are not only drastic but also selective, impacting the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Some of the main public universities are under budgetary pressure, and are under risk of closure. The public research sector is being dismantled, whilst alternatives for the private financing of public research institutions are created and encouraged. Profound public sector reforms have impacted university teachers' and researchers' job stability, and increased the executive power to appoint public servants, such as deans, and to change their functions within the public administration. In addition, the federal government has restricted the hiring of new university researchers, whilst creating new contract formats that deepen the precarity of work, including taking advantage of the forced expansion of distance learning in the pandemic context.**Brazil is currently led by an ultraliberal 'popular neo-fascist' government at the federal level. Many governmental actions within the academic sector are taking place in the name of fighting what ideologists claim to be the dominance of 'cultural Marxism' within public universities. In budgetary terms, the federal government has deepened neoliberal austerity policies and their budget cuts—which are not only drastic but also selective, impacting the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Some of the main public universities are under budgetary pressure, and are under risk of closure. The public research sector is being dismantled, whilst alternatives for the private financing of public research institutions are created and encouraged. Profound public sector reforms have impacted university teachers' and researchers' job stability, and increased the executive power to appoint public servants, such as deans, and to change their functions within the public administration. In addition, the federal government has restricted the hiring of new university researchers, whilst creating new contract formats that deepen the precarity of work, including taking advantage of the forced expansion of distance learning in the pandemic context.*

Hierarchical structures

The structure of academia, which presents a supply of postdoctoral ECAs far greater than the market of jobs available, resembles a pyramid with power concentrated within the secure upper levels (Stephan 2013; Afonso 2014). These uneven power relations mean it is often difficult to say no to certain tasks when on a precarious contract, even if it jeopardises our own health or compromises our personal lives. This dynamic disproportionately impacts those who are unable to work outside their contracted hours, due to caring responsibilities or disabilities, squeezing many out of the sector (Horton and Tucker 2014; Ysseldyk et al. 2019). Hierarchical working relations and the nature of ECA research contracts (often on research projects led by a senior PI) can mean that ECAs have to work towards the priorities of more senior colleagues, with many of us using our annual leave or evenings and weekends to pursue our own research agenda. In some cases, ECAs have also seen their work unacknowledged and/or plagiarised, including funding proposals, bibliographies, and teaching plans, by colleagues in secure university positions able to exploit those operating with this uncertainty. The growing dependence of universities on part-time staff (in some Latin American universities this percentage exceeds 50-60%

of academic staff) reinforces this hierarchical structure, not only in terms of salary, but also in terms of workload. In many cases, the teaching load of the ECAs does not leave time for research and the publication of scientific articles, and in the framework of the neoliberal academy, teaching has less and less 'value' for promotion schemes that prioritise productivity and demonstrable scientific products. Additionally, the proliferation of short-term contracts and the 'publish or perish' culture, as well as the perverse internalisation of academic freedom as a 'privilege' or 'vocation', incentivises and normalises this overwork (Hall and Bowles 2016; Brown and Leigh 2018; Cannizzo, Mauri, and Osbaldiston 2019).

ECAs face different forms of disadvantages in academia based on intersecting characteristics, such as gender, race, age, childcare and other caring roles, disability, reproductive labour, income, and nationality (Thwaites and Pressland 2016; Bosanquet 2017; Caretta et al. 2018; Bono, De Craene, and Kenis 2019; Webster and Caretta 2019; Briscoe-Palmer and Mattocks 2020; Hughes 2021). On top of this, students and staff from marginalised communities have also been disproportionately hit by COVID-19: from the health inequalities experienced by racialised minorities (Anyane-Yeboa, Sato, and Sakuraba 2020), to the uneven impact of isolation on migrants and LGBT+ communities (Chen et al. 2020; Oginni, Okanlawon, and Ogunbajo 2021). The unfolding financial impacts of the pandemic are having disproportionate effects on the most precarious workers (Woolston 2020b, 2020c). In many ways the pandemic is making visible and exacerbating existing (all too often unacknowledged) inequities both within the neoliberal academy, and wider society. Whilst 'equality and diversity' programmes have seen a proliferation within the academy in recent years, these have been criticised as superficial, given that their implicit incremental approach commonly fails to challenge deep structural inequalities (Ahmed 2012; Makhubela 2018; Tzanakou and Pearce 2019).

Hierarchical structures in academia exist inter-institutionally as well as within universities and research establishments. Elitism is rooted within the higher education system, and the legacy of traditionally 'high reputation' institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge in the UK or Harvard and Yale in the USA as vehicles of education for the upper social classes still persists (Shin and Harman 2009). Efforts to create a 'competitive market' between publicly funded institutions in various contexts across the globe, as well as right-wing, conservative governments in many countries, have led to assaults on the arts & humanities, critical social sciences, and departments deemed 'unprofitable' (Anwaruddin 2013; Hunt and Boliver 2021). On top of this, the dominance of the 'Global North', and in particular Anglo-American hegemony, as the centre of global academic knowledge production remains as a persistent inequity (Collyer 2018; Kong and Qian 2019). Despite some moves by powerful actors (aside from individual researchers/groups) to 'democratise' global knowledge production, e.g. by waiving fees for journal access, opening international campuses, and providing Open Education Resources (Rambe and Moeti 2017), this divide is perpetuated by neo-colonial practices and structures, such as the shape of funding landscapes (Noxolo 2017). Academic institutions have restructured around a business

model that is reliant upon high international student tuition fees and vested property interests (Findlay, McCollum, and Packwood 2017; Cebolla-Boado, Hu, and Soysal 2018). For many UK universities, COVID-19, and the closure of international borders affecting the anticipated intake of overseas students, highlighted the importance of this cross-subsidy to sustained research activities (Kelly 2020).

Finally, patron-client relations, favouritism, nepotism and corruption can all affect ECAs' career progression, and magnify the exclusion of those not of a dominant race/gender/age/socio-economic status (McDowell 1990; Kumar 2018). It remains challenging for many ECAs to progress and advance a career in academia without social connections and a willingness to 'play the game'. This culture often ingrains an inherent bias against those who suffer from systemic prejudice. Those who have not worked with particular professors and senior colleagues might find it more difficult to get recognition, funding and permanent positions (de Winde et al. 2020; Salihu Shinkafi 2020). Adopting individual strategies without wider systemic change has its limitations, since resisting and reacting to structural inequalities can undermine one's own precarious position and sometimes reproduce exactly those biases that are contested (Bono, De Craene, and Kenis 2019). The three following vignettes expose the challenges some of us experience in the UK, Nigeria and Mexico.

UK:

Postdoctoral researchers in the UK are often hired on fixed-term research contracts as part of larger research projects, led by senior academics as PIs. In practice, this means that their work is entirely focused on supporting someone else's research agenda, and that they have very little time to develop their own research. The extent to which PIs allow ECAs to develop their own research agenda varies greatly and rests on individuals. There are no sector-wide guidelines on ECAs development and no obligations for PIs to grant extra research time or provide dedicated support. Some supportive senior academics allow postdoctoral researchers to dedicate a portion of their weekly working hours to their own work, or tailor their project's research objectives to ECAs expertise and research focus. More often, ECAs are left to work on their own research outside of their working hours (when they are able to) as 100% of their working time is dedicated to supporting senior academics' research goals. This perpetuates inequalities for people who cannot (or do not want to) do unpaid work on evenings, weekends and holidays to develop their research profile. In addition, these pressures have uneven impacts on ECAs with different caring responsibilities, such as childcare or other caring duties (in some instances amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic). For those who are able to dedicate their free time to pushing their own research agenda, this means additional pressure and stress. This reality further reinforces hierarchical structures and ECA dependency towards more senior academics.

Nigeria:

While ECAs in Nigeria are often found in permanent employment in Universities, they are often subject to disproportionately high workloads, and required to take on multiple administrative and teaching roles. It is not unusual for ECAs to be required to be student advisors, committee secretaries, etc, while also being allocated more units to teach and having to support their supervisors in their own teaching assignments. This reduces the time they can put into high-quality research and also subjects them to health challenges and inability to balance work and home responsibilities.

Mexico:

In Mexico, the functioning of the National System of Researchers (SNI), a ranking system based on individual performance, intensifies long-standing inequalities like the gap between public and private universities, meritocracy, and discrimination based on age, gender, and race. The frantic search to enter and remain in the SNI creates an elitist hierarchy with 'SNIs' at the top, and 'SNIs not', at the bottom. Hiring, funding, career opportunities, everything goes through the SNI. The individual competition that sustains its oppressive structure turns the research landscape into a fishbowl where big fish eat the small, with ECAs being the most vulnerable link. Being an ECA in Latin America is being stuck between not being a student but also not regarded as a 'proper' researcher. We are sometimes considered as 'free labour' by our supervisors and expected to dedicate most of our time to helping them out. Even when we have our own research projects with their own commitments and deadlines, they are seen as less important. How could our one-year projects compete with their three-to-five-year ones? ECAs make hard choices, because saying 'no' will jeopardise future opportunities, but saying 'yes' will risk our own funding records; when the larger projects we are expected to help on do not even include provision for hiring an ECA in the future.

Institutionalised racism and decolonisation

Across the UK, India, Austrialia, Brazil and in many other countries, the rise of 'hostile environments' and discrimination on the basis of nationality for those considered non-citizens or racialised as 'other' has been embedded within the university with severe consequences for ECAs and students. In the UK context, this pattern is manifest in a host of challenges faced by non-UK job candidates, existing staff and students including issues obtaining work/resident visas, and spiralling everyday costs of working at a university (including covering visa, insurance, childcare, transport and healthcare expenses). Furthermore, racially othered staff and students face increased levels of surveillance and monitoring. This stems most directly from the UK's Counter Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST), initiated in 2003 and since widened in its mandate and spaces of implementation (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2017), which has increased burdens on staff to take on the role of racial profiling and securitisation within the university, as part of a growing 'surveillance infrastructure' targeting Muslim and other racialised communities (Qurashi 2018). ECAs and students targeted by such infrastructures face limitations in pursuing international fieldwork, ethical clearances for research and limitations on everyday university activities such as organising events, with non-citizens facing a double set of restrictions as a result of both CONTEST and the UK's Hostile Environment Policy (Awan, Spiller, and Whiting 2019). ECAs and students vulnerable to punitive outcomes of these policies are less empowered to participate in industrial disputes (Pendleton et al. 2018). In recent years, the rapid rise of fascism in states such as India, Brazil and Hungary[4] has seen several violent, often state sanctioned, crackdowns on universities and sweeping cuts to university funds and freedoms (see: Scholars At Risk Network 2021), with our workshop participants sharing insights on the growing surveillance, and criminalisation of everyday university activities.

Institutional racism negatively impacts racialised scholars and students in differential and structural ways including hiring, promotion, the racial pay gap, and workload. This context also creates barriers to the progression of decolonial

and critical methodological debates (Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu 2018). Coloniality and institutional racism in universities have deep roots with many universities in the 'Global North' built directly from profits of empire and slavery (Unis Resist Border Controls no date; Meyerhoff 2019)—though very few institutions are yet to fully investigate these links or account for reparations; as an exception see the University of Glasgow's report (Mullen and Newman 2018). At the same time, many international student-led movements have been seeking to actively dismantle White supremacy in the academy including: Why is my curriculum White?; Decolonise SOAS; Reclaim Harvard Law School (RHLS); #LeopoldMustFallQM; and Why isn't my professor Black? (Thomas and Jivraj 2020). During the COVID-19 crisis, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement led UK and US universities (amongst others) to release statements of support. In the UK context, this has been critiqued as superficial and tokenistic for failing to systematically engage with the structural nature of racism (see Perry, Itaman, and Golding 2020; Adey 2021). In the US, critical scholarship details the long histories of universities as 'colonial capitalist institutions' whilst calling for new modes of organising for an abolitionist university (Meyerhoff 2019). Such, if not all, movements worldwide are generated by student bodies and ECAs, drawing to attention both the vulnerabilities and burdens disproportionately borne by ECAs. The work of mobilising and sustaining resistance to institutional racisms, enforcement of (national) borders in the university space, intersectional discriminations of class, caste and gender and so on typically lies with ECAs worldwide, and even when institutions respond, ECAs continue to bear either disproportionate burden or complete erasure in the process. In the UK, a disproportionate reliance on precarious ECAs (not matched with job security, remuneration or recognition), without sustainable support from university faculty and management, characterises institutional responses ranging from Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies, to university-led decolonial enquiries, to anti-racist and pro-LGBT+ campaigns.

Bringing anti-racist, decolonial critique to Urban Studies is central to critical urban scholarship through ideas like epistemologies of the South (De Sousa Santos 2018), decolonising practice (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012) and through the modernity/coloniality research group from Latin America (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2007). This work has called into question the dominance of anglophone language in publishing and uneven access to opportunities for ECAs from marginalised locales (Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay 2007). This division leads to additional difficulties for publishing, especially if English is not an author's first language and resources are required for proofreading. Such barriers act to perpetuate global inequalities in the production of knowledge, who is cited, and which debates are published. Within this context, we see a growing international division between universities and ECAs with and without access to resources, institutional accounts, affiliations, and larger budgets. Normative research practices are often directed by 'Northern institutions', with Southern co-researchers structured into inferior positions in knowledge production, denying them equal opportunities to obtain higher positions in international research as 'experts'. Many 'Southern scholars' do not receive authorship for work that is based on their labour. Labels are constructed and used and Southern scholars are 'made to wear them' (for example 'insider'/'outsider' dichotomies,

see Giwa 2015). Lastly, in many countries short-term research projects are externally funded and oriented towards a set of deliverables, which makes it difficult to meaningfully engage with communities over the long run, leading to exploitation and research fatigue (Giordani 2020). The next three vignettes offer examples of these challenges in different continental and regional contexts, drawing on participants' experiences.

Australia:

Non-Australian staff and students experience several challenges while navigating the academic job market including issues related to obtaining work and work visas. As there are not many universities in Australia, the Australian job market does not offer many academic jobs. Jobs are often advertised only for internal candidates and these candidates are often White Australians. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, most jobs have been advertised only for Australian citizens or permanent residents. Consequently, international students and casual academic staff who might have lost their jobs since the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia, are not eligible to apply for most academic jobs. Many international students have ended up joining the platform economy and other precarious non-academic jobs.

Africa:

ECAs in Africa are challenged by a dearth of funding and most often have to use their own funds for research if they are able to make any significant progress. As a result, the scale and impact of research is minimal. In recent times, there has been renewed opportunities for external funding from the UK and the EU, however these come with very stringent guidelines on what to research and how to research and with whom to research. These conditions can be very stifling because without a clear articulation and tight adherence to these foreign research agenda, ECAs cannot access significant funds to carry out meaningful research. COVID-19 has re-created a situation where these funds are now further limited and further restricted. In many cases, Grants are provided to ECAs in developing countries on a reimbursable basis, meaning you have to use your own (or University's resources) to fund the research in the first place, and thereafter seek reimbursement from the Funder. The due diligence associated with these accounting processes could go on for months. The explicit lack of trust discourages ECAs from applying for these Grants. So, we are in a precarious position: we stand higher chances of conducting more impactful research if we seek external funds but are constrained to focus on what the funders want to be researched. Hence we continue to push agendas that are not our own. It is difficult to think of a more restrictive, recolonisation strategy in academia.

Europe:

The issues of institutionalised racism goes beyond the university and echoes political developments across society. Recent European examples include the Danish and British cases, as well as the assault on Universities in Hungary within the last five years. The closing of social science departments in new universities in the UK furthers the privilege of specific groups who attend elite institutions and are able to pursue social sciences. It is important to raise that authoritarian measures are at the heart of Europe, reflecting the resistance to change. The crumbling of academic freedom says a lot about the future of social sciences in general and urban studies in particular. Again, it may set the research agenda of ECAs who can face, for example, deportation, if a contract is terminated due to the content of the research.

Rethinking urban research practice post-COVID-19

In addition to the deep-seated challenges outlined above, COVID-19 has particular implications for ECAs, and the academic community more broadly, with regards

to conducting research during a global pandemic (Weinstein 2021). This is apparent with existing measures to limit the spread of infection, but is also likely to have longer term consequences due to uneven access to vaccines. International borders and travel remain restricted, leading us to question what will happen to urban research in the coming months and years? In discussing such implications, the workshops focused on *methodological* and *ethical* considerations.

The pandemic has disrupted plans for fieldwork and in-person research. There is uncertainty over new and existing projects, and a need to evaluate what forms of methodological tools apply in the pandemic context. A recurrent methodological question that was discussed throughout the workshops was whether we should distinguish 'pandemic disruption' from normal 'field of play' in our research. To put it another way, should research be postponed or should the pandemic be accepted as part of the research endeavour? This is particularly relevant to ECAs who tend to have fixed-term contracts and a finite period to redesign research projects or postpone fieldwork. For those who decide to adapt using remote or online methods, new opportunities can arise in the additional 'distance' where some interlocutors may feel more protected and anonymous, and willing to talk openly. The transition to digitally remote methodologies is not always feasible, however, in research contexts where there are already barriers to access online, e.g. China (due to restricted access) or low-resource contexts with limited connectivity, poor internet connections, or electricity blackouts (e.g. Pakistan and Mexico). The switch to online modes of engagement has helped broaden participation in some cases, but excluded others due to enduring inequalities in access to technology for participants, students, and staff.

The pandemic raised questions about the methods, ethics and aims of our research. In this new context, ECAs may have greater opportunities to experiment with less conventional, more radical research methodologies, such as approaches that build on 'slow scholarship'—'distinguished by engaging with ideas through deep reflection, experiential learning, and reflexivity, ultimately resulting in critical insight, creativity, and innovation' (Hartman and Darab 2012, 58), a politics of care (The Care Collective 2020), and collective re-structuring of the neoliberal university (Mountz et al. 2015). This can serve as a counter-force against institutional ethics procedures and challenge their conservatism, risk aversion and propensity to prioritise risk calculation over ethical commitments to research participants. However, the pandemic may also constrain existing repertoires, especially among ECAs who cannot postpone research, and must rapidly and opportunistically re-design projects. Additionally, the demands of competition, existing workload burdens and precarity may discourage ECAs from experimenting with novel methodologies. Challenges also arise from the need to rethink our questions to be more relevant to urgent needs of participants (e.g. immediate survival, support mechanisms, community groups).

Questions about unequal power and privileges among ECAs are also raised in the light of COVID-19. In this context, it is important to focus on our own positionalities, beyond vulnerability, and to reflect on our roles as researchers in the undoing or perpetuation of inequalities. While the pandemic forces us to take pause, we can use this as an opportunity to rethink the norms around research ethics. Conducting research in and with low-income communities prompts concerns that researchers could exacerbate the spread of COVID-19.

Increased risks to participants and researchers conducting face-to-face research (e.g. research assistants) need to be thought about carefully, as well as the location of power to judge such risk. In addition, as mentioned in section 3c, funding structures remain skewed toward foreign (White) researchers who travel 'to the field', and there is often a problematic division of research labour between empirical fieldwork and data collection (often outsourced to local research assistants and ECA colleagues) versus theory generation (still dominated by ECAs and senior academics in Northern institutions). A pause in travel grants us time to reflect on White privilege and how methodologies can be transformed to renegotiate power relations. Can new forms of collaboration that are less extractive be developed and can we rethink the ethics of sharing information and extractive research practices?

Towards a redefined post-COVID-19 university

This collective piece has sought to raise the visibility of challenges facing ECAs in the neoliberal university and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We have heard stories of struggle and resistance from colleagues across Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. We began with a discussion of the position of urban studies ECAs within the (neoliberal) academy, focusing on the challenges brought about by precarious employment, hierarchical structures in everyday working arrangements, institutionalised racism and the ongoing dominance of Northern scholarship and funding opportunities. We highlighted how these challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with impacts experienced unevenly between ECAs according to our intersecting identities and geographical locations. In section four, we then outlined the methodological and ethical challenges and opportunities brought about by COVID-19, including the exploration of more radical, thoughtful methodologies, or co-productive, creative methods and approaches to teaching and research. Here we conclude with some reflections on responsive actions we can take, together as ECAs and in solidarity with other students and staff, to redefine the post-COVID-19 university. Taken together across multiple locations, we believe these actions can lead to a more inclusive, secure and equitable Higher Education system.

Our discussions on potential actions and interventions centred on two key questions: (1) *How can we find the holes and cracks in the neoliberal system to create other possibilities?* And (2) *How can we challenge this system as precarious scholars?* Underpinning these two questions is the understanding (elaborated in Sections 3 and 4) that ECAs are not always in positions of authority to challenge and change the current Higher Education system, especially when that system is systemically racist, sexist, heteronormative and ableist. Herein lies a contradiction between doing meaningful long-term engaged or co-produced work with scholars, activists and urban communities whilst building a more hospitable academic landscape and operating from a precarious research position. At the same time many universities reward career trajectories following a 'superstar' career model valuing individual research, publications and outputs rather than the deep embedded work of long-term collaboration. In the absence of large-scale support from senior staff, management and funding

organisations, there is a need to value academic practice differently via working collaboratively, building transnational solidarity and recognising the dynamic contexts in which we work, including our own positionalities.

These final two subsections outline our collective thoughts of how an equitable 'post-COVID-19' global academy could be rebuilt. In many ways, the choice made in 2020 to frame our workshops around the idea of a world post-COVID-19 was naively optimistic. As the final revisions are being made to our article in April 2022, COVID-19 remains very present, with case numbers on the rise in many countries, and highly uneven institutional responses and realities, with new boundaries being drawn between 'the vaccinated' and 'the unvaccinated', and colleagues that must continue to shield at home. Whilst the introduction of hybrid or 'blended' working models (combining in-person and online interactions) seems here to stay, we also see the return to business as usual in a 'new normal', with the resumption of face-to-face teaching, local and international travel. The pandemic, and its long-term impacts on wellbeing and mental health, continues to exacerbate existing injustices and inequalities across Higher Education.

The need to build solidarity and mutual support

Figure 1 represents some key actions that emerged around building solidarity and mutual support within and across institutions and countries. Whilst building professional networks, we noted how these connections are also vital to improving mental health and wellbeing among a group of people who often face feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety (Section 3). This ambition to build structures for peer-to-peer support also addresses issues of inequalities within the ECA category. A number of colleagues noted inequalities in accessing journal articles or funding opportunities, with calls to create shared resource hubs or databases, and to pay ECA invited speakers and waive fees in/for international conferences. Whilst recognising the contradictions that having institutional support for ECA activities can bring about (for example, tokenism or failure to address underlying systemic challenges, as seen with Equality Diversity and Inclusion committees), we also highlighted the need for support from senior colleagues on more permanent contracts, as well as institutions themselves. This is based also on the realisation that, while some initiatives are formed by ECAs, others (like the one at Sheffield) were formed by a senior colleague who, due to their permanence, could run it over multiple years.

Other ideas included writing more precarious scholars into funding bids, and openly resisting exploitative practices by building alliances with more senior colleagues. Raising visibility of ECA struggles happening locally and nationally around the world was also a recurrent theme, with calls to create further opportunities for these struggles to be voiced and visualised via international workshops, jointly written articles (such as this one) and funding bids, websites, news and social media channels, and action networks situated within but also outside of the academic realm to advocate for wider sectoral change (see, for example, the Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa in New Zealand TEAGA 2021). Finally, sharing our vast, cross-disciplinary and non-normative skills and knowledge with each other via online spaces, more creative outputs such as zines, and training participants in online practices.

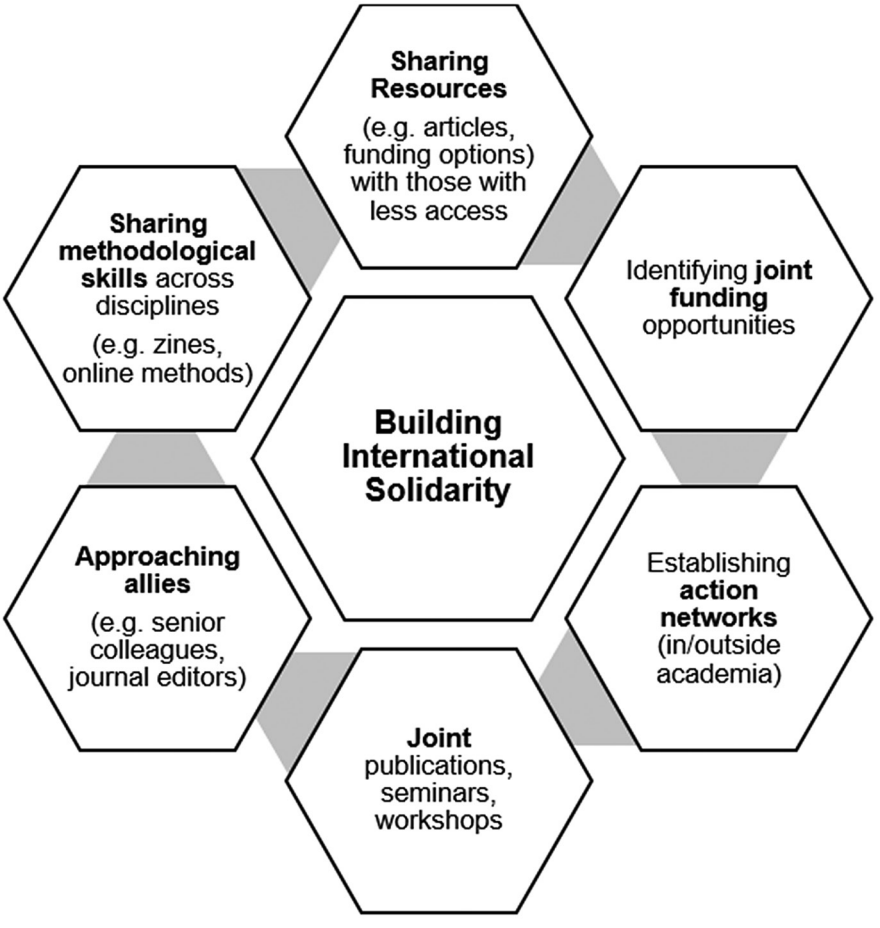

Figure 1: Building International Solidarity Among ECAs.

The need to question and decolonise normative practice

Underpinning solidarity building efforts is the need to recognise, reflect and act upon our multiple positionalities and locations as ECAs, to question and decolonise normative practice, and ensure we do not reproduce the exploitative neoliberal system in which we find ourselves. Building on international solidarity (Figure 1), Table 1 outlines ways in which we can question and decolonise normative practice as ECAs by exposing and addressing patterns of transnational inequalities in different ways (e.g. at the institutional level, in the context of research partnerships, in publishing outlets, etc.); by disrupting the dominance of Northern scholarship and institutions in urban studies; by challenging precarity within and outside our institutions; by redressing unequal access to funding; by providing mutual support to explore enriching and meaningful career trajectories outside of academia; by collectively organising against the precaritisation and neoliberalisation of academic institutions; and by rethinking education beyond its marketised form.

The actions we identify here are intended as a means to collectively challenge the broader contexts within which we operate, at different scales. By making visible the challenges faced by ECAs within the COVID-19 pandemic context but also more structurally and in the everyday, it is our hope that this intervention

Table 1: Entry points for action/s.

Entry point/s	Action/s
Expose and address patterns of transnational inequality	Gather evidence of oppression and share ideas of how to redress imbalances within and across institutions;
	Challenge structural racism and discriminations at the institutional level and within research partnerships;
	Advocate for these ideas within academic institutions and other spaces of knowledge production (for example, journal editorial boards, conference committees, Faculty committees).
Disrupt the dominance of 'Northern' scholarship and knowledge production	Create and advocate for more equal publishing partnerships, authorship and funding;
	Actively question and deconstruct problematic and homogenising labels and their impacts on ECAs (for example, 'Southern' scholars), as well as so-called 'horizontal research' that reinforces hierarchical academic structures;
	Interrogate our citation practices and how we might be erasing scholars from more marginalised contexts or backgrounds.
Challenge precarity within and outside our Institutions	Demand standards on how ECAs should be treated at the local, national and global scale (including for those without formal contracts but affiliations) by different institutions and actors (e.g. academic journals, higher education institutions, international research programmes).
Re-balance an unequal funding landscape	Challenge funders to make funding available for more in-depth, activist, collaborative research;
	Use our funding opportunities to support fellow ECAs.
Explore alternatives in career trajectories (beyond academia)	Create ECA-led partnerships and new research collectives, including to re-centre ethical practice and resolve conflicts between knowledge and action.
Disrupt everyday neoliberalism	Push back against metrics, ranking systems, and for-profit and closed-access publishing.
Rethink education beyond business as usual	Push for structural change beyond short-term economic interest.
	Contribute to collective action and organising in our own workplaces, such as union organising and solidarity actions with other workplace struggles.
Create an infrastructure of care	Institutionalise systems and networks of care so that those facing challenges, whether academic, systemic, or personal, do not feel isolated and can find and connect with others who recognise and/or empathise with such challenges.

will contribute to ongoing debates and efforts to reflect upon practices, including issues of invisibilisation and marginalisation. We call on the solidarity of more senior colleagues whose greater visibility, experience, stability and job security would contribute to broadening the margins and scope of our intervention; the questions raised should concern the entire academic community, and through the combination of our efforts we can strengthen, spread, and obtain support for the cause of establishing a caring and equitable post-COVID-19 university.

We also recognise the uneven and often overwhelming workloads and pressures put on senior colleagues, and suggest that a wider shift in academic culture is needed via collaborative action (Table 1).

Critically, however, ECAs and precariously employed colleagues within the academy must engage in and strengthen existing collective organising, whether through trade unions, informal networks, or collectives. The publication of this article itself demonstrates that collective efforts and solidarity within academia can be not only a valuable experience but a viable, plausible and socially significant contribution for current and new generations of academics to come. The publication of this collective piece is above all, a way of thanking and recognising the work and effort of all the organisers, participants, and volunteers who participated across the workshop series. Most importantly, it shows that by uniting step by step, by being solidarian, we can succeed and show that the strength and value of collectiveness can make a real transformation against the neoliberalisation of our universities and our work environments. As precariously employed 'early career' academics, we must advocate and care for ourselves and each other. We are the future of the academy and we have a world to win.

Notes

1 Within this article, we follow Kezar, DePaola, and Scott's (2019) formulation of the neoliberal university to describe the result of "structural shifts in higher education since the late 1970s that fundamentally altered the operational logics and institutional character" of institutions, adopting the internalised "values of corporatization, marketization, and privatization" (6,14). Whilst much of the literature explicitly conceptualising the 'neoliberal university' originates from the Global North, this is by no means exclusive, and indeed was observed by our colleagues based in Global South institutions.

2 After the international workshops, we collectively decided to re-define ourselves as 'ECAs' rather than 'ECRs', to recognise the variety of positions, beyond research, within this broad category. Section 3 elaborates on the complexity of the term ECA, and its various definitions, in greater detail.

3 To put this in perspective, between the start of the workshop series in 2020 up to submission of this intervention in 2021, six of our ECA members at Sheffield alone were forced to change their position/were required to find new employment. By the time the revised version of this article was resubmitted, only 3 of the 12 Sheffield ECAs remained in their original posts. Of the 30 total co-authors of this article, only 13 remain in the post they were in at the time of the workshops approximately 18 months previously.

4 For some examples see: https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/the-mask-of-anarchy-on-jnu-violence/article30496604.ece; https://theconversation.com/brazilian-universities-fear-bolsonaro-plan-to-eliminate-humanities-and-slash-public-education-budgets-117530; https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/03/hungary-continues-attacks-academic-freedom

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ORCID

Ana Julia Cabrera Pacheco http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1740-7299

Prince K. Guma http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8511-5664

Lutfun Nahar Lata http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4177-4446

Basirat Oyalowo http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4003-0602

Linda Westman http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4599-4996

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Nabeela Ahmed is a Lecturer in Urban Geography at Sheffield Hallam University.
Email: nabeela.ahmed@shu.ac.uk

Alexander G. Baker is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the University of Sheffield. Email: alex.baker@sheffield.ac.uk

Akash Bhattacharya is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Azim Premji University. Email: akash.sr.87@gmail.com

Sally Cawood is a Lecturer in the Lancaster Environment Centre at Lancaster University. Email: s.cawood1@lancaster.ac.uk

Ana Julia Cabrera Pacheco is a PDRA in the School of GeoSciences at the University of Edinburgh. Email: aj.cabrerapacheco@gmail.com

Mallo Maren Daniel is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Estate Management at the University of Jos. Email: mallod@unijos.edu.ng

Matheus Grandi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at Rio de Janeiro State University. Email: matheus.silveira.grandi@uerj.br

Christian O. Grimaldo-Rodríguez is a Professor in the Department of Psychology Education and Health at ITESO Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara. Email: grimaldo@iteso.mx

Prince K. Guma is an Honorary Research Fellow in Humanities and Social Sciences at the British Institute in Eastern Africa. Email: prince.guma@biea.ac.uk

Victoria Habermehl is a Research Associate in the Department of Geography at the University of Durham. Email: victoria.habermehl@durham.ac.uk

Katie Higgins is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Social Policy and Intervention at University of Oxford. Email: katie.higgins@spi.ox.ac.uk

Lutfun Nahar Lata is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland. Email: l.lata@uq.edu.au

Minsi Liu is a Research Student in the Department of Geography at Hong Kong Baptist University. Email: minsiliu@life.hkbu.edu.hk

Christopher Luederitz is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University. Email: minsiliu@life.hkbu.edu.hk

Soha Macktoom is a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts at the Karachi Urban Lab. Email: sohamacktoom@gmail.com

Rachel Macrorie is a Research Associate in the Transforming Cities Hub at the University of Utrecht. Email: r.m.macrorie@uu.nl

Lorena Melgaço is an Associate Senior Lecturer in the Department of Human Geography at Lund University. Email: lorena.melgaco@keg.lu.se

Inés Morales is a Postdoctoral Independent Researcher at the National Technical University of Athens. Email: inesemeve@gmail.com

Elsa Noterman is a Research Fellow at Queens' College in the Department of Geography at the University of Cambridge. Email: eajn2@cam.ac.uk

Gwilym Owen is a Research Associate in the Department of Public Health Policy and Systems at the University of Liverpool. Email: gwilym.owen@liverpool.ac.uk

Basirat Oyalowo is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Estate Management at the University of Lagos. Email: boyalowo@unilag.edu.ng

Ben Purvis is a Research Associate in the Sheffield University Management School at the University of Sheffield. Email: b.purvis@sheffield.ac.uk

Enora Robin is a Research Fellow in the Urban Institute at the University of Sheffield. Email: e.robin@sheffield.ac.uk

Lindsay Sawyer is a Research Fellow in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the University of Sheffield. Email: l.sawyer@sheffield.ac.uk

Jessica Terruhn is a Research Fellow in the National Institute for Demographic and Economic Analysis (NIDEA) at the University of Waikato. Email: jessica.terruhn@waikato.ac.nz

Hita Unnikrishnan is a Research Associate in the Urban Institute at the University of Sheffield. Email: h.unnikrishnan@sheffield.ac.uk

Thomas Verbeek is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Urbanism at TU Delft. Email: t.verbeek@tudelft.nl

Claudia Villegas is an Independent researcher with GT Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales. Email: videcla@gmail.com

Linda Westman is a Research Associate in the Urban Institute at the University of Sheffield. Email: l.westman@sheffield.ac.uk