

The COVID-19 pandemic and international students: consequences for researchers, stakeholders and policymakers in the mobility field

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1. Introduction

Since the early months of 2020, COVID-19 has had a profound impact on societies, transforming social, economic and political life throughout the European Union. This resulted in dramatic change in a central aspect of life for many Europeans: the freedom to circulate between countries for non-essential purposes, including tertiary education. This loss has created problems for EU citizens and others from third-party countries, who have found themselves cut off from essential support or the means to return home in a safe and timely manner. In this chapter, we take a look at this situation, with our research questions considering some of the most prominent impacts of the pandemic on internationalised learning for both intra-EU exchange students and extra-EU educational migrants. To illustrate the emerging challenges, we have conducted research with international students in Portugal during the initial months of the public health emergency, from which we were able to identify issues that may be of concern to researchers, stakeholders and policymakers in the mobility field.

While our main aim is to present the findings of our study, this is a subject that resonates beyond the confines of the student mobility research field, not least due to the fact that Erasmus+ students in particular have been widely reported in Portugal as being responsible for spreading the virus (e.g. Silva, 2020). As such, we have an opportunity to provide an important counterpoint to an overwhelmingly negative viewpoint and reveal what actually happened in the lives of international students at this time, acknowledging the efforts students and host institutions have been making to control the spread of COVID-19 during what have been unprecedented events in internationalised learning. This includes the challenges of coping with social isolation and prolonged separation from families, and complying with government edicts regarding public health and personal safety.

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At a more general level, the pandemic provides us with an opportunity to re-think the place of groups such as international students in tertiary education and the practicality of maintaining free circulation at a time of widespread restrictions and risks relating to corporeal travel. This includes assessing the efficacy of alternate learning modes using virtual platforms and looking towards different means of establishing intercultural conviviality, including making better use of social activities outside formal learning contexts. We therefore hope to demonstrate, using our evidence, how students are able to manage their mobility in a safe and meaningful manner, providing some ideas for maintaining such forms of exchange at a time of limited horizons.

2. The inverted meaning of mobility

In approaching these issues, it becomes immediately apparent that the meaning of mobility has changed during the pandemic, not only for students but also for the institutions that host them. There is also a potential change in the way in which young Europeans in particular make transitions to adulthood. In the years prior to the pandemic, geographical mobility and personal development appeared to have become conjoined, woven into many young people's lives and featuring prominently in their attempts to complete education and find secure employment (Cook & Romei, 2020; Robertson, Harris & Baldassar, 2018). We now face the task of re-thinking what mobility means for students and for society, with the negative aspects of international travel having become very apparent.

The abruptness of this change – mobility moving from being imagined as valuable and pleasurable to something risky and inconvenient – makes re-thinking mobility difficult, since we have to re-assess some of the main assumptions that have underpinned the rapid expansion of the student mobility field, a development charted in numerous studies (e.g. Brooks & Waters, 2011; Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013; King, 2018; Raghuram, 2013). Furthermore, despite a high volume of work being produced on this topic, relatively little attention seems to have been paid to the health risks of internationalised learning, a criticism we need to accept in our own work (e.g. Cairns, Krzaklewska, Cuzzocrea & Allaste, 2018; França & Cairns, 2020; Malet Calvo, 2018); we seem to have focussed more on the economic and political implications of heightened levels of student circulation rather than the well-being of individual travellers. This deficit means that relatively little is known about the stress and anxiety experienced by mobile students, beyond relatively self-evident issues such as the culture shock and alienation some experience in their host society due to the somewhat artificial nature of intercultural learning (Cuzzocrea, Krzaklewska & Cairns, 2021).

Such neglect may also help explain why, prior to the pandemic, the positivity of mobility was rarely, if ever, questioned. And also, why the recent societal transformations make this an appropriate time to consider what an inversion in the meaning of mobility means for students and other interested parties in our field. Furthermore, re-starting mobility in a post-pandemic world is not simply a case of re-opening borders and increasing funding for host institutions. As we hope to illustrate with our evidence, trust needs to be generated among students so that they feel they can travel without concerns for their physical and mental health, and be assured of a quality learning experience.

3. Research context and methodological approach

In what remains of this article, we focus on discussing the results of research conducted in Portugal with international students. More specifically, we look at their lives during the pandemic and at how their mobility experience changed. Questions hence focus on adjustment to abrupt changes in lifestyle and learning after the start of the pandemic in March 2020, and day-to-day life during the initial lockdown of the months that followed. Alongside the new challenges, we also consider existing vulnerabilities, especially in economic situations as well as the capacity to sustain intercultural connections with their international peers and friends and families in their home countries.

In regard to scope, our analysis includes evidence from students from inside and outside the EU, some of whom were engaged in credit mobility exchanges, others being student migrants with relatively settled lives in Portugal. Diversity is also present in regard to country and region of origin, reflecting the national context. Portugal has quite a distinct student mobility profile, encompassing both intra-EU movers participating in programmes such as Erasmus+, some of whom we have explored in our prior work (e.g. Cairns, 2017; França & Cairns, 2020; Malet Calvo, 2018), and those from outside the EU, especially Portuguese-speaking African countries and Brazil, who moved to Portuguese universities for the entirety of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree programme.

Fieldwork was conducted in Lisbon between May and June 2020, involving semi-structured interviews with 27 international students aged between 20 and 28. These students were recruited using various social media, i.e. Facebook and WhatsApp. In line with social distancing guidelines, all interviews were conducted remotely by the authors, using Zoom and Skype. In regard to the sample, we included students from different degree levels (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral) and a range of academic disciplines. While not a representative sample, a maximum diversity principle was followed to ensure representation from these different

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student cohorts, maintaining balance for gender and socio-economic background. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the authors, a process that also enabled an initial analysis to take place during which prominent themes emerged from the material.

4. Results

The discussion of the results is organised around a number of key themes, starting with an outline of some of the immediate responses to the pandemic lockdown. Also mentioned are a few potentially positive outcomes, including lessons learnt by the student interviewees during the period of confinement.

4.1. Immediate changes in circumstances

As international students, the interviewees were able to discuss the immediate impact made by the closure of universities and support structures and the abrupt shift to online classes and remote working. Being suddenly cut off from families also had a drastic effect on their lives, including issues arising through the loss of financial support, with those reliant on income from employment also badly exposed. With much of this work taking place in restaurants, bars and the tourist sector (e.g. as tour guides or tuk tuk drivers), typically without formal contracts, many students immediately lost their jobs during the lockdown and, with this, an essential part of their income. Disruption to academic work was also common, with this interruption creating other difficulties, including financial penalties. This situation is illustrated by the case of 25-year-old Laura from Italy. Laura moved to Portugal in September 2018 to pursue a two-year Master's degree in chemistry. Her programme had been proceeding as planned, but the start of the pandemic coincided with her final semester, during which she had been conducting experimental analysis in the laboratory.

I was going to graduate in July, but I have an experimental thesis, so as I cannot go to the lab, I will not be able to graduate in July, but maybe in November or December. As I have to wait a few more months [to conclude the thesis], I will also have to pay extra rent for the room, which is quite expensive, and I thought, "Maybe I can get a job to pay for my groceries." That is why I got the delivery job in the bar. My parents pay the rent, but at least I would then have some extra cash.

Here we have an illustration of the manner in which the pandemic disrupted the immediate plans of one international student, bringing with it economic penalties and a potential delay to the completion of studies. Also notable is the fact that despite being at an advanced stage in her education, Laura still depends on her parents to pay the rent. Her response has been to seek employment in a bar, creating additional complications, since the hospitality sector has also been affected by coronavirus restrictions. Equally significant is the potential cost of a late finish to a degree course, which may also have an impact on the ability to take the next step in a career trajectory, potentially postponing labour market entry.

Looking at other common experiences among the interviewees, maintaining social contacts during the initial lockdown was difficult for many students, especially in university dormitories. These residences were converted into hyper-securitised environments with no possibility of leaving, except to buy groceries

in a prearranged manner. Rodrigo, a 28-year-old Master's student in economics from Guinea-Bissau based in Lisbon, explains what happened in his case:

Here at the university residence, there were intransigent measures and no one dared disobey them [...]. They left guidelines on how we should use the kitchen and what distance we should keep between us [...]. It was then that I experienced the loss of my freedom; it was very hard. Emotionally it was very complicated, because there was no freedom to leave the house. Everyone was required to stay at home. I could only go out and buy something. I could not use my time to do the things I like. And that, psychologically, being in the same space for 24 hours a day, is very exhausting. Psychologically, almost unbearable. I reached my limit. I was not well, a little exhausted, worn out.

This is obviously quite a difficult situation that emphasises the need to focus on issues like mental health within international students' lives. If such a topic was already relevant, with the pandemic situation its importance became even more obvious. However, we can see that the impact of the pandemic in its first few months was both severe and far-reaching. Not only were studies disrupted, maintaining any kind of semblance of normal life among international students became impossible with the accompanying emotional and economic strains for both European and non-EU learners.

4.2. Less immediate impacts

Much of what the interviewees related to us about the impact of the pandemic on their lives was perhaps to be expected, in line with what much of the population was experiencing at this time. The stress and anxiety being induced was obvious. This feeling extended to a sense of isolation and dislocation, especially where host institutions failed to provide enough support and information. In the specific case of Erasmus+ students, the European Commission proactively issued some guidelines on how the Programme should react to the pandemic at an institutional level, recommending that sending universities apply a "force majeure" clause and provide support to international students who wished to return home. Those who had migrated independently fared much worse, being left to deal with the situation by themselves.

A lack of information about what was happening with studies also seems to have been an issue, for postgraduate movers in particular, including both those in receipt of grant funding and others responsible for paying their own tuition fees and expenses. In general, news about what was happening in universities seems to have been posted with domestic students in mind, and largely in the Portuguese language. The confusion among international learners can be observed in the case of Katrin, a 25-year-old Master's degree student in international studies, funded by DAAD, the German agency for international exchange for higher education students and staff. She confirmed that communication was largely restricted to the Portuguese language, even though, in her case, her course was entirely taught in English.

Maybe the university wrote to me in Portuguese, but I do not really understand Portuguese. Maybe they sent an e-mail, but I do not know as I have a problem with my institutional e-mail address, I cannot access it anymore.

The predicament among fee-paying students is explained by Sergio, a 21-year-old student who moved from Italy to Portugal in 2018 to take a Master's degree in architecture in Lisbon:

The response, it was really slow. They [the universities] closed the courses and did not say anything about that, about doing courses online, at the beginning. We stayed, more or less, one month without having any classes. It was a little bit strange. Some professors sent us e-mails asking how we were doing, like in a human friendly way, but the institution itself took lots of time to respond to anything and after one month we started the second semester, and then nothing. Now we are having classes online. I knew because they sent e-mails.

The lack of meaningful engagement from universities in Portugal in regard to these international students is disappointing, especially considering the fact that they are making a substantial financial contribution to these institutions and providing an internationalisation dividend to the host city through their presence. Nor was there any compensation for the loss of human contact that takes place between international learners, ruling out the possibility of intercultural learning in the traditional sense of students from different countries mixing inside or outside the classroom. This situation suggests that more care and attention needs to be taken within host institutions that brand themselves in terms of internationalisation, especially in regard to issues such as maintaining effective communication, with international students feeling left out by a somewhat insular approach being taken that assumes everyone is local.

It is also clear that the experiences of the Brazilian and African students were markedly different compared to their peers undertaking intra-European exchanges in Portugal in regard to a number of practical issues arising from the lockdown, e.g. in their prospects for a rapid return home. As well as facing much higher travel costs and fewer flight options, there was the fear of losing a scholarship if they returned to the sending country and, subsequently, of permanently losing the opportunity to study in Europe. This concern was quite pressing for students in the first year of their degree courses when the pandemic started, as explained by Jazmine, a 19-year-old aeronautics student from São Tomé, now based in Covilhã:

When I realised that this pandemic was here to stay, I went into panic mode. I am a grant student, so I thought that maybe it might be impossible for me to return home, then go back to Portugal at a later date, after the pandemic, to continue my studies here. Also, access to [the] internet in my country is rather limited, so following the online lessons would be impossible.

As this interview extract from Jazmine illustrates, another issue that emerged related to the potential return home was a lack of facilities for remote learning. While this problem has also affected domestic students, keeping up with classes online is even more difficult for overseas learners who may not only lack reliable internet access but also be in a different time zone. Such considerations created much stress and uncertainty, at a time when anxiety was already running high.

Another less immediately apparent impact of COVID-19 relates to changes in the global economy, with the devaluation of currencies and the imposition of budgetary cuts by governments in sending countries. Universities and the institutions funding international students have become stretched, with mobility becoming less of a priority due to the need to respond to urgent public health needs. This was one further issue that affected students' finances, but it also reveals a pre-existing economic precarity

in many of their lives related to a reliance upon multiple sources of income. For example, Ana, a 25-year-old student from Cape Verde, studying for a Master's in quantitative methods in Lisbon, explains:

The level of the scholarships is too low. If you are living with your family, it is OK, but if you must pay for your expenses the grant is not enough and you must work. Actually, even those that live with relatives eventually get a job, and this job tends to be informal, without a contract, which is not even permitted when you have a grant. Either during the first degree or the Master's, the African student always works.

This position explains why many international students, especially those from the Global South, need to supplement their incomes with money from employment despite being in receipt of grant funding. Another financial problem, faced by Brazilian students, concerns political instability back home and the impact this has on exchange rates as well as the country's poor performance in coping with the pandemic. According to Ricardo, a 19-year-old communication sciences student based in Setúbal:

Even with a scholarship covering the university fees I need money for my expenses, especially the rent and food, which is very difficult because of the exchange rate of currencies. My mother lost her job recently and that has a strong impact on the possibility of sending money, because she loses an important part of her income when [it is] converted into euros.

We therefore have another driver pushing these students to get a job: to release families from the pressure of sending money to Portugal. While these financial issues pre-date the pandemic, we can clearly see that further complications have been introduced, all of which serve to create additional stress at a time of uncertainty.

4.3. Positive developments?

While there is nothing to emerge from the pandemic that might be viewed as positive, we can highlight a few possible chinks of light that give us a modicum of solace, particularly for the Erasmus+ students we interviewed. During the initial lockdown period, when students were confined to their homes, some new forms of international conviviality did seem to be emerging within these households as people learnt how to cope with an unprecedented situation. For example, Thomas, a 25-year-old Erasmus+ student from Germany, moved to Portugal in September 2019 as part of a mechanical engineering Master's degree course. The comfortable size of his house and good relationships with his roommates were important in regard to how he coped with the pandemic:

We did not go out but we stayed in our apartment, chilled together, in the kitchen or on the balcony. It was quite nice. I think I enjoyed it more than if I was with my family [...]. I had a very good relationship with my flatmates and we also have a very big balcony, it was a shared balcony but it was very, very big. So, it came in very useful as it gave us the opportunity to be outside for a while.

Agatha, another Erasmus+ student, this time from the Czech Republic, who arrived in Lisbon in the months prior to the pandemic, also made reference to this new form of conviviality and the necessity of building a tolerable living environment together with her housemates:

I live in private accommodation, but there are just Erasmus students here. There are three of us, just girls, living here in the house. We set some rules together. We bought alcohol for disinfecting things. We bought masks together. We are taking care of each other. We take decisions together. We created the right kind of environment for that. Everyone knows when someone else is going out.

We can therefore observe from these two cases that having a comfortable place to live and good domestic relations helps a great deal in coping with a public health crisis. There is no suggestion that the pandemic situation has been easy or without stress for them, but having mutual support was important during the initial months of the lockdown. We can see that under such conditions, informal solidarity can independently emerge between students from different national backgrounds, based around the need to cope with the demands of the pandemic rather than engaging in more traditional forms of internationalised learning on campus, the somewhat artificial “learning bubble” environments created by mobility programmes (Cuzzocrea et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion: learning from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic

Bringing this paper to a close, we can see some of the most prominent consequences emerging from the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on evidence from international students in Portugal. These individuals witnessed a sudden change in their learning culture and patterns of conviviality as well as a curtailment of personal liberty. We might also argue that there has been a shift in the meaning of their mobility: from a form of liberation from the limitations of their place of origin to something of an endurance test. It also seems as if some universities were slow to recognise the specific needs of international learners and the limitations of online teaching. However, we should note that we are witnessing unprecedented shifts in how internationalised learning is practised, and it remains to be seen what lasting impact the pandemic has upon globalised tertiary education.

For national and European policymakers involved in funding and managing mobility systems, the pandemic has also proved to be an enormous challenge. In the short term, dilemmas now exist about how to continue programmes such as Erasmus+ at a time when non-essential travel remains restricted and risky. The viability of the expanded Erasmus+ may also come into question, especially if there is a decline in interest and a lack of resources to fully integrate health and safety provisions. Mobility may therefore come to feel like more of a luxury and less of a necessity for stakeholders and policymakers. Having passed through the initial waves of COVID-19, educational institutions now need to consider the medium and long-term impacts of the pandemic and the heightened costs of remaining operational. As mobility researchers, we also need to re-think some of the assumptions we hold about the place of international circulation within the educational sphere. As a sign of things to come, we might need to pay more heed to immobility and the importance of attachment to a single place, with the prospect of tertiary education being oriented around local concerns and situated increasingly at home (see also Finn, 2017).

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