

Learning in the Dark: Exile and the Temporal Reordering of Hope

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how hope is lived and reshaped in Higher Education Projects (HEPs) established abroad by Russian scholars in exile following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It focuses on how the darkness of exile, marked by loss, disorientation, guilt and a sense of suspended or broken futures, changes teaching practices and futures thinking in these projects.

Using learning diaries and interviews, the study asks two questions. First (RQ1), how are key aspects of hope — such as looking to the future, feeling able to act, and wanting to change things — experienced and challenged in exile? Second (RQ2), how might the emotional pressures of exile and moments of hopelessness become productive forces that reorder what scholars prioritise, how they relate to others, and how they relate to time and the future?

Drawing on Ernst Bloch's ideas on hope, the findings suggest a distinctive shift. Hope moves from planning and projecting better futures toward sustaining what is meaningful in the present; from individual, action-focused agency toward shared practices of care and support; and from a clear, linear sense of time toward intense, meaningful moments within an unstable present. The article argues that these distinctive shifts are signs of a temporal reordering of hope, and dark conditions may generate alternative, present-oriented ways of making futures in higher education.

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CONTEXT

I never chose this — but here I am, living far away from home, unable to return. Having been an educator in HE for ten years before emigration, I have spent the past 4,5 years exploring two core aspects of my life — education and exile. This article is based on a Chapter of my PhD thesis, which adds a third dimension: the future.

KEYWORDS

higher education; darkness; exile; hope

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INTRODUCTION

In times of uncertainty and upheaval, education becomes a battleground of hopes and hopelessness: some educational endeavours aim to sustain existing orders, others dare to envision transformation, and moments of hopelessness question whether any future change is possible at all. However, hope (or its absence) cannot be understood as a singular (individual) feeling but rather as a socially mediated human capacity with affective, cognitive, and action dimensions (Webb, 2013). Different varieties of hope can be present in educational contexts, ranging from patient and passive to critical and transformative, and each could be aligned with distinct pedagogical orientations (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Halpin, 2001; Webb, 2013). Their roles can diverge: some forms of hope reproduce stability, while others foster resistance and social transformation.

Besides, crisis settings offer a particularly revealing lens, because the social work of hope becomes more visible when futures are contested and conditions are unstable. Research on displaced learners demonstrates that educational contexts often act as spaces where students and teachers mobilise hope as a sustaining and future-making practice, constructing a pedagogy of belonging as a way to balance between existing reality amid instability and future-oriented dreaming of transformation (Dryden-Peterson, 2025). This form of relation to time situates hope as a crucial affective and cognitive practice through which individuals and communities orient themselves amid upheaval (Kleist & Jansen, 2016, p. 380). In that sense, hope appears as being fundamentally intertwined with crisis; it emerges (or gets lost) precisely when established temporal horizons are destabilised and when the continuity between past, present, and future can no longer be taken for granted. Tracing how hope changes, therefore, allows to explore transformations of particular phenomena (i.e., educational practice) shaped by darkness (understood here as an affective state(s) of loss, disorientation, guilt and suspended futures in exile). In other words, this study explores how educational practices are reshaped in exile, approaching hope not as the opposite of hopelessness but as something reshaped through it, asking how experiences of darkness and perceived hopelessness generate new, often more modest and present-focused, ways of making futures in education.

In order to do this, the study focuses on the exploration of education-hope interplay and takes the *temporal* dimension of exile as its point of departure. In this article, the latter is treated as an affective space of darkness, lived as loss, disorientation, suspended time, and isolation, actively shaping what education can become. Rather than assuming that educational practice unfolds *despite* these conditions, I explore how these experiences, generated by exile, exert pressure that reorders pedagogical priorities, relations, and temporal orientations. At times these transformations are deliberately cultivated; at other times they emerge accidentally, as improvisational responses to an unfolding present. In this sense, the darkness of forced displacement is approached here as a generative force of affect, co-constitutive of scholars' and students' educational practice.

That is because exile is not simply spatial displacement but an affective-temporal condition (i.e., it changes not only where one is, but how one feels, remembers, imagines the future, and experiences time itself) that profoundly reorganises a person's identity, relationships, and capacity to act and make meaning (see also, Smyslova 2024; 2026). It appears as a lived condition of 'limbo' and 'in-betweenness' that frustrates assimilation and profoundly reshapes exiled identity, as various

authors argue (Ashley & Walker, 1990; Hall, 2018). They emphasise the psychological and social impacts, such as alienation, grief, and ‘identity confusion’ of exiled, sometimes linked to depression and anxiety. In Said’s reflection (1984), exile marks an unhealable rift between the self and its true home, producing estrangement that is not only emotional but also reflects in produced knowledge and performed profession. Yet this in-betweenness also generates a uniquely productive creative condition: ‘modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees,’ Said observes, suggesting that displacement, while painful, can catalyse cultural and intellectual productivity. Thus, exile becomes a condition of radical dislocation, both spatially and temporarily, and, at the same time, ‘a potent, even enriching, motif of modern experience,’ where meaning is constantly generated through the tension of being between worlds. In this article, following Said’s reflection, I approach exile as a lived darkness, a prolonged condition of rupture and disorientation that could give rise to new forms of educational practice.

To trace the appearance of these new forms, however, I take hope as my primary analytical lens. It allows me to examine how darkness is worked through in educational practice: how exile, rather than producing only disintegration, may also become, in Said’s terms, ‘a potent’ condition through which meaning is remade and an alternative elevated orientation toward the future becomes possible, following the quote below. Thus, although hope appears as a central focus of this article, each narrative begins by foregrounding the particular force of darkness from which it emerges.

A pessimistic, negative attitude [towards what is happening]—this feeling transformed [as a result] into inspiration. I no longer have the sense that everything is bad and has always been bad and that I should just give up. In this sense, I can definitely say that learning functioned as a weekly [charge] of inspiration; that is, when there were classes and group discussions, afterwards one could clearly say that they nourished and sustained [my] activity. (Orion, student, interview)

The following chapter explores a conceptual framework for structuring the key theoretical dimensions relevant for this study.

WHAT IS HOPE? CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FROM THE BLOCHIAN PERSPECTIVE

As a point of departure, I utilise Ernst Bloch’s philosophical framework regarding the interconnections between the future and hope. I use his framework as an analytic lens to trace how various dimensions operate, shift, or are reworked when education takes place in dark conditions. Accordingly, I will successively outline three interrelated features central to Bloch’s understanding of hope: its future-orientation toward the ‘not-yet’, its agentic character as praxis, and its directional temporality toward a better, transformed future.

According to Bloch, the concept of hope is a ubiquitous presence in daily thought and is expressed through various cultural mediums, from fairy tales to grand philosophical and political utopias (Kellner, 1997); hope arises as a result of ‘the future is Not-Yet made’ (Hammond, 2017) and the breach between ‘present’ and the ‘future’ creates space for optimism, accumulating aspirations for a better existence and utopian desires for realisation. Entering this space through utopian thinking, i.e. imaginative daydreaming, one demonstrates Not-Yet-Conscious, ‘uniquely the preconscious of

what is to come, the psychic birthplace of the new' (Bloch, 1995, p. 113). According to this perspective, hope appears as something ontologically future-oriented.

This future orientation emerges through praxis: it 'exists in the struggle' (Freire, 2014, p. 105). In this sense, hope is agentic, a form of futural momentum that mobilises potentiality into actuality (Bloch, 1995; Knight & Stewart, 2016). Hope is a tendency toward action as a 'participating, co-operative process attitude' (Bloch, 1995, p. 46). In that sense, hope arises from the not-yet-conscious, which becomes a resource for agency, enabling individuals and collectives to imagine otherwise and to act toward making the otherwise-than-actual real.

Moreover, Bloch insists that hope should not be directed at the future in the abstract. It has an object: not merely 'tomorrow,' but a qualitatively better tomorrow (reflected in his understanding of concrete utopia, see Levitas, 1990). Temporal orientation of hope thus appears as transformative towards future *progress*.

As a result of this conceptual decomposition, hope in a Blochian sense appears to have three constitutive dimensions. First, it is *future-oriented*, emerging from the 'not-yet' of possible existence. Second, it is *agentic*, inseparable from praxis and collective action. Moreover, it is *transformative*, directed toward an object: the imagination of another better future. This study, therefore, asks how these constitutive Blochian dimensions of hope operate when education takes place in exile, and what transformations could occur and be traced. Hence, the focus is on two research questions:

RQ1. How are Bloch's constitutive dimensions of hope, i.e., futurity, agency, and transformative orientation, lived, challenged, and reconfigured within HE in exile?

RQ2. How, thus, do the affective pressures of exile, or 'darkness', reshape pedagogical priorities, social relations, and temporal orientations within HE in exile?

These questions will guide the analysis that follows.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the analysis of learning experience within Higher Education Projects (HEPs) created by scholars in exile after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (for more background on academic displacement and exile in the case of Russia, see Smyslova, 2026). I draw on data collected for my PhD dissertation during 2023–25 from two online and two on-site (with physical campuses) higher education projects.

All projects (n = 4) were established in exile after the outbreak of full-scale war; however, they varied in their levels of continuity and institutionalisation, i.e., the process of becoming embedded in a society and the higher education system. The following table (Table 1) briefly summarises project details and their level of formalisation. To protect participants' anonymity, all projects are referred to by pseudonyms; I use constellation names that, for me as the researcher, evoke each project's distinctive character. Throughout the article, all quotations are attributed to these invented project names rather than to any identifying institutional labels.

Table 1. Level of HEPs' formalisation and mode of delivery

		Mode of delivery	Formalisation
Project Orion	Nº1	Online only	non-formal
Project Phoenix	Nº2	Online, partially established on-site with in-person (formal) courses	non-formal, but includes some formal courses (credit-based)
Project Cassiopeia	Nº3	In-person, on campus	Formal, accredited as a faculty (within the host university)
Project Ursa Major	Nº4	Started online and then transferred to in-person on campus	Formal, accredited as a higher education institution (university)

Overall, the data consist of learning diaries (n = 41; n = 7 teaching scholars; n = 34 students) and follow-up reflexive interviews (n = 51; n = 14 teaching scholars; n = 37 students). The methods of collection employed here are framed as participatory interventions (PI), designed as an alternative to conventional 'observation' practices grounded in subject-object dynamics. PI foregrounds the co-creation of knowledge, highlighting the collaborative potential that emerges when researchers, participants, and communities engage iteratively in the research process together (Kesby, 2000; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). This approach introduces reflexivity and multiplicity of voices into the inquiry and positions research itself as a form of future-oriented action.

All data were analysed through iterative reflexive thematic analysis (ITA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Conducting the analysis as a sole researcher, I worked in cycles of close reading, coding, and theoretical reflection, with analytic notes documented throughout in ATLAS.ti. First, all materials were read closely and coded deductively using an initial coding frame derived from the study's theoretical framework. This first-round frame combined broad aspects of learning; such as learning experience (e.g., emotions, engagement, difficulty etc), learning space (e.g., atmosphere, infrastructure, social and physical arrangements, online platforms etc), pedagogical practices (e.g., facilitation, feedback, discussions etc), and learning outcomes/goal-setting (e.g., aims, perceived value, initial syllabus design etc), combined with Bloch-inspired dimensions of hope, namely temporal structure (initially coded as future-oriented), agency/praxis (initially coded as action), and rhythm/temporality (initially coded as transformative time).

Next, all coded extracts were reread to identify recurring patterns. This second part was abductive: it tested whether the initial frame adequately captured participants' lived experience and whether it allows for tracing nuances of the 'dark' experiences. Through this process, the Bloch-derived categories were refined and expanded, allowing data 'to speak'. Temporal structure, initially treated as future-oriented hope, repeatedly surfaced as present-oriented hope. Agency, initially framed as action, most often emerged as care, i.e. relational sustenance, mutual support, and companionship as the primary mode of 'doing' hope. Rhythm/temporality, initially approached as progression, repeatedly appeared as kairotic time, understood as intense, condensed moments of meaning and possibility within an unstable present. This iterative refinement resulted in three key emergent codes (present-oriented, care and kairotic) that reconfigured the original frame, allowing for the introduction of subsequent themes further (see Braun & Clarke, 2021a, on transforming codes into themes).

Third, the refined codebook was applied to the entire dataset in a second full round of coding. At this stage, analysis also focused on how the emergent hope codes intersected with the learning-aspects codes. As a result, I developed three analytic narratives (themes) that each articulate one dimension of hope's temporal modification by darkness; they were constructed through the careful selection of illustrative quotes that best captured the ideas within each dimension, while remaining grounded in participants' own language and experience. Preliminary ideas were discussed and refined with several participants who had previously expressed a wish to take a more active role in the study; some of these discussions led to extended reflexive conversations that inspired, corrected, or deepened the ideas in this article, thereby bringing participants' voices into the co-creation of the narratives.

Finally, each narrative was enriched through targeted engagement with relevant theory. It is worth noting, however, that this analysis structure is presented here primarily in retrospect – in practice, the work unfolded through multiple, sometimes messy cycles of movement between deductive coding, abductive modification, and theoretical reflection, often in different directions and not always in a linear order.

TEMPORAL TRANSFORMATION(S) OF HOPE BY THE DARKNESS (FINDINGS)

- *[Scholar] It's so hopeful to be part of this initiative!*
- *[Researcher] What exactly are you hoping for?*
- *[Scholar] I don't know really, it's just so affirming!*

Phoenix, interview, scholar

Drawing on students' and scholars' reflections, a situated modification of Bloch's three key dimensions was traceable. To structure this modification, I analytically discern three narratives: 'hope as mattering today'; 'hope as care'; 'hope as kairotic time'.

The first narrative ('hope as mattering today') presents how Bloch's *future-oriented* dimension transforms into a present-affirmative stance in the context of disorientation and uncertainty. It complicates Bloch's hope to what Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019) call 'hope in the present', emerging not as a projection toward a distant 'not-yet' future but as a mode of engagement grounded in the immediacy of lived experience.

The second narrative ('hope as care') explores how Bloch's *agentive* dimension transforms into relational care, where sustaining one another becomes a primary mode of (educational) acting. It reframes hope less as a one's capacity to anticipate and act, and more as an intersubjective practice of maintaining conditions of liveability for learning. Here, the affective pressures of exile (namely, loneliness and estrangement) reorganise the learning process, generating a collective orientation in which hope is enacted.

The third narrative ('hope as kairotic time') reflects on how Bloch's *transformative* dimension of hope could become kairotic time, in which meaning and possibility appear as dense moments within an unstable present. Related to the specificity of darkness in this case, i.e. painful reflection on implication in ongoing war, this narrative highlights how temporality is rethought. Rather than treating the future as

a horizon to be approached, this narrative foregrounds hope as a capacity to recognise and inhabit the ‘right time’ when it unexpectedly emerges.

Although I present these as three distinct narratives for analytic clarity, they are better understood as facets of a single transformation: like a prism turning in the light, where the same beam is refracted into different colours depending on the angle. Each narrative catches and amplifies a different wavelength of the same shift: what matters now (present-affirmation), how hope is done (care as praxis), and when possibility appears (kairotic moments). Read together as a story of the transformation of pedagogical priorities, social relations, and temporal orientations in the darkness of exile, these narratives describe, one by one, a reconfigured structure of hope, whose texture becomes visible through shifting refractions.

HOPE AS MATTERING TODAY

Even planning for a year now sounds pretty daunting, because a year ago I couldn't have imagined that I'd be studying [in such a different context] [...] The main thing is, I like learning. And after that – I have no idea, I don't even try to plan. (Ursa Major, interview, student)

Hope, in this account, shifts from looking ahead and projecting futures to finding the future in a deeper, more intensified engagement with the present. By reflecting on experiences of war, exile, and authoritarianism within a learning process, participants are able to reintegrate these events into their understanding of the world. This reconstruction does not resolve uncertainty or provide a clear direction forward; however, it re-establishes a minimal continuity between past, present, and future. In this sense, the future does not reappear as a defined horizon of projection, but as a latent possibility that can once again be sensed. It is at this point that hope emerges—not as a structured anticipation of what is to come, but as an affective orientation toward the possibility that the future is not closed. Yet, in the absence of concrete trajectories and in conditions where projective thinking remains constrained, this hope cannot attach itself to specific outcomes. Instead, it becomes redirected toward the present. What matters is no longer the future for which learning might prepare, but the fact that learning itself acquires value within the present moment; hence, to affirm the value of learning in the present presupposes detaching it from the demand for projection, planning, and measurable transformation. It is this reconfiguration that the student quote above conceptualises: a form of hope grounded in the experience of meaningful engagement in the here and now.

Here, hope is articulated through the intrinsic worth of study itself, and learning is framed as something that matters today, rather than a deferred investment for tomorrow. It shows how future-related disorientation (uncertainty about applicability, the impossibility of planning, and the opacity of ‘next steps’) is initially experienced as frustration; yet within HEPs, this frustration is reworked into a present-affirmative stance, where learning matters just because it becomes meaningful now.

In this way, the illegibility of the future does not simply diminish hope; it redirects it toward the intrinsic value of study as a way of inhabiting the present. Students and scholars describe reading, discussing, and creating not merely as preparation for some future reconstruction of the homeland but as valuable in its own right. One way to interpret this social togetherness is through Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's value creation framework (2020), which conceptualises learning

communities in terms of the kinds of value participants experience through participation. In this framework, immediate value refers to the experience of participation itself, i.e. the intrinsic worth of being in interaction, thinking together, feeling recognised, and enjoying the learning partnership, rather than to downstream outcomes. As the authors explicitly clarify, however, ‘immediate’ is not meant as a temporal category (p. 83). This is precisely where the present narrative, described further, extends the value lens: it highlights not only value-as-immediacy (intrinsic worth), but also a present-oriented temporal stance, in which this value is bound to an intensified now—a way of inhabiting the learning process as meaningful today when future horizons are unstable or foreclosed.

From this perspective, education does not prepare one for the future as a solution (as it disengages from the long-term horizon) but instead honours the present as meaningful in itself and appears to suspend (in several cases) progress-oriented and instrumentalised logics in favour of present affirmation, focused on present actions. The significance of intellectual debates thus lies in their capacity to affirm the meaningfulness of education as such, as the following quote depicts:

A university isn't a [space to get] profession, it's an education. That's why we read Plato, we read Aristotle, we read the Classics. For what? To be educated. (Ursa Major, interview, scholar)

What emerges is a micro-utopian moment in which education is sustained as worthy of protection precisely because it already matters, as the quotes below highlight. Besides, this intellectual engagement provides a foreground for inspiration and affective hope – a sense of joy, gratitude, and curiosity that resists reducing study to merely a utilitarian means for survival or future employment.

[I] really enjoy this education. I enjoy it when we read, discuss, interpret, and think. First and foremost, I would say it's simply the development of some kind of intellect and the accumulation of knowledge that resonates with me; I need it to feel good. (Phoenix, interview, student)

In fact, based on the results, I think I somewhat regained my faith in a brighter future, as if, because we looked at so many different examples—we studied specific stories from the very recent past, all sorts of different versions of the same things in different countries. This education gave me a sense of great diversity: that it's impossible to be like someone else, that many factors influence the choice of certain political models, strategies, traditions, and everything connected to the political sphere. And at the same time, everything changes. (Orion, interview, student)

Focus on affectivity here-and-now amplifies de-instrumentalisation of education, as the quote below illustrates; HEPs' practice (whether within the whole institution or sporadically within several courses) could therefore present 'education that takes us away from the logic of progress and proposes a logic of presence' (Korsgaard, 2024, p. 6). These reframing challenges the dominant temporalities of education under neoliberal regimes, which often emphasise skills, employability, or reconstruction (of conflicted regions) as deferred goals (for example, see Bosanquet et al., 2020).

I don't really force myself to solely believe that the knowledge I am gaining now could be used for the benefit of people and for Russia, for example. So at the moment I don't know [how it could be used]—I've decided that while I am still studying, I have the chance not to get frustrated about the fact that it's not entirely

clear where and how this knowledge can be applied. [...] This frustration doesn't discourage me [from learning]. (Orion, interview, student)

In that sense, the phenomena of HEPs could reflect what Osberg and Biesta (2021) describe as a move beyond curriculum and toward a non-instrumental theory of education. They argue that education should not be reduced to a curricular instrument designed to achieve pre-given external ends (such as employability, nation-building, or after-crisis development), but rather understood as 'an emergent phenomenon with its own unique aesthetic qualities (like art or music); a phenomenon, moreover, that does not simply serve a purpose, but generates the purpose it serves' (Osberg & Biesta, 2021, p. 57). The metaphor of emergence captures how collective intellectual life in HEPs often brings forth meaning and value that were not planned in advance – for instance, a seminar that is formally organised 'to cover the reading,' but in practice becomes something closer to an improvised ensemble: participants read together, pause to share what the text 'does' to them, and the discussion drifts into mutual recognition, humour, grief, and small acts of care. The session's value emerges in the collective doing, to restore dignity, reduce isolation, and make the present liveable enough to keep thinking ***[description based on student diary entry, Orion]***.

Education, in this non-instrumental sense, 'comes into being' when symbolic, individual, and political dimensions are coordinated in ways that do not serve an externally imposed goal but generate their own purposes (Osberg & Biesta, 2021, p. 62). Parts of HEPs reflect this very process: the symbolic realm (belonging to the knowledge 'outcasted'), the individual realm (students' self-formation through study and broad exploration of self), and the political realm (the creation of a shared intellectual space in displacement) coalesce to bring into being education as an affective, emergent entity and appears as a space that 'does not merely serve a pre-given purpose, but offers unique opportunities for engagement and hence brings with it any purpose(s) it may come to serve' (2021, p. 60), as the quote below highlights.

Even if democracy never comes to Russia, this project is 100% justified (Orion, interview, scholar)

This suggests that the uncertainty and discontinuity between the present and the future reframes the temporality of hope within HEPs; it now cannot be reduced to deferred reconstruction and tied solely to the forward horizon of the future (even if presented as such); on the contrary, it emerges as mattering now. In this sense, affective hope begins to extend Bloch's original conceptualisation: the 'not-yet' that opens space for anticipatory consciousness, projecting into what has not yet materialised (Bloch, 1995, p. 113). Expectation inserted into this gap, according to him, generates hope. Nevertheless, the lived practice of HEPs might suggest that this is not the only source of hope; rather than being solely anchored in futurity, hope here is generated through the experience of the present. As a result, hope appears as what Anderson (2006) calls an affective atmosphere, that is, less about a projected telos and 'how the circulation, and presence-absence, of hope is spaced and timed' (p. 747). By interrupting the assumption that education must derive its value from a future, darkness shifts attention to the present as a site where learning can still matter. In HEPs, then, disorientation reconditions hope, making it more closely tied to the affective, relational, and epistemic practices through which learners endure, interpret, and inhabit the present.

HOPE AS CARE

The second narrative shows how exile-generated loneliness is transformed into a practice of care. This loneliness is not merely the solitude of being alone in a new country; rather, it is an existential one specific to exile¹: a sense of being morally and politically estranged from one's own state, rendered 'damaged' or suspect by belonging to a country that has initiated an unjust war. In this disorienting condition, HEPs become spaces in which care answers the threat of isolation: co-presence, recognition, and mutual holding reassemble a liveable social world in the present, especially through open and difficult discussions. This shift also reframes Bloch's action-oriented hope: praxis is not primarily the forward-driving work of building a future utopia, but a collective practice of staying together now—an everyday, relational agency through which hope is enacted as shared endurance.

Here, the 'value' of education is in the affective atmosphere of mutual co-presence. Hope thus arises in the gestures of recognition, solidarity, and companionship that transform exile from a condition of despair into one of shared endurance. While the first narrative highlights a modification of educational goal setting (shifting from end-oriented outcomes to the immediate value of learning now), this second narrative illuminates the practice through which such present-affirmative hope is made: it is crafted, sustained, and circulated through care.

In broadly understood post-critical reading, care could be seen as 'collaborative work together [that] helps us manage the uncertainties, risks, and unknowns that shape our higher education lives in the ongoing social-economic crises' (Taylor et al. 2023, page 20). Such care may emerge from a teacher's stance toward the subject matter (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019), from the cultivation of love for the world and the preservation of that which is worth caring for (Zembylas, 2022), and, in a feminist reading, in a form of caring relations (Held, 2006). In the HEP cases, I propose to understand care as a practice of being together (hence, acknowledging feelings and conditions of each other) within the conceptual space of shared reality.

I started thinking about how learning in exile brings us all together. Being in the same context makes it easy for us to understand each other. I really enjoy this feeling of shared interest and belonging. (Phoenix, diary entry, student)

As the quote above shows, what emerges, then, is that existence within HEP is marked by both a shared experience (going underground, the impossibility of publicly articulating one's position and feelings) and shared affect (namely alienation and isolation in relation to one's perception of reality). This common ground makes it possible to create a space of community, through the cultivation of which students are able to shift their attention away from defending their own position and asserting their critique, and towards being together and caring for one another (without abandoning critique, however). This sense of togetherness, organised around an oppositional, constructed anti-war shared reality, becomes the axis around which communal bonds are strengthened, in ways that can fuel care in a post-critical sense, as the quote below tells.

We wanted to create something very flexible, where everyone would teach their blocks one after another, weaving into the theme of the war... or not necessarily the

¹ In this narrative, exile appears as both a spatial dislocation (a physical) and as a conceptual one, 'inner exile', a practice of going underground while physically staying in the country

war itself, but a kind of chthonic horror: a situation where you don't even know how to name what is happening [...]. We wanted to cover all these aspects, gently handing the students over from one to the next [scholar], so that over the course of a year they would develop new ways of speaking about what is going on [...], more thoughtful formulations, so they could understand where they themselves are, what they feel, what is happening around them, how they relate to it, and how they are ready to respond. So that they wouldn't fall into despair. And so that the teachers, too, would arrive at something similar. (Phoenix, interview, scholar)

Moreover, in an educational space that is ontologically oriented toward cognitive processes, hope becomes inseparable from knowing. Understanding, in this sense, is not confined to disciplinary comprehension (gaining knowledge in the broad sense) but extends to a reflective grasp of one's own position, feelings, and trajectory within unfolding events. Learning can therefore function as a beam of light, orienting through darkness: it clarifies what is happening, helps to name and sort experiences, and offers orientation when the broader landscape feels illegible. In this way, education in the form of co-presence that deliberately stares into darkness and dares to work with it could become a source of hope, as the quote below shows, situating the learner within a world that would otherwise feel disorienting.

If you feel that you belong and you get answers to your questions, even the uncomfortable ones, [...] if you receive a response, that frees you up and gives you [...] support in making sense of the fact that yes, the world is changing—but there are also changes in a positive direction. And so that sense of ease, openness, and breadth of perspective is very important. (Phoenix, interview, student)

I value the discussion format of the group because it is important for me that students can speak freely and communicate with one another, overcoming the feeling of intellectual loneliness and experiencing the support of like-minded peers. We discussed how crucial—and at the same time frightening—it is to recognise violent tendencies within ourselves and to resist the dehumanisation of others. (Orion, diary entry, student)

In the context of this study, the isolation and estrangement associated with exile are closely bound up with a sense of implication (in Rothberg's (2019) reading): a painful entanglement with an aggressive regime that has launched a war and destroyed thousands of lives. This affective knot can be profoundly damaging, producing a form of 'shame-saturated distress' (Mohamed, 2015) that is difficult to endure. Yet, tracing hope within HEPs shows how co-presence and the construction of a shared space through relational care can help transform these feelings into productive reflection — if, however, they are embraced rather than avoided, a case I explore elsewhere.

HOPE AS KAIROTIC TIME

The final narrative highlights a movement from linear, teleological time to kairotic time, understood as moments of intensity, rupture, or redemption in the present (Cocker, 2015). Unlike chronological, sequential 'clock time', which is measured, scheduled, and organised through timetables, deadlines, and routines, kairos denotes an opening in which the present is experienced as dense with possibility — as lived time. While the previous narrative highlighted how care enables a problematic positionality (both morally and organisationally) to be reworked into productive

reflection by constructing space of mutual support and shared reality, this narrative traces how hope appears as the ‘right moment’, drawing attention to the mechanism through which this transformation becomes possible.

Education is deeply entangled with chronos and, in many respects, functions as one of the first social sites where we learn to inhabit it: ‘Early school days may be the first instances when children [...] experience their life being retold through formalized “clock time” on an ongoing basis’ (Goble, 2020, p. Chapter 14, para 19). Time in formal education is not merely an ordering device; it becomes a normalised routine that is introduced, controlled, and rehearsed until it feels natural—an embodied practice of moving through the day in units and sequences that continues long after finishing formal studying. In this sense, schooling trains subjects into chronos as a dominant temporal orientation.

Kairos, by contrast, names a lived experience of time that breaks with chronological flow: an event-based, intensified ‘now’ in which meaning and possibility surge in ways that cannot be planned or contained. Van Manen describes such moments as ‘pure, perfect, unpredictable, and uncontrollable’ moments that nevertheless ‘possess possibility’ (2015, p. 52). In educational settings, kairos can ‘break through’ ordinary life and override everyday routine: it may eclipse the subject matter being taught and even the internal logic of schooling itself. These moments can be so saturated with significance that they far exceed any curricular outcomes set for the class. Importantly, kairos challenges not only what is learned but also how learning unfolds: the assumption that time must be spent efficiently can suddenly become meaningless in the face of what the moment demands—staying, attending, responding, and making time now. In this way, kairos reveals education as an event that generates its own purpose and tempo in the present.

Focusing on the social sciences and humanities, HEPs eventually arrive at the tensions produced by historical knowledge, which call for a reckoning with implications (in the current war and more broadly, in the violence of Russian history). If the educational space is bound up with a process of working through (if it slows down, lingers, and becomes ‘stuck’ in moments saturated with the possibility of reflection, self-awareness, grieving, anger, and so forth), then the ability to experience such a moment fully brings relief. The possibility of synchronising the inner processes of experience with the rhythm of learning, reorienting it from externally governed chronos towards the inner dynamics of kairos, gives rise to an experience of hope; kairos thus matters because engagement with difficult histories cannot be continuous or linear, but occurs in dense moments of readiness, similarly to what the next quote highlights.

Among other things, in class we discussed that justice does not really exist at all, not that it is selective, but that it simply does not exist. It felt to me like a session of existential psychotherapy (Orion, student, diary)

Within HEPs, such kairos moments manifest through several mediums. First, they appear as disruptions, delays, and improvised deviations that alter chronos time; interruptions of the expected sequence and pacing of the class. The usual logic of the educational process (scheduled starts, regulated duration, orderly endings, and predictable rhythm) is repeatedly modified, and this modification is not simply accepted by students; it is frequently initiated and led by participants, who extend discussions, slow the tempo, linger with what has surfaced or reorganise the session around what feels urgent and meaningful in the moment, as in a quote below.

The questions [during the discussion] were really interesting, much broader than the lecture topic and easier for me to grasp. I had planned to log off after the theoretical part [i.e., leave the online session], but I couldn't pull myself away; I ended up having to go to the shop almost at night 😊. (Orion, diary entry, student)

A similar contrast emerges in participants' reflections, as shown in the quote below, on the course's shift from an informal to a formal mode (following accreditation). In this account, the earlier stage is remembered as more vivid and 'alive', as a chaotic process organised around spontaneous events and emergent needs, whereas increasing formalisation brings the temporality of *chronos*, altering how the learning experience feels.

Honestly, I can see that no matter how informal the learning was in the first semester [and that was exactly what I liked], with each month it's becoming more and more formal—and personally, I'm not very happy about that. Somehow it turned out that I felt really comfortable in the chaos, but now it's sometimes genuinely hard (Ursa Major, student, interview)

The second medium is a form of lingering: staying with moments of intensity, whether prompted by a specific event in a session or by the course as an overarching lived experience. Pedagogically, it could be seen as *kairosophy*, even if established unintentionally: lessons of time that resist commodification and reposition education as 'un-destined and unfinished time' (Masschelein, 2011, as cited in Papastephanou, 2014, p. 719). Rather than moving on according to the expected tempo of instruction, participants describe being 'held' by what unfolds: affect, connection, or insight stretches time, making the moment (or the course itself) feel fuller than its scheduled duration and difficult to leave behind, as the following quotes illustrate.

[Quoted before] I started thinking about how learning in exile brings us all together. [...] I really don't want this course to end. (Phoenix, diary entry, student)

Probably one of the most important sessions of the course for me personally. The session was more than a month ago, but it still hasn't let go. (Orion, diary entry, student)

Moreover, the notion of *kairos* could be understood as a concept of 'critical timing' (Goble, 2020), in which education itself appears possible and meaningful. For instance, a discussion of *kairos* in medical education suggests that developing a sensibility to the opportune moment involves learning how to respond proportionally to uncertainty, to act when circumstances call for reflection, dialogue, or re-orientation, and to recognise when a situation becomes transformative rather than merely routine (Kumagai & Naidu, 2020). HEPs, however, can themselves be understood as such moments of 'critical timing', not simply because they occasionally generate *kairotic* episodes within classes, but because participation in them is lived as an ongoing attunement to *kairos*. Under conditions of continued political crisis and displacement, the ordinary experience of time is often fractured: stable routines organised by *chronos* are disrupted, and what remains are interruptions, delays, and sudden turns rather than a predictable rhythm. In this context, temporal existence shifts into a mode of tracking the opportune moment; both pedagogically (for scholars, sensing when it is appropriate to act and how) and existentially (for students, calibrating their learning moments). As a result, disorientation of time reworked into a tense expectancy for *kairos*, where education becomes less a steady progression and more

a preparation for recognising and inhabiting the right moment to reflect, rework and relearn difficult histories and complex positionalities.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER REFLECTIONS

In this article, following Said's reflection, I approach exile as a lived darkness, a prolonged condition of rupture and disorientation that could give rise to new forms of educational practice.

Assuming exile's darkness as a generative force, this article has traced how the affective states of learning in exile/authoritarianism (uncertainty, loneliness, estrangement, disruption of normalised routine and grief/anger towards difficult histories) might change pedagogical routine in HEPs. To discern this change, this article focused analytically on the transformation of hope.

In response to the first research question (*how are Bloch's constitutive dimensions of hope lived and challenged within HE in exile?*), the study showed that hope in HEPs might be reconfigured under the pressures of exile. Its three Blochian dimensions could be lived in modified temporal forms, where futurity may become a present-affirmative orientation in which study matters now, especially when the future cannot be clearly imagined. Agency may take the form of relational praxis, where care, co-presence, and mutual recognition sustain the conditions in which learning remains possible. And transformative orientation may appear as kairotic temporality, where meaning and possibility emerge through dense moments of reflection, interruption, and shared attention within an unstable present.

In response to the second research question (*how, thus, do the affective pressures of exile, or 'darkness', reshape pedagogical priorities, social relations, and temporal orientations within HE in exile?*), these temporal transformations of hope suggest that exile's darkness could reorder educational practice in the following way. Pedagogical priorities may shift toward making the present liveable, thinkable, and meaningful. Moreover, learning processes may become grounded in relational infrastructures of care, dialogue, and shared endurance. Social relations may be reorganised around co-presence and the construction of a shared reality in which difficult histories, guilt, grief, anger, and estrangement can be collectively held and worked through. In this sense, the article suggests that the difficult affects of exile might be metabolised in educational practice into a distinct, non-instrumental form of hope: an emergent capacity to endure, relate, and keep making meaning when future horizons remain unstable.

Consequently, beyond education studies, this article contributes to futures studies by reopening a more fundamental question: what are the constitutive principles of hope as a future-oriented capacity? If the darkness of exile deforms lived temporality so profoundly that hope shifts from a future-oriented, agentic and transformative orientation toward a present-oriented mutual care, then a conceptual problem emerges: does this remain hope in any robust sense, or does it become something else – a mode of endurance, attentiveness, or relational livability without a future horizon? Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019) gesture toward this problem by proposing the concept of 'hopeness': a form of hope without a hoped-for, where hope is no longer anchored in a concrete object or plan but persists as an affirmative stance toward existence in the present. From a futures studies perspective, this temporal modification could be seen as a shift from futures as projections and pathways to

futures as conditions of possibility; in this case, cultivated through care, kairotic attunement, and the maintenance of meaning under uncertainty. Read alongside Adams et al. (2009)'s account of anticipation as an affective 'regime of being in time' (p. 247) oriented towards the Not-Yet, Zamojski et al.'s notion of hopeness shifts the focus from expectation to openness. While conventional anticipation (what Miller (2018) frames as 'Anticipation for the Future (AfF)') presupposes a finitely temporal relation to an imagined future that will sooner or later be either fulfilled or will disappoint, hopeness names a more fragile, present-oriented condition in which the future remains indeterminate (hence, unimaginable?) and even objectless, yet still experientially possible. In other words, hopeness refers to what is left when one can no longer organise their lives around clear expectations or future plans but one still keeps a small sense that different futures might be possible. This openness is sustained through everyday practices and seems to align with what Miller refers to as 'Anticipation for Emergence (AfE)' (Miller, 2018; Miller & Sandford, 2019). These reflections open an agenda for further research: to examine how crises produce alternative modes of being with different kinds of futures, where it is less about expecting and more about sustaining the relational and affective infrastructures through which any future can become thinkable again, by activating what Amsler and Facer (2017) refer to as critical anticipatory consciousness.

Besides, it is important to note that the shift described in this study is not the result of a deliberate pedagogical design (except for two courses in which scholars formulated a present-oriented modification as a deliberate focus). HEPs do not explicitly *aim* to reconfigure hope; rather, the reorientation arises in practice, almost incidentally, through the ordinary rhythms of study, and dialogues structured around what matters. What can be seen, then, is not a strategic redirection of educational purpose but an emergent dynamic: hope that takes shape in the present through the lived experience of crisis. Yet, while this happens unintentionally, it could be further reflected into more intentional teaching and learning.

Recent scholarship has argued that hope could (and should) be approached as learnable content – for example, students may analyse, name, and regulate anticipatory emotions in relation to uncertainty (Ojala, 2017). Decomposing the pedagogical process through the lens of temporally transformed hope also makes visible what can be taught (or at least intentionally cultivated) as the educational conditions that sustain and even construct hope in the dark. First, this is a matter of rules and spatial organisation: introducing norms that prioritise reflective process (rather than strict performance and outcomes), beginning each course with collective arrival (ice-breaking, introductions, orienting routines), and building in regular practices of joint work, especially open, moderated discussion that legitimises uncertainty and creates room for 'uncomfortable questions. In this sense, hope appears as a mode of participation: by repeatedly experiencing a space where one can speak, be heard, and think with others under conditions of instability, students can be fuelled with an uplifting, inspiring state. This implies that the ability to host and sustain such dialogue, i.e., facilitating disagreement, holding ambiguity, and protecting dignity while inviting critique, can be treated as a distinct competence (for both teachers as facilitators and students as participants), deliberately developed within educational settings.

Second, sustaining this kind of intensified 'right-time' learning requires what van Manen (2015) calls pedagogical tact: an educator's capacity to perceive what the moment is calling for and to respond proportionally, even when this means deviating from the planned sequence of activities. Cultivating such a mode of learning,

therefore, involves a deliberate practice of teacherly presence: making room to linger, to pause, to stay with what has surfaced and to let meaning unfold even. Moreover, such competence in pedagogical tact presupposes recognising this mode of learning as legitimate and valuable in its own right, rather than dismissing it as aimless drifting—an underachievement measured against the normative, outcome-driven script of ‘proper’ education.

However, the idea of potentially purposeful design raises a downside. The vulnerable position of students in exile highlights tension between the present-oriented orientation of learning within HEPs and the demands of the external context. Having left their home country, many enter a turbulent process of adaptation: they must adjust to new social and cultural environments, acquire or transform competencies for employability, and secure the means of survival in unfamiliar settings. Within this situation, their expectations toward HEPs (or education in general) can be conflicting. On the one hand, they value and affirm the present-oriented character of study as meaningful in itself. Simultaneously, they can experience frustration due to the absence of a clear trajectory for their future lives and careers in the host country.

This frustration is amplified by the wider neoliberal mode of education, which equates educational ‘value’ with measurable achievement, demonstrable skills, and legible outcomes. In such a regime, time is treated as a scarce resource that must translate into visible progression (through content covered, assessments completed, competencies acquired), so that learning can be justified to institutions, funders, and, crucially, to students themselves as an ‘investment’. The pressure to make education count in this way sits uneasily with the HEPs ethos of present-affirmative study and with the kairotic interruptions that often carry the deepest meaning. As Goble puts it, ‘Under neoliberalism, kairos moments may take place but only if they do not inconvenience the educational system’s operating structure’ (2020, Chapter 14, para 61). When temporal modifications are permitted only on the condition that they do not disrupt the system, the very educational moments that sustain possibility (lingering, digression, collective processing, staying with what matters) risk being reframed as inefficiency, deviation, or failure to ‘deliver’.

This highlights a persistent tension for learners in exile: HEPs may offer a non-instrumental space where care, belonging, and meaning are generated in the present (even if unintentionally), yet students simultaneously face external demands that require credentials, employability narratives, and proof of forward motion. Designing HEPs in exile, therefore, means explicitly negotiating this tension: protecting spaces for kairos and care while also acknowledging students’ material needs. In this sense, the downside of present-oriented hope is that it can be difficult to inhabit without guilt or anxiety under these neoliberal conditions, especially when survival depends on producing legible ‘progress’. The article thus closes with an unresolved question that HEPs bring into conversation: how can educational practices cultivate kairotic, care-based education (that is so needed to face and reflect on difficult histories as well) without being forced back into the narrow temporalities of performance and optimisation that exile so often makes unavoidable?

DATA STATEMENT

The data for this article were collected as part of my PhD research, undertaken at the University of Cambridge; the data were collected in 2023–2024.

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