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Immobility, precarity and the Covid-19 pandemic: The impact of lockdown on international students in Portugal

Abstract

This article looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic among international students in Portugal, focusing on their experiences during the Spring 2020 lockdown. Discussion begins with an outline of the research context, and recognition of the inherent precarity of much international student life. Our research questions hence look not only at the immediate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on internationalized learning but also the heightening of pre-existing economic vulnerability among many of our research subjects. Using evidence taken from 27 interviews, we document their experiences, including the challenge of maintaining communications and coping with social isolation, and look at how the pandemic has undermined the financial integrity of international studentship. In conclusion, we argue that in addition to widespread stress and anxiety the pandemic has created additional forms of precarity for this cohort, creating a need to integrate better support measures into the governance of mobility at tertiary education level.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is the defining event of our age, with the spread of coronavirus leading to social and economic change on a scale that is unprecedented in the post-war era. While young people may not have been disproportionately affected in terms of morbidity, there are

youth-specific aspects of the global health crisis and the accompanying societal lockdowns we wish to consider in this article. This includes heightened precarity among international students, some of whom have found themselves cut-off from economic and emotional support at a time of vulnerability. In this article, we explore this emerging situation, using first-hand accounts of international students' lives during lockdown to provide examples of how they coped with unprecedented social, emotional and educational challenges.

In doing so, we recognize that are entering a pre-existing research field, with numerous studies having charted the rapid expansion of student mobility, especially but not exclusively in the European context (see, e.g., Brooks & Waters 2011; Feyen & Krzaklewska 2013). Our own work on this theme has sought to integrate key ideas from Youth Studies into this research field, recognizing that while intra-European mobility may have expanded and become relatively democratic in terms of access, significant levels of precarity are generated by the high personal cost of becoming a mobile student (Author xxxx). Therefore, while the archetypical image of the international student remains one of an affluent global consumer (see Murphy-Lejeune 2002), in reality, the mobile student population is diverse in terms of socio-demographic backgrounds, including many individuals who have limited access to comprehensive social and economic resources.

The situation raises concerns that alongside some very prominent mental and physical health impacts, the pandemic may have brought with it a potential to scar young people's lives, particularly those from less well-off backgrounds. Students, international and domestic, also face the challenge of accessing support structures at a time when university campuses are closed or restricted to online services. We view this situation as a change in the 'materiality of education' (Brooks & Waters 2018), with mandatory remote working influencing learning in a similar manner to how the design of classrooms hinders or supports students. At a less abstract level, student support involves access to in-person counselling and mentorship, and peer

groups, as well as bureaucratic and technical assistance. These physical connections form part of the process of building a connection to a destination country, the host institution and the wider student body (Arthur 2017; Roberts et al. 2018; see also Forbes-Mewett & Nyland 2013).

This raises questions about what happens when access to international offices, student health services and IT departments is limited to on-line platforms. During lockdown, peer support was also limited to households, inhibiting the formation of solidarity networks which are known to form the bedrock of international student life (Krzaklewska 2013). Financial support networks are also vulnerable. While some students receive grant funding from organizations such as Erasmus, for the less well-off, the amount of money they receive will be insufficient to cover tuition fees and/or living costs. This means making recourse to one's own savings or, more likely, casual employment and financial transfers from family members back home, reminding us that support to students is multi-faceted. While issues such as the underfunding of scholarships for young people who have inherited low levels of social and economic capital are issues that pre-date the pandemic (Orr et al. 2011), it may be that greater numbers are drawn into the precarity mire as a result of the pandemic or new forms of precarity are emerging during lockdown, making this our main analytical focus.

While the impact of the pandemic is geographically transversal, we will look at this situation among mobile students in one specific location, Portugal, with emphasis on the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, a city that has become an important hub for internationalized tertiary education (Author xxxx). In what follows, we discuss evidence from 27 interviews with international students who moved to the city prior to the pandemic, in some cases only a few weeks before the first lockdown. Questions look at their responses to the closure of tertiary education infrastructure and the means through which they coped with a sudden change in social and economic circumstances. The conclusion returns to the theme of precarity in tertiary education, and the challenge of maintaining mobility at times of great uncertainty.

3

Mobility, precarity and the pandemic

While this article has a topical focus on the pandemic, in undertaking this work we are also able to inform long-standing theoretical debates in Youth Studies. This includes consideration of the place of geographical mobility in young people's lives (see, e.g., Farrugia & Wood 2017), and the experience of precarity in students' lives (Antonucci 2018). In this sense, the arrival of the pandemic may have played upon existing vulnerabilities, especially among mobile young people who lack access to resources at a time when they are temporarily displaced from the safe environment of home. Their precarity may also extends to how they 'arrange' their lives, including making recourse to precarious employment as a means of responding to the financial demands of their educational institutions and/or living costs (Carmo et al. 2014; Motakef 2019; see also Vosko 2010). Ironically, mobility, which has been seen by as representing an imaginative means of escaping hardship, can lead to further marginalization due to the precarious foundations of much geographical circulation, especially in the European context (Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016). This explains why in a review of recent studies in the youth mobility field we have argued that in contrast to the assumption underpinning classical migration paradigms that mobility is a means of maximizing incomes, young people's mobility often leads to a depletion of resources, at least in the short term (Author xxxx).

Putting this work into a broader context, we can say that student mobility in its expanded form has been of societal and geopolitical importance to the point of becoming taken for granted, particularly within the European Union, with its alleged 'Erasmus Generation' (see Feyen & Krzaklewska 2013). However, the development of student mobility frameworks, driven by policies at national, municipal and European levels, including the Bologna process and the more abstract idea of free movement between EU member states, has somewhat obscured the implications of diversifying the mobile student population, including heightening

the participation of individuals with higher support needs. Their precarity, while pre-dating the pandemic, may have become much more visible and acute during this period of rapid societal upheaval. As youth sociologists, we hence face the challenge of assessing not only the impact of Covid-19 on physical and mental health but also the potential of the pandemic to reproduce inequalities at a time when the economic situations of these students are jeopardized by the loss of presential institutional support and a decline in personal incomes.

It is also important to note that we are looking at this topic in a national context where incoming mobility has rapidly grown in importance. In Portugal, statistics collated by UNESCO show that in the region of 22,194 students were being hosted by its universities, comprising almost 13 per cent of all students enrolled in the Portuguese higher education system in a single year (UNESCO 2020). Our 'hypothesis,' if we can call it that, is however that outward success in attracting ever increasing numbers of incoming students to Portugal is tempered by a potential rise in the numbers of mobile students in vulnerable positions, to the point where geographical circulation and precarity can become inextricably linked.

Methodology

The choice of Portugal as a site for our work is apt considering not only its popularity as a destination for students noted above, especially in the years following the 2008 economic crisis (see Sin et al. 2016), but also the early impact of the pandemic within the Lisbon municipality. Portugal was in fact one of the first European countries to shut down its tertiary education system, with universities closing in early March 2020, followed by the declaration of a State of Emergency by the Portuguese government. This meant sustained disruption at campuses across the city, and as has been the case in many countries, without any clear signs of a return to full-scale presential teaching at universities during the following academic year.

Fieldwork was conducted in Lisbon between May and June 2020, involving semi-structured interviews with 27 international students, all of whom were aged between 20 and 28 years old. These students were recruited using various online platforms, including Facebook and WhatsApp, and emails to individuals within the target population with whom we had prior contact in previous projects. The interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, with questions focused on motivations to stay in Portugal during the pandemic, challenges faced during lockdown, support offered by home and host institutions, relations with friends in the host city, family connections and engagement with consulates, as well as the potential impact of the pandemic on academic outcomes and future career prospects.

While there were no issues with obtaining ethical clearance, due to mandatory social distancing measures in force at our institutions, all interviews were conducted remotely, using zoom and skype, and interactions between the research team were conducted virtually. In regard to the sample, we followed a maximum diversity principle, including students from different levels (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral), also covering students in mobility schemes such as Erasmus alongside who had migrated to Portugal for the duration of a degree course. While not a representative sample, students were included from a wide range of nationalities, with 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. This data analysis then proceeded to further readings of the transcriptions by the authors, enabling four main categories to emerge in regard to the experience of the lockdown (see Wang & Li 2011).

In addition to observing the appropriate pandemic protocols in the conduct of the research, participants were fully informed as to the purpose of the study, with interviews only starting after informed consent was verbally given. Respondents were also assured that the information obtained from the interviews would remain confidential and that they could refuse

to answer questions or leave the interview at any point if they did not feel comfortable. To preserve their privacy, all names of students and their host institutions have also been anonymized in this text, alongside any other identifiable information.[1]

Analysis and discussion of results

As our material will reveal, the Covid-19 pandemic created a number of immediate challenges for the interviewees. An initial appraisal of our evidence revealed issues that were general to all students. This included the emergence of concerns relating to health and well-being, and problems in communications between students and host institutions. Also prominent was the role played by domestic conditions in mediating the impact of lockdown measures. Looking deeper, many international students were left without adequate access to social and economic resources, revealing precarious financial situations and a reliance on maintaining a delicate balance of family support, income from work and scholarships. In what follows, we discuss each of these four areas: health and well-being, communications, domestic life and economic precarity.

In moving towards a conclusion, we re-iterate the idea that the pandemic has (re)ignited precarity among in the lives of a number of these individuals. This may come as a surprise, since as we mentioned previously, international students are not necessarily viewed as a vulnerable population. As we shall reveal, a dependence on precarious work followed by the loss of this work has the potential to create difficulties that are hard to resolve due to the impact of the pandemic on local labour markets. Students can hence find themselves trapped in an unvirtuous circle of economic hardship, with a dependence on unstable and insecure sources of income increasing stress and anxiety at a time when concerns about the mental and physical health consequences of the pandemic are already present.

Health, well-being and the return home

We start, as we must, with the health of international students, and how they maintained personal well-being during the lockdown. Staying fit and healthy, and keeping up with studies, was not easy at this time due to the closure of university faculties. Students, international and domestic, were not able to access guidance from mentors and administrators, and cut-off from emotional and psychological support services. We might also add the inability to engage in peer group interaction on campus, with extra-curricular activities restricted to the occasional motivational session via zoom and on-line physical fitness activities, especially yoga. This privatization of the learning environment nevertheless posed challenges in regarding to maintaining peer-to-peer conviviality within what can already be fragile intercultural learning 'bubble' environments (Cuzzocrea & Collins 2015; Van Mol & Micheilson 2014); delicate arrangements that are not necessarily replicable within virtual classrooms (see also Watermeyer et al. 2021). In regard to how students responded, the most common recourse was to engage with roommates for moral support, and to collectivize shopping trips in order to avoid unnecessary journeys outside. As our evidence illustrates, this was easier to organize when friends, as opposed to looser acquaintances, lived together, suggesting that some form of intercultural bonding has been taking place. Many in fact reported having many pleasant moments, cooking together, watching movies or simply going for walks.

Another positive finding was that none of the students we interviewed had the experience of being infected with Covid-19. In fact, despite the ever-present risk of living in a city in which the virus was circulating, personal health risks were generally down-played in their accounts. They did however have concerns for older family members' health, with this secondary stress generating considerable anxiety. Health concerns, including differential infection rates between countries, also intersect with the dilemma regarding a possible return home. We can observe this concern in the account of Katrin, a 25-year-old Master's degree

student in International Studies, funded by DAAD, the German agency for international exchange at higher education level.

I was not really concerned about my family because there aren't so many cases (of Covid-19) back in my hometown, but I was concerned about my gramma, because of course she is in the high risk group. I have a great-gramma. She is 90 years old. She is super fit, but I was worried about her, so I was calling her and advising her: 'When you go to the supermarket wear your gloves,' and so on. (...) I think in general I feel pretty safe in Portugal. If something happened, I am not in the risk group and I would trust the health system here, and in any case, Germany is not so far away.

Other interviewees who remained in Lisbon felt that returning to their home country might be disruptive to their studies and their families. For certain mobile students, the question of a return is further complicated by a lack of clarity in regard to where to return to, since Portugal now constitutes 'home,' while other students have multiple nationalities and peripatetic life histories. For instance, Andrea is 22-years-old, with French and Dutch nationalities. She has also lived in Germany, with her parents, before moving to Portugal in September 2019, like Katrin, to take-up a Master's degree course in international studies. Her parents still live in Germany but she feels somewhat ambivalent about moving back there, seeing Portugal as her home now:

It was my choice to stay. My other possibility would be to go back to Germany and I didn't want to be there, I prefer to be in Lisbon because it is my home, and also because I know I would be more productive here. I thought it would be more comfortable to spend the lockdown with my friends than in a flat with my parents, in a small village in

Germany (...). If I had felt the need to go to Germany I would have gone, even if it was more dramatic there than here. The number of infections in Germany doesn't influence my decision to go to Germany. (...) I don't see the difference if I am stuck here or if I am stuck in Germany. My parents know that my home is here, so it was not even discussed that I would go back. But they said if I wanted to come back, I could. (...). But I have been calling them much more often, sometimes every day, sometimes every two days. I would never do this before.

In interpreting these situations, we can see that mobility during tertiary education can, purposefully, disconnect students from safe and familiar environments, as well as connect them with others in similarly liminal situations. While this issue is not generally discussed under the rubric of student health, there are consequences arising out of being placed in a position of artificial rootlessness, ranging from a lack of knowledge and access in relation to local health services to harder to define feelings of social disconnection (see also Bradley 2000). With 'home' no longer connoting the place where one is born, or where one's parents still reside, it becomes a more transient or transportable category, creating confusion when it comes to taking care of mobile students' health.

Discussion of mental health also seems prescient at this time, perhaps due to the emotional consequences of the pandemic, which has impacted severely upon students with pre-existing conditions, especially depression and anxiety. Even with our relatively small sample, we were able to find two cases, Enrico and Aada respectively, that illustrate what can happen to psychologically vulnerable individuals:

I had been quite depressed for a long time and I needed psychotherapy for a long time. Before having a doctoral scholarship, I contacted the university service to access

psychotherapy. But I received an answer a few months later, at a time when I already had the scholarship. So, the moment I got the answer, I decided that if I really did need psychotherapy, I would pay for it and not go to the university services, which must already be very busy and already have a long queue of people who need help and cannot pay. And so, now, in this pandemic period, I was depressed. I think it's more anxiety. Anxiety and depression at the same time (Enrico, 28-year-old PhD Student from Italy).

I don't think I was scared, but at some point, I got stressed and a little bit anxious because of the restrictions. I felt like my freedom was being taken away, all the things that I do for relaxing, like going for a walk, or sauna or swimming or camping at the weekend, and I could not do any of this at a time when actually I would need to do it the most. (...) I am trying to do things differently, we have this rooftop terrace so I've been trying to stay there a lot and get some fresh air, then I tried to create some routines to relax. I downloaded mediation apps and I try to do it every day, trying to think that this is not a forever thing. (...) I think, somehow, it would have been easier if I was at home when I think that it would have been an environment that was so familiar. I think for this period, it is the first time I have been actually homesick, because I miss home and all the normal things in my life. But maybe not, because I would not have the routines I have at home and all the people I have here (Aada, 27-year-old Erasmus student from Finland).

Enrico provides an illustration of the practical difficulty of accessing mental health support services during lockdown, although it is implied in his account that finding support was difficult even prior to the pandemic. Aada meanwhile brings to light latent issues in international student life such as homesickness and the emotional cost of being culturally

uprooted that do not feature prominently in most accounts of student mobility (except perhaps Krzaklewska & Skórska 2013). Stranded by the pandemic, Aada has suddenly realized the value of 'home' and having a fixed place of residence, leading her to question the value of her mobility due to these previously hidden emotional costs.

Institutional (mis)communication

Communication between students and their host and sending universities, and in some cases funding agencies, was another prominent issue, having become somewhat strained during the pandemic. Other intermediary parties also assumed importance in the provision of information, including the Erasmus Student Network, a European network of student associations sponsored by the European Commission, which acted as a source of information for those travelling via this platform. In the specific case of Erasmus students, the commission eventually issued some guidelines on how staff should react to the pandemic at an institutional level, recommending that universities apply a 'force majeure' clause and provide support to international students who wished to return home. This unfortunately meant students being told to contact institutions that were not able to respond effectively, having closed their doors and reduced contact with the outside world to the bare minimum.

Some universities did eventually open communication channels for their Erasmus students, aiming to offer deeper support; others treated international students the same as local students. Those who had migrated independently of platforms such as Erasmus seemed to receive less support, left to deal with the situation by themselves and rely on locally-oriented instructions. For example, Katrin whom we cited previously, 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 don't really understand Portuguese. Maybe they sent an email, but I don't know as I have a problem with my institutional email address, I cannot access it anymore. I wrote several emails already asking if they can do something about it, but it has already been three months that I cannot access it. So maybe they sent an email to this account and I didn't get it (...). I was expecting that the university would give us a little more support because writing a Master's thesis alone is ok, because it is self-work, but at some point, when you work alone for so long you need a little guidance, especially during these times when you cannot really share it with other people.

Sending institutions in home countries also demonstrated a tendency to hide behind university regulations in an attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility for overseas students who would not follow their guidelines, while host universities were slow to post basic information about how suspended academic courses were to be re-started. In such cases, students' own networks attained great importance as a means of learning about the evolution of the pandemic and how to interpret local regulations. As Thomas, a 25-year-old mechanical engineering Erasmus student from Germany who moved to Portugal in September 2019, explains:

My home university sent me a paper to return and they said if you want to stay, I had to sign this paper to say that it is my own responsibility, saying that if anything happened to me, the university has no responsibility (...). So, I signed and I stayed. (...) The Erasmus Student Network did not contact us, but I follow them on Instagram, and they were always posting news about the situation, saying that we should stay at home and they would also translate the Portuguese announcements into English, as most of

the documents published by the government were in Portuguese and most Erasmus students do not understand it.

Interviewees who were not part of the Erasmus programme had fewer options. Consulates and embassy had closed and were hard to contact during the lockdown. The predicament is explained by Sergio, a 21 year-old student who had moved from Italy to Portugal in 2018 in order to take a Master's degree in Architecture in Lisbon:

The response, it was really slow. They (universities) closed the courses and didn't 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 emails 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 emails.

In looking at the situation described by these students, we also are presented with a picture of inconsistency among Portuguese universities and host country institutions, many of whom despite branding themselves in terms of internationalization, failed to adapt their communications strategies or maintain adequate means of informing international students about what was happening. While this apparent neglect might be what we expect to find in tertiary education systems that prioritize profit over students' well-being (Bok 2009), we might expect greater care to be taken with international students during the pandemic, especially those who make substantial financial contributions to their host institutions. Furthermore, while short duration non fee-paying student mobility has now largely stopped, as we have discussed in

another recent study (Author xxxx), fee-paying student migrants have largely stayed in place and are continuing to make a substantial financial contribution to their universities. As such, there is a strong financial imperative to maintain this revenue stream through acting responsibly, lest bad publicity deter future incoming student migrants.

Learning at home: The domestic life of international students during lockdown

With students locked out of classrooms and laboratories, domestic conditions played a central role in regard to coping with the stress of life during lockdown: having a 'nice house' clearly matters a great deal during a global pandemic. Some interviewees found their accommodation to be more than adequate, with lots of space, large windows, terraces and balconies. Others were confined to small, cramped rooms in university dormitories, sometimes shared with other students, creating an extra stress factor. From our evidence, we have cases that illustrate both good and more challenging domestic conditions. In regard to the former, Thomas, whom we met previously, explained that the comfortable size of his house and friendly relationships with his roommates were factors that influenced his decision to stay in Portugal during the lockdown. Having room to live, as well as this 'natural' conviviality, was very important:

> We didn't 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 is a shared balcony but it is very, very big. So, it came in very useful as it gave us the opportunity to be outside for a while, and if we didn't have it, we would not have had this opportunity, and going out would have been, basically, going to the supermarket. So, the balcony was quite nice, and we have a grill and we decided to cook together on the grill sometimes, and also if the weather was good, we would just

15

chill there, have some lunch together, some drinks there. The balcony was actually a very nice way to survive the quarantine.

Agatha is another Erasmus student, from the Czech Republic, who is attending a Master's course at another university in Lisbon. She arrived just prior to the onset of the pandemic in Portugal, in February 2020, having planned to spend a year in the country. While she made reference to the stress of coping with this situation, and the burden of taking care of herself and her home, she felt that she had been able to build a tolerable living environment together with her roommates:

> 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. This is not so comfortable of course, because different people are taking precautions in different ways and feel differently about the situation. Some people panic less, so many panic more, but we are working together. For example, if someone is going for grocery shopping, we just ask, 'Hey, should I bring you something?'

Looking at other scenarios, students living in university dormitories seem to struggle during lockdown, with these environments subject to stringent controls limiting the use of communal space. This meant that students, including many who had migrated for the entire duration of their degree course, some from extra-European destinations, were confined in small

rooms for long periods. This predicament is explained by Benjamin, a 19-year-old Journalism student, originally from Brazil:

> The kitchen of the student dorms is still opened for us, but there are many restrictions. Only three people can cook at the same time, for using the socialization areas there are also limitations on the number of people. Those in double rooms could not go to anyone else's room.

These cases illustrate some basic contrasts, and highlight the importance of domestic relationships during a public health crisis. There is no suggestion that the pandemic situation has been easy or without stress, but having mutual support was crucial during the lockdown, and it is interesting that in the case of Agatha this took place among a group of Erasmus students, a programme in which gaining intercultural skills is a central objective. However, in this case, these exchange students were working outside the parameters of what Erasmus authorities would describe as interculturality, namely a 'bubble-like' learning environment on campus wherein students from a wide range of national origins create shared understandings as part of the process of creating European unity (Cuzzocrea & Collins 2015). This suggests that new, more informal but less policy-relevant, forms of solidarity can independently emerge between students from different national backgrounds, based around the need to cope with the demands of the pandemic at home rather than learning about one another's home countries.

From a less salutary position, the somewhat difficult conditions facing many international students in Portugal reveals another form of precarity, this time related to the neoliberal governance of the local housing market. We already know that this cohort has been specifically targeted by investors and agencies in Portugal who have sought to profit from the recent expansion in numbers, with concerns also voiced regarding the quality and poor value

for money of much accommodation (Author xxxx). University dormitories are another concern. Students such as Benjamin were subject to stringent rules not of their own making. In contrast to Thomas and Agatha, who could develop their own coping mechanisms, others had to follow external instructions due to there being a larger concentration of people within a smaller space. This extends to managing academic work, with domestic space having become a *de facto* part of the university campus, echoing the debate on the materiality of student mobility previously introduced (Brooks & Waters 2018). Learning itself became constrained within the domestic space, and subject to interruption from internal and external noise, the reliability of internet connections and the willingness of co-residents to not impede one another's work.

Economic precarity

Having mentioned the prospect of new economic challenges emerging during the lockdown in the introductory discussion, we now wish to look at the ability of the interviewees to maintain financial stability, making connections with the 'precarity' theme and acknowledging the significance of pre-existing and pandemic-related hardship. What our evidence suggests is that the economic situations of many international students were delicately balanced even prior to the pandemic, the main reason being a reliance on multiple sources of income. For all but the most affluent students, financing mobility involves combining income from scholarships (including Erasmus grants), handouts from parents, government support, part-time jobs and personal savings. It is the accumulation of these revenues that makes mobility viable, and the end of one or more of these streams will almost certainly create problems.

This is not a uniform situation, but seems more apt in describing the economic circumstances of students who have migrated for the entire duration of a degree course rather than short duration credit mobility exchanges. Even taking into account the relatively low level of Erasmus grant funding, interviewees who had travelled via this platform for short stays fared

better in terms of their finances than others who received no support from an external agency.[2]

However, our evidence suggests that even for grant-holders, making recourse to precarious work – often without a formal contract or fixed hours – can happen, with much of this employment conforming to the uncertainty, instability and risk archetype (Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2011; Wilson & Ebert 2013), lacking financial security and an ability to plan effectively for the future (see also McDonald et al. 2011). Precarious work also tends to lack non-monetary value for the highly qualified (see also Bone 2019), being disconnected from studies, taking students outside their academic milieux and integrating them into what may be an exploitative habitus. In other words, they are just doing it for the money, and perhaps not enough money, rather than the acquiring or enhancing skills that might contribute to their employability profiles.

We also found that international students reliant upon income from such forms of employment were very badly exposed during the pandemic. 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, these students lost their jobs during the lockdown, and an essential part of their income. Given that this situation was seen as unlikely to improve in the near future due to the unviability of tourism in Lisbon during the pandemic, some students had to find other jobs, falling back on sectors they perceived as posing a threat to their physical health in addition to being financially precarious: delivery drivers, working in hospitals and supermarkets. Time spent in such employment may also need to be extended due to the prolongation of educational courses as a result of the closing of university facilities, extending exposure to risk and exploitation.

This prolongation situation is illustrated by the case of Laura, a 25-year-old student from Italy. She moved to Portugal in September 2018 to pursue a two-year Master's degree in Chemistry, supported by her parents. Her programme had been proceeding as planned, but the

start of pandemic coincided with her final semester, during which she had been conducting experimental analysis in the laboratory.

As the university fees can be paid monthly here, I pay 150 euros monthly, which is not much for my parents. But now with Covid-19 (…) 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's why I got the delivery job in the bar. My parents pay the rent, but at least I would then have some extra cash (...). Luckily, we were not that badly affected financially, but my father's business closed for two months. So, it would be good if I could work a bit, as he was expecting me to graduate in July, so now it is another three months of rent that he has to pay.

These economic inconveniences may seem inconsequential in isolation, but incrementally, the prolongation of studies can create expenses that add up to substantial outlay, and this is not even taking into account the impact a late finish to a degree course might have upon making the next step in an educational or career trajectory at a time when the world's economies will be in deep recession.

In looking at the economic situations of these students, we have not only identified the pre-existing point of vulnerability – the need to combine income streams – but also found at least one additional form of precarity that has emerged during the pandemic, namely the prolongation of studies leading to an extended immersion in precarious risk. This is not even taking into account the epidemiological risk of working in hospitality and the health sector. We

can hence add important nuances to our understanding of international student precarity that we feel needs to be made more visible within current debates. This is also a topic that we therefore hope will attract future studies in the student mobility field, and perhaps also be given more attention in research on tertiary education in general.

Conclusion: The immobility pandemic and the future of international studentship

In many European countries, geographical mobility has increasingly provided a means through which a socio-demographically broad range of students can move towards educational success and career development. In the years preceding the pandemic, studying abroad, whether for a short exchange visit or longer-term educational migration, become one means of overcoming regionally-situated disadvantage for those residing in a place with limited opportunities and/or a means through which others already rich in social and economic capital could consolidate their positions. For universities, international student migrants represented an important revenue stream, while institutions such as the European Commission viewed heightened levels of participation in mobility programmes like Erasmus as a form of free movement between EU member states. What all these parties seem to have failed to take into account was the precarity experienced by many international students due to high costs and low levels of support. With the Covid-19 pandemic bringing much of this circulation to standstill, these concerns have suddenly obtained a new visibility, which we have sought to highlight in this article, alongside an elaboration of some of the additional existential challenges created at this time.

Through focusing on the Portuguese context, an emerging hub for internationalized tertiary education, we have been able to describe some of the issues confronting students at this time, including the mental and physical strain of lockdown, and the stress created by a re-positioning of learning within the domestic sphere, with international students' intercultural

learning trajectories also heading in an inward direction. More tellingly, we wish to re-iterate the important role played by precarious employment, and the vulnerabilities created by relying upon fragmented and unpredictable sources of income. This is an issue that is under-represented in students of international student mobility, including our own work, and we hope that in preparing this article, we have begun to re-dress this imbalance.

The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed many aspects of life as we previously knew it – social, economic, political and cultural – and student life is not exempt, including a sudden loss of mobility horizons. The interviews we conducted with students in Portugal help show how vulnerable many international students have been before and during the pandemic. The challenge for student mobility in the future is to work out how large numbers can circulate without needless risk and excessive hardship, suggesting that more effective support is required, creating an additional burden for host institutions. If universities wish to retain a strong presence within the circuits of internationalized tertiary education, they need to think carefully about the additional costs as well as the potential benefits.

Looking towards the future, and considering what our evidence means for international students, we can observe some latent concerns that have come to the surface in our Portuguese research context; for example, in regard to students' financial situations. Without evidence from other regional contexts, we cannot generalize these findings, but one study recently completed in Poland highlights many of the same issues, including 'unprecedented levels of uncertainty, anxiety and stress' among student migrants at this time (Krzaklewska & Şenyuva 2020: 2). The effectiveness of Portuguese universities' main response, remote learning, also remains to be seen when applied to mobility platforms (see Iorio et al. 2020), as does the capacity of agencies such as Erasmus+ to make provision for students who have been 'deprived' of going abroad during the 2020/21 academic year, something that has been identified as another source of stress for students who had anticipating moving abroad at this

time (Czerska-Shaw et al. 2020). Alongside the global health crisis, we are in fact looking at what might be termed an immobility pandemic, with no signs of a return to pre-pandemic norms any time soon.

The extent to which student mobility 'bounces back' therefore remains to be seen, but we certainly hope that the stress test of the pandemic will prompt host universities and funding organizations to strengthen their commitments to the pastoral care of international students, including support to individuals from a wide range of socio-demographic backgrounds. On a more optimistic note, we have also revealed that at least some of these young people can take responsibility for themselves and their fellow students in times of severe distress. We also acknowledge the concern they have had with others at this time, especially their families, providing a welcome relief from the hackneyed images of international students as party-obsessed lockdown breakers that have circulated in our national context, and no doubt in many countries. It has not been particularly easy to find positive value in the pandemic, but in documenting the conscientiousness of our interviewees, we hope that we have managed to do so in one small respect.

Notes

1. Project description removed due to blinding.

2. An undergraduate undertaking an Erasmus exchange may receive around 300 euros per month from the European Commission.

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