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Sustainable urban development research in the time of COVID-19: reflections from doctoral researchers

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced academia in many ways, impacting learners and teachers. This article is authored by six sustainable urban development doctoral researchers from various backgrounds and stages of their journey, and an academic advisor. The article is an outcome of remote collaboration through a substantial period during the pandemic. We offer self-reflective and collaborative accounts of how the pandemic affected doctoral research in a domain that requires in-depth connection with a physical field or site. We explore the impact of COVID-19 on the field through the themes of resonance and credibility, ethics and rapport, and the doctoral researchers' academic experience with regard to physical disconnection and virtual connectivity. In lieu of a conclusion, the supervisor's perspective offers insights into the future of the field and links the discussions in this article to wider debates in the literature on the role of the screen in delivering, presenting, and sharing research. The key takeaway is that the field and how we approach doctoral research and teaching have changed irrevocably. While we adjust to these new realities, it is important to look outwards as much as inwards to navigate the new complexities we now face.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has permeated all dimensions of society, including academic institutions, the lives of researchers, and the contexts in which doctoral studies take place. To illustrate how the pandemic has impacted the research field, activity, and the doctoral experience, this article provides a reflective account of the experiences of six doctoral researchers in the DPhil in Sustainable Urban Development programme (DSUD) in the Department for Continuing Education at the University of Oxford. Four researchers (Marion, Angela, Andreas, and Clara) are based in Europe, while two researchers (Deland and Julia) are based in the United States. Most of us are conducting research

in proximity to our areas of residence, which include Hamburg, Germany (Clara), South Wales, UK (Angela), San Francisco, USA (Deland), and Nicosia, Cyprus (Andreas). Marion and Julia focus their projects outside of their current places of residence. Marion resides in Paris, but her research focuses on Tokyo, while Julia lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and her research focuses on Santa Fe, New Mexico.

The DSUD programme is part-time, integrating online seminars with in-person gatherings, the latter taking place at Oxford at least twice per year, allowing students the flexibility to pursue employment and other opportunities while studying for the doctorate. Even prior to the pandemic, we were challenged to integrate doctoral research with the demands of our working lives outside of the university. This is in contrast to full-time doctoral programmes in which research is a full-time occupation. We all hold part or full-time jobs in addition to our studies. For some of us, our jobs intersect with our academic research or take place in an academic environment, while for others, our professional work is extraneous to our research topic. Several of us are caregivers to ageing parents or children, in which the demands have increased during the pandemic. In addition, many of us have experienced the loss of family members, friends, and employment due to COVID-19.

It is helpful to delineate between key programme milestones and phases. All students enter the DSUD programme as Probationary Research Students and then progress to DPhil status after passing their first key assessment, the Transfer of Status. The Transfer of Status takes place between the second and third year (out of a maximum of 8 years for completing the DPhil) and consists of a written research prospectus and an oral examination. Once approved, the research projects are unlikely to change drastically. While some adjustments to the circumstances of fieldwork are common, case studies and research methods are set. Some of us are writing before this milestone, while others have already passed it.

At the time of writing, Clara and Julia are Probationary Research Students and have yet to pass their Transfer of Status. Deland, Angela, Marion, and Andreas are all post-Transfer of Status and have begun their fieldwork. Julia and Clara formulated their research proposals during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have modified them in light of ongoing effects. Deland, Angela, Andreas, and Marion designed and submitted their initial research proposals prior to the pandemic and have been forced to reconsider, and in some cases significantly modify, their research design and methods in response to pandemic conditions.

We employ predominantly qualitative methods to respond to a variety of research questions that pertain to the sustainable urban development field. These involve observations, interviews, and other activities that require human subjects' participation (see Table 1).

Co-writing this article has been an exercise in collaborative research from a distance. It consisted of several synchronous virtual meetings and individual written contributions. Initially, each author wrote about and shared their doctoral experiences in the time of COVID-19 in a shared Google Doc. Then we worked on combining our contributions under an agreed focus and structure. Google Docs provided a useful collaborative workspace where we could monitor contributions and engage in asynchronous discussions through comments. The comments section was the most revealing part of the collaboration, often leading to realisations and contributions from all authors that are

Table 1. Summary of authors' research methods and location.

Name	Methods	Face-to-face /Remote	Case Study
Andreas	Interviews, participant observation, cognitive mapping and reflexive discussions	Face-to-face	Nicosia, Cyprus
Angela	Interviews, secondary data analysis (policy and planning documents and other written material)	Both	Neath and Swansea, Wales
Clara	Interviews, mapping, participant observations, secondary data analysis (policy documents, demographic data, public meeting minutes)	Both	Hamburg, Germany
Deland	Interviews, participant observations, secondary data analysis (policy documents, demographic data, public meeting minutes)	Both	San Francisco, USA
Julia	Interviews, participant observation, secondary data analysis	Both	Santa Fe, USA
Marion	Interviews, travel diaries, secondary data analysis (policy documents, travel surveys)	Entirely remote	Tokyo, Japan

possibly difficult to reach in an in-person, synchronous setting. Such realisations ranged from learning about different experiences on how everyone coped with research during the pandemic, to discovering different approaches that we had initially considered uniform.

The range of researcher experiences and geographical scope of study in this article reflects the ongoing challenges of designing and executing doctoral research during the ongoing and uncertain effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following pages, we address the impact of the pandemic on our research experiences, and relate these to the wider effects on fieldwork, academic experience, life-work-studies balance, and personal well-being.

Pandemic impacts on the field and researchers' relation to the field: resonance and credibility

The challenges entailed by the pandemic encourage researchers to think back to the basic question: What makes good qualitative research? Resonance and credibility (Tracy, 2010) are two factors that can be affected by the circumstances of the pandemic. Resonance, on the one hand, points to a certain transferability of findings. While qualitative research does not seek to produce universal, generalisable results, it does endeavour to further research in a certain field by pointing to new factors, nuancing past results or raising new questions. How can research findings during the context of COVID-19 inform research in the social sciences, beyond the pandemic? Credibility, on the other hand refers to thickness of description, rigour of research methods, and explication of the tacit knowledge that allowed for analysis. The pandemic has forced many researchers to adapt their (ongoing) research to new circumstances and to experiment with remote fieldwork. How can the rigour and credibility of findings be ensured in this context? While it is beyond the scope of the current paper to address the wider theoretical applications of rigour, validity, and credibility in research, we offer a few reflections based on our experiences with doctoral research during the pandemic and suggest that broader implications could be explored in a future journal article.

We all rely on qualitative methods. This section reflects on our experiences from the two concepts of resonance and credibility. First, we discuss how to ensure the resonance and credibility of research when the field is transformed by the pandemic. We then

discuss how to ensure quality research when our own relationship to the field is altered by the pandemic.

Resonance and credibility of results – studying a social world transformed by the pandemic

We identify three main challenges in the context of our research: first, the changes in the activities and objectives of social organisations and institutions; second, the reorganisation of participants' daily routines; and third, the challenge of maintaining consistency when a research project unfolds over acute, and non-acute stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Deland notes that the community-based organisations that she observed during her fieldwork changed their original missions to focus on the most immediate needs during the pandemic. For instance, affordable housing organisations shifted their focus to distributing personal protective equipment and food. Moreover, she attended online hearings in her capacity as a planning commission board member that were moved to a digital format, transforming commissioners' relation to the public and limiting some citizens' capacity to participate in these hearings. In both cases, the organisations she was studying were different from what they would have been outside of a pandemic context, both in their activities and in their societal effects.

Marion researches the link between mobility practices and gender, understood as a power relation. Both dimensions of her research topic have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the pandemic has been marked by a stark decrease in mobility. This implied a continuous engagement with participants, as the mobility practices discussed changed with evolving sanitary restrictions. Second, this pandemic period has rendered existing inequalities – may they be related to gender, class or race – even more acute. Indeed, COVID-19 has had a disproportionately strong impact on the daily constraints, health, and resources of women and minority communities (Chandler et al., 2021; Gaynor & Wilson, 2020; Peck, 2021; Sharma & Vaish, 2020). In addition to the ethical challenge it raises – discussed in the next part – this has greatly affected participants' daily constraints, arguably in a durable manner. Marion observed the impact of the pandemic on the daily routines of time-strained female bicycle users: the presence of children and of their partners at home entailed new domestic tasks and made juggling work and care even harder. This point was also raised by Deland, whose research focuses on marginalised communities.

In the early steps of her research, Clara conducted exploratory observations of public space use in the German city of Hamburg. The dynamics she observed were entirely different from a non-pandemic situation: most cafés and shops were closed, just like schools. It is most likely that both the people and the activities carried out in public space were affected by the situation. This leads her to wonder how those observations would inform the remaining steps of her research, expected to unfold over several years. This points to an additional challenge: How can one maintain the internal consistency of a research project that starts during the most acute stages of a pandemic and continues when social life resumes to a "new normal"?

We all employ the case study method. Case studies inform wider research by the richness of data and depth of analysis they allow. We argue that COVID-19 case studies

are no different from other case studies in the sense that their results are strongly context-dependent. Similar to other case studies, they can only be credible insofar as researchers thoroughly describe the context and are transparent on all biases. These "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1983) however, will need to be even thicker in the case of COVID-19 case studies. While the pandemic unfolds over a long period and at a global scale, sanitary restrictions, work conditions, mobility patterns and social impacts vary greatly from one place, time period and social group to the other.

Understanding the field from a distance – the validity of the researcher's understanding

Collecting qualitative data, may it be through interviews or participant observation, goes beyond recording discourses or practices observed in the field. As researchers engage with their field, they develop a form of tacit, intangible knowledge that allows them to make meaningful analyses, mindful of the context in which the data has been collected. Restrictive measures implemented to combat the COVID-19 pandemic transformed "traditional" ways of conducting research (Sy et al., 2020), by limiting face-to-face interactions, in-field observations, and shifting many research projects to the digital realm. How does this affect the resonance and credibility of research conducted in these conditions? Of course, it should be considered here in what way remote methods are included in the research project. Are they used to "augment previously collected data . . . as . . . sole data collection method or as a preliminary method to inform further data collection?" (Sy et al., 2020, p. 602). Generally, face-to-face interactions are considered indispensable in any research project applying qualitative research methods (Sy et al., 2020) and ethnographers would argue that without sustained, in-person interactions with the field, researchers are unable to develop the intangible knowledge necessary to make relevant analyses (Low, 2017). This idea of intangible knowledge echoes the concept of culture – that is, "deep-rooted beliefs and assumptions about the world, as well as normative and explicit agreements that enable interpersonal coordination" (Goldberg et al., 2016, p. 1193). A study by Krouwel et al. (2019) that compared the depth of data generated by in-person and video call interviews only found minor differences. Yet, the question remains as to how researchers can develop intangible knowledge and with that a refined understanding of the field while conducting remote qualitative research, taking account of any type of remote research, including the conduction of in-field-observations for instance. Answering this question would require a dedicated research project; we share some modest contributions based on our own experiences.

As part of her remote fieldwork, Marion endeavoured to maintain sustained social interactions with local contacts in Tokyo. She contacted local associations – both related or unrelated to her topic – and maintained informal relations with several of their members. Snowball sampling from these contacts allowed her to develop a Tokyo-based social circle with which she was in regular contact online. At that time, COVID-19 had pushed most social interactions to the virtual realm, such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Teams, and other video conferencing platforms (Krause et al., 2021, p. 4). This gave a certain sense of normalcy to these fully distant social relations. Online informal discussions allowed her to develop a second-hand understanding of how daily life was affected by COVID-19 in Tokyo. She also contacted several Japan-based academics to

keep her interpretations in check as her research progressed.Marion also found language to be key to building rapport. Through intensive, bi-weekly Japanese conversation classes, she worked on her fluency. She was able to speak without an intermediary. This contributed to normalising the social interaction created by the remote interview and to creating trust: many interviewees noted the efforts she made to learn their language.

Different from Marion, the challenges entailed by the pandemic encouraged Julia and Clara to modify their research projects entirely. Marion started her doctoral research before the pandemic and adapted her initial plan to a remote format. Julia and Clara, on the other hand, started their doctoral research during the pandemic and decided to adapt their research projects without betting on a prompt return to normal. They both decided to bring their project sites closer to home. Julia, who had initially planned on studying international case studies, and focusing on sensitive communities, furthermore decided to engage with communities who are closer to her current place of residence and with better access to virtual interviewing technologies.

In sum, this section has discussed the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on shifting the field, the researcher's relation to it, and how we have adapted to these new circumstances as doctoral researchers. The following section examines how some of us have entered the field during this time to engage people in research.

Pandemic impacts on engaging people in research: ethics and rapport

For many of the authors, conducting qualitative research in the time of COVID-19 calls for reflecting on issues of ethics and building rapport with people as human subjects. While these considerations would have been the case regardless of the pandemic, the current situation has exacerbated existing lines of exclusion and deepened existing social inequities, resulting in us, as researchers-in-training, needing to navigate new or heightened ethical ambiguities (Newman et al., 2021; Salam et al., 2021; Surmiak et al., 2022). Likewise, this has also necessitated new considerations of our relationship to human subjects in the process of approaching participants and gathering data in pandemic-related situations.

Ethics – rethinking exclusion/inclusion

We collectively see this moment as encompassing *new and old forms of ethical exclusion/ inclusion* when engaging people in research as human subjects. While the pandemic has, in some cases, led to the exclusion of certain demographics, it also affords new possibilities for inclusive forms of measuring ethical considerations. This section describes our experiences in two areas: first, how the pandemic has affected existing "vulnerable" populations and how we as researchers engage with such populations, and second, how COVID-19 has deepened exclusion of certain perspectives in research, while offering possibilities of inclusive considerations in institutional ethical measures to reflect new realities.

In "the right to research", Appadurai describes research as a privileged act undertaken by well-resourced, highly trained researchers in wealthier countries (Appadurai, 2006). Given this power imbalance, we are aware of the potential

pitfalls when researchers recruit participants who lack the same resources or may be in precarious situations. In the worst-case scenario, this has resulted in exploitative situations where the act of research is self-serving and benefits the researcher's career at the expense of participants' material, emotional, and spiritual well-being. As a result, the researcher may face two distinct, but equally problematic situations: either resigning to working with more convenient populations – thereby over-representing those with privilege to participate in research, such as educated professionals or experts rather than marginalised populations that are inclined to distrust researchers (Corbie-Smith et al., 2002) – or choosing to engage margin-alised populations in ways that exacerbate further trauma and exploitation (Cochran et al., 2008).

These ethical considerations have only heightened during the pandemic. COVID-19 has disproportionately had an impact on poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and Indigenous populations in the majority of our research contexts (Fortuna et al., 2020; Laurencin & McClinton, 2020). Not only are these populations more likely to be essential workers and unable to shelter at home, resulting in higher case rates, deaths and hospitalisations, but they are also more likely to live in housing conditions where social distancing was not possible (Rozenfeld et al., 2020). In addition to the public health crisis, the same communities faced a double whammy of economic losses given shutdowns in the service and hospitality sectors.

Those of us engaged in fieldwork grappled with questions of interviewing participants from these populations who were directly impacted by grief, loss, and illness. While research already privileges certain voices, this seemed to be an even greater challenge during the pandemic where we needed to make more efforts to engage with already limited representation in research studies. For example, we saw a difference between interviewees of different demographics where it can be difficult to schedule a time, not because the person was not interested, but because they were dealing with personal health issues, deaths in the family, or caregiving responsibilities. With much of this trauma fresh in their minds, it felt unethical and inappropriate at times to pursue these leads when the participant was clearly distressed; however, we also wondered the loss of not pursuing this interview and potentially losing the ability to represent an important perspective in the study and relying on more convenient sampling.

In other situations, we discussed the global inequities in vaccine access, and whether we would feel comfortable travelling from countries where vaccines are readily available to other countries where this is not yet the case. Vaccine inequality across countries weighed heavily in decisions about where one should travel to conduct research. Furthermore, there are vaccine inequities *among* populations within any given location or city, where undocumented individuals may lack access to vaccines, thus raising an ethical dimension as to whether such participants should be excluded in order to protect them and the greater public. Masking was also discussed; whereas some participants may opt out of an interview where they do not feel comfortable discussing certain subjects in a mask, other participants may decline to avoid meeting the researcher in indoor situations where mask mandates have been lifted. One participant interviewed by Andreas noted that migrants in public space wore face masks even if the regulations did not require them because they were not sure of the regulations and were too afraid to take them off. These scenarios suggest heightened forms of ethical exclusion through the

winnowing of potential participants, who would have otherwise been more willing to participate in the research in pre-pandemic times without vaccine or masking considerations.

Given this dilemma and the very real possibility of losing important perspectives and perpetuating the loss of representation, many of us forged ahead with engaging these vulnerable populations but then faced new ambiguities. One salient theme was the issue of juggling complex relationships when the researcher wears multiple hats as a friend, colleague, consultant, or even a member embedded in the culture in which they are studying. Another issue was that of compensation: whether to provide compensation, how much compensation, the form of compensation (a stipend or "taking someone out for coffee"), as well as the complex meanings of compensation (as a matter of respect or equity, or potentially elitist depending on choice of compensation). To be clear, we would have similarly grappled with questions of what benefits we can provide to our research participants during pre-pandemic times. These issues become even more present given the exacerbated marginalisation of certain communities, where people in even more vulnerable states may feel that they have even more to gain or directly benefit from participating in research or engaging with a researcher from an elite university.

As we describe above, the pandemic has introduced new forms of ethical ambiguities by exacerbating long-standing questions and dilemmas. While any global crisis of this nature calls for increased care to these issues, the main difference with COVID-19 is the shift in institutional attention to these new considerations. For example, the institutional measures that researchers have previously relied on – such as ethical review boards and human subject protocols – have adjusted to pandemic realities by requiring new documents and requirements. Much of these efforts have focused on ensuring the health and well-being of the researcher vis-a-vis their research participants; for example, ensuring safe travel and minimising COVID-19 exposure and risk for all parties involved. It has not accounted for new forms of inclusion by directly addressing the issues of privilege and burden mentioned above. Should we continue to pursue an interview with someone experiencing bereavement due to the loss of a family member to COVID-19? Should we compensate people who work multiple jobs during the pandemic and would be competing for time away from their livelihoods to participate in our research? We question whether doing research in the time of COVID-19, and by extension other times of crisis, should meet higher standards beyond passing institutionally sanctioned ways of measuring research ethics; in other words, we may have a proposal that checks all the institutional requirements for doing ethical research but clearly misses some of the current realities, such as building rapport with *human* subjects – who are after all people with real lives – in ways that we discuss in detail below.

As the pandemic and its aftermath have laid bare the vast and deeply entrenched socioeconomic inequalities in our societies, we as researchers should be critically considering the impact of our actions in this new age. We increasingly find ourselves grappling with "what right do we have to do this research" in alignment with those who have theorised about refusal in research (Simpson, 2007; Traianou & Hammersley, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2014). This current moment opens doors to revisiting these questions and seeking new forms of inclusion as we ask what is missing from our current ethical frameworks and work to address those gaps. In

sum, we have the opportunity to be more inclusive, to place these questions front and centre in our work, to refine our ethical and moral compass as we do our work in the pandemic age and beyond.

Rapport – data collection

These approaches require, among other things, building rapport with participants, especially when the research deals with sensitive subjects such as migrant experiences. Some studies view rapport-building through an affiliative and empathetic dimension (Prior, 2018) while others challenge rapport as necessary to the conduct of an interview championing building working relationships first (Lee Ann, 2017). The experience of the authors of this article are multiple and range from instances where the researcher is local to international to the context, where they had to shift the research virtually or keep it in-person but accommodate to pandemic related situations, instances where researchers developed relationships over a period of time before gathering data or where approaching participants was brief and immediate.

Some literature has already emerged offering insights about conducting research during the pandemic such as Midgelow's (2020) compilation of methods. Mani and Barooah (2020) elaborate on the challenges of building rapport on the phone where Strong et al. (2020) find that some participants preferred face-to-face over remote interviewing. The technical challenges entailed by remote interviewing, such as having a bad connection or poor audiovisual equipment, lead to rapport-building issues such as difficulty in reading facial cues or exacerbate communication problems. However, we did not find this to be the case. Interviews are inherently social encounters (Qu & Dumay, 2011) that tend to allow for connections beyond questions. Angela found that by moving her interviews online, she experienced a shift away from the social nature of the interview, becoming constrained to time and purpose that can be attributed to the medium. She also noticed exceptions to this especially where the interviewee was more relaxed and comfortable to the medium and researcher as well as their own time constraints. While interviewing online allows access to busy participants, Angela also finds that some participants find it easier to cancel or change plans as they didn't have to plan as much as an in-person meeting would require.

Andreas was fortunate to be local to his fieldwork site, and due to the particularly sensitive nature of his research, engaging participants with migratory background, made an effort to keep interviews and meetings in-person. He reports that in meetings where he wore a mask, participants were more reluctant to open up and respond to casual chat. The workaround was to hold meetings in cafes that had an exception to the mask regulation which however introduced new dynamics that had to do with the commercial space of the cafe as a zone of exclusion for some participants, either culturally, economically or plainly because these have become "policed" spaces that required a vaccination status that some participants did not have. Andreas also noted that moving interviews and meetings online would have been a challenge due to communication, technology and language barriers with a diverse population that includes migrants and elderly.

A different experience is offered by Marion who had to find ways to account for being quite far from her fieldwork site in Japan, as she was located in Paris without the ability to travel due to COVID-19. Marion echoes Greeff's (2020) observation regarding additional

difficulty in accessing and building rapport with gatekeepers, especially in Japan where relying on gatekeepers is embedded in the professional culture. Her network of local contacts, established by contacting associations and snowballing from friends, was key in helping her recruit. She found her positionality as a foreigner speaking directly at people's homes via the internet allowed for informal discussions that related to the COVID-19 experience through which she built rapport. The ability for the participant to join from the comfort of their home created a positive environment that benefitted Marion. She found that interviewees were comfortable with technology and the remote format encouraged participants to accept the invitation as there was less effort and it was less intimidating than a possible in-person encounter.

Technology offers alternatives to synchronous audiovisual interviews such as synchronous textual interviews or asynchronous group discussions through online forums or groups such as Whatsapp (Dube, 2020). These methods have benefits in comparison to in-person interviewing, ensuring anonymity when needed, accessing remote populations or engaging participants for longer periods of time with minimum effort. Marion, with this in mind, found travel diaries in the form of voice memos sent through a Japanese messaging app to provide her a valuable glimpse of women's mobility decisions and constraints on a day-to-day basis.

Pandemic impacts on the doctoral researcher: the academic experience

The previous sections have addressed how COVID-19 has affected the field, our relationship to the field, and the practice of engaging participants in our research. In this section, we reflect on how the pandemic has impacted us as doctoral researchers. We touch on the doctoral academic experience, the balance of work, studies and personal circumstances, and the consequences for our research and personal wellbeing.

Physical disconnection and virtual connectivity

Regarding the doctoral academic experience, we look at the impact of moving all interactions online, with a contrasting effect of reducing social interaction while increasing virtual accessibility. "The academic world has moved to a combination of physical immobility and disconnection, coupled with virtual mobility and connectivity" (Xu, 2020, p. 18), and our program was no exception. Before the pandemic, students in our programme would meet in Oxford three times per year, in doctoral weeks that were packed with academic and social activities. These weeks were opportunities to gather with classmates, supervisors and other doctoral researchers and academic staff, as well as to engage with training opportunities. We were already based away from the university and balanced studies with work. These regular opportunities to fully engage with university life at Oxford gave us a sense of community and connection through the personal interactions and shared experiences.

With the start of the pandemic, the authors' department and programme management announced, in April 2020, the move to fully-remote provision including online training opportunities, supervision and social events. This was put in practice three weeks later. This quick adaptation to online teaching seems to have been common across institutions (Xu, 2020). It addressed the initial lack of study support and access to training and

resources that was reflected in Goldstone's et al. (2021) early survey from April-May 2020. For the authors, the move virtually meant that the programme did not need to follow the one-week-per-term residential structure for social and academic activities. Instead, doctoral related activities could spread over the semester, at various times of the day, peppering the doctoral experience and contact with the department through the year, albeit online. Students kept in contact informally through Whatsapp groups. On one hand, this meant a more continuous contact with the programme, and access to training and supervision were now easier, from our own homes across the world. However, there were a few drawbacks to these new arrangements.

Firstly, Goldstone and Zhang's survey, with 91% full-time student participants, states that the doctoral student experience is heavily impacted by "departmental socialisation" (Goldstone et al., 2021, p. 2); this was taken away during lockdown. Even though our program was already part-time and mostly remote, the "working from home" and "shelter in place" orders also disrupted the cadence and socialisation component of our doctoral experience. Arguably, the significance of socialisation goes beyond the mere social interaction with peers and has a wider impact as we also miss out on serendipitous encounters and spontaneous dialogues with peers and faculty members. These would normally provide informal opportunities to organically bounce ideas, progress thinking, and find new paths in which to develop someone's research. The changes brought by the pandemic reduced the chances of serendipitous conversations virtually to zero.

Secondly, before the pandemic one could take off work during the doctoral week for a full immersion in the experience of academic life in Oxford. The spreading out of the programme as opposed to concentrated weeks blurs the limits between the doctoral experience and the rest of circumstances in our lives, either personal or work related. While efforts were made to announce sessions in advance, the likelihood of sessions clashing with work commitments hindering attendance also increased. On the flipside, most of the sessions were recorded, allowing asynchronous access, whether to watch them for the first time or to revisit them. While this positively increases access to sessions, it further reduces the informal interaction with peers and instructors, as discussed earlier.

Additionally, outside the formal academic provision, attendance at seminars and conferences is an important contributor to the academic experience. During lockdown there was a proliferation of free of charge virtual events all around the world. These could be accessed from the comfort of one's home and became commonplace, even overwhelmingly abundant. The seemingly universal and in real time access to research communities and output dissemination has, no doubt, great benefits. However, there are also drawbacks, from being overwhelmed by offers to Zoom exhaustion (Fauville et al., 2021), and a lack of time to process the new material as the next event is coming in. These events may have originally been designed to substitute the in-person counterparts and, with the progression of the pandemic they became more sophisticated in terms of addressing the social experience and wellbeing of the participants. Andreas, for instance, was involved in organising a graduate symposium. This was originally planned to take place in person in Oxford, but had to be postponed and moved online. The organisers sent a physical care package to all (international) attendees with wine, coffee, notepad and biscuits; and held a successful "coffee break" and "wine break" at the end where participants engaged in a casual chat while organisers managed to build good rapport. They continued correspondence with the presenters and managed to successfully bid for

a special issue publication. While they never met physically, they all feel quite close with each other. Andreas believes this to be due to the positive hybrid atmosphere that was created through virtual interfaces and physical tangible objects that were shared across. This example goes above and beyond the average practice. While it is now usual to try to facilitate the attendees' interactions in virtual lobbies and breakout rooms, these are not always successful in recreating the synergies of an in-person event. With the passing of the months, "attending" these conferences and seminars have at times become a passive activity, closer to listening to a podcast, occasionally during a walk in the park.

Wellbeing and stressors: life-work-studies balance

The isolation resulting from the switch to remote interactions has been a widely accepted stressor during pandemic times, as were the challenges of balancing work, studies and personal circumstances within the confinements of one's home. Goldstone and Zhang (2021) report the negative experiences of UK postgraduate research students during the pandemic in relation to mental health and wellbeing. This is largely supported by both individual recounts and a further study on higher education students' experience of the pandemic (Birmingham et al., 2021). The effects of the pandemic on a personal level were felt differently by the authors, depending on each one's circumstances. Two of us became parents during the pandemic and shared the challenges of balancing research and family life with a newborn, as reported by Buckle (2021). These include the fall-out of social services and the caregiving network with the closing of day-care centres and the inability for family to visit and provide support. In these circumstances, the home becomes also the workplace and a nursery 24/7, which requires supportive partners and the negotiation of space.

For one of us, worrying about ageing parents who live in a different country and the isolation of living alone during lockdown were additional stressors. Anxiety for family members getting sick and social isolation are aspects commonly reported by students with an impact on their mental health and wellbeing (Birmingham et al., 2021; Goldstone et al., 2021). However, once travel restrictions were lifted, the virtual mode permitted this author to relocate and care for her parents for months at a time. While she had to balance caregiving with work and studies, the closeness to family was a beneficial and welcome counterbalance to the lack of in-person social and academic interaction with friends, colleagues, and fellow students. The notion that this support and connection was needed for personal wellbeing echoes findings in the subjective wellbeing literature (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Diener & Ryan, 2008). Co-author Marion had seen the fieldwork in Japan as a way to spend several months in a country she has been passionate about for years. The forced move to online means for her fieldwork gave her access to community events and meetings in Japan and the opportunity to meet people online that she might never have met on the ground. However, as well as a part of her research project, living in Japan was a personal dream that she had to give up on due to continuing travel restrictions.

In these circumstances, the support that universities may provide for students' wellbeing becomes significant. Goldstone and Zhang report that pastoral support in UK universities tends to be tailored to undergraduate students, "... meaning that the unique experiences and issues of [postgraduate research] students might not be effectively addressed" (Goldstone et al., 2021, p. 15). This has not been our experience. Our institution provides doctoral researchers with a personal advisor who is

independent from the academic supervisors. This was already in place long before the start of the pandemic and became an invaluable resource once the lockdown started. Angela had been in the program for a couple of years before the lockdown and has experienced the benefit of this support for her wellbeing, both before and during the pandemic. As an incoming doctoral student during the pandemic, Julia does not have a frame of reference for how a DPhil programme "felt" pre-COVID. Nonetheless, in contrast with the " . . . desire for a more empathetic, understanding and compassionate approach by funding bodies, universities, and supervisors . . . " that was gathered by Goldstone's et al. (2021, p. 16) survey, Julia has noticed a great deal of empathy and understanding from the faculty as students grappled with the fallout of the pandemic including illness, death of family members and friends, loss of income, and other life circumstances.

With the streaming and recording of the doctoral programme and the amount of seminars and conferences that in many cases were made available for free across the globe, the pandemic expanded access to knowledge and research communities beyond geographical and time-zone barriers. Nonetheless, and despite the pastoral support of our department, the pandemic inevitably brought challenges to the doctoral experience with loss of informal serendipitous conversations, the lack of interpersonal connection and other stressors that may have slowed down in some ways the progress of our work. Altogether, the described circumstances may have required adjustments of initial expectations of taking part in a doctoral programme.

From field to screen, and back?

In early June 2022, three days of "in-person" events were arranged for students on the DPhil in Sustainable Urban Development programme at the University of Oxford. After two years of virtual, and then hybrid engagement, the gathering in Oxford was billed as "The Reunion", but many students had not yet met in person due to the impact of the pandemic. As classrooms were repopulated, the importance of shared physical space was palpable in the context of communal learning, dialogue, reflection, and humour. Conversational preamble and afterword, the connective ephemera of the everyday, echoed loudly in class, and added to the sense of the collective – a gentle, perhaps whimsical nod to Tobler's first law of geography (Tobler, 1970): "Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things" (p. 234). The experience of doing research during the pandemic leaves a learning legacy that is still evolving as researchers negotiate the balance of *in* and *ex situ* research, and the momentary, or more permanent, transition of the field to the screen.

The doctoral researchers who authored this paper had completed, or were undertaking fieldwork. The "field" for many during the pandemic had been the screen, without the previous accoutrements of travel, chance encounters, and the pros and cons of the friction of distance and physical location. The advantages and disadvantages of the transition to screen-based research interviews and conversation are well-versed above from the postgraduate researchers' perspectives. The means and modes of postgraduate supervision were similarly transformed, particularly in the context of non-resident, international part-time students. The timing of supervision meetings, adjusting to global clocks became the lead consideration. Previous

occasional connection via Skype or telephone, evolved into regular, normative engagement over Zoom or Teams. Accelerated transition of connection emerged as standard, just as the temporal trumped the spatial in terms of access, while the increased and more flexible process of online supervision turned out to be a transformative, and positive introduction to postgraduate programmes. Much supervision had previously been reliant on meetings in place – always a contentious and problematic aspect for an international, sustainability-focused programme for part-time students, with many working outside the UK. The legacy of this pandemic period has been greater flexibility and possibilities for supervision formats. Part-time graduate students have a "residency" requirement to attend the University in person for a minimum of 30 days each year, and while this regulation remains, it forms the basis for a new, diversified circumstance for academic engagement each year. The emerging context of graduate supervision, again specifically for non-resident part-time students, often living and working outside the UK has been opened up, and energised. Decades of rumination, discussion, and feasible regulation-changing moments were bundled forward, and now rest to be re-defined in the context of in-person and online hybrids.

As 2023 evolves, postgraduate researchers can now get back to the field in most cases, pursuing Goffman's (1989) concern for "getting into place", but perhaps they now have more pathways, direct and indirect to examine. The existing critiques of "studying in the field" have taken on a new perspective, where the field and screen at times mutate, facilitating access for lifelong learning and research, opening engagement and removing boundaries, while at the same time restricting some forms of emotive and personal engagement with the field, person and place.

The impossibility for many researchers to undertake their work "in the field" during the pandemic has brought concerns, and new innovative ways of how to complete qualitative research. Within a relatively short amount of time, particularly for students starting out on their doctoral research, the field was replaced by the screen. Deliberations between the current authors revealed the positive and negative aspects of this transition to hybrid forms of information gathering, which challenges many of the arguments central to the importance of "fieldwork". While the reassessment of "the field" from the perspectives of Orientalism (Said, 1979) and wider postcolonial theory has previously led to revised methodological approaches, direct engagement with the physical context has underpinned most of our research to date, whether through ethnographic observation, participation, or the process of interviewing *in situ*. Research projects carried out during the pandemic have generated a new context of *ex situ*, or at least "between-screens", possibilities for academic investigation, throwing further doubt on what might now seem to be outdated assertions, such as ". . . epistemologies evolve from fieldwork, not from the armchair" (Handelman, 1994, p. 376).

Discussions during the writing of this paper confirmed on the one hand, the now normative "acceptability" of placing doctoral "field" research on the screen – principally via interviewing – but on the other, leaves a nagging uncertainty of how much can, or should the field itself be replaced in a hybrid or blended approach to delivering research projects. As these current research experiences show, questions remain ahead about the constitution of fieldwork in doctoral research. Ardent supporters of fieldwork *in situ*, such as Varisco (2018, p. 19), emphasise that "Being in the field . . . is so much more than

collecting information", and is an essential component of the process of learning, a rite of passage. Others challenge the very premise of "the field", and its legitimacy in knowledge production (Clifford, 1988). The context of doing research online during the pandemic will bring new perspectives to this ongoing debate.

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