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# Introduction

## The intermittency of youth migration

*David Cairns*

*Mara Clemente*

*Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Portugal*

This book presents a range of different perspectives on youth migration, focusing upon research from a wide range of geographical contexts. While diverse, what theoretically unites the assembled chapters is the idea that migration as practiced by young people has fragmented into disparate episodes. Rather than becoming migrants in the classical sense of following a path with a clear beginning, middle and end, young people tend to move intermittently, in a more circular manner and for different, frequently over-lapping reasons such as education, work or training. They may not even see themselves as migrants - especially in the very early stages of a spatial trajectory, but when we take into account the accumulation of mobility experiences being consumed, starting with what may be relatively short duration stays abroad, we come to see that they are actually practicing migration, albeit in a manner different to established ideas that centre on the idea of settlement. Another way of looking at this situation would be to see moves abroad during the youth phase as precursors to longer duration stays later in life. What happens at a young age hence comes to matter a great deal to professional development, as this can be the time of life when the knowledge and skills required to become a migrant are generated, along with an awareness of how to make effective decisions about where and when to go.<sup>1</sup>

Having stated this position, a more straightforward way of introducing this book would be to say that different chapters have been collated with a view to representing some of the most prominent topics in the youth mobility research field. There is however a desire to show the connections, literal and imaginative, that exist between seemingly unrelated experiences. As noted above this includes the idea of youth mobility as informing later life migration, heightening its significance. This is not the only connection made in this book. We also seek to integrate forms of youth mobility that have been placed at the margins of society into the centre of the research field, and discuss mobility in terms of its contribution to migration. Not accepting young people categorized as ‘migrants’ in media and policy discourse as consumers of mainstream mobility values denies the fact that these individuals have ‘normal’ aspirations to engage in internationalized forms of work and learning. Furthermore, excluding those who engage in student exchanges, work placements or training exercises from migration frameworks contributes to their social and economic marginalization in host societies, potentially denying them access to vital support structures.

The aspiration to make a better life for oneself via mobility is also transversal, shared by young people in the centre-ground and at the margins of society; those rich in social and economic capital, who wish to consolidate or multiply their wealth, and others moving without resources or support in an attempt to escape hardship. How these young people are perceived may however differ. The former are seen as good consumers and net contributors to society, while the latter may be marked as vulnerable and seen as a social problem due to their dependence on public largess. Mobility can be further problematized in political and public discourse when it takes place outside the regular channels of circulation between sending, transit and receiving countries, to point of being defined, in some cases, a product of criminal behaviour. This helps explain why, instead of being seen as mobile youth, ‘the poor’ come to be seen as ‘involuntary’ or ‘forced’ migrants, perhaps even ‘victims of trafficking’.

There is clearly a great deal of room for exploration of the full spectrum of youth mobility, taking into account the contradictions of mobility and migration, as well as a need to challenge many taken for granted assumptions. No one, for instance, thinks of international students and trainees as ‘victims of trafficking’ even though they may have been divested of thousands of euros or dollars and compelled to work for minimal wages in order to make ends meet. Problematized categories of mobility do however seem to be the exclusive preserve of ‘poor people’ who migrate in what might be seen as an irregular manner. The categories mobilized by politics and the media, and sometimes by the protagonists themselves, are often an integral part of the problematization of young people’s migration, particularly where there is a failure to take into account the complexity of their motivations and ambitions, and the challenges they face in managing their incipient migration trajectories.

One of these challenges is simply attaining coherence in regard to one’s own mobility. Internationalized experiences of education, training and work are not generally linear but characterized by continuous fragmentation and a need for improvisation. There is also a need to recognize the exploitation mechanisms that built into migration systems, often disguised as ‘opportunities’ but laden with hidden costs, and barriers in relation to bureaucracy, even in countries that – in theory – have open borders.<sup>2</sup> Policies can also strengthen marginality through controversial intervention practices such as detention and encouraging young people to make ‘voluntary’ returns once they are no longer deemed necessary to the host society. At a more quotidian level, that much youth mobility policy, and youth policy per se, is aimed at supporting agencies and institutions rather than directly engaging with an inclusive range of young people means support is usually lacking, creating a dichotomy between official discourses that endorse the value of youth circulation to societies and the reality of young people having to shoulder the costs of embodying internationalization.

These initial remarks bring to light some of the most basic concerns in regard to the intermittent state of youth migration, wherein episodic mobility is nested within an individualized migration trajectory, dependent upon one's own resources. This is a basic starting point that recognizes the agency of young people, something that can be easily denuded for those whose mobility has been either problematized, monetarized or used as some kind of political plaything. In reality, we are left with a situation wherein millions of young people construct their migration trajectories in a ramshackle manner, including many individuals in vulnerable positions, moving abroad without a safety net or the guarantee of any kind of return despite the promise of individualized success.

### **Mobility imperatives and motivations**

Another reason for this book being issued at this time relates to the growing popularity of various forms of youth mobility. The impression created by a decade or more of serious scholarship on this topic is that young people from across the world feel compelled to circulate; to seek out new or at least different ways of learning, training and working, combined with some form of personal development, with a view to pursuing individualized success. The take-up of mobility nevertheless remains patchy.<sup>3</sup> In a number of countries, especially in the more prosperous regions of the European Union, youth mobility is popular to the point of become a relatively mundane part of education and training. Elsewhere, it remains more elusive and thus continues to possess a certain cachet. There are also young people who, while very small in numbers, engage in forms of mobility that attract a huge degree of media and political attention, perhaps due to the exceptionality of their experiences, a recent example being the arrival of young refugees in 2015. However, in the case of minority and majority youth populations, we can see mobility as an individual response to social and economic conditions in present place of residence, whether this is a lack of appropriate opportunities, prevalent inequalities or threats

to personal well-being, all of which can contribute to the generation of a very strong mobility imperative.<sup>4</sup>

Noting the existence of societal conditions, whether the structure of local labour markets and the distribution of educational opportunities or various forms of discrimination and marginalization, provides one means of understanding migration decision-making, but throughout this book we will seek to move beyond describing self-evident contextual factors, acknowledging the importance of individual motivations in the practice of mobility. It is certainly the case that many young people move abroad out of desperation and frustration, and hope, rather than carefully calculated cost-benefit analysis. For this reason, we cannot ignore the need for prosperity and security. But we also need to accept other motivations, such as the strong associations travel has with leisure. There is a danger that this could create the impression that being mobile while young is a less than serious preoccupation, lacking gravitas. However, while the promise of a good time may be used as an enticement it is unlikely to be the principle reason for embarking on what may be mentally and physically arduous journeys. An important corrective function of this book is hence to take young people's mobility seriously and not dismiss it as holidaymaking, especially as there is a great deal of effort involved on their part.

In regard to our own motivations for preparing this book, the authors come from a wide range of professional backgrounds, but mostly within the social sciences, and are for the most part aware of how young people wish to improve their personal and professional circumstances, and perhaps escape personal hardship and societal difficulties, through engaging in mobility. Geographically, contributions have been sought from the traditional centres of youth mobility research, Europe and the Anglophone world, and other regions, including the Global South. A globalized phenomenon absolutely needs to take a global approach in order to acknowledge the diversity and the commonalities in the practice of internationalized learning in particular.

We are nevertheless subject to the vagaries of authorial preferences in regard to the topics covered in this book. While the balance between Global North and Global South may appear somewhat skewed towards the former, this is a reflection of the greater popularity of youth mobility research, especially in Europe, rather than a desired outcome. Within Europe, there is also a strong focus on short-term educational exchanges (especially via Erasmus), again reflecting the current state of the youth mobility research field, and perhaps explaining why the title of this book denotes an educational focus. For these reasons, no spurious claims of representativity will be made in regard to coverage of the youth mobility research field, with the emphasis more upon depth rather than breadth. Despite our shortcomings, we nevertheless wish to share knowledge and insights of what we have observed first-hand, and perhaps bring to light some frustrations with the manner in which youth mobility is conceptualized, especially the uncomfortable manner in which young ‘migrants’ are viewed as a threat to society, with other ‘mobiles’ seen as vital contributors to a nation’s wealth and well-being.

Finally, we also have to admit at this stage that we may be documenting practices that, while not necessarily at an end, have for the most part entered a period of hiatus. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the *Palgrave Handbook of Youth Mobility and Educational Migration* was prepared at a time of profound social and political upheaval across the world, with the Covid-19 pandemic placing geographical mobility under strain in ways we could not ever have imagined. Entire societies have been locked down, strangers defined as people to be feared and travel something to be endured rather than enjoyed. While the work presented in this book was prepared before the pandemic, there were already signs of strain within mobility systems, especially in relation to over-heated institutionalized mobility platforms and under-prepared free circulation that generated vulnerabilities, something that may now have become exacerbated during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> We are hence looking at mobility and migration at a time

when certain practices started to become dysfunctional in regard to their detrimental impact on individuals and societies.

### **The structure of this book**

The book is organized into five main sections, accompanied by this brief contextual introduction and a concluding discussion which looks to reappraise the content of the chapters in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic. In assembling these chapters, an attempt has been made to cover what we see as the most prominent aspects of the youth mobility research field and bring to light relatively undocumented experiences, sidestepping some topics that are already extensively covered in existing literature.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, while we acknowledge the importance of developments such as the Erasmus programme in Europe, we do not focus exclusively on mobility within this framework, extending the scope of the book to the Global South and self-motivated forms of circulation.

The basic structure also reflects the current state of the youth mobility research field. Three main strands are quite apparent in regard to existing studies: work that relates to young people's mobility in tertiary level education, moving abroad for training purposes and seeking employment abroad, albeit with certain topics falling between these dividing lines.<sup>7</sup> Studies of mobility within education and work, and to a lesser extent training, also oscillate between exchanges undertaking via institutional structures, such as Erasmus, and free movers who organize and pay for their own mobility. That a significant amount of research has been conducted on both modalities explains why we have a demarcation between the two in this book, although experiences often overlap, with free movers also engaging in institutional mobility and vice versa. What is left to consider are the more marginal aspects of youth mobility; experiences exceptional that do not fall inside any neat category.



In sum, we have a diversity range of mobility to cover. In doing so, we hope to strike a balance between documenting the successes and failings of these modalities, moving beyond simplistic and stereotypical ideas; for example, that student exchanges are predominantly the preserve of the middle classes in rich Western countries and that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds feature more prominently in accounts of negative migration experience, especially individuals who have travelled to the Global North from the Global South. Theoretical exploration is also presented alongside empirical evidence, the latter using mostly original qualitative material. What we are left with are five basic areas within which chapters have been grouped as follows.

### *Part 1 Introducing youth mobility and migration*

Part 1 of this book provides a space for theoretical-based discussion, introducing the idea that young people's mobility is characterized by fluidity and precarity, with migration broken down into episodic commodity forms. As a result of this fragmentation, becoming and remaining geographical mobile requires a great deal of thought, effort and resources. This perspective thus recognizes the contributions young people make to their own mobility; rather than being passive or casual, undertaken without thought or planning, spatial choices are premeditated, with the consequences of these decisions essentially privatized in monetary and emotional terms.

This view, of youth migration as concatenated mobility, is viewed as a politically acceptable means of 'allowing' young people to circulate with a relatively high degree of freedom, reflecting a neo-liberal orthodoxy designed to benefit institutions rather than individuals. However, much of this mobility takes place without an effective safety net, helping explain why events such as the 2020 pandemic have had a profound impact on young people's mobility. They were among the people made vulnerable by societal lockdowns, the abrupt

closure of national frontiers and the shifting of education, work and training onto online platforms, with the prospect of incipient migration trajectories being curtailed or at least interrupted for a substantial period of time. We therefore have to acknowledge that the opening-up of borders and democratization access to certain forms of mobility came at the price of introducing risk and precarity into youth migration, the effects of which may take years to manifest.

### *Part 2 Free movement in education*

Part 2 of the book takes an in-depth look at free movement in tertiary education. As discussed above, there is recognition that young people make their own mobility, to a certain extent, using their own agency, and that along with the economic costs, the responsibility for coping with the challenges of living abroad are privatized for ‘free’ movers. While operating within prevailing structures of opportunities for learning, training and working, with marked contrasts between the Global North and Global South, circulating young people are generally left to themselves to make decisions and make sense of their own migration trajectory, working out how to secure a passage from one mobility phase to the next.

Also explored in this section is the internationalization of tertiary education, something that is dependent upon a high degree of cooperation between universities situated in different country, and intercultural conviviality among and between students and staff, despite the fact that these parties are simultaneously in competition with one another for limited resources and sought after opportunities. At a more quotidian level, social class and cultural inheritances (including language fluency) also come into play in defining mobility choices, with some young people occupying a more favourable starting position than others. The impact made by teaching professionals can also be significant, particularly where they offer encouragement and practical support. In looking at educational free movers, we can hence learn more about where

migration starts, and sometimes where it stops, taking into additional consideration the roles played by public and policy discourses that define ‘migration.’

### *Part 3 Institutionalized mobility inside and outside Erasmus*

Part 3 looks at institutional mobility, including exchanges made through platforms such as Erasmus. In the past, it has been argued that student mobility, whether undertaken for a semester or a longer period of time, is a form of migration in itself.<sup>8</sup> However, in keeping with the emphasis in this book on youth migration as accumulative, student exchange visits are interpreted more as preliminary steps in a larger migration project, albeit taking more regularized forms compared to the examples of free movement discussed in the previous section of the book. Completing an educational or training course abroad also brings with it accreditation, and in the case of moving abroad for the duration of a degree programme, an actual diploma, implying a certain standardization and predictability of outcomes. In other words, the outcomes of institutional mobility are more quantifiable and visible than free movement, making these ‘products’ marketable and replicable.

This idea that spending a fixed period of time abroad through a platform such as Erasmus with measurable results may help explain the popularity of the programme, and many others like it, especially among policymakers who wish to invest in programmes with guaranteed returns. Despite this apparent success, the socio-demographic and geo-demographic inclusivity of student mobility platforms has always been in question, challenging the idea of the programme as an unqualified success story for European society.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, in programmes that are explicitly international, it can be a failure to take into account differences at national and regional levels that undermines aspirations towards equality of access, since not everyone is starting with the same advantages and disadvantages. Following a ‘one size fits all’ approach to participation in student mobility programmes will always lead to partial or

superficial success, especially in contexts where learners are travelling without prior experience of internationalized learning to places unable or unwilling to accommodate large incoming student populations.

#### *Part 4 Working towards mobility*

Having stressed the importance of mobility in training and employment for young people, we must also acknowledge the limited quality of research in these areas. While this book has tried to address this oversight, the relatively low number of contributions received means that training and work have been collapsed into this section of the book to ensure some kind of coverage can be attained, focusing on the idea that training and working with a mobility dimension in plays an important role in the transition from education-to-work. Also evident is that as with student mobility, much of this movement takes place within institutional structures, and in internationalized groups, taking advantage of the dynamics such environments offer for intercultural exchange and collaboration, as well as the expertise of specialist training providers. But mirroring developments in tertiary education, there is also strong emphasis on ingraining neo-liberal values into trainees and young workers, most obviously in a focus upon entrepreneurial dynamics.

In more practical terms, we can see that much of this mobility is aimed at relatively young age groups (i.e. 16-to-18 year olds), and has involved small groups of young people taking relatively short stays abroad, measured in weeks and months rather than years. Arguably the most valuable research on this topic relates to mobility in Vocational Education and Training (VET), which does feature prominently in this section of the book. Significantly, while not always awarded the respect given to student movers, those who engage in mobility at this level not only wish to enhance their skills and abilities but also their personal outlook on the world, which they hope will become more cosmopolitan. What we can infer from the

evidence is that their geographical movement is not just utilitarian, but also feeds into ontological narratives about making life a mobile project. However, mobility for work and training, when not well managed can become more symbolic than substantial; another line on a CV rather than a viable means of securing stable employment.

### *Part 5 Mobility at the margins*

Finally, we come to the part of the book that considers experiences of young people's mobility that feature heavily in policy and media discourse, making these issues hard to ignore despite the fact publicized accounts rarely reflect young migrants' actual experiences. This is first and foremost the case in 'human trafficking,' historically characterized by insubstantial claims and spurious statistics, not to mention ineffective interventions and the allocation of high levels of public funding. There is an uncomfortable tension between what passes for political and public debate on this issue, manifest in these individuals being converted into subjects amenable to exploitation for the political and economic capital can generate for governments and agencies, the most obvious recent example in Europe being young people who moved to the EU during the 2015 refugee crisis, also acknowledging more long-standing concerns regarding the trafficking of youth.

In evaluating this position, it is necessary to investigate further the experiences of young people who have experienced mobility episodes that have had an obvious negative impact on their personal well-being, and to do so in their own terms, using in-depth evidence that document actual experiences rather than passively consuming what may be heavily biased media narratives and political discourse. Using problematized forms of mobility as a means to attract attention and money can in turn be problematic for society, such as in the case of spurious links being made between the Covid-19 pandemic and trafficking at a time when

governments around the world should be concentrating their resources on health public health and the new economic crisis.

Less well publicized is the marginality generated by what are thought of as relatively benign forms of youth circulation. Acknowledging the inherent precarity of young people's migratory behaviour is a key concern throughout this book, and developing this theme beyond the theoretical perspectives of part 1, we consider the contribution precarious migration makes to physical and mental frailty. Another marginalized theme within youth mobility research concerns the negative impact of intensified levels of student circulation on urban environments. This is particularly evident in cities that lack the infrastructure to host expanded numbers of exchangees, something that can be to the detriment of international students and local residents alike.

### **Some brief notes about editing this book**

Putting together this book has involved a great deal of editorial decision-making. While authors have been given the liberty to express themselves as they deem necessary in their chapters, we have tried to treat our research subjects with respect and avoid attaching prejudices and value judgements in our assessments of their mobility. While editorial interventions have largely been restricted to the re-organizing the structure of chapters, reducing verbiage, correcting spelling and grammar, uncritical terminology that has pejorative or racist associations has been avoided (e.g., terms such as 'immigrant' and 'ex-patriot,' as well as dichotomies between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' migrants). Attempts have also been made to avoid making inappropriate regional comparisons, such as can be the case with perspectives privileging the alleged 'civilization' of the Global North to the detriment of people from the Global South. The use of secondary statistics is also largely avoided, since such figures are always out-of-date at time of publication and generally accessible to online.

## Notes

1. See Cairns (2021a, 2021b) in this book for a continuation of this discussion.
2. This topic, of ‘opportunities’ laden with hidden costs, was discussed extensively in Cairns et al. (2017) in the context of intra-European circulation among the highly qualified, including students, interns and scientists.
3. Various statistics exist in regard to estimating the prevalence of various forms of youth mobility, the most popular being the UNESCO *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students* database. Little, if any, comprehensive data seems to exist regarding the mobility of trainees and young workers.
4. This idea of ‘reflexive imperative’ has been explored extensively by the editor in various works (see, e.g., Cairns et al., 2017), and is linked to the sociological idea of a ‘reflexive imperative’ within life planning (see Archer, 2012).
5. In the conclusion of this book, we discuss some results from research conducted with international students during the pandemic (see Cairns et al., 2021).
6. Most obviously, this includes studies of ‘credit mobility’ exchanges among undergraduates via Erasmus and other institutional platforms (see, e.g., Brooks and Waters, 2011; Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013; Van Mol, 2014; Cairns et al., 2018).
7. Examples of harder to classify mobility include work placements (Deakin, 2014) and international internships (Cuzzocrea and Cairns, 2020).
8. See, for instance, studies by Findlay (2011) and Raghuram (2013).
9. A lack of social inclusivity is a long-standing theme in student migration research in Europe, including the work of Murphy-Lejeune (2002). For a specific analysis of social inclusion, see also Cairns (2017).

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