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An immobility turn? The Covid-19 pandemic, mobility capital and international students in Portugal

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Abstract

Corporeal travel has been highly problematized during the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to the curtailment of many previously taken-for-granted mobilities. This includes the circulation of international students; individuals undertaking short duration credit mobility exchanges alongside those who have migrated for an entire degree course. The objective of this article is to look at how the pandemic has affected credit and degree mobility students from inside and outside Europe, focusing on the example of Portugal during the lockdown of Spring 2020. Using evidence from qualitative interviews, we illustrate the unfolding impact of the pandemic on the lives and learning habits of these students, showing how the international learning experience changed from being a relatively positive and carefree experience to one characterized by risk and uncertainty. This apparent inversion extends to a potential devaluation of their mobility capital, somewhat undermining the raison d'être of much student

mobility. In conclusion, we argue that whether temporary or permanent, during the pandemic we have witnessed a turn towards immobility in tertiary education, and perhaps in the broader field of mobilities, creating an imperative to open up debate on the impact of the limitations that affect student mobilities.

Introduction

As studies in the mobilities field are making abundantly clear, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on corporeal travel has been profound, transforming social, economic and political life, taking away many previously taken-for-granted liberties (Cresswell 2020; Lin and Yeoh 2020; Jensen 2021; Salazar 2021). The public health crisis has accordingly problematized travel, with mobility constricted at regional, national and international levels. Instead of moving to another country to find liberation and pleasure, people are more likely to face danger and risk, and being seen a threat to societies, non-essential movement having been deemed conducive to spreading the virus. In this article, we will take a look at this predicament, and the consequences of mobilities becoming supplanted by immobility, focusing on the example of international students during the initial months of the public health crisis.

In the recent past, student mobilities have taken different forms, including short-duration 'credit mobility' exchanges between countries and moving to a third party nation for the entire duration of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree course, with developments in this field heavily researched in the decade preceding the pandemic, especially in the European Union (see, e.g., Brooks and Waters 2011; Feyen and Krzaklewska 2013; Raghuram 2013; King 2018). This work has greatly enhanced our understanding of the democratization of both credit mobility (including exchanges made via the European Commission supported Erasmus programme) and more open-ended forms of educational migration, moving us beyond the idea that student mobilities are the sole preserve of a migratory elite (Murphy-Lejeune 2002).

However, in addition to describing expanded levels of participation, and the value of this circulation to individuals and societies, there has also been recognition of negative aspects, including the often high emotional and economic costs of sustaining the study abroad experience (Böttcher et al. 2016; Sin et al. 2017). That we have a socio-demographically diverse international student population – rich and poor, from the Global North and Global South – means that when the pandemic stopped unrestricted global travel, many were left high and dry, without enough support to fall back on. This situation creates a strong imperative to take a look at student mobilities, or student immobility, during the pandemic, particularly in the most prominent internationalized learning hubs.

One such hub is the Portuguese capital city of Lisbon. Portugal is a country that experienced a rapid expansion in the numbers of incoming students in the years prior to the pandemic, with statistics collated by the Portuguese Ministry for Education covering 2019/20 showing that 16,674 credit mobility students (4.2% of all enrollments in tertiary education) and 44,005 degree mobility students (11% of all enrollments) were being hosted by its universities, with Brazil and other Portuguese-speaking nations popular sending countries for both modalities alongside the presence of Erasmus students from other EU member states (DGEEC 2021: 4-5). As we have discussed in our prior work on this topic, this means co-existence of student migrants from the Portuguese speaking world, who are following well-established mobility trajectories, and elevated numbers of highly educated young people from other European countries at Portuguese universities, many of whom are leisure-oriented, attracted by the country's image as a tourist destination (Cairns 2014, Cairns et al., 2018; see also Torkington 2012). This diversity thus provides us with the opportunity to take a cross-sectional look at the sudden disruption of these mobilities, with our research starting in April 2020, only a few weeks after the start of the first pandemic-related lockdown.[1]

The timing of this research can obviously be explained by the fact that like most European countries, Portugal rapidly shifted its tertiary education system in early March 2020 to a remote learning system, followed by the declaration of a State of Emergency by the Portuguese government, lasting until May of the same year. This meant sustained disruption for students – domestic and international – during the first wave of the pandemic, with no sign of a return to full-scale in person teaching at the time of writing, the country having now experienced three further waves of elevated numbers of Covid-19 infections. What we are hence creating is a portrait of a possible turn towards immobility in its early stages, using evidence detailing the experience of living through the initial months of the pandemic.

Student mobility capital and the pandemic

It is no exaggeration to say that the pandemic came as an enormous shock to many people, including researchers who have had to question many of their long-held assumptions about previously taken-for-granted benefits of internationalized learning. The same can be said of international students, who now find their mobility experience turned upside down, with a curtailment of leisure pursuits in destinations that have strong associations with tourism alongside the suspension of face-to-face teaching. Therefore, what might have been foreseen as a relatively trouble-free, even pleasurable, way of enhancing intercultural skills and gaining additional credentials has become something of an endurance test, with no sign of a return to pre-pandemic norms at the time of writing.

Personal freedom is not the only thing being lost. Clearly, something valuable has been gone missing during the pandemic that may prove extremely difficult to replace or re-capture. Putting this into conceptual terms, international students may be experiencing a loss or devaluation of their mobility capital, a term that has been employed by numerous authors as a means of quantifying the various forms of personal and professional development that are

acquired via studying abroad, including enhanced intercultural competencies and the heightening of international employability (Cairns 2021). Through engaging in episodic or open-ended forms of mobility, students are thought to become more adept at living and working alongside people from different social and cultural backgrounds, and possibly more able to appreciate the norms and values of other societies and their labour markets.

Using this concept helps us tap into the sociological roots of student mobilities, with 'mobility capital' owing a considerable debt to the work of Bourdieu in theorizing various forms of capital (see, e.g., Bourdieu 1986). This means that what is being lost during the pandemic are potentially ontologically valuable life experiences, including the creation of cosmopolitan predispositions; Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 51) goes so far as to describe this as 'a taste for living abroad,' making one part of a migratory elite and, more contentiously, forming a sub-component of human capital (see also Kaufmann et al. 2004). Mobility capital hence relates to the acquisition and loss not only of status but also *values*; predispositions that are thought to influence the way in which students plan their future lives and complete the transition to adulthood (see Kennedy 2010; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Robertson et al. 2018; Winogrodzka and Grabowska 2021). That the values associated with mobility appear to have drastically changed during the pandemic also means running the risk of becoming codified as personally irresponsible and a problem to society through being mobile, placing groups such as international students into a negative social category, with the apparent immaturity arising from their attachment to non-essential mobility disrupting rather than making a positive contribution to their personal and professional development.

In more practical terms, there is little or no opportunity for sought after properties such as interculturality and employability to emerge at shuttered universities and in locked-down societies due to the lack of opportunities for engaging in international conviviality, with the shift of teaching onto virtual platforms proving to be of limited value in regard to cultivating

these attributes. As we have observed in our own institutions, universities sought to sidestep the risks of Covid-19 through moving their courses online, constituting an expanded form of 'digital mobilities' (Urry 2007), extending the idea to conducting credit mobility exchanges via virtual learning platforms, entirely avoiding corporeal immersion in the host society. Leaving aside the many technical problems that have emerged from the suddenness of the shift to remote learning, with institutions and members of staff unprepared and under-qualified, this approach assumes a fungibility that may not exist. One form of pedagogy cannot necessarily be replaced by another when it is not of equal or even sufficient value. The timing of our research hence creates an opportunity to learn about this new evolution in student mobilities during the period in which the virtual replaced the corporeal.

Methodological approach

Having looked at some contextual and theoretical issues, in what remains of this article, we will focus on our evidence, looking at international student life in Portugal during the Spring 2020 lockdown. In doing so, we integrate perspectives from those engaged in intra-European credit mobility exchanges, principally via Erasmus, and others enrolled in degree programmes in receipt of individual scholarships or self-financing. This dual focus reflects the constitution of the international student population in Portugal, covering people from other European countries alongside their peers from the Global South.

In regard to our approach, in contrast to contemporaneous studies that took a quantitative approach to student mobilities in Portugal during the pandemic (see, e.g., Iorio et al. 2020; Sin et al. 2021), we have used qualitative methods. Fieldwork was conducted in Lisbon between April and June 2020, involving semi-structured interviews with 27 international students, lasting between 50 and 90 minutes. Given the pandemic conditions, face-to-face interviews were not an option due to the potential for endangering researchers and

interviewees. Respondent recruitment was also difficult due to the inability to directly contact people at home, not to mention students not being on campus. For this reason, we reluctantly made recourse to using social media platforms and webpages frequented by international students, principally Facebook, to recruit individuals. While we accept the limitations of this approach, and would not typically resort to such means since not all international students use social media, the deficits were outweighed by the pressing need to document events as they happened rather than retrospectively.

Insert Table 1

As Table 1 shows, we included students from a wide range of academic disciplines. While not a representative sample, we have maintained balance for gender and socio-economic background. In line with mandated social distancing guidelines, all interviews were conducted remotely by the authors, using zoom and skype. 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 had been obtained. Respondents were also assured of the confidentiality of the information obtained from the interviews and that they could refuse to answer questions or halt the interview at any point if they did not feel comfortable. To preserve their privacy, all names of students and their host institutions have been anonymized, alongside any other identifiable information.

In regard to the interviewing process itself, a certain amount of improvisation was required to help us cope with the impact of the pandemic on the fieldwork. Furthermore, while we did not start our research with a pre-set theoretical position, we had a clear aim of exploring the problematization of student mobility, following up on the approaches taken in our prior studies in this field (Cairns 2014 xxxx; França and Cairns 2020). We can therefore say that our

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work was problem-centred, the 'problem' being the impact of the pandemic on international students' lives, enabling us to be informed by methodological precedents influenced by the work of Witzel and Reitor (2012). While arguably less systematic compared to other approaches focusing upon more rigid research questions, we were able to engage with a diverse range of individuals united by the common 'problem' of the pandemic. In simpler terms, the interviews could be described as semi-structured, with a relatively short but well-arranged set of topics rather than a long list of questions, in order to help maximize opportunities for creating dialogue. This approach also helped us to be culturally sensitive to geo-demographically diverse research environments, moving beyond an overly 'Western' orientation (Witzel and Reitor 2012: 53-54).

The interviewing process, and subsequent analytical work, can also be said to have been biographical, with questions broadly structured around the unfolding impact of immobility. This enabled us to look at students' subjective experiences of the pandemic rather than our own positions or the stereotypical ideas about international students promoted in the media, with a view to constructing narratives about everyday life and deeper processes of biographical development. More prosaically, in focusing on short-duration stayers alongside more settled student migrants, we were able to look at the experiences of those at the beginning, middle or nearing the end of their stays in Portugal, with the relatively tight timeframe of the research meaning that our approach necessarily became cross-sectional.

Results

In regard to the presentation of results, our analysis is structured into three main sections, starting with an overview of the initial reactions to the abrupt changes that took place in living and learning circumstances. This is followed by details of how the interviewees reacted to the unfolding consequences of immobility, including divergences between students from outside

the European Union and intra-EU movers, the dilemma about whether or not to stay in Portugal, and the roles played by friends, family members and host institutions in making the adjustment to new realities. The third and final part of the analysis looks towards the post-pandemic future, leading towards the concluding discussion of emerging issues, including the efficacy of virtual and blended learning formats.

Initial impact on international student life

We start by detailing some of the immediate effects of the lockdown which began in March 2020, and the dramatic changes that took place in the interviewees' living and learning circumstances. Much disruption ensued from the closure of university facilities, especially for those dependent on access to libraries and laboratories, meaning that study plans and experimental work had to be cancelled or delayed. For everyone, the ability to cope with the sudden shift in learning was an obvious problem, in some cases made worse by a lack of communication from universities. Andrea, a 22-year-old degree mobility student, with French and Dutch nationalities, told us that she had receive 'maybe two emails from the university' at this time, while Thomas, a 25-year-old German Mechanical Engineering exchange mobility student received no instructions from his institution other than a circular aimed at all Erasmus students. For those who did receive more substantial messages, the language of dissemination was in Portuguese, which caused further confusion, as can be observed in the case of Katrin, a 25-year-old International Studies student from Germany.

> 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.

The speed of the institutional response came in for particular criticism, with some universities taking weeks and even months to explain how students were to continue their courses through working at home. This delay led to the creation of a twilight situation, when university life lost impetus, a position explained by Sergio, a 21-year-old student who had moved from Italy to Portugal in 2018 for 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.

These accounts suggest that the initial transition from face-to-face teaching to virtual learning was not particularly well-handled, something that is perhaps understandable given the abruptness of the change. Further confusion stemmed from the fact many students were put in the unprecedented position of not being able to work. Diligent individuals, many of whom had detailed study plans and deadlines to be met, suddenly found that these strictures no longer mattered or that they had no suitable place in which they could continue their studies. While this situation also affected domestic students, their overseas counterparts faced additional complications. As well as a lack of information they could understand, there were frequent concerns with family members back home in countries that had been more deeply affected by the first wave of the pandemic than Portugal.

Related to this concern were the consequences arising from the potential prolongation of academic courses beyond their envisaged completion dates, which put immediate financial

strain on already hard-pressed individuals and their families, as explained by 25-year-old Francis from Angola, currently studying for a degree in Business in Lisbon.

> With the crisis, my parents are struggling to send me money, so right now, there is nothing that I can do, only wait. I can't go out to look for a job, because everything is closed. So, I can't move. The only thing that I have to support me financially here are my savings, this is what has been saving me so far.

This evidence provides us with an important reminder of the financial costs of studying abroad, and that less well-off students are likely to be reliant on support from their families and part-time jobs to supplement scholarship funding. Many international students' economic needs are in fact met through constructing a complex web of support, combining different income streams, challenging the idea of international students as a homogenous elite (see also Sin et al. 2017; Raguram and Sohdhi 2021). We can however confirm that in some cases, such students did receive help from their host universities. This was not in the form of actual financial transfers but rather via the deferment of tuition fees or extension of grant funding where courses have been prolonged. In the case of Rodrigo, a 28-year-old Master's student in Economics from Guinea-Bissau, this support meant that he would not have to automatically pay for his university accommodation.

> Like other institutions, my university suspended the dorms payment temporarily. They could not expect us to pay as before, the situation would not allow them to demand this from the students, because the main concerns were health, food and meeting the basic needs. (…) They were saying, 'You are here, you cannot go out to work, but you don't have to pay the dorm fee.'

We therefore have some signs that certain universities responded to what was for them an unprecedented situation in terms of addressing existential issues that arose during the early weeks and months of the pandemic, helping to alleviate some of the economic stress and associated anxiety being experienced at this time. This is an important finding, and it is reassuring to learn that despite the evident problems in communications, there were host universities that took their duty of care to international students seriously, at the same time, making a contribution to the broader effort to limit social interactions in Portuguese civil society.

At a more personal level, and relating back to the mobility capital idea introduced previously, we can observe issues arising from curtailed conviviality and mandated social isolation. Maintaining meaningful social contacts during the initial months of lockdown was a serious challenge for many interviewees, especially among those living in dormitories that had been rapidly converted into hyper-securitized environments. Benjamin, a 19-year-old Brazilian Journalism student explained what happened in his university residence:

> 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 experiences were commonplace for the international students we interviewed who lived in university dormitories, constituting a major shift in how they managed everyday matters such as cooking and cleaning. The ability to interact with friends and peers was obviously constrained at a time when the learning experience was also becoming highly insular,

confined to what were often very small, uncomfortable spaces, and students who lived in private accommodation related similar tales in regard to social isolation, the difference being that they were able improvise their own solutions rather than follow an institution's set guidelines. Along with the shifting of learning into the domestic sphere, we can see that the international learning experience become extremely insular at this time. Educational and social horizons simultaneously shrinking to minimal levels of interaction, with the mobility experience losing its capacity to contribute to the process of learning about and integrating into different societies.

Living with the pandemic: Intra-European and extra-European contrasts

Looking at international student life after the first weeks of the public health crisis, we can see that people started to reflect more on what was happening in their lives, with the new restrictions already starting to take on a degree of permanence, and we noticed diversity emerging according to different mobility modalities and countries of origin. While the initial experience of the pandemic was broadly similar, as time wore on contrasts emerged, with a greater amount of friction being experienced by those from outside the EU. This may explain why host institutions felt the need to display a much greater duty of care towards extra-European students, many of whom were fee-payers who had migrated for the entire duration of a degree course. In contrast, for Erasmus students in particular, the onus was placed on individuals to take greater responsibility for managing the transformation taking place in learning and living environments themselves, to the point of some sending universities seeking to absolve themselves of liability for the those whom they had previously sent abroad. This position is illustrated by the experiences of 25-year-old Thomas from Germany:

My home university sent me a paper to return and they said if you want to stay in Portugal, 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 it and I stayed.

There were also contrasts in domestic situations. Unlike the extra-European university dorm residents whom we discussed previously, Erasmus students tended to share private accommodation, and were able to devise coping strategies that suited their own needs. For example, Agatha arrived in Lisbon from the Czech Republic just prior to the start of the pandemic in 2020, for an envisaged year-long Erasmus exchange. While mentioning the stress of coping with the situation, she also felt that she had been able to cope with this thanks to having other Erasmus students as 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.

Others in similar positions benefitted from having fewer people living in what would have otherwise been over-crowded accommodation. This was the case for Enzo, a 24-year-old Mathematics student from Italy:

During the quarantine we were five people living in the house, because the other four tenants went home to quarantine. It's a big house, it's really nice, we have a big living room, a big terrace. (…) in the terrace we have a garden and we are planting tomatoes

and salad, it's nice, it takes time, we water it and wait for it to grow. We also have compost, we mix it. These things help a lot (...). Of course, we also have rules, we have a hand cleaner product by the entrance, when we are leaving the house, we need to say where we are going. We are respecting the quarantine pretty well, we have a trustworthy relationship, I know they are not doing stupid things (...) but it was also challenging because it is a lot of time for us to be together all the time. (...) Sometimes when you are free to go and something bothers you, you just go out and forget it, but all of us staying in the house, we realize that we have to speak as soon as possible about what is happening because you are going to be with the person twenty-four-seven.

These last remarks from Enzo illustrate the importance of collective responsibility and maintaining a high level of trust within a household. It is also heartening to read about his attempts at communal gardening as a possibly therapeutic means of passing the time during the lockdown. Such coping mechanisms are however somewhat ad hoc and arise from good fortune rather than diligent planning. What, for instance, would have happened had Enzo's roommates decided to remain in the house during the lockdown or if their accommodation had not been so luxurious?

Looking outside the Erasmus sphere, some of the extra-European students we interviewed, many of whom pay higher tuition fees than their EU counterparts, began to realize that they were facing significant economic challenges. A frequent problem related to the devaluation of national currencies, with the amounts of money that parents could send to their children abroad having been significantly lowered by these fluctuations. Budgetary difficulties experienced by governments in the sending societies also meant grant funding to overseas students being cut or suspended.[2] Some of the Brazilian and African interviewees faced challenges arising from their limited prospects for a return home. Alongside high travel costs

and relatively few flight options was the fear of losing a scholarship if they returned home, and consequently, of not being able to return to their studies in Europe. For example, 19-year-old Jazmine, from São Tomé:

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

Here we have confirmation of another issue affecting some extra-European students: the lack of facilities for remote learning in their home countries, somewhat undermining the potential for virtual mobility to create democratic access to internationalized learning. While this problem has also affected domestic students, keeping up with classes on-line can be more challenging for overseas learners who not only lack reliable internet access but are also in a different time zone. Such considerations create much stress, and uncertainty, at a time when anxiety is already running high. All these considerations serve to complicate and devalue the international student experience, lowering the prospect of generating mobility capital.

Reflecting back on some of the other, more intangible, elements of mobility capital, we can argue that in a changing landscape of global mobility, including but not exclusive to circulation in higher education, extremely valuable faculties risk being lost or diluted. This obviously includes the interculturality dimension of both student exchanges and longer duration migration, related to the literal loss of social contact with international peers, extending to *not learning* to how to be cosmopolitan and conscientious as a result of constricted conviviality and mandated civic disengagement. In extreme cases, we might speculate mobility

capital might even become debited from rather than accumulated by the individual, with the negativity of the experience creating a strong disinclination to engage in future endeavours abroad, coupled with a more straightforward inability to complete international learning trajectories due to resource depletion. Host institution must also confront the fact that their 'product' may have become less appealing and that in the future they may have fewer incoming students, particularly from countries deeply affected by the pandemic, with student migrants from Brazil being an outstanding concern in the case of Portuguese universities.

In summarizing this change, in the opening part of this article, we noted the pre-pandemic expansion of student mobility in countries like Portugal, with the accompanying suggestion that the diversification and heightened proliferation these mobilities had shifted the meaning of internationalized education; in European space, towards reflecting values such as democratization of access and social inclusion. Basically, the image of the student migrant looked as if it might have shifted from the elitist archetype towards becoming something familiar and generic to the point of mundanity. At the same time, it might have been hoped that mobility capital would become distributed more widely, enriching a socio-demographically diverse range young people with interculturality and international employability. Although this project was never fully realized, we can say that an attempt was being made, but even assuming that we are able to move past the immobility interregnum, it may be that student mobilities move back towards selectivity due to factors including the damage wrought by the pandemic, with the mobile student population shrunk by a lack of impetus and/or depleted (economic) resources to point of the pandemic signalling an immobility turn in higher education.

This is a somewhat speculative position, and it remains to be seen what long-term effects emerge from the experience of living through Covid-19. We can however note that it is still notable that all the students we interviewed still elected to stay in Portugal despite the concerns with their financial situations. Whether this demonstrates recklessness or resilience

remains to be seen, but there was a particularly strong feeling among the non-European students that returning home was simply not a viable option, regardless of the stress and anxiety they were enduring. While facing adversity, it is also interesting to note that many of these students started to see themselves as directing their own agency as opposed to simply reacting to changing circumstances or passively following official guidance, as might have been the case in the early days of the crisis. We might even say that their lives became centred upon devising imaginative means to cope with new challenges and unfamiliar living circumstances. It may also be that they have realized that due to the failure of institutional mechanisms to comprehensively address their needs, they must take responsibility for many aspects of their own situations, explaining the large amount of self-reflection about the need to remain in Portugal (see also Heinz and Witzel 1995). We might say that as the pandemic became a normative experience, they adjusted through developing more durable habits or changing their expectations; and they collaborated with each other to overcome shared challenges, realizing that they had little choice but to stay where they are until the situation improves.

Re-evaluating future student mobility

The evidence we have presented in the preceding two sections illustrates how internationalized learning was dramatically changed by the pandemic. As we noted previously, pre-existing challenges in student mobilities have been recognized by researchers, and these problems appeared to have deepened for many people. We might say that more visibility is being given to previously hidden costs and risks, extending to a potential inversion of sorts in the meaning and the value of the international learning experience, albeit with the devaluation in mobility capital partly compensated for by the emergence of more intense forms of conviviality within households. However, much less prominent in the interviewees' accounts is the fact that long-

term career goals are being put on hold in order to address more immediate needs, with at some point a reckoning needing to be made with the prospect of a less mobile future.

Putting these reflections into less dramatic terms, there is among the interviewees an undeniable despondency related to the transformation of an experience they imagined as rewarding, even pleasant, into something of a trial. While a contributing factor, not all of these doubts can be attributed to the pandemic. It is in fact interesting to observe, especially among those nearing the end of their stays in Portugal, that disillusionment had set in prior to the arrival of Covid-19, suggesting a degree of pre-existing internationalized learning fatigue. This was certainly the case for the oldest interviewee, Adriana, a 40-year-old Architecture postgraduate from Brazil:

> I think that living in Europe maybe is not what we want, even though it is a dream for many Brazilians. We are discriminated against here as in many other countries, which is what happened to my boyfriend when he was living in USA; for being Latin American. So, I don't think that staying here is definitive. I can't see myself living here forever because I don't identify here as my 'home.'

Problems relating to prejudice and homesickness have obviously not gone away with the pandemic, and may start to become more general, particularly if the quality of new learning arrangements, including remote working and blended degree courses, is found wanting. For example, Erma, a 19-year-old Civil Engineering student from Turkey explained:

> It has been very difficult. I am under constant stress because I cannot go back home, and as I said, the classes are not good and sharing the room is difficult. (…) I was

supposed to stay until the end of June, but now I want to go back as soon as the borders in my country open.

Erma's account also reminds us that some students simply could not return due to the epidemiological situation at home. Facing a very real existential threat is different to familiar fears about academic success and social integration, something unanticipated by those who left home before the advent of Covid-19. While we certainly hope that vaccination programmes will permit meaningful levels of circulation between countries to return, limited supplies and uneven distribution mean certain countries remaining isolated for longer, especially where new variants emerge, with the situation in Brazil further complicated by pre-existing political instability. This may result in students from such countries remaining in Portugal even after the completion of academic courses, despite concerns about inequality and disadvantage, as well as the experience of prejudice noted by Adriana above (see also Sayad 1998).

For intra-European movers, the value of circulation between countries is compromised in different ways, with what might be described as political, or geopolitical, consequences alongside micro level impacts. While the Erasmus programme has continued to operate throughout the pandemic, with its charter being renewed in 2021, its capacity to link together people from different national backgrounds and provide a symbol of European integration has been severely constrained at this time. This implies not being able to socially integrate people from different backgrounds, an issue that has featured prominently in studies of Erasmus during its expansion period (see, e.g., Van Mol 2013). And taking into account some of the economic concerns raised, we can expect to see students from certain socio- and geo-demographic groups becoming increasingly absent from this programme and other platforms that cater for students from Brazil and Portuguese speaking countries in Africa.

Arguably more complicated is the fact that the disruption of the pandemic also appears to have created a certain amount of confusion for students who were in the process of re-formulating their sense of national belonging when the first lockdown began, and who no longer have a clear idea of what now constitutes their 'home' country. For instance, 22-year-old Andrea lived in Germany before moving to Portugal in September 2019 to take a course in international studies. Her parents still live in Germany but she feels 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.

Making a choice about returning 'home' is hence not always clear cut. This is perhaps one aspect of student mobility that needs to be rethought, with the idea of using programmes like Erasmus to effectively de-nationalize young Europeans rendered somewhat obsolete when having a well-defined sense of home attains a greater value. A further issue concerns the long-term impacts of having been an international student during the pandemic on health and well-

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being. Thankfully, none of the interviewees suffered major physical health impacts, but the emotional consequences of the pandemic are hard to ignore, made harder to cope with by being away from familiar sources of support. For example, in the case of 27-year-old Aada from Finland:

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. Socially I was fine because I live with many people, so there was always company in the house, and I could have company when I wanted or when I didn't want it, I could go to my room. (...) 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 brings to light the emotional cost of being culturally uprooted at this time, and the association her mobility now has with physical isolation. Effectively stranded in Portugal by the pandemic, she has suddenly realized the value of 'home' and having a fixed place of residence, leading her to question the value of an experience that leads to a reduction not an increase in freedom, and perhaps an enhanced appreciation of her point of origin.

While Aada has sought solace in meditation, Francis, a 25-year-old Business student from Angola underlines that in coping with the emotional challenge of the pandemic, it has been human contact that has mattered most:

In this kind of situation, we need emotional support, because we are here alone. When I need this support, I have to call my parents in Angola. However, the people who I live with now, they became good friends, so we share our concerns. The university didn't help with anything. (…) I was very worried with my parents, my family and Angola. Angola is still not open for anything and the majority of the population live from small and informal business. So, if everything closes, people don't know how to survive, there is no other source of income, and this made it more difficult for me to be well. (…) I think it was a very difficult moment, I have to focus and try to grow up and be mature at the same time (…). Africa is too far away from Europe, so when we start to think that our parents are thousands of kilometres away, in another continent, and you are here, alone, struggling financially, it is very easy for you to feel lonely and depressed.

New forms of conviviality and resilience within the domestic sphere, some of which we have been able to discuss in this article, help to cushion the blow of geographical separation from families, but the awareness of physical distance can still have a major bearing on health and well-being. While we do not know at this stage to what extent student mobility has been indelibly stamped with the negative baggage of the pandemic, greater attention certainly needs to be paid to the emotional and the economic costs of being away from, or without, a home, alongside revaluing the extent to which the large-scale circulation of students is ultimately sustainable.

Concluding Discussion: An immobility turn in student mobilities?

Bringing this article to a close, we can certainly say that there has been an immobility turn affecting the lives of practically all the interviewees. Whether this means a full scale, long-term change in their mobility consumption patterns obviously remains to be seen, but we can already observe that much of the previously taken-for-granted positivity of the student mobility experience has dissipated, replaced by risk and uncertainty. We can also see that there has been a potential devaluation of the mobility capital they hoped to generate via their mobilities, related to the loss of opportunities to engage in various forms of intercultural conviviality and build on international employability. Social isolation seems particularly corrosive for the generation of cosmopolitan predispositions, to the extent of prompting a reappraisal of the value of home in some cases. In regard to pandemic-related changes in the broader culture of internationalized education, while the main trend has been to move classes and other pedagogical activities online, we have no real evidence of fungibility in regard to the use of virtual learning for international students due to the lack of face-to-face contact. The interviewees in fact seem to feel that moving lessons online contributes to the aforementioned social isolation, acting as little more than a place-holder until 'real' teaching can return. It is also unclear what exactly has been learnt in the virtual classroom at this time, beyond coming to terms with a life characterized by numerous restrictions, raising the prospect of pandemic-interrupted educational courses needing to be re-taken at in person settings when it is safe to do so.

As we also implied in the middle part of our analysis, the changes that have taken place in international student life have not been homogenous. Taking a relatively elastic approach in the interviews and looking at a broad range of student travellers has enabled us to see some of the contrasts that have emerged between students from inside and outside the EU, as well as differences between those taking short-term exchange visits and longer duration educational

migrants. Arguably, those who have travelled furthest have been the most affected due to their limited prospects for returning home, coupled with political and economic problems in sending societies, although there are also concerns in regard to intra-European movers participating in credit mobility schemes, a few of whom lack a clear sense of what constitutes home due to their pursuit of the European dream. This finding challenges the value of cosmopolitan or de-nationalized identities, which may become problematic when there is a losing sight of what constitutes home (see also Finn 2017). Putting these findings into a broader context, transformations in the meaning of student mobilities are not unprecedented, the rapid expansion of circulation levels in the years prior to the pandemic being a case in point, which made moving abroad feel like a normal part of student life rather than an exceptional experience confined to relatively elite circles. What we may be witnessing now is the start of another change, a sudden and widespread contraction, implying that the heyday of intra-European circulation in particular may have been much more short-lived than many of us expected.

At the time of writing, it is not yet clear whether a temporal, albeit prolonged, period of immobility will turn into a more solidified grounding of students' learning trajectories, meaning that we will for now refrain from answering the question posed in the title of this article, leaving the debate open for further investigation. We will also refrain from endorsing the somewhat reckless narrative being promoted by certain vested interests – including universities – aimed at creating the impression that the time has come to re-start mobility, without first addressing on-going risks. Our own subsequent research also confirms that reservations about mobility remain prevalent among prospective international students (Malet Calvo et al. 2021), and work conducted by our European research peers implies that systematic concerns remain in regard to building in safeguards to exchange programmes (see, e.g., Krzaklewska and Şenyuva, 2020). Despite what often feel like unsolvable problems, we nevertheless hope that relatively free and easy mobility will return sooner than later,

particularly taking into account the negative impact on student life in Portugal and in many other countries made by the lack of an inclusive body of international learners.

It might also be argued that immobility is becoming mainstream, with stay-at-home and avoid non-essential travel the mantras of the pandemic era. Looking at possible future scenarios, we may start to move towards urban encounters without physical travel as part of what might be termed an 'invigorated localism' (Cresswell 2020: 10), constituting an upending of the 'time-space compression' idea and a rediscovery of the often uncomfortable reality of distance (Harvey 1990; see also Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021). During this re-alignment, there is going to be an evitable amount of confusion for mobile students, where educational trajectories have stalled due to mandatory immobility, leading to many moments of stillness within biographies, centred around notions of 'rootedness and the sedentary' (Cresswell 2012: 648). Instead of looking at how far and wide they travel, and how often, we might be better served looking at the means through which they minimize spatial circulation, making best use of what is close at hand and certified Covid-safe (see also Budd et al. 2011). That this immobilities turn is not confined to students is self-evident, with challenges for tourists and the reception of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as migrant workers. It might even become necessary to talk about immobility capital, in relation to becoming an expert in staying local.

Looking at another side of this situation, universities are faced with the additional costs and inconveniences of hosting incoming (and domestic) students at a time when their facilities were required to close or be adapted to meet social distancing guidelines. We might therefore want to re-consider the value of student mobilities to systems of tertiary education which have paid sufficient heed to critical perspectives associated with the new mobilities paradigm and its accompanying literature (see, e.g., Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Adey 2009; Sheller and Urry 2016). This means that practices such as internationalized learning are

now required to take into account public health considerations, including the risk of incoming students spreading the virus, in addition to issues that affect all students, such as maintaining social distancing in small classrooms. For institutions that host and fund international students, it may therefore be an opportune moment at which to pause mobility until the adaptation is complete or the spread of the virus has come under control.

What remains to be seen is the extent to mobility remains attractive to students. While our research is limited to one particular national context, a high degree of perseverance is evident, with disillusionment related more to long-standing issues such as prejudice and homesickness rather than the effects of the pandemic. This suggest a durability in student mobilities, meaning that we need to temper our pessimism. Some students still appear to want the stamp of student mobility on their passports and CVs to show that they are 'international,' despite the somewhat compromised nature of the experience, leading us to end this article on a relatively hopeful note.

Notes

1. This project was entitled, *removed due to blinding*

2. For example, INAGBE (the Angolan agency for the administration of scholarships) drastically reduced its level of support for Angolan students in Portugal due to the domestic economic crisis.

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