

## **‘Stuck at home’: digital and spatial inequalities and exclusions amongst marginalised students in Global South and North higher education contexts**

Sue Timmis, Carolina Valladares Celis  
University of Bristol, Bristol, United Kingdom

### **Research Domains**

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### **Abstract**

This paper concerns digital inequalities experienced by higher education students across the Global South and North, during and following the Covid-19 pandemic. We understand digital inequalities or ‘divides’ as temporal, spatial, social, cultural, and material. The idea of ‘stuckness’ (Jefferson et al., 2019) frames this paper to examine how confinement disproportionately impacted marginalised students due to uneven study conditions, when forced into being ‘stuck’ at home. Drawing on an international literature review undertaken in 2022, we show how access to devices and connectivity, space and resources, together with pre-existing and intersecting inequalities widened and entrenched the digital divides within and across universities. These inequalities disproportionately impacted on marginalised students and increased their marginalisation, with considerably more negative effects for students in the Global South. We conclude by suggesting how policymakers and universities might adopt more creative ways to reduce ‘stuckness’, digital exclusions and marginalisations, particularly in the Global South.

### **Full paper**

Whilst higher education has been positioned to ‘actively seek to

address social inequality and promote equity and social justice'(Mbat, 2019, p. 254), social inequalities hampering choice, representation and participation in higher education continue to exist based on class, race, gender, socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds (Devkota, 2021). These became even more pronounced during the Covid-19 pandemic and particularly for those in rural or disadvantaged areas in Global South contexts (Mohamedbhai, 2020). Indeed, 'with 82% of students in Sub-Saharan Africa stranded without internet access, many African universities' valiant efforts to embrace online delivery got stuck in the digital divide' (Nakweya, 2021, para. 1).

Digital inequalities still tend to be conceptualised in terms of a 'digital divide' as if this was a single entity. Yet, Graham (2011) argued long ago for digital divides to be considered multiple, localised, spatialised and temporal (Graham, 2011). More recently, Graham and Dittus refer to 'digital geographies' and 'digital exclusions' where the 'digital' includes 'technologies and the artifacts they produce, but also the practices and discourses surrounding them' (Graham & Dittus, 2022, p. 8). Mohamedbhai (2020) also highlights how digital divides mirror other inequalities and in particular, urban-rural divides and recognises the complex intersections with other dimensions of inequality – particularly economic, class, gender, and geography. Thus, we understand digital inequalities or 'divides' as temporal, spatial, social, cultural, and material. We draw on the idea of 'stuckness' (Jefferson et al., 2019) to reflect on how confinement at home without access to university resources, infrastructure, mental or physical space to study disproportionately impacted on marginalised students and increased their marginalisation.

This paper draws on an international literature review undertaken in 2022. Our focus was on higher education students' learning experiences in relation to digital exclusion and digital inequalities during the pandemic. Coverage includes research undertaken in both Global South and Global North contexts, focusing principally on empirical studies, rather than commentaries and opinion pieces. In

conducting the literature review, a set of keywords and synonyms were selected: “higher education”, “digital”, “COVID-19”, “student” and “inequalities”. Additionally, the time interval was set from March 2020 to March 2022. The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database was consulted along with the Web of Science, which was included due to its wider language and regional reach. This was a fundamental methodological choice, aiming to be inclusive of academic publications in English and Spanish. From an initial 1518 references, 152 empirically-based studies were reviewed for relevance, methodological rigour and coherence, resulting in 53 selections. Additionally, a manual review was conducted of all published issues in six key higher education journals using the same time interval criteria. A total of 58 papers were finally included.

The paper highlights key areas found in the review, related to access, connectivity and infrastructure, assessment, online interactions and pedagogical choices, as well as inadequate institutional support, especially in relation to students with disabilities. Intersecting inequalities that mirror other forms of marginalisation are also addressed, showing how digital inequalities are interwoven with aspects such as economic disadvantage, race, and gender and those with caring responsibilities.

An area of particular importance and prevalence was the swift cessation of on-campus services and the impact caused by the sole reliance of students on their home resources and environments to engage in education. The notion of being ‘stuck at home’, which is at the heart of this symposium, is distinctively addressed in our review which lays bare the uneven conditions faced by those already disadvantaged when displaced from on-campus facilities. The review also highlights contrasting digital inequalities within and across the Global North and Global South. Markedly different levels of technological infrastructure, reliable connectivity, and digital literacies were identified among North and South contexts. Differing concerns and foci of the studies were also noted, for example in European contexts where access to technology is assumed in contrast to many Global South contexts.

In conclusion, uneven home study conditions stemming from differences in students’ gender, disabilities, race, socio-economic status, and location seem to have widened and entrenched the

divides within and across universities. Equally relevant, we show that differences in access to devices and connectivity across the Global South and Global North have disproportionately affected students in the South, accentuating the pre-existing disadvantages and gaps in opportunities for students across these contexts. Finally we suggest how HE policymakers and universities might adopt more creative ways to reduce 'stuckness' and address digital exclusions and the multiple intersecting inequalities, particularly in the Global South and areas of marginalisation, which became both more visible and entrenched during the pandemic.

## References

Devkota, K. R. (2021). Inequalities reinforced through online and distance education in the age of COVID-19: The case of higher education in Nepal. *INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF EDUCATION*, 67(1-2, SI), 145–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09886-x>

Graham, M. (2011). Time machines and virtual portals: The spatialities of the digital divide. *Progress in Development Studies*, 11(3), 211–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146499341001100303>

Graham, M., & Dittus, M. (2022). *Geographies of Digital Exclusion*. In *Geographies of Digital Exclusion*. Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv272452n>

Jefferson, A., Turner, S., & Jensen, S. (2019). Introduction: On Stuckness and Sites of Confinement. *Ethnos*, 84(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2018.1544917>

Mbati, L. S. (2019). Capabilities-based transformative online learning pedagogy for social justice. In S. Wisdom, L. Leavitt, & C. Bice (Eds.), *Handbook of research on social inequality and education* (pp. 253– 272). IGI Global.

Mohamedbhai, G. (2020, April 9). COVID-19: what consequences for higher education? *University World News*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?>

story=20200407064850279

Nakweya, G. (2021, July 8). E-learning is getting stuck in the digital divide. University World News.

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210707124818759>