

# Student Activism and the Pandemic: A Global Round-Up

Thierry M. Luescher and Didem Türkoğlu

Student activists persisted to push for change during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the pandemic itself added fuel to the fire. Many of the grievances and commitments that had sparked students to political action before the pandemic continued to drive them into the streets and onto social media platforms in 2020 and 2021. But the single biggest issue causing protests at different moments was the pandemic itself.

## A Geospatial Overview of Student Protesting

To gain an overview of student activism worldwide during the pandemic, we identified and analyzed all articles published in *University World News (UWN)* between February 2020 and March 2022 that referred to protesting. This gave us 210 instances of student protest news covering 55 countries and all world regions. As much as this shape of the data is an artifact of the news-making decisions of *UWN*, for the purposes of this article, it provided a useful point of entry for further exploration.

Of the 210 reports, the regions that had the biggest number of *UWN* reports were Asia and Africa (75 and 72 respectively), followed by Europe (34) and North America (14), with South America, the Middle East, and Australasia reporting less than 10 protest instances each. In terms of countries, a third of all student protest reports came from only six countries: South Africa (14), the United States (12), Turkey (11), Zimbabwe (11), Pakistan (10), and Thailand (10). In addition, Hong Kong continued to have a high count despite the crackdown on student protesting in the aftermath of the 2019 protests.

## Causes of Protests and Highlights

Globally, both grievances specific to higher education or triggered by broader societal, socioeconomic, and political concerns caught the attention of student activists during the pandemic. Still, the top concerns were student funding, scholarships, and access to affordable higher education; greater equality and social justice; and access to employment. Opposition to undemocratic government and coups, lack of political freedoms and democracy, advocacy for gender equality, and protests against racism, gender-based violence, and LGBTIQ discrimination were also among students' pressing concerns. Most of these triggered protests in every world region in 2020 and 2021.

In South Africa, the country with the highest number of *UWN* protest reports, student funding, the affordability of higher education to working-class students, and financial exclusions continued to top the list of issues causing protests. After the nationwide #FeesMustFall protests of 2015–2016 (and the more localized reverberations since then)

### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to far-reaching changes in higher education globally, yet student activism continued to be a force to be reckoned with. Key concerns and commitments remained student funding; equality, social justice, and antidiscrimination; political freedoms and democracy; and gender equality. The single biggest cause of protests was, however, the pandemic itself. Recent additions to the protest agenda include climate change, academic freedom, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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had succeeded in greatly expanding student financial aid, historical student debt came into focus. The inaptness of the national student financial aid scheme also continued to cause anxiety to hundreds of thousands of students. Thus, prepandemic trends of protests clearly carried on in South Africa.

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis caused a massive outcry across the United States and beyond, and triggered a huge wave of protests. Thousands of students joined community members in the streets across the country and in other parts of the world during the May–June 2020 protests against racism and police brutality. In addition to Black Lives Matter protests, students continued to target racist legacies at their institutions, such as buildings named after slave owners or the very names of the universities that refer to confederate generals. Continued employment and working conditions of student workers during the pandemic, housing concerns, and rising college costs were also among students' key grievances. In short, we also observed a continuation of prepandemic student protest trends in the United States: antiracism and higher education finance.

In Turkey, the biggest wave of student protests arose in response to the appointment, by Turkey's president Erdoğan, of new public university rectors with close affiliations to the ruling party, starting in Istanbul with the rector of Boğaziçi University and followed by appointments in Ankara. Faculty members and alumni joined student protests. These appointments were widely considered a violation of university autonomy. The excessive use of police force against the protesters caused even more protests across the country in solidarity with the students. Rising housing prices led to another wave of student protests; students organized sit-ins in parks in major cities and protest marches. In this respect, the Turkish cases demonstrate two additional leading trends in global student activism: academic freedom and economic concerns.

### COVID-19 As a Source of Grievances

As much as prepandemic causes continued trending globally, the most frequent reasons for protesting in 2020 and 2021 were the pandemic itself, pandemic-related measures, and governments' use of the pandemic as an excuse to pass unpopular measures and repress protests. In addition to public health measures restricting public gatherings, protests were also triggered by indirect effects of the pandemic: economic pressures and new government repression tactics. It soon became clear that the pandemic exacerbated inequality globally and within country. Student financial concerns were another significant driver of protesting. Students demanded tuition hikes to be reversed, fees to be refunded, scholarships to be paid, program closures to be undone, rent assistance, and so forth. Such protests occurred in a wide range of countries from Kenya to Indonesia, Ireland to South Africa, Puerto Rico to Brazil.

Over 2020–2021, the challenges that the pandemic brought to higher education, the way governments and institutions responded, and students' discontent evolved. In the first year of the pandemic, students in countries such as Zimbabwe and Nigeria protested against the reopening of campuses without appropriate safety measures. In the second year, as India became the worst-hit country in April–May 2021 and universities moved to online teaching, several campuses witnessed student protests against this measure and in favor of continuing face-to-face instruction; the same had been observed earlier in China. Medical students in India and Pakistan protested against increasing hours of active duty in COVID wards. In Iran, in contrast, students protested against taking exams in person. As several studies show, the most affected student groups during the pandemic were international students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In China, Bangladeshi students protested restrictions on their movement; in Sweden, protests occurred against changes made to international students' residency permits; and Mauritanian students stuck in Mauritania picketed in front of their ministry to be permitted to return to their universities in Morocco and take exams there.

The reopening of universities across the globe caused yet another COVID-related grievance: mandatory vaccination. Antivaxxing student protests have been observed across continents in universities in Australia, South Africa, Switzerland, and the United States, to mention but a few.

*Thierry M. Luescher is research director of post-schooling education and work at the Human Sciences Research Council and affiliated associate professor in higher education at the University of the Free State, South Africa. Email: [tluescher@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:tluescher@hsrc.ac.za).*

*Didem Türkoğlu is assistant professor at Kadir Has University, Turkey and is affiliated with the New York University Abu Dhabi as a postdoctoral associate at the Division of Social Science. Email: [didem.turkoglu@khas.edu.tr](mailto:didem.turkoglu@khas.edu.tr).*

**A New Postpandemic Front for Student Activism?**

With the end of the pandemic in sight in 2022, key global concerns are returning onto the global protest agenda. Climate change certainly tops that list. From late February, anti-war protests against the Russian invasion of Ukraine surged across Europe and beyond.

Global challenges that have been flying under the radar or were not yet covered by *UWN* are also coming to the fore. In several US states, there is a crackdown underway on universities' equity and social justice agendas, in a conservative (mis)interpretation of free speech. In France, there are attacks on sociology curricula that are alleged to promote leftism. And in countries from the United Kingdom to Australia and Brazil, a right-wing agenda is threatening academic freedom. As these issues increasingly come to the attention of progressive student activists, they will likely spark the outcry that they deserve. ▲