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A commodity to be exploited and exhausted:
Expressions of alienation in higher education

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A COMMODITY TO BE EXPLOITED AND EXHAUSTED: EXPRESSIONS OF ALIENATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *There are concerns about mental health in academia globally, which is a direct consequence of an increase of a neoliberal entrepreneurial approach, one heightened during the time of the pandemic. This paper uses Skotnicki and Nielsen's categories of alienation and Fisher's work on capitalist realism to make sense of academic staff's responses to a survey on their experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching, collected in 2021 at a large research-intensive university in South Africa. The responses indicate that participants all experienced some form of alienation, though experienced and expressed differently. We suggest expanding Skotnicki and Nielsen's lens on agency and structure with what we found missing, an element of culture, to ask the question: "How can a university create and rebuild a sense of community and belonging to counter alienation?". We propose a concerted effort to build spaces for collective encounters to rediscover community, which may allow us to re-imagine a future for the academy beyond conflicting imperatives of responding to the need for socio-economic redress and delivering education as a public good, in times of austerity budgets.*

Keywords: *mental health, higher education, alienation, South Africa*

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Introduction

The global literature on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the COVID pandemic reported a diversity of experiences; but also showed a remarkable coherence regarding the digital divide and vast educational and socio-economic inequalities; as well as many commonly experienced ERT problems, issues, and challenges (Stewart, 2021). Central to these are feelings of isolation, disengagement and displacement expressed by both staff and students. While issues of staff well-being have been written about extensively (Morrish, 2019; Winefield et al., 2003), in particular as a consequence of moving towards neoliberal practices in academia (Hall, 2018; Mendes et al., 2020), the pandemic has exacerbated mental health challenges, leading to what has been dubbed a 'mental health crisis' in academia.

This paper reports on staff experiences with regard to teaching and managing teaching and learning during ERT in 2020 and 2021. It focuses on staff's experiences of alienation during the pandemic as a particular moment in time to heighten awareness of what we see as a longer-term and critical danger of the neoliberal university. We employ Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) categories of alienation and their notions of 'inclusion/exclusion' and 'voluntary/involuntary', as well as Fisher's (2009) work on 'Capitalist Realism', to make sense of staff's experiences during this period. The findings indicate that participants all encountered some form of alienation, though it was experienced and expressed differently. There is a general sense of 'futurelessness', as staff feel limited agency to change a status quo they do not necessarily believe in. We discuss our findings in relation to the purpose of higher education and provide recommendations of how academia could negotiate its growing tensions between supporting excellence and serving expanding markets; while providing a public good and furthering a social justice and redress agenda.

Literature review

The pandemic illuminated and intensified trends in higher education (HE), such as neoliberalism, social injustice, alienation and poor mental health.

Neoliberalism in Higher Education

The dominance of neoliberalism in the sector over the past decades has seen several characteristics enacted in numerous local contexts. These include the commercialisation of teaching and learning (Komljenovic & Robertson, 2016), the growth of new managerialism (Lynch et al., 2012), the prioritising of 'employability' (Boden & Nedeva, 2010), the metrification of knowledge production (Beer, 2016), increases in student fees leading to an increase in private student loans and in private equity firms re-financing HE (Hall & Bowles, 2016), the recasting of 'students as customers' (Mendes et al., 2020) and the casualisation and precarity of academic labour (Megoran & Mason, 2020). Integral to the neoliberal mix have been cultural practices which have seen the rise of academic performativity (Kenny, 2017) and insidious political practices, including growing surveillance in education (Beetham et al., 2022). The period of the pandemic – when universities almost everywhere pivoted to online teaching and learning – then saw massive corporate investment in educational technology, with private companies becoming central in the teaching and learning ecosystem (Williamson & Hogan, 2021).

Neoliberalism and social justice aims co-exist in South Africa

Neoliberal tendencies in South African HE were recognised when the economic turn to the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) economic strategy in the 1990s led HE scholars to observe the infiltration of marketisation discourses into national and institutional HE policies

(Bertelsen, 1998) and to critique national HE policy choices (Ntshoe, 2002). The country was also affected by the global financial crises, which scholars elsewhere had observed impacting on the sector (Hall, 2018; Mendes et al., 2020). The decrease of public funding for tertiary education led to student fees increasing (Cloete, 2016) and student debt rose, with up to US$905 million owed to universities (Naidu, 2022). Financial crises were central to student protests in 2015 and 2016, which disrupted HE on a national level for months at a time but continued to simmer to the time of the writing, when, for example, registration at the beginning of the 2022 academic year was disrupted (O'Regan, 2022).

In contrast to many countries elsewhere, South African policy frameworks post-1994 have foregrounded social justice aims. This has left the country's universities between 'a rock and a hard place' (Swartz et al., 2019), expected to fulfil the public interest obligations of public universities within a practical and cultural climate which effectively privileges competition and private profit-making imperatives. These contradictory imperatives have contributed to a difficult climate for academic staff to navigate, even prior to the pandemic.

Alienation in Higher Education

Alienation in the neoliberal state is most commonly discussed from a Marxist perspective, in which academic work is reduced to a commodity in a capitalist society (Hall & Bowles, 2016; Harley, 2017; Hall, 2018; Mendes et al., 2020). Under such a state, academics are no longer in control of their own work, rather find themselves at the mercy of the institution that owns the means of production. Alienation manifests as an estrangement or detachment of the academic from the work that they produce.

Marx classifies work into two forms: use-value and exchange-value. While use-value work involves work that "produces useful things, things that are necessary for our existence and well-being", exchange-value work reduces work to a commodity that is valued by its quantity and not quality (Harley, 2017, p.2). In a capitalist state, exchange-value ousts use-value work. Exchange-value work alienates workers from their product as "exchange-value creates a relationship between things/commodities and not people" (ibid.). Harley (2017) discusses how the substitution of use-value work for exchange-value work in the HE context leads to alienation through the process of 'unbundling', where work is divided and categorised. In this process, certain work is attributed higher value than others. For example, teaching as a product does not have the same exchange-value as research as a product. Research, as a product, is also not "valued in terms of how useful the knowledge it contains [...] but rather in terms of its exchange-value", which "is constantly being refined as the market shifts" (pp.2-3). In the process of unbundling, not only is work fragmented and weighed in commercial terms, but it is also calculated in relation to the time needed to produce the product. The calculation is often less than the time needed to complete the work. Under capitalism, the drive is to gain as much profit as possible from the paid labour. Mechanisms, such as, casualisation of academic labour; promotion of individualism and competition through research incentives and excellence teaching discourse; as well as performance reviews that involve a reward and punish culture, are means to create this state in HE (Harley, 2017). Deteriorating mental health and well-being are a consequence of this state.

Mental health before and after the pandemic

Poor mental health and well-being among staff in HE is well documented. In the early 2000s, Winefield et al.'s (2003) study with 17 Australian universities outlines five major causes of academic stress: work overload, insufficient funding and resources, poor management practice, job insecurity, and insufficient recognition and reward. A decade later, Kinman and Wray (2013) write

that university staff in the UK are more stressed than the average British worker. In the period 2009-2016, Morrish (2019) reports an average of 77% increase in staff counselling referrals and 64% occupational health services referrals in the UK.

When the COVID outbreak became a pandemic, and teaching institutions worldwide were forced to move most of their activities online, the complexities and stress of working online *from home*, completely blurring the boundaries between professional and private lives, became mainstream. The national report on staff experiences during ERT, the survey data we used in this paper, concludes that impact on academic staff's well-being has been significant, with more than half indicating that they were experiencing burnout (CHE-USAF-USEF, 2022). Over 40% of respondents reported that the isolation accompanying remote teaching and learning influenced their well-being. The report lists increased workload, balancing home and work life, and burnout as the three most relevant factors impacting staff mental health.

To cope with the stress, various strategies at the individual and institutional level were employed. Individually, Shen and Slater (2021) observe both positive (exercise, assistance and time management) and negative strategies (alcohol consumption, substance misuse, smoking and unhealthy diet). Institutionally, mental health initiatives for staff, such as promoting mediation and yoga, and support in terms of individual counselling and group therapy sessions were provided. There, however, has been pushback by staff against these 'self-care' interventions which are focused on individuals rather than the collective. By framing mental health as "an individual responsibility", stress is presented as "something for the individual to manage, not something structural for the institution to resolve" (Clarke Gray, 2021, p.4). This is dangerous, as Yan Pan (2020) writes, as "[t]hese narratives centered around individual choices and medical treatments, sometimes miss the socio-political dimensions of the problem, and fall into the trap of neoliberal consumption: bandaid like quick fixes that leaves structural issues of neoliberal capitalism unchallenged and unchanged" (np).

The study

Site of study

The site of study is a South African research-intensive university, which would historically have been described as having a collegial culture, characterised by freedom, permissiveness, informality, consensus, and community (McNay, 1995). This collegium has been seriously challenged by a confluence of the global neoliberal economy and challenges expressed through student protests since 2015 regarding exclusion in many forms. Indeed, the impact of socio-demographic factors on the mental health and well-being of staff in higher education is particularly visible in the South African context, where inequalities stemming from apartheid add a layer of complexity.

The university itself has conducted staff institutional climate surveys roughly every five years since 2000. A 2019 survey identified demographic-based prejudices and race as a key issue, stating that the university has a culture of bullying that amplifies the legacy of systemic demographic inequalities, both inside and outside the university. These issues were reiterated in an enquiry report into the circumstances surrounding the suicide in 2018 of a high-profile black professor which detailed racism, including systemic racism, discrimination and the slow pace of transformation as some factors impacting the mental well-being of staff and students alike at the university (Nhlapo et al., 2020). These mental health issues were heightened during the pandemic, exemplified in the early retirement of a prominent academic, who stated in her exit interview, that "I am retiring early because I am exhausted, and I know many academics who feel this way" (Davids, 2021, n.p.).

Research methodology

Our study draws from a larger national survey, coordinated by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), in partnership with Universities South Africa (USAf) and the University of the Free State (2022), which explored the experiences of university teachers and academic leaders during the pandemic, as well as learning from them to create a supportive, more flexible teaching and learning environment that would be more resilient to change.

This study focuses on responses by one institution only, where 155 responses were collected, which amounts to approximately 10% of full-time academic staff. Most respondents were academics involved in teaching (n=101), about a third had both teaching and managerial roles (n=48), while six occupied managerial positions. In terms of academic hierarchy, most respondents were at professorial level (n=65, 42%), followed by senior lecturers (n=45, 29%), and lecturers (n=29, 19%). A smaller proportion (n=16, 10%) described themselves as teaching assistants, librarians, or other support teaching roles ('Junior Lecturer' and 'Other' roles). In terms of gender, more respondents identifying as female completed the survey than male (n=91, 59% vs. n=55, 36%). In terms of race, most respondents identified as white (n=92, 59%), followed by African, Coloured and Indian. The majority had been at the institution for more than 21 years (n=38, 26%), followed by 6-10 years (n=36, 24%). The majority of respondents were full-time staff members (n=125, 81%) and most respondents were between 45-54 years old (more than 50), followed by 35-44 (app 45) and 55-65 (n=31).

For the investigation of staff's experiences of alienation, we drew on the responses to open-ended questions regarding participants' experiences with ERT and, in particular, the perceived challenges in both teaching staff and management roles. From reading the responses in the first round of coding, the sense of isolation and disengagement was striking. This led us to drawing and adapting Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) four categories of alienation as an analytical framework.

Analytical framework: categories of alienation

Central to Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) theory of alienation is the notion of 'futurelessness'. According to their argument, future is "the sense that something remains possible or outstanding in this life" (p. 842). It is "a way of relating to the world, of sensing that things are possible – not a specific image of what will come or pass" (ibid.). Understanding alienation as 'futurelessness' then assumes "a deficient relationship to the future in which people's senses of possibility ossify, narrow, or dissipate" (p. 837).

Skotnicki and Nielsen situate their theory of alienation within experiences of capitalist alienation: that is, experiences of alienation in a modern capitalist world. They propose that it is necessary to view alienation as a "system matter" where alienation is a manifestation of "the extent to which people are subject to or lack access to particular capitalist mechanisms (inclusion/exclusion) and their relations to the processes of inclusion or exclusion (voluntary/involuntary)" (p. 838). As such, they identify four distinct types of alienation: voluntary inclusion, involuntary inclusion, voluntary exclusion and involuntary exclusion (see table 1).

Table 1: Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) four categories of alienation

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Involuntary	Commercial exhaustion	Imaginative marginalisation
Voluntary	Pragmatic denialism	Therapeutic Nowism

Voluntary Inclusion is when current social and political institutions are embraced as "the only legitimate basis upon which to build a future" (p. 858). It is when the current situation is seen as "the best that can be hoped for" (ibid). Voluntary inclusion is also described as 'pragmatic denialism' because people in this situation "deny the possibility that collective efforts could or should take on systemic tendencies in financial capitalism" (p. 857).

Involuntary Inclusion, also described as 'commercial exhaustion', occurs when aspects of financial capitalism are seen to drain or obstruct one's senses of possibility. Terms that are commonly used to describe the sense of the future in this context include: estrangement, exhaustion, affluenza, and burnout. These terms are said to encapsulate "the future-denying effects of inclusion in a regime of financial capitalist commerce" (p. 850).

Voluntary Exclusion is when "imperatives for growth and commodification generate circumstances where people are prone to experience certain kinds of exhaustion and marginalization" (p. 854). Such a circumstance leads to individuals seeking therapeutic or self-help techniques to help deal with the situation. Voluntary exclusion is, hence, also described as 'therapeutic nowism'. Consequently, "therapeutic efforts can lead to future-denial when people withdraw into a private, individual present as they seek to escape the continuous demands and expectations of contemporary life" (p. 854).

Involuntary Exclusion, which is also described as 'imaginative marginalization', occurs when lack of access or situations of deprivation within the formal labour market lead to an obstructed sense of possibility.

In this study, we are interested in how our colleagues describe their experiences of alienation. Our focus is thus on a discursive analysis of alienation, how people make sense of a system they deem inevitable. The work of Mark Fisher (2009) is useful to unpack the experience of futurelessness that Skotnicky and Nielsen allude to. Under conditions of capitalist realism, he writes, the idea of any practical alternative to capitalism becomes not just 'unrealistic', but literally unthinkable. He uses the example of how when neoliberal strategies became implemented across the UK's Further Education and Training (FET) sector, they were presented as inevitable — even when individual managers stated that this went against their 'inner beliefs'. The notion of 'inevitableness' or 'no other alternative' allows the system to continue, and in accepting this 'inevitableness', we fail to see "our own complicity in planetary networks of oppression" (p. 19).

He argues that neoliberalism has led to an 'atemporality' where we live in an eternal state of presence — there is simply no future, for better or worse. The inexistence of a future also robs us from a past and leads to a collective cultural malaise, or sense of alienation. It is a deeply unhealthy state of affairs, in psychological terms, which gives rise to profound anxieties and neuroses at both an individual and a social level. These lead to a rise in mental health issues, which are seen as individualised 'chemico-biological problem' (p. 36), rather than collective experiences. Collectivism is seen as a viable way to challenge capitalism, as the "'mental health plague" in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is [actually] inherently dysfunctional' (p. 19).

Analysis

Our data exhibited three forms of alienation: Voluntary Inclusion, Involuntary Inclusion and Voluntary Exclusion. Given that our survey respondents were all academics currently employed at the institution, they are less likely to describe experiences of Involuntary Exclusion. It is important to say that not all respondents fit neatly into the quadrants. Some responses may belong in more than one quadrant.

Table 2: Experiences of alienation in Higher Education (based on Skotnicki and Nielsen, 2021)

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Voluntary	Individual buy-in	Individual rejection
Involuntary	Reluctance	*No data*

Voluntary Inclusion: Individual buy-in

Voluntary Inclusion is a category of alienation whereby individuals who have bought into the capitalist discourse see this as the only possible way to move forward. Responses from the survey that we categorise as '*Individual buy-in'* include those who expressed excitement by the potential of change that ERT presented and who reported embracing the opportunities of moving to online learning. We might refer to them as 'e-learning champions' or 'innovators' (Gachago et al., 2018), as what these respondents shared is an appreciation for the opportunity to *create* and *innovate*, as exhibited in the following comment:

> Challenging but absorbing and galvanising. Best ever thing for me, opportunity to exercise my strengths in innovation and pastoral care. Opportunity for creativity which I relished.

Such comments illustrate a sense of ownership and agency, indicating the belief that there is room for individual control of pedagogical choices. These participants saw the move to ERT as a chance to rethink their own situated teaching and learning strategies and pedagogies:

> …what it did do was focus my attention on HOW we teach, and why: of what value are face-to-face lectures, and the kind of conveying material by lecture as opposed to reading, that we have been doing for so many years?

They noted that the move to online learning required a *huge amount of effort* of educators, but highlighted that the value was worth the effort:

> After a massive effort and redesign of all my teaching materials to apply in a synchronous online live-teaching environment, which was very hard, [I] have now got an amazing set of courses and an amazing way of working online.

Interestingly, for some, their efforts led to an increase in the *quality of their course content* and this, in turn, led to personal fulfilment and pride:

> Through designing a course which was held completely asynchronously I could think through how exactly I want to present materials. I think it became an excellent course which I am proud of.

Respondents also commented on the improved general *student experience*:

> To my surprise, the online environment [...] we are working [in] is adding even greater value to the student experience. People go deeper and emerge more competent and more enriched using this approach. I plan to always teach using [the] online live-virtual approach!

In general, participants in this category emphasised the importance of *becoming more sensitive and responsive to their diverse students' needs*; of making an effort to reimagine relationships between students and lecturers and proactively engage their students across multiple channels; and of being more flexible to respond to students' needs:

> It required many additional hours re-imagining how to teach my practical courses. [...] It is influencing my teaching, in that I have to be FAR more adaptable and flexible to students' needs and their reasons for not being present in class.

They also talked about the *care* and *compassion* that they developed through the experience of teaching remotely:

> Interestingly, this experience has made me more aware of the many challenges faced by teachers and students, not just pandemic-related. I think (I hope) that I am more understanding, more compassionate, and more flexible in my expectations of students now.

This was often linked to a greater concern around *issues of equity* that emerged throughout the pandemic:

> My personal guideline for teaching and learning remotely is to ensure that all participants in my courses have access to the teaching and learning materials / interactions / sessions. If I cannot guarantee this equity / equality when choosing a certain method or course design, I am rather not using [it] in order to not disadvantage any of the students.

In terms of future orientation, the ERT experience changed some respondents' teaching and learning practices sustainably: "Regardless of whether the university goes back to face-to-face or hybrid, I plan to use as much online teaching going forward regardless." Others saw some advantages of online learning but would also retain some face-to-face teaching: "I think some aspects work well but cannot ever be a complete and true replacement for quality face-to-face teaching."

At the same time, respondents noted that positive results are not necessarily equally spread, but depended on positionality, attitudes, and access to resources of staff and students, and other factors:

> I think our experiences have been split along lines of internet access and digital literacy. Staff / students who had good internet access (and were more likely to be digitally literate) could adjust to remote teaching and learning with a little training… However, for people who don't have reliable internet or good digital literacy, this was a massive challenge!

> There have been amazing positive spin offs due to the shift to online teaching and learning [...] However, it is very uneven as many students struggled tremendously as they do not have a supportive environment.

While individuals in this category tried to make the best of a difficult situation, they recognised that their efforts are not a collective, systemic practice (yet):

> I have no problem with technological advancement. This is the next era — change or be forced to change. [...] the sooner we can collectively work in accepting [this] status quo and working to adapt to methods and technologies that work for all we will thrive!

Involuntary Inclusion: Reluctance

In involuntary inclusion, alienation manifests as a form of exhaustion. Respondents placed in this category were those who reported a sense of *powerlessness* as they moved grudgingly to online learning:

> I don't feel like I have been consulted or taken seriously at all. I don't feel like I have been engaged sufficiently. I think because we made it through 2020 and

> because 2021 is proceeding nonetheless that there is an assumption that this is working. While I'm doing my best, it is not working.

They shared a sense of *helplessness* in their inability to assist students they were responsible for:

> Students need help from each other and guidance from tutors/teachers, [as] learning is a social activity. Maybe there are better ways of building community online, but the junior students without peer structures struggled. And I couldn't help them.

They used strong words and metaphors to describe their relationship with the institution, such as feeling like an 'indentured slave' or a 'commodity' to be exploited and at the mercy of both the institution and their students:

> The sense that the institution that I have worked for my entire adult life really cares very little about me. I am a *commodity to be exploited and exhausted*, just as if I was [a] can or a jar on a conveyor belt in a manufacturing plant.

> I felt totally unsupported by [the university] in this regard and generally felt like an indentured slave of both the university and the students.

As a result, respondents felt despondent and complained about their work being *meaningless, wasted* and express their concern for their students*:*

> …trying to find meaning and purpose in amongst all of this is exhausting

> I feel that I am being 'wasted' by my institution now (I am the recipient of several teaching awards and an expert in some aspects of pedagogy at higher education level).

The feeling of *isolation* from their students, their colleagues and the institution was palpable in respondents' comments. They found it hard to 'feel' their students, without seeing their faces in synchronous session, to get a sense of how they were doing and engaging with the content:

> Personally I feel more detached from my students and recognize that it takes effort to invest in relationships to facilitate a productive learning environment.

They missed their colleagues and recognised the importance of conversations around practices of teaching and learning that happen in-between spaces, in the corridors and cafeterias:

> I am very lonely. I have lovely colleagues and our corridor was always full of laughter. We generated tremendous ideas and energies together and I really miss that. [...].

Without the usual feedback loops and ways of sharing experiences with others, respondents felt deeply unsettled and expressed self-doubt about their capacities to teach in this new way, leading to increase levels of *anxiety, insecurity and an uncertainty* about the future:

> Lack of confidence in my teaching strategies, uncertain of the future of the value of my teaching, feeling helpless with regards to supporting students appropriately.

Respondents in this category still tried and were able to deliver on their responsibilities as educators as best they could, despite the tremendous amount of work required:

> No end to work hours, huge burden of student pastoral support, increased burden due to being on teaching & learning task teams and having to communicate information between the academic body and the university at EXTREMELY short notice (often same-day notice) meaning everything else had to be dropped, causing delays in my ability to assess student work, etc etc.

This tremendous workload coupled with feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness and

uncertainty around their future, created *challenges to their mental health.*

> My approach has gone from enthusiasm for innovation in teaching and learning and bringing energy to my work to a "survival-based" approach where I am simply doing my best to make sure it is good enough and I do not let my students down complete[ly], with no energy left over to try make things ever better.

> We are simply trying to keep moving forward in an environment where everyone is drowning.

Respondents noted the tensions between what are experienced as *unrealistic expectations* by the institution and the lack of institutional support:

> I suffer from major depression because of the unrealistic demands by top management and students. At my university emotional, moral and financial support are severely compromised. The HOD lacks empathy and often overruled staff during meetings. This environment is not conducive to boosting morale.

> I have had to seek professional care because my workload is so out of control. I didn't sleep for more than 2-3 hours a night for nearly 4 months during 2020 because of anxiety about work. It is not normal to work in an environment like this.

Workplace conditions also greatly affected *personal lives*, especially for those who had to juggle multiple responsibilities, as parents, care givers and partners:

> Long work hours cause conflict at home as well: it's difficult to balance demands of work with demands of home and one ends up upsetting everyone through not being available long enough or immediately enough for either side. This was super tough.

The findings also indicate that experiences were highly dependent on positionality and context. Various circumstances and contexts made ERT more difficult for some than others, such as *mothers* and *single parents.*

> I am the mother of two children. My eldest daughter only returned to school full time in the last three weeks. My youngest daughter still goes to school on alternate days. Their father has an immune disorder and they are deeply fearful that he might get covid. They are also lonely. Trying to establish a stable emotional tenor in the household has been my main objective during lockdown. There is a great deal of disruption in my work life as I try to maintain stability for the family.

> The biggest challenge was the increased workload being managed at home where I have children who were home most of the week. So as a single parent, during the pandemic, I needed to manage the homework of my children, manage the increased workload and student expectations of being available 24/7.

Voluntary Exclusion: Individual rejection

In Voluntary Exclusion, alienation takes the form of escapism, as individuals withdraw from the state which they find alienating. Responses placed in this category are those that exhibit rejection of ERT. This was the smallest group of our respondents, but might include those most affected, as these are respondents whose experience propelled some to take *extreme action*, such as early retirement:

> My experience has been so bad that I have decided to take early [retirement]. This is mainly due to feeling unsupported by my HOD, poor admin support and severe overload in terms of both teaching and course admin. I have carried the highest teaching load and the admin load in my department during this period and my

> appeals for help were met with empathy only. [The university] purports to support academics, but all they ever offer is psychological counselling. The inefficiency in the institution is shocking.

Others referred to thinking of taking early retirement, but could not due to financial responsibilities:

> To be frank, if I could resign today, I would but cannot do so because of financial reasons. It is also not in the interest of students to lose senior academic expertise. I used to love the tertiary teaching environment and find it very sad to witness how my passion dwindled.

Respondents in this category expressed a strong sense of *dislike of ERT* and shared their mourning for traditional face to face teaching:

> I severely dislike remote learning and teaching. So much so that I am currently questioning whether I want to continue in academia. I am here for the people and interacting face to face is a big part of the job appeal.

There were many more whose experiences made them *disengaged* from teaching in a way that resembles those who are considering leaving or have left the university. Some shifted their attention elsewhere, for instance, to their research:

> I am not a full time teacher — I am a researcher and thus I choose not to invest my little time [in]to teaching.

For many, though, there was no way to transform their bitterness and resentfulness into more generative forces:

> I find I am less engaged with the educational outcomes, I care less, I assume they [students] are doing well as I don't see them. So less investment, they are fatigued so am I so teach less content and cover less material thus they know less and are less prepared in the future. They get core content without the anecdotes of teaching and an educational experience. They have less structure.

Respondents reported not being the only ones feeling this way, but defined this as a *collective experience of depression and disengagement*:

> I feel the same about most (not all) of my colleagues — a general sense of depression and disengagement from their work making me feel bitter and resentful.

Discussion: Making sense of the manifestations of alienation during and beyond ERT

This paper set out to make sense of varied expressions of alienation in relation to ERT at a South African university. Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) categories of alienation served as an analytical tool to explore different staff experiences and highlight the generative tension between agency and structure.

We understand expressions in the 'Voluntary Inclusion' category as a pragmatic response to a difficult situation. Alienation here does not necessarily feel alienating; individuals are able to use the disruptive chaos of ERT as generative and creative. While respondents in this category are not as vocal about their mental health issues, it is likely that there will still be an impact on an individual's mental health, as personal resilience, and innovation in the face of adversity are draining and require mental and affective resources (Bessette & McGowan, 2020). If one accepts Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) argument, that individual solutions that render life better for a selected few are still alienating, then these responses, which are highly individualised responses and which do not result in inclusion for all, are still forms of alienation.

Some of the positive experiences that were described – despite extremely challenging circumstances – came as a surprise. They were unexpected for both educators themselves and perhaps also us as researchers who are aware of the challenges of designing for online teaching, even in the best of circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020) rather than, as in this case, the worst of them. Respondents in this category appear very cognisant of their likely outlier status, of their responses being individualised and not a collective shared experience. They are sensitive to how their own experiences differ based on socio-economic context, class, race and gender. While their experiences are useful to showcase what is possible, their focus is on making things work right now within their own sphere, for their own students, rather than being able to focus on long-term, collective consequences. In this way, they recognise the importance of collective efforts to take on systemic tendencies in a neoliberal state: they see this responsibility as an institutional one, not their own as individuals.

It is worth noting that these selected positive experiences may also speak to structures at the institution. Firstly, the university reward systems encourage individualism, making it possible for individuals to react fast for better or for worse (Becker et al., 2021). Secondly, these responses also suggest that individual academics can respond appropriately within a decentralised organisation. This indicates that a 'laissez faire' culture, associated with McNay's (1995) notion of a collegium, still exists in the university and that the institutional culture has not been strangled by bureaucracy or overly centralised.

We interpreted the 'Involuntary Inclusion' category of respondents as being reluctant adopters as they are much less enthusiastic about ERT. These respondents continue with the academic project but feel less control and often complain bitterly about lack of institutional support. As Fisher (2009) would argue: "They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it. But that 'knowledge', that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 21). They feel the double burden of unrealistic and constantly changing expectations. The feelings of alienation, isolation, meaninglessness, coupled with tremendous workloads, lead to serious mental health problems. These pressures are heightened for specific groups, such as mothers, single parents, or respondents juggling multiple responsibilities (Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020). The findings support Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) claim that "[t]he social distribution and substantive character of commercial exhaustion will surely vary with race, gender, ability, class fraction and other status markers" (p. 852).

For the respondents in the 'Voluntary Exclusion' category, we understand this to entail individual rejection. Here, the only way to survive in this system is to withdraw completely, either through taking early retirement, refocusing their energies elsewhere or simply expressing full detachment from their work. While Skotnicki and Nielsen's (2021) category of voluntary exclusion reads positively, at least on an individual level, "where one pulls away from collective projects and associated efforts to secure senses of possibility into a serene, private, futureless present" (p. 855), we could not find such generative responses in our data. On the contrary, this group of respondents present a rather bleak picture of academia.

Conclusion

This paper sought to interpret academics' responses in a survey about their experiences of teaching during ERT at a highly-ranked research-intensive university. The responses indicated heightened experiences of alienation, which we attempted to make sense of by drawing on Stocknicki and Nielsen's (2021) alienation framework. The framework provided a way to map the various responses across two dimensions, demonstrating the important interplay of structure and agency

in the construction of alienation: inclusion/exclusion and voluntary/involuntary. Fisher's work on capitalist realism enabled the exploration of the sense of 'futurelessness' expressed by our respondents, whereby they responded to a situation which they did not necessarily believe in, but deemed *inevitable*.

Our data shows that while alienation was experienced differently by respondents, what was common across all accounts, was a sense of the inevitability of the situation. Having to adapt to this new normal was unavoidable, indeed the crisis was normalised in different ways, as Fisher (2009) put it. Unlike in other cases, such as during student protests (see for example Swartz, Gachago & Belford, 2018), no-one in this data set argued that the university should not shift its teaching online. No matter how any individual felt, everyone had to adapt to the inexorable reality. And what most academics felt was exhausted and exploited. However, while some of the sense of alienation was linked to the disconnect arising from ERT, what we argue in our paper, is that the growing sense of alienation and the increase in mental ill health in academia is a much broader challenge.

Exploited and exhausted

What was striking about the expressions of exhaustion and extreme emotions in the study was the fact that these desperate feelings were expressed by a particularly privileged sample of respondents at a top-ranked research-intensive university: the majority of the respondents were white, full-time academics who had been in the university for more than two decades, nearly half at professorial level. Their fervent emotions were strongly-worded; it is not trivial for anyone – let alone those in stable senior positions — to report in a survey feelings of such intense purposelessness, detachment, meaninglessness, uncertainty and alienation.

The perception of the present as something that cannot be changed, created a sense of futurelessness, impacting on how one engages with the future. Academics experienced the pandemic in a sector already characterised by the pressure of constantly 'keeping up', a neoliberal view of success and progress (see, for example, Bunn & Bennett, 2020 or Bozalek, 2021). Academics in a context like this one already have gruelling work lives, driven by the imperative to maintain rankings and other manifestations of the metrified university. Academics in the global south suffer an extra burden of proving themselves against global north measures. At an institution ranked the top in Africa, it is not part of the culture to fail, hence the pressure to succeed even in the face of the impossible, as in the case of the online pivot.

Empathy is not enough

While it is evident that individuals' emotions were stretched thin and that mental health was a crisis issue, this analysis highlighted the entanglement of the personal experience with the environmental and structural conditions shaping them. The respondent, who stated sharply that support offered only through counselling is not enough, summed it up concisely: "*requests for help were met with empathy only*". Individual support through counselling turned the problem into that of the individual; if they were given personal psychological assistance, they would somehow be able to cope. Academics rejected this response, demanding that the institution take responsibility for their ill health and make systemic changes.

In this case, there was some room to manoeuvre: there are several academic and worker organisations with robust union-management relations at the university. Strategies were put in place such as individual and collective mental health support, meeting-free weeks and automated messages to remind staff about not attending to emails after hours. As a relatively privileged university, important gestures could be made, including financial contributions to the cost of

setting up home offices. These attempts at rewarding staff for the difficulties experienced over the last years are a marker of an institution's recognition of alienation as a collective challenge. Of course, the question remains: whether these institutional efforts are enough for staff to be seen and their labour, both cognitive and affective, to be *recognised* by the institution, to move towards more systemic change rather than once-off responses?

Nurturing possibility

This analysis of staff's experiences of ERT has benefited from Skotnicki and Nielsen's alienation framework, which provided a conceptual language to identify academics' individual buy-in, individual rejection and reluctance – with each of these coming at a different mental health cost. Yet, when we consider responses to the alienation we have described, we find a gap. Skotnicki and Nielsen ask: 1) What worldly circumstances nurture senses of possibility? and 2) How do people build senses of possibility within such circumstances? From the analysis, we argue that there is an additional question pertaining to culture: 3) How can a university — or rather how can *we as university* — create and rebuild a sense of community and belonging to counter alienation?

We are not alone in this realisation. Such questions have received more recognition in the literature since the pandemic began, with suggestions that "*culture* is probably the most important thing that leaders can be thinking about" (McClure, 2022, para. 19, emphasis added), and that institutions are having conversations about equity and belonging. Others have observed that one of the positive outcomes of the pandemic has been positive relationships between academic colleagues; indeed "from structural inequities we are witnessing not only collective self-presentation but the humanitarian response of ubuntu" (Hardman et al., 2022, p. 16) – referring to the African philosophy of *'ubuntu',* where a focus on collective well-being, rather than on an individual, is central.

In the face of neoliberal capitalism in higher education becoming even more rogue, we believe that collective encounters are essential to take advantage, as these openings enable the re-creation of community, the bringing of different lives to the common one. Together with colleagues elsewhere in the world (including Skotnicki & Nielsen and Fisher), we envisage different forms of *shared* management, collective and collaborative, which would allow us to conceive alternatives together. The 'slow scholarship' movement, for example (Bozalek, 2021), works collectively across the world against the pressure of academics to be 'always producing and anticipating change while at risk of being out-competed (for example, in employment and research opportunities) or becoming obsolete or irrelevant' (Bunn & Bennett, 2020, p. 699). The movement promotes the quality of relationships, collectively grappling with ideas and recognising the importance of subjectivities, while focusing on the affirmative, what brings joy and pleasure, rather than succumbing to the pressures of academic publishing (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2018).

An example of a ground-up approach is the steps our Centre took to collectively improve well-being when the stress of playing a key role to address the university's challenges of implementing ERT (Trotter, Huang and Czerniewicz, 2022) was followed by the responsibility for transitioning the institution to a new Learning Management System. The pressure of the situation led to engaged conversations within the Centre on how to develop more sustainable work practices to build a healthier work environment. We openly discussed how constant overwork is built into the structures of the institution (and the sector) through a continuous onslaught of time-sensitive and institution-wide innovation projects our Centre takes on; and challenged the affirmation of a culture of performativity that encourages people to give more of themselves than they should. These community-led conversations and strategic executive actions are forms of *collective management* (Fisher, 2009) and possibly *collective resistance* (Bottrell and Manathunga, 2019), which

could allow us to collectively reimagine and reclaim how we would like to work and live in the future.

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