Article

Managing Student Mobility during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Immobility Turn in Internationalized Learning?

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Abstract: This article looked at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the management of internationalized learning, and the disruption to the transitions to adulthood among students reliant upon the freedom to move within and between countries. We started by outlining the place of mobility in transitions, connected to debates about the 'Mobility Turn,' with particular relevance to developments in the European context, including the expansion of successive Erasmus student mobility programmes. Following the start of the pandemic, we hypothesize that we are now experiencing an 'Immobility Turn' in youth transitions, which, even if temporary, has the potential to disrupt personal and professional development of many young people in problematizing stays abroad at foreign universities. To explore this issue, we drew on evidence from Portugal, discussing issues including the measures taken by host institutions to maintain a safe environment and secure the integrity of educational courses for their international students, thus keeping open their mobile transition pathways. This research also enables us to illustrate the changes in the materiality of internationalized higher education that took place during the pandemic, and the challenges facing academic staff members. In conclusion, we look towards the future of mobile transitions, recognizing the important role played by staff members, and look towards future developments, including the heightened use of virtual mobility platforms for students with the potential to further transform the meaning of internationalized tertiary education.

Keywords: transitions; mobility; COVID-19; international students; Erasmus; Portugal

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the social and economic situations of many people, with serious implications for their physical and mental health, as well as complicating aspects of life previously taken for granted. In specific regard to young people, this includes a problematization of certain aspects of the transition to adulthood, in disrupting learning and employment, particularly during the more intensive periods of lockdown. Although we can say that this has been a general experience, there are more specific concerns that arise among sections of the youth population who had become dependent upon the freedom to travel and engage in intercultural learning activities. International students are an obvious case in point, namely young people who relocate to another country to enhance their educational profiles and, ultimately, their careers.

While the impact of the pandemic on international students has been considerable, as we have explored in prior publications, much of what has taken place in their lives is self-evident and, hopefully, temporary, meaning that their transitions are likely to be delayed rather than curtailed [1–3]. While this may be due in part to students' resilience, we might also want to consider the role played by higher education institutions, which have faced practical difficulties in hosting students during the pandemic, many of whom have enhanced support needs.

In this article, we considered this situation, focusing on the Portuguese context, using evidence gathered from university staff members to illustrate the challenges and controversies that have arisen at this time in their work as mobility custodians. While we do not know if the transformations in international student life will be temporary or permanent, our prior research with mobile students suggested that we might be moving towards we have termed an 'immobility turn' [1]. In the discussion that follows, we develop this investigation further, with a focus on the institutional level and efforts to address the challenges implicit in such a turn, also considering what this change might mean for our understanding of transitions.

2. Mobile and Immobilized Transitions

We start with some insights from the field of youth sociology, including debates about mobility in transitions, enabling us to re-connect with our prior work on higher education students. Prior studies have emphasized the role played by geographical circulation in democratizing and diversifying transition pathways through participation in programmes such as the European Commission supported Erasmus platform, complementing individually driven forms of migration [4–6]. While the value of this mobility, or mobilities, has been questioned, not least by our own analysis of transient students [7], moving abroad to study is generally seen through a positive lens, offering a means to circumnavigate social and economic disadvantage and take advantage of opportunities not available closer to home. At a more abstract level, there is also the prospect of gaining and strengthening a number of key aspects of mobility capital, especially interculturality and international employability, through participating in learning programmes that bring together young people from a range of national and regional backgrounds.

The prospect of synergy between social and spatial mobility, energizing the transition to adulthood, helps explain why in the decades preceding the pandemic, 'mobility' came to be seen as a kind of magical solution to overcome many of the limitations that face young people in regard to accessing educational and occupational opportunities, especially in the European Union, with many able to take advantage of its relatively porous borders. In regard to universities, their place within this framework exponentially expanded, moving from hosting handfuls of students each year towards thousands, with these institutions seeing international students as an important source of revenue and contributors to internationalization profiles.

A growing acceptance, or dependence, on mobility also explains why the immobility associated with the pandemic came as a profound a shock to so many. For students, this meant disruption to study programmes and social life; for universities, it meant heightened costs and lower profits. In engaging with mobility, and immobility, in transitions we hence have quite a convoluted situation due to the entanglement of economic and existential imperatives, disruption to studies and to ontological development, and, ultimately, questions about the future integrity of internationalized learning programmes. At the same time, academic staff members found themselves charged with supporting enlarged populations of incoming students, and while some were relatively well-off, many others lacked social and economic resources, meaning that when the pandemic struck, they were left in vulnerable positions, increasingly dependent on their universities to help them cope with the challenges that emerged during the periods of lockdown. We might then say that there was a change in the materiality of internationalized learning, and by association, a transformation of mobile transitions.

2.1. Transitions in Theory

In theorizing mobile transitions, we need to look back towards the canon of youth sociology, and the 'transition' metaphor, which has been used to describe movement between different stages of life and the passing of major milestones: completing full-time education and training, finding stable employment, forming durable relationships, and establishing an independent household. These transitions elements have been extensively

theorized, especially during the latter decades of the twentieth century, referred to as the 'late modern' era [8], with particular emphasis on instability and unpredictability arising from encounters with barriers that impede the exercise of young people's agency [9]. We can hence say that transitions have an element of pre-problematization, albeit focused more on certain, relatively exceptional, life situations rather than the mainstream youth experience.

The academic popularity of transition theories can be explained by the simplicity of the metaphor and the familiarity of the basic paradigm. Key transition tropes can be traced back to ideas promoted by [10] and contemporaneous authors, including the proposition that the (adult) self is reflexively constituted; people construct their lives and identities in an incremental fashion, out of the gradual accumulation of an often-eclectic range of life experiences. The demands of reflexivity create an impetus for individuals to seek-out the most personally meaningful and professionally valid opportunities, making the individual a consumer of higher education and specialized training products. With different gradients of value attached to experiential activities, we have an extremely effective system for social inclusion and exclusion, related to the competition dynamic arising from the fight to gain access to the most sought-after opportunities, revealing the late capitalist conditions that youth engaging in late-modern transitions found themselves embroiled in. The unavoidable inequalities, and the difficulty of knitting together existential bricolage, also helps explain why individualized transitions become protracted and fragmented, non-linear, and unpredictable, with 'frequent breaks, backtracking and the blending of statuses' [11]. That adulthood is built *once piece at a time*, explaining the variability in durations of individual transitions, not to mention the obvious fact that not everyone has the same starting position or the same level of inherited social and economic capital.

As if this were not complicated enough, transitions become even more fragmented and diversified by the addition of a spatial dimension; young people now face not only the question of what do to with their lives, but also where to do it [12]. This development is possibly grounded in the belief that globalizing opportunities, especially in higher education, would increase choice and make obtaining specialist credentials easier. However, with mobile transitions, the possibilities may increase, but the problems multiply, the most pressing of which relates to the generating of precarity due to the relative lack of support on offer to the most vulnerable, and the high cost of living, studying, and working abroad. This is arguably most apparent within the European context, where mobility in higher education has become commonplace, but also pervades other global regions where mobility is, if not mandatory, highly advisable [13]. As such, mobility has moved from a relatively niche experience for youth to becoming an integral part of higher education, specialist training, and even employment, representing a huge expansion of the transition pathways to the point at which the idea of moving abroad for short or long periods has started to appear somewhat *jejune*.

2.2. The Mobility Turn and Transitions

The desirability of international opportunities helps explain the massive expansion of programmes such as Erasmus that occurred in the pre-pandemic decades, and exponential rises in numbers of international students. We might also want to acknowledge the heightened commercialization of higher education [14], with universities moving away from their traditional roles as knowledge generators towards being simply wealth creators, or extractors, if we want to be cynical. As mentioned previously, international students became important after they became a significant revenue stream and symbols of a university's international profile, providing both a financial boon and symbolic benefits not found with domestic students. It is also apparent that in regard to this expansionism, there is no shared or comprehensive institutional framework guiding the development of internationalized higher education, with the main impetus seemingly increasing enrolment numbers to increase profits, a development that may be appealing to universities but risks creating unsustainable and unbalanced levels of incoming and outgoing mobility. We might then

say that since there is no 'handbook' on how best to manage this population, it is up to institutions to work out what to do, extending to issues such as the pastoral care of their international student populations.

At a theoretical level, we might, however, say that these developments reflect broader trends in sociological theories that sought to make sense of new forms of globalization and the heightened circulation of people and goods across borders, leading to the idea of a 'mobility turn' and the establishment of a 'new mobilities paradigm' [15–17]. This perspective sought to capture a sense of fluidity and the lack of spatial fixity in global flows of people and capital, enabled by the expansion of communications and transportation links. However, alongside potential benefits from the multiplication of mobility, or 'mobilities' [18], certain reservations were noted, especially the impact on the natural environment from the expansion of non-essential travel. We can nevertheless view the mobile transitions idea as reflecting a broadening in scope of the field of opportunities for reflexive life project-building, also becoming part of the greater project of the diversifying capital accumulation that came to be associated with politically hegemonic neo-liberalism [19].

What emerged was a diversified field of opportunities for those seeking to spatialize their transitions via internationalized higher education. In more prosaic terms, two distinct 'product lines' could be identified, referred to somewhat literally as 'credit mobility' and 'diploma mobility', covering short duration exchanges and more open-ended processes of student migration respectively [5]. Individual young people, hence, had different ways of mobilizing their transitions, able to move abroad for a semester or several years at a time, with the possibility of participating in multiple mobility episodes, sporadically or one after another across the youth phase, thus assembling for themselves a de facto youth migration trajectory due to the accumulated length of time spent abroad [20].

In numerical terms, both these modalities appear to have expanded in popularity in the decade prior to the pandemic. Looking at statistics relating to the Portuguese context, figures published by the European Commission relating to participation in its Erasmus+ programme suggest that during the lifetime of its first mandate, starting in 2014 and ending 2020, the number of annual participants from Portugal rose from 8047 to 15,734, although these figures also include staff exchanges [21]. With participation in Erasmus appearing to have almost doubled at this time, data from the OECD suggests more steady growth in the number of fee-paying overseas students enrolled in Portuguese universities, from a relatively low base in 2010, when less than three percent of all enrolments were from overseas, to a proportion of almost 10 percent in 2019 [22]. This means that at Portuguese universities, as many as one in ten of all students may be from abroad, and this does not include the smaller but still significant numbers of incoming students participating in Erasmus and similar programmes.

2.3. An Immobility Turn?

These remarks about the growth of the international student population take us to the present day, with the pandemic still raging as we write in early 2022, having now entered a fifth wave in many European countries. At the start of the public health crisis in March 2020, with the mass curtailment of international travel, we could certainly talk about an 'immobility turn' in a very literal sense. Two years on, mobility has returned to a certain degree, but remains tentative, and travel remains less fluid and more convoluted due to problems with restarting full-scale aviation and the on-going reluctance of many people to travel. Leaving aside the question of numbers circulating, the value of mobility during the pandemic for groups such as international students also comes into question. For example, interculturality and international employability are hard to generate at times when there are limited opportunities for social activities, and a geo-demographically narrower range of young people participating in exchanges.

In regard to what we know about the collateral effects of this immobility turn from prior studies, during the initial lockdown period of Spring 2020, research looking at the impact of the pandemic on international students in Portugal, including both credit mobility

exchanges and more settled student migrants, illustrated the extent of the transformation in international student life during the rapid shutdown of society, including the closure of university facilities, leading to prolonged domestic confinement [1–3,23].

Bearing in mind the theoretical focus of this article, and insights from our prior work that emphasize the relatively brittle nature of the experience of moving to another country to enhance personal and professional development [12], being cut off from many essential forms of emotional and economic support, making mobile transitions 'naturally' precarious, we can see that considerable emphasis is placed upon the task of ensuring that mobile transitions can continue, even at a time when the internationalized learning experience is somewhat compromised by the collapse in conviviality during the periods of lockdown. In practice, this means more work for host institutions, explaining why we focused on staff members rather than students in this article as a means of gaining a different perspective on this issue.

3. Methodological Approach

The pandemic obviously creates new research imperatives, raising questions about how mobile transitions are to be managed by host institutions during a public health emergency. This includes the extent to which universities recognize the difficulties experienced by international students at this time; did they, for example, realize the severity of the situation and the limitations of online teaching? Furthermore, in regard to the logistics of hosting, did they feel compelled to maintain large numbers of incoming students due to a dependency on the money they bring via tuition fees and European funds?

To look at these issues, we conducted fieldwork between September 2020 and January 2021, adopting a qualitative approach, suitably adapted to pandemic conditions, with this research conducted specifically for the purposes of this article. Given that the questions were relatively straightforward, we did not adopt a theoretical framework. The main objective was to document the unfolding situation, and the efforts being made by staff members to preserve the integrity of learning programmes, including the provision of support to students who needed emotional and economic support, and more direct assistance in regard to maintaining communications with their families at home. We conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom with individuals in public universities from across Portugal with responsible for the management of student mobility at these institutions, engaging with the maximum number of cases. This involved engaging with representatives of 9 out of 13 Portuguese public universities (the remaining 4 deciding not to participate), including representation from all of the administrative regions of Portugal (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characterization of case study universities 2019/2020.

	A	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**	**H**	**I**
Enrolments	7869	30,610	8047	10,938	22,537	7189	20,831	6594	2217
Percentage of International students 2019/2020	4%	20%	26%	8%	12%	8%	7.2%	24%	6%
Number of Erasmus students 2019/2020	335	1500	483	541	1.662	192	1067	232	145
Number of Erasmus students 2020/2021	66	537	173	261	849	35	493	47	95

Appropriate ethical considerations were observed in the conduct of the research, explaining the use of Zoom to avoid engaging in in-person contacts, and prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained from each of the participants. Additionally, the confidentiality of the information obtained was assured, with all names anonymized in this text. All interviews were recorded, translated, and transcribed by the authors to facilitate analysis and interpretation of the material.

4. Analysis

For students and staff in university institutions, the pandemic was a massive shock, coming after a long period of relatively untroubled expansion in various forms of geographical mobility. While international students experienced immediate change in relation to their learning and living situations, host institution staff members faced a range of different challenges arising from the transformation of academic life and expansion of bureaucratic burdens, simultaneously addressing health and safety concerns at their universities. In looking at the immobility turn in universities, we hence have to take into account the novelty of this situation, and the lack of time and resources for safeguarding international students. In the discussion that follows, we look at the procedures that were adopted within institutions, moving on to consider another institutional perspective, that of the European Commission, during the early months of the pandemic, and ending this analysis with discussion of the role played by online teaching platforms and virtual mobility.

4.1. Institutional Responses

While some universities in Portugal have been participating in various iterations of the Erasmus programme since its inception in 1987, and hosting migrant students for an even longer time, other institutions are more recent arrivals in the field of internationalized higher education [24]. As noted in Table 1, the numbers of overseas enrolments at each university also differs markedly, with incoming students obviously gravitating towards the more established institutions, meaning the 'new' universities tend to have smaller numbers of mobile students. As such, some institutions have more experience, and more experienced staff, in regard to managing student mobility, an issue that became apparent during the course of conducting our research. This dichotomy seems to have been of particular importance in defining the pandemic response during the first waves of the pandemic. Universities experienced in hosting students viewed them as a vulnerable group that needed to be looked after, while less experienced institutions tended to see the student body, national and international, as a singular community, with everyone given more or less the same level of attention.

The divergence is illustrated by the following two interview extracts, representing what might be termed a pro-active student-centered approach and fulfillment of the minimum requirements respectively:

We were particularly aware that international students were a vulnerable group because they are away from their families. We offered them support in all different spheres: academic, for the classes, and in terms of broader infrastructure, the canteens and student dorms were open and psychological counselling available. We gave special attention to students' doubts about going back home or staying to finish their semester abroad here. We also tried to keep in touch with students' families, aiming at keep them aware of all the decisions the university was taking. (University B)

When the State of Emergency was implemented in Portugal, we were fairly ok with our students here, because the situation in Portugal was much better than in other countries: Italy, France, Spain or Germany. That the first wave was light compared to what had happened in other countries meant that our concern with the international students who were here was not critical, because we knew that they were better here than there. If they wanted to leave, they knew they could go as during the lockdown their classes were all online and they could follow the classes online here or whenever they were. (University G)

In regard to the former interviewee's account, we can see that a major effort was made by the university to address the international students' specific needs, with a large degree of flexibility in regard to managing what was a difficult and stressful situation. Meanwhile, the second interviewee appears to downplay the impact of the pandemic, feeling that the students were actually better off in Portugal since it was relatively unaffected by the first wave of the pandemic compared with other countries. We can however infer that the

amount of support one received as an international student might be something of a lottery, depending on the policies in place at the host university.

Lest we sound too judgmental about the latter interviewee, we should point out that the smaller-sized universities often lacked the resources, or the facilities, that larger institutions possessed, explaining their pragmatism, and there were concerns about health and safety at all institutions, especially in regard to maintaining the psychological well-being of students during lockdown. We have numerous accounts, reflecting this position:

> *Students' main difficulties were regarding anxiety, because the classes were suspended on March 20 and the response was not immediate; it was necessary to transit to the new configuration, and they were also very worried about how they were going to be evaluated, 'If I am not at the university, how is it going to be?' They were demanding quick answers at a time when we were still learning and looking for answers for these situations, for some of which there were no answers.* (University F)

> *So, they were feeling psychologically pressured as they were isolated; as they were not able to continue with their normal activities. (. . .) They really had the urge to talk. The mobility students are in a different country, and suddenly they see themselves confined in their dorms.* (University H)

In looking at the immediate response to the pandemic, we can already see that there has been recognition that learning processes, formal and informal, were not continuing as usual. We can therefore deduce that the quality of the mobility experience was impacted, alongside these students having to cope with the more general challenges associated with the most intensive periods of lockdown, including feelings of anxiety and isolation. Reflecting on what this means for the mobile transitions of the students, the impression created is one of standstill, with the capacity to form social bonds with other travelers severely limited, suggesting a more insular, even introverted, form of learning taking the place of anticipated social activities.

4.2. Pastoral Care

These initial reflections suggest that for host institutions, their responsibilities greatly enlarged in regard to pastoral care for overseas students, and at a time when academic staff faced a range of other pandemic-related issues, not least of which was the preparation and delivery of their own classes and participating in meetings via Zoom. In regard to the levels of support needed, and provided, there were differences between mobility students and those studying in Portugal for the entirety of a university course. Erasmus students were, in some cases, been domiciled together, and could therefore mutually support one another, but individual student migrants tended to be left to fend for themselves, albeit in some cases being able to compensate through having attained a degree of settlement in the host community, including a few contacts with local people.

In looking at the demands on staff members, unlike students, they had new responsibilities created by the government-mandated public health measures that aimed to limit the spread of the virus. This included the adaptation of university accommodations to ensure compliance with the law:

> *One of the first actions we took was to ensure they had a good and safe place to stay. So, in some cases, they were taken from the student dorm they were in because it would have to close because there weren't many students left, as most of the national students who were in the dorms went back home. Therefore, we found appropriate installations for them. (...) We are also making sure that they have enough food in their fridges, and we would take different products every week, according to the number of students who were in each dorm. (...) some students were also having financial problem to pay the tuition fees. Some of their families lost their income sources, as you know, international students' tuition fee is higher than national one. So, we started a solidarity action that both the university staff (administrative and professors) could donate to as external entities to the university. So, we were able to raise a substantial amount that was later distributed among the students*

according to their needs. Each student must have received around 500 euros. (...) We also allowed the students to renegotiate their payments with the university, including those who were already in debt. (...) There was also psychological counselling on offer, as there was a huge demand for this. (University C)

Along with changes to material conditions, we can see that financial interventions were also needed for the most in need international students, including reduced tuition fees and lower dormitory charges. Another practical, and more general, practice through which host institutions helped their students was in relation to improving communications and updating technology, enabling them to keep connected with their host universities during the period of confinement.

Additional to the normal communication channel via email, we put in place 13 new phone lines to attend via skype for only the international students; as there were many doubts and questions on their side (. . .). A whole new communication flow was created, including notifications from informatics and social networks. (. . .) We tried to monitor them on a weekly basis via email, to know how they were doing, if they were confined or not, how the classes were going, if they had informatics support. (. . .) Sometimes it was only to know if they were fine or not, and if there was any problem. (University E)

These measures show how some Portuguese universities attempted to maintain the integrity of the internationalized learning experience, and address the wider process of addressing public health concerns. There was obviously no means of providing activities of equivalent value to what was previously envisaged, but some contacts were retained, including placeholding activities such as holding classes online.

4.3. 'Force Majeure'-the European Commission Response

On the issue of providing support to Erasmus students, it should be noted the main funding agency, the European Commission, was very late to react to the situation. Its eventual recommendation was that universities hosting Erasmus students should take a 'force majeure' approach, and enable those who wished to return home to do so. The commission also advised host institutions to conduct final exams remotely, but no specific support measures were created in regard to students' accommodation, finance, or health needs. This absence has generated consternation among university staff, as did the slow response to what were obviously quite urgent matters.

It was very slow. The European Commission took too long to issue any guidelines. Students were very anxious and asking many questions about it and we had nothing to say. We authorized them to go back home and made the compromise on the delivery of on-line classes even before the commission had announce that the students could invoke the 'force majeure.' Keeping these students here was nonsense. The only good thing is that when the guidelines came, they were very clear. (University H)

As we can see, a great deal of 'nonsense' was evident in regard to the response to the crisis at European level, and shifting responsibility for supporting Erasmus students onto host institutions was not a welcome decision, considering that university staff lack autonomy in regard to the management of the Erasmus platform. This meant they had no choice but to wait for the European Commission, and Erasmus+ national agency, to respond before they could intervene.

Everyone had seen the pandemic coming and the new semester was about to start and the commission had not given any instructions. (. . .) We did what we could, and I think we have done pretty well, but we did not have any support network (. . .). We were all overloaded with work, having to give answers to questions that we did not know and the commission does not recognise this. Now we have to send back a lot of the funds that they gave us for mobility, because the mobilities did not happen, or because they went home in the middle of the semester. We saw our work duplicate, triplicate; we had much more work because there was a group of processes, procedures and contacts that did not exist

and we had to create (them). And what about the extra cost, financial and psychological, that we had to cope with? There is no counterpart. (University I)

The burden for managing the situation in universities involved can be measured in increased economic and emotional costs, and the accumulated fatigue of working through an unprecedented and unprepared for public health crisis. While we do not yet know the long-term consequences for programmes such as Erasmus, and for the wider field of student migration, it is highly likely that there will be changes in economies of scale, certainly for universities but also for funding organizations such as the European Commission, owing to fewer young people travelling, requiring greater expenditure. The impression created is hence one of contraction in levels of incoming mobility at Portuguese universities, and no doubt elsewhere, suggesting that such transition routes will be become more exclusive, at least for a temporary period.

4.4. Moving Online and Future 'Mobility' Prospects

In looking towards the future, the immediate challenge for mobile young people relates to coping with the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and the more general problems with travel related to rising risks and costs. In the longer term, a further consideration relates to the virtual modes of 'travel' that have been popularized to a certain extent; one legacy of the pandemic may be the retention of digital platforms to replace or supplement more traditional forms of exchange. There is, however no consensus emerging from our research in regard to the future place of virtual mobility. Some institutions welcome the move online, while others point out some rather obvious limitations.

Six of the nine universities we surveyed adopted hybrid or blended learning formats for the 2020/2021 academic year, combining in-person teaching with online classes, while in the remaining three, the intention was to continue to hold face-to-face classes for international (and domestic) students. This latter decision related to the specific nature of learning processes.

No, we don't have international students attending classes online, because I understood that our institution was not prepared for an entirely remote modality. We had to prepare the courses according the demands of remote classes (. . .) and last year we accepted it because it was an exceptional situation. However, the two modalities are not the same, because for a physical mobility they go because it is an experience in a different country, in a different language, and in a different culture. With the virtual modality, the course is being taught in another country, the professor is from another country, they might meet people from another country online, which is also an interesting experience, but it does not have the same level of immersion. The two mobilities have to be different, and it has to be clear in the learning agreement, it has to state clearly, when it is a physical mobility and a virtual one, because otherwise we will be putting together two things that are not the same. (...) Also if we have students from different countries, the time zone is a problem. I believe it is necessary to define clear rules, because our courses are planned to be taught in-person, so to go for a virtual mobility, it needs to be the right standard. The whole university has to be involved in this decision, because it also involves learning aspects. (University H)

Other universities were more pragmatic in regard to the digital migration, seeing online platforms as a means to address concerns with health and safety on campus, and a justification for the expansion of what they can offer overseas students. Online courses are also seen as a lower-cost option for consumers, who no longer have to pay for accommodation and flights, or expensive living costs. Validation of the digital approach is further re-enforced by signs of higher enrolment numbers from overseas students, something that is seen as contributing to the socio-demographic diversification of the international student population:

Now (2020/2021) we have students attending classes online, since March we started to plan this, because we noticed that some parents would not allow their kids to come. And we believe this will continue, even after the end of the pandemic. (University G)

Taking into account such considerations, we need to acknowledge the positive aspects of virtual education alongside the limitations for international students. Another positive point is the opportunity to include people who face barriers to participation due to their personal and/or professional circumstances, creating the potential to recruit more fee-paying postgraduate students. It was noted, for example, that in Portuguese-speaking African countries and Brazil, many prospective enrolments have families and on-going careers that restrict their freedom to travel. For these reasons, it appears economically expedient to move mobility online.

Virtual mobility will become very popular mainly among postgraduate students. They will consider it as an opportunity, because they tend to already have a professional career or because of family reasons they cannot leave their countries. So, the virtual mobility opens up new opportunities and for much cheaper costs, and keeping the comfort of staying at home simultaneously with being in touch with other colleagues from different countries. (University I)

While this position may be expedient for addressing university budget shortfalls, what is being proposed is a fundamentally different form of international student mobility, pedagogically different to the familiar modes of physical movement between countries, characterized by highly convivial interactions inside and outside the classroom. Its impact on the transition to adulthood is also potentially different, generating skills relating to connecting people via the internet rather than in person. We therefore lose the capacity to contribute to civic society, with no real opportunity of establishing connections with local communities and international peers. Virtually learning may be comfortable and manageable, but it is not necessarily efficacious in regard to generating social and political capital, a position recognized by the following interviewee:

The cultural differences that are learnt in a face-to-face mobility are so important that it could never be substituted by virtual mobility. The e-learning experience is not the same, it will never be. So, the in person mobility will never be substituted, because in a virtual mobility we do not create bonds to the city, it does not foster a European citizenship. These links between people are done only in person, it is not possible to do it virtually. Now we are in a transition process, it might be hybrid regimes, online regimes; however, I continue to believe that the mobility programmes have a plus that continue to be through the in person experience. The new mobility schemes might be shorter, might be adapted to a new reality, but they will not disappear, because if it disappears, the contact between people will also disappear, and this is fundamental for the world. (University E)

We therefore have a somewhat mixed evaluation of virtual exchanges, which have major advantages and disadvantages, offering a different rather than an equivalent experience to students. Certainly, as a replacement modality for traditional in-person interactions, the limitations are obvious, suggesting that online pedagogies are a supplemental form of mobility rather than an evolutionary step. More concerning is the prospect of a two-tiered student mobility system, divided between real and virtual travelers, creating new inequalities in the process. We therefore need to be careful in regard to how future mobility is managed to ensure that it is meaningful for students and for host societies.

5. Conclusions: Learning from and during an Immobility Turn

To conclude this article, what we have learned from the preceding discussion is that the pandemic revealed a need to better understand the role played by the institutional structures that underpin student mobility, an infrastructure that supports both credit and degree mobility, and universities have had to undertake the hard tasks of not only adapting and aligning teaching programmes, but also facilitating the accommodation and support for students in need. They have also had to guarantee access to communications to enable

online learning and the maintaining of some level of intercultural exchange, doing so without sufficient guidance from funding agencies such as the European Commission. This is a major change in the materiality of internationalized learning, and academic staff members should be applauded for their ability to keep open mobile transition pathways, at a cost to themselves and their institutions.

What, then, does an immobility turn mean for our understanding of mobile transitions, and pathways to adulthood that interpolate mobility? Clearly, we have entered a period of flux, with the end of a period of expansionism of student mobility, and the arrival of more circumspect approaches to studying abroad. This shift creates much uncertainty in regard to the place of studying abroad in young people's transitions, not least due to the heightened costs and enlarged risks, but less obviously, also the changing role of host institutions, which also face higher costs and potentially lower profits.

Putting this material into a broader context of youth sociology, we can see that a global pandemic has the potential to close down opportunities for young people, in a very literal sense. This can happen in regard to employment opportunities at times of social and economic crisis, as is the case when people lose their jobs or find that the range of options open to them has diminished [25,26]. Mobility is obviously an important part of these structures, a theme explored in our prior publications [12], since this potential widens the field of life opportunities, which contracted during the long periods of lockdown. As we observed in this article, it not simply a case of the opportunities disappearing, but rather of the mobility experience becoming a problem, making mobile transitions harder to complete than might usually be the case,

Such situations are hard to manage, for students and academic staff members, especially considering the abruptness of the shift in learning circumstances and the nature of the changes. The difference between a pandemic and a 'normal' crisis is that it is not (just) sociological factors that are pre-determining the choices but also an unpredictable epidemiological situation, extending to generating problems within the material structures of higher education that complicate learning, in addition to creating problems in other spheres including the labor market that may reduce future opportunities. Such a situation put significant pressure on universities to remain operational. There was a very real risk of internationalized learning programmes collapsing and closing down these pathways for a prolonged period. However, such a disaster seems to have been averted, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the university staff members we discussed in this article.

What is also notable are the divergences between different universities in regard to their approaches to delivering support at this time, with 'surviving' the pandemic more challenging in some places than others. Funding agencies, most notably the European Commission, seem to have taken a withdrawn role, confirming the impression that the management of internationalized higher education is somewhat ad hoc and lacking any kind of centralizing influence that might serve to equalize the quality of the learning experience. The viability of hybrid or blended learning formats is also debatable. There seems to be a lack of enthusiasm for virtual mobility, and a lack of applicability to Erasmus-type exchanges is quite evident given the limited scope for addressing concerns such as interculturality. What might be more profitable is the use of information technology to recruit overseas students who have few prospects for engaging in international travel. However, this is a means of bringing in students not currently catered for by universities, rather than substituting in-person courses for students who are traveling with online classes. We might then see this as an expansion of mobility pathways, with the creation of a new stratum of virtual mobility on top of what already exists.

These are all major concerns, but from a more positive point of view, while the COVID-19 pandemic is not at an end, student mobility seems to have already rebounded to a major extent. In fact, recent statistics published in Portugal are already indicating that enrolments of international students in degree programmes have actually risen to levels slightly above the pre-pandemic peak, suggesting that studying abroad may now increase in importance, even taking into account on-going problems with international travel [27]. We therefore

end with a note of cautious optimism, considering that the immobility turn has not meant the end of mobile transitions, only the realization that a much greater account needs to be taken of the needs of students and staff within host institutions.

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