Developing (language) learning opportunities for precarious migrant workers at HE institutions: charting possibilities, challenges, and pathways towards more equitable and inclusive educational futures

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Background

- **BERA Small Grants Award 'Learning for All?'** to examine the **'Teaching English to Migrant Workers'** programme

  ➤ a grassroots education initiative at UCL IOE providing access to language tuition aimed at empowering migrant workers, helping them to defend their rights, equipping them with skills and knowledge to counteract exclusion, marginalisation and to support their wellbeing

  ➤ predominantly taken up by **Latin American cleaners at the university**

- This recent immigrant group is particularly vulnerable to exploitation and societal exclusion as a result of language barriers that intersect with other multiple and interrelated challenges

  ➤ research highlights the importance of providing accessible language tuition and the potential to link this with training in basic rights and entitlements, how to access and engage with services and other necessary information (Berg 2017; 2019; McIlwaine et al. 2011; 2016)

- **Providing educational opportunities for precarious migrant workers at UCL - a much-needed intervention !?**

Approach

- An **evaluative element** of the initiative in order to understand the experience and perspectives of organisers, volunteer teachers, and migrant workers

    ➢ semi-structured interviews

- A **participatory element** to allow for a more in depth exploration of the lived experience of cleaners at the university providing an opportunity to reflect on, document and communicate their experiences and to amplify their voices
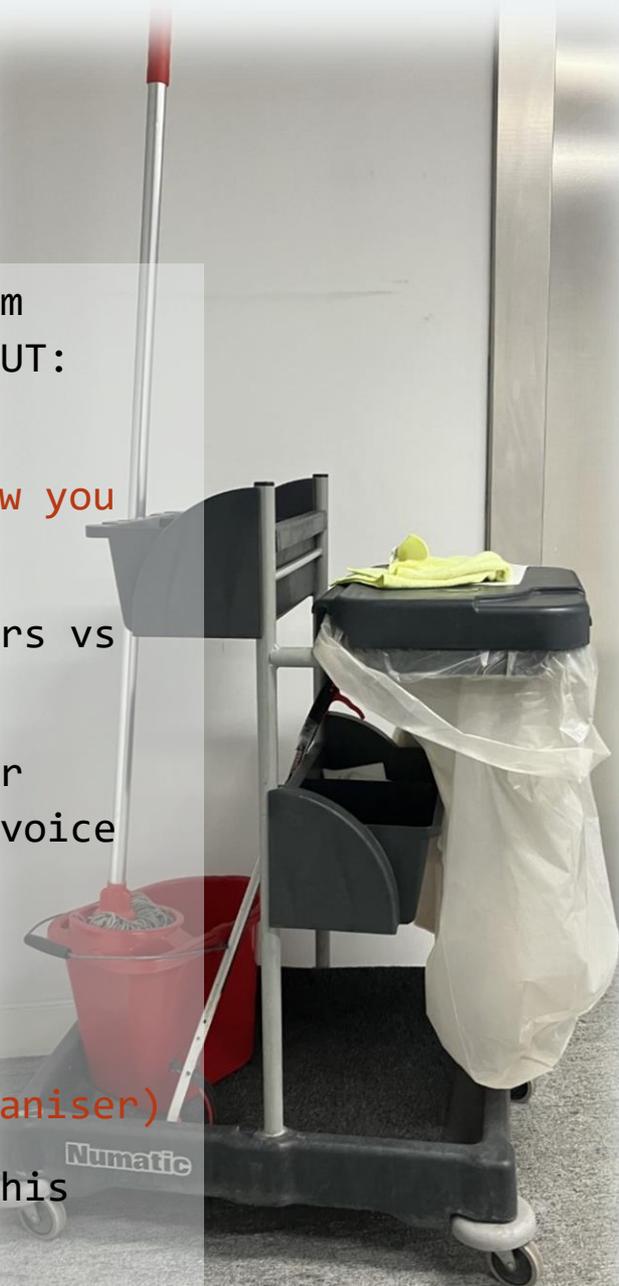
    ➢ photovoice workshops

Insights

- Lots of interest and initial engagement from workers - 'commitment' waning over time - BUT: precarious working & living conditions

'If the structures are not in place that allow you to commit, what can you do?' (organiser)

- Imbalance of who benefits (student volunteers vs migrant workers)

- Demystifying learning English as 'the silver bullet' vs concrete need to learn / have a voice

- About much more than language classes

'Trying to do something for those who are not normally getting the benefits of those spaces [university], to redistribute resources' (organiser)

- Reluctance from the university to support this part of their workforce and work towards sustainable change and to improve conditions

Insights

- Being a cleaner at 'Numero Uno'

(In)visibility

Lack of

➤ Empathy

➤ Solidarity

➤ Respect

➤ Dignity

De-humanising conditions & relations

Precarity & marginality

As far as working at the university goes, if I pass by 5 people, regardless of whether they are staff, admin, students…2 of them will greet me. When they say hi to me, I think ok, there still are people that are human and have feelings. But, the students…they never say hello to me. Not even one. (Cleaner)

We the cleaners, we don't exist […] it's actually got worse [after the pandemic]. It makes me sad that we, the cleaners … we don't exist. They don't say even 'hello', they don't say anything and this applies to EVERYONE, not just managers. I've seen it everywhere, not just at the university. (Cleaner)

I was just disappointed [at the lack of support from the university] because I thought that what we were doing was something big - maybe not the numbers, but the direction in which we were framing this English teaching, and in a very kind of local context – it's not like something abstract, it's people's everyday reality of going into the university, and who's there, and so on – because we are talking about making a difference and changing society, it even says something like this on the IOE logo, doesn't it? (Volunteer teacher)

They put as in a place where we don't exist … It's a question of empathy. If you have a plant and you water the plant and you talk to the plant and you say you are going to be fine you can do a lot for that plant … so it's easy to do something for others because it is only to say 'Hello, how are you?'. Just say 'hello', look at me, I am here! (Cleaner)

Mobilising solidarities & support

- (Im)possibilities for rehumanising relations and empathy/'empatía'

- Leveraging the university's social responsibility and civic capacity

- A 'Learning for / Engagement with precarious migrant workers' agenda?

Higher education through civic and social engagement moves away from the perceived notion of the ivory tower to engage with the wider world, thus helping bring together the haves and the have nots, the insiders and the outsiders. (Godonoga & Sarrico 2023)

Thank you

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