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Conclusion:

Youth migration in the age of pandemic immobility

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This concluding chapter should have been very different, and in fact it was very different before being re-written to take account of recent developments in the field of public health. Had it not been for the global spread of Covid19 in 2020, youth mobility might well have continued along its decades long course of global expansion and diversification, spreading into different forms of education, work and training, with the dividing line between mobility for these purposes and tourism continuing to blur. These concerns are no longer as pressing as they once were, and may not return to being high priorities for a very long time. Right now, writing in the middle of what has come to feel like an open-ended pandemic, all we can do is look at what has happened in the last few months and attempt to grasp some of the main consequences for young people who still wish or need to be mobile, in addition to engaging with the pressing problem of how to re-orient mobility practices that have stalled or never got off the ground, literally and figuratively. Additional concerns are evident in regard to how to maintain mobility systems at a time when institutions have closed their doors, again literally and figuratively, are struggling to re-open in any meaningful sense of the word.

The immobility pandemic

What then has happened to the mobility field since the arrival of Covid-19? The most obvious change without doubt relates to the quantity of movement that is now taking place, with circulation levels having rapidly shrunk to levels not seen since the last century, obviously a scenario that applies not only to young people, although the impact of the virus on collecting statistics means we do not have accurate indications of the precise scale of the change. What is however obvious is that during the pandemic, there is a very limited capacity to engage in mobility, within and between countries, accompanied by a change of perception in how we view non-essential travel. Mobility feels different; something to be practiced only out of necessity rather than in expectation of pleasure or personal satisfaction. And in places once inundated with foreign visitors, it is not 'immigrant' hating racists and sleep-deprived local residents who are saying that migrants and tourists are not welcome. Virologists and government ministers have become the new gatekeepers, along with citizens concerned about the welfare of their families and future sustainability of local communities.

Reflecting on what this development means for this book, as opposed to assessing the impact of the pandemic on society, which is really too much to think about right now, we have a certain reversal of fortune to integrate into our interpretations of how young people have been engaging in mobility in the recent past. Many of the chapters illustrate how various forms of mobility grew rapidly in scale and acquired a certain familiarity in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, with student exchanges in particular becoming diffused throughout the world as a socially and politically acceptable form of spatial circulation. This dynamic, of expansion and anticipated continuation of this expansion, will now end and may not ever return on the same scale. Outside academia, programmes such as Erasmus+ that sought to integrate circulation into areas ranging from vocational training to postgraduate studies (see, e.g. Pantea, 2021) now need to be refocused on what can be safely practiced at home, creating a major

political headache for European Union policymakers and education and training institutions across the world.

A move back towards sedentary learning is certainly unfortunate for the proponents of large-scale youth migration, especially when mobility is so reliant upon group activities (see Cuzzocrea et al., 2021), but we should not lament this loss too hard. There were already signs of strain arising from rapid expansion, manifest in the difficulty many young people had in sustaining mobility due to the high emotional and economic costs involved (Cairns et al., 2017), with many host cities were simply not equipped to cope with the rapid expansion of incoming mobility (Malet Calvo, 2018). In this book, this extends to documenting health consequences and heightened precariousness arising out of mis-managed mobility (Aresi et al., 2021; Çiftçia and Karaman, 2021). These concerns will now be replaced with more basic questions about how to re-start a large number of stalled mobility trajectories in a manner that is safe for individuals and society.

We are now looking at a situation, that is likely to continue for a substantial period of time, of restricted freedom of movement. Equally important to consider is the limited value emerging from what is now possible. Even when and where students and trainees are able to travel, they will be locked out of many classrooms by social distancing, meaning little or no opportunity to engage in intercultural learning since this is dependent on physical interaction with peers and conviviality in host communities (Cuzzocrea et al., 2021). The sudden shift towards virtual learning systems may have ensured a certain degree of operational capacity in regard to the delivery of teaching, but this cannot replicate delicate social dynamics. Virtual learning also has serious downsides through heightening the fatigue of teaching and training, not to mention alienating learners who lack the necessary domestic conditions to engage in remote learning. Putting everything online is obviously not the answer. The challenge then is not just to get young people circulating again, corporeally, but to work out new ways of learning

and working during the time that can be spent abroad that conform with the new normal. Otherwise, everyone might as well stay at home.

Moving out of immobility

What we do have is an opportunity to use this pause as a moment of reappraisal in which to consider ways forward for mobility, taking into account the concerns that have been discussed in this book including the preceding paragraphs concerning the immediate impact of the pandemic. There are obvious negative aspects for youth in regard to what is spatially possible and for youth mobility researchers, given the sudden – if totally understandable – shift in research agendas towards Covid-19 topics and public health, opportunities to work in this field are also now limited. Mobility feels like a luxury concern, and given its problematized position, it may also lose its symbolic value. Having attained a totemic position, particularly in the EU (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013; Cairns et al., 2018), mobility will now undergo a repositioning in regard to changing views of togetherness and the reality of closed borders and reduced capacity to engage in bilaterally circulation.

In looking for effective ways of moving beyond this sudden onset of immobility, the most obvious solution is to focus on what is still possible within local communities, thus avoiding what might now be looked upon as ‘mobility for mobility’s sake’ during a time when risks of needlessly spreading contagion remain. Taking into account this position, in what remains of this concluding chapter, we will consider what this immobility position means for individuals, institutions and societies, looking first at some of the vulnerabilities that have been generated by mobility as practiced by youth and the attendant fragility of migration, moving on to consider some of immediate consequences for those affected by pandemic immobility.

Vulnerable migration

We are now in some respects looking at the breaking down of a system that was broken down, in a literal sense and on purpose. Migration devolved into mobility to make it manageable and monetizable: more profitable, less politically contentious, and perhaps somewhat more democratic than in previous eras (see Cairns, 2021a, 2021b). But converting a migration trajectory into an episodic fixed-term format cultivated vulnerability as a means of deterring young people from ‘permanently’ settling abroad. While political expedient for governments concerned about alleged ‘brain drain,’ the devolution of migration left mobile youth to fend for themselves if they got sick, went broke or, heaven forbid, tried to own a home or start a family (Howie et al., 2019). Meanwhile, for institutional movers, such as the examples cited in Part 3 of this book, certain universities were arguably the main beneficiaries of the wave of youth mobility expansion, gaining an internationalization dividend from hosting exchange platforms, with the presence of international students used to define these institutions as globalized learning hubs. Academic institutions were also able to import international staff, students and trainees at bargain prices and in large numbers, with scientific institutions particularly adept at cherry-picking low cost talent for their requisite centres of excellence.¹

In retrospect, this expansion looks rather naïve and very hard to sustain given the need for a constant flow of incoming talent, centred upon a relatively small number of internationalized learning centres, meaning that the global circulation of talent may well have ‘naturally’ reached its limits without the intervention of Covid-19. Within the EU, it was in fact quite obvious that the ‘mobility without migration’ approach had been stretched to a point where it could easily break due to the huge effort required on the part of individual young people to maintain their mobility, engaging in one phase after another in the hope that one might lead to permanent settlement rather than another ‘moratorium’ period (Cuzzocrea and Cairns, 2020).

Young Europeans in particular were in fact exposed to a narrative strongly implying that spatial circulation would provide a means through which they could all access personalized success and career development, with this belief also providing a *raison d'être* for the free movement orientation of the European institutions (King and Williams, 2018; see also Recchi, 2015). 'Mobility' might even be said to have become a kind of fetish, especially within the European Commission, who seemed to take great pleasure out of the annual increase in numbers circulating via Erasmus, however precariously, regarding rising participation rates and expenditure levels as indicators of growing European integration. This approach, too celebratory and excessively 'self-referential' (King 2018, 2), was never sustainable. Grounding mobility policies in a neo-liberal logic was also corrosive, with institutions and agencies ending-up fighting one other for funding, and exchange students provided with a stipend barely capable of covering their drinks bill, never mind accommodation and living costs. A competitive approach to mobility inevitably meant that not everyone could succeed, bringing with it a potential squandering of social and economic capital, and needless delay in entering the labour market.

Despite these harsh words, mobility will continue during the pandemic, whether through virtual platforms, in cut down formats or, in an odd twist, a manner closer to the norms of classical migration: long duration stays without a circulatory or pendular dimension, oriented around economic gain and eventual social integration into the host society. Rather than the piecemeal approach to migration introduced in Chapter 1 of this book (Cairns, 2021a), it becomes logical to make a singular decision about where to go and orient stays around settlement, rather than indulging in a succession of peripatetic education, training or work phases. The spatial dimension of the transition to adulthood thereby might become regularized and relatively linear, and perhaps less susceptible to the neo-liberal 'migrant as consumer' philosophy (see Çiftçi and Karaman, 2021 in this book). Mobility chances may however

become concentrated in the hands of few dedicated individuals, considering the high level of personal resources required to maintain long duration stays abroad. In this regard, the imaginaries that surround certain mobility destinations and the social practices while abroad may change drastically as young people seek safety, security and guaranteed returns rather than adventure, acculturation to new experiences and an expansion of one's spatial horizons, thus creating new patterns in flows of incoming and outgoing mobility.

Pandemic immobility

For several years at least, we will be facing the challenge of coping with pandemic related immobility, challenging the way we live and work, especially our willingness and ability to circulate. Anyone taking a flight during the period of confinement will already have encountered some of the milder difficulties: a limited number of often very expensive flights, invalid health insurance, social distancing and temperature screening at airports, wearing facemasks during transit and, equally as important, the anxiety of not knowing with whom one is going to be sharing an enclosed atmosphere for prolonged periods, with the risk of quarantine, or worse, should a positive test be registered after the flight. The stress, anxiety and depression of the pandemic will take a very long time to recover from, continuing long after we are told by the authorities that it is now safe to travel for non-essential purposes.

For young people still seeking to pursue education and training abroad in the short-term, plans will need to be put on hold for an indefinite period or entirely re-evaluated. For young workers, there are obviously fewer opportunities, considering the inevitability of recruitment freezes and reductions in the workforce, first in sectors such as hospitality and tourism, and later elsewhere as the economic downturn becomes a prolonged recession. This is certainly not a good time to be seeking employment abroad. While many who had previously planned or intended to move may have already changed their minds, there are a substantial

number of young people whose mobility was in course when the lockdown began, or who had already travelled to their destinations during the early stages of the pandemic, before the scale of the problem was officially acknowledged. What they found on arrival was certainly not what they were expecting.

In our own university, classes were cancelled, without warning, on 11 March, a gloriously sunny Wednesday afternoon. The next day, the university was deserted. To prevent the spread of the virus, institutions suspended face-to-face teaching, switching to online platforms, a change that required a great deal of effort from students and staff, as learning routines were disrupted, examinations put into different formats and extra-curricular activities indefinitely postponed. For members of staff with children, the closure of schools and kindergartens, confinement at home and teaching online has been a particular burden. For researchers, most of whom are on fixed-term contracts, their jobs have become more precarious. Unlike teachers, much of their work cannot be shunted online, with vulnerability enhanced by the refusal of institutions to refuse to re-negotiate contracts or suspect evaluation procedures than carry with the sanction of dismissal should (pre-pandemic) targets not be met, even when work cannot be conducted without breaking health and safety regulations. For some students and staff, the issue of internet access at 'home' was also an immediate problem, as was maintaining social distancing and finding appropriate places to work in family houses and shared accommodation, where conditions could be over-crowded, cramped and noisy.²

While the main priority for universities was moving teaching on-line, another visible issue concerned the continued viability of hosting international students. As we have tried to establish in this book, not all international students conform to the affluent Westerner stereotype. Major disparities exist, not least in terms of capacity to respond to the shutdown of classrooms, including differences between the Global North and the Global South (see França and Padilla, 2021), and among those with already precarious financial situations. Some had the

means and the opportunity to return home rapidly. Others lacked flight options or preferred to stay in their host city as they feared being infected on the return journey to being repatriated to a country with a high infection rate. We were therefore left with many students living in isolation, apart from their families and outside regular social networks, experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety, facing the prospect of on-line tuition in a foreign language. Others had to cope with administrative uncertainties regarding the viability of continuing their studies and doubts about the payment and repayment of loans and scholarships. The economic impacts included not only transportation costs related to emergency travel but also family members losing their jobs and being unable to be reimbursed for now uninhabitable accommodation. At the extremes, some experienced racism and xenophobia, especially Chinese and Italian students held accountable for spreading the virus.

How then did these individuals respond to this challenging situation? As might be expected, the strategies developed by international students to cope with the pandemic during their stay abroad were not homogenous. Prior literature (see, e.g., Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) has long argued how socio-economic background shapes student mobility experience, something that would we not expect to change during the greatest public health crisis in over a century. To explore this issue, we conducted interviews with approximately 30 international students in Portugal, all of whom were studying at the country's universities when the pandemic began in March 2020. Some returned home almost immediately, while others stayed, despite often difficult circumstance, providing us with an opportunity to look at both these scenarios.

Bearing in mind the discussion of this issue in this book on the issue of student housing (Malet Calvo, 2021), we found that domestic conditions played a central role in determining well-being during the period of confinement, something frequently linked to the decision to stay or leave the city. Having a 'nice house' clearly matters a great deal during a global pandemic. The quality, and the availability, of the parental home was also a consideration.

Many students who had moved out when they started university claimed that the houses in which they currently resided were the only places in which they could stay as they no longer had a room in their parents' house. A few also found their student accommodation to be superior to the family home, with more space, large windows, terraces and balconies. Others, however, were confined to small, cramped rooms, particularly in university dormitories, creating an extra stress factor. These interviews hence revealed some vital information about the structural inequalities facing international students in a global learning hub like Lisbon.

Financial situation also had a major bearing upon the ability to cope with the pandemic. The interviews revealed that rather than being dependent upon one form of income, such as an Erasmus grant, students in fact relied upon multiple sources: money from parents, government scholarships, part-time jobs and personal savings. The cessation of one or more of these revenue streams thus created problems. This is another interesting discovery and an aspect of mobility-related precarity, and vulnerability, under-represented in prior studies (including our own work). In some cases, a lack of funds prevented people from returning home even though they were desperate to do so. Notwithstanding the disparities that exist in Erasmus grant funding, in general, students travelling via this platform fared better than others who were self-financing or from countries experiencing severe economic difficulties. For example, several students from the Global South relied on home governments, who had now ceased to send money, or parents who were enduring their own hardships.³ A relatively common situation was however working to help cover learning and living costs. With much of this work taking place in restaurants, bars and the tourist sector (e.g., as guides or 'tuk tuk' drivers), these students effectively lost their jobs due to the lockdown, and hence a major part of their income. Given that this situation is unlikely to improve in the near future, especially due to the unviability of tourism, some students have had to find other jobs in sectors in which they are put in potentially risking situations: delivery drivers, working in hospitals and in supermarkets.

In some cases, host universities and student accommodation providers were sensitive to students' needs, leading to the creating of funds for emergency financial aid and free meals, but this was the exception, not the norm. Both host and home universities were an important source of emotional support to students, offering psychological care, motivational sessions and on-line physical fitness activities, especially yoga. It was however, more common for international students to make recourse to their flatmates and the friends with whom they shared their accommodation. Indeed, in many cases the decision to stay was made following a friend's decision, with these students feeling safe and confident through staying together. Many in fact reported having a number of pleasant moments at home, cooking together, watching movies or simply going for walks, activities they might not have undertaken with their parents or siblings if they had gone back home.

The preoccupation with families in their home country nevertheless remained constant, particularly among those whose home countries were more seriously affected by the pandemic than Portugal. In response, they tried to mitigate their separation with video calls and messages on a more frequently basis than they would have done otherwise. While some deeply regretted not being able to go back home and stay with their parents, others reasoned that a return trip would be an opportunity for them to become infected and spread Covid-19 to their families, mitigating against making this journey.

Mobility goes local

Having looked at the immediate impacts of the pandemic on student mobility, how then are parties such as universities, training agencies and employers to respond in regard to maintaining the integrity of their organizations? A moratorium of sorts on 'non-essential' mobility (i.e., short duration and/or circulatory movement) might be expedient after what has been a *force majeure* event. In other words, a necessary move away from the one-piece-at-a-

time Bauman-esque idea of 'liquid migration' (Engbersen and Snel, 2013). Temporary and circular mobility replaced by more exceptional but substantial migration is one approach but given this may only be viable for small numbers of young people, this is probably not the answer. The alternative is to apply what has already been learnt from several decades of managing mobility to young people 'at home,' directing the focus of mobility systems inward rather than outward.

The idea of mobility 'going local' is actually consistent with recent developments in the youth field at European level, such as the *Europe Goes Local* initiative, which has engaged in strategic partnerships between municipalities in different countries in the field of Youth Work.⁴ It would obviously be a case of following the principle of shared activities simultaneously taking place at municipal levels rather than the actual practices of this programme, which would not be possible with social distancing, and changing from a focus on youth workers to young people. But localizing mobility might be particularly valuable for maintaining some form of activity within institutional programmes such as Erasmus, albeit with a change of emphasis towards supporting youth in local communities as opposed to creating internationalized learning spaces.

Accepting the obvious loss of internationalization and opportunities to engage in intercultural activities, this idea has many possible benefits. Firstly, there is a preservation of expertise, and perhaps of jobs, for people who work in the institutional mobility sector. These professionals will be able to continue their work, albeit in a different context, and justify maintaining mobility infrastructure until such times that it is safe and viable to recommence incoming and outgoing exchanges on a larger scale. This will also make re-starting mobility platforms much easier when the time comes, reducing unnecessary prolongment of pandemic immobility. Secondly, a knowledge transfer of sorts can take place between those who have returned from abroad and those who still wish to move, helping to maintain their levels of

interest. While there is little or no opportunity for new forms of interculturality to emerge, it is still viable for those with large stocks of mobility capital to help prepare others who are, hopefully only temporarily, grounded. Thirdly, in regard to institutional activities, local ‘exchanges’ cost substantially less and involve a lower intensity of bureaucracy, meaning no need to request huge levels of external grant funding. There is no travel involved, no accommodation to book and no visas to arrange. Everyone presumably will be speaking the same language, unless they chose not to. Fourthly, in focusing upon physical activities, we have a means of avoiding the digital overload that has accompanied remote working and online teaching and training.

These ideas are speculative and feel somewhat idealistic, but a lack of mobility does not mean the end of mobility. There is certainly a great deal of loss – of life chances and of life – for which it is appropriate to lament, but in moving forward from this position of pandemic immobility, more mature forms of mobility can, eventually, offer a more stable and less precarious means of improving personal and professional positions. Young people will certainly not lose their desire to travel but will want to do so in a safe and meaningful manner rather than in the somewhat reckless fashion which seems to have characterized much pre-pandemic circulation.

Final remarks

In bringing this book to a close, looking at migration in the new age of immobility has led us to look back and re-evaluate developments in our research field that preceded the pandemic. This includes an unstable globalization of mobility – in the Global North and Global South, and all points in between – and problems relating to a lack of socio-demographic inclusivity. This is not so much a case of mobility creating exclusivity. Rather, a reliance upon institutions that ‘naturally’ reproduce inequality and on individuals’ social and economic resources

(including family inheritances) provides an unfair starting point in the global race for talent. Mobility in itself cannot overcome inequality given such conditions, albeit acknowledging that at a more personal level, decision-making regarding destinations and durations also plays a part in mediating success. But the idea of mobility as an easy and unproblematic path to individualized success for everyone is absurd. Furthermore, while much progress was made in education and training, the internationalization of highly qualified labour markets never really happened in any meaningful way due to the high level of costs involved, creating difficulties in extending migration trajectories beyond education and training and into employment.

A confused notion of what constitutes being a migrant, especially in policymaking and media narratives, hardly helped matters. The idea that to be codified as a migrant should involve undergoing some kind of exceptional experience, centring upon life threatening events such as war, famine and political persecution, followed by intervention from western saviours, stigmatizes those put into such narrow categories of experience, excluding numerous others whose life experiences may be different but no less problematic. As this book has shown, young people can be problematized by mobility without having been refugees or asylum-seekers, and problems can be general as well as specific to outlying situations, including issues arising from the high emotional and economic costs of sustaining successive mobility episodes in the same or different destinations. The idea of 'circulation' may have been popular among policymakers and host institutions, but this may be because they realize that they don't have to cover most of the expenses, which are essentially privatized onto individual movers. The greatest lesson to be learnt regarding pre-pandemic youth mobility hence relates to the unsustainability of fragmented and commodified migration, with negative impacts starting to be felt in host societies as well as among individuals.

To conclude, the diffusion and differentiation of mobility created tensions for youth and for societies. Mobility could be seen as a symbol of internationality but a symbol of social

inequality, while ‘migration’ for youth was simultaneously enticing and expensive, exciting and dangerous, educational and recreational. That these properties were antonymic made the in-built tensions hard to reconcile, while certain cities struggled to accommodate ever-growing numbers of incoming students alongside bloated tourist populations. After the pandemic, there should be no return to unbalanced flows of incoming and outgoing students, or the tiresome and over-priced stays abroad that kept many young people in prolonged liminality. The best way forward is therefore to integrating the local with the global, recognizing that mobility ultimately relies upon partnership and co-operation between individuals and societies rather than mutual exploitation.

Notes

1. This is a reference to the editor’s current research project, *Circulation of Science: Mobility, Precarity and Economic Growth in Research and Development*, which looks at the development of careers in science in Portugal, funded by the national Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). With fieldwork temporarily suspended, this has provided more time to work on the editing of this book.
2. One of the more bizarre aspects of the lockdown was the fact that construction work continued unabated. In fact, numerous new public works were initiated, at a time when remote working was legally mandated. For many people, the sound of pneumatic drills will forever be associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Associations for international students from Angola (AEAP) and Cabo Verde (UECL) in Portugal have been very supportive for those in severe hardship among their communities, providing money for rent or food, and personal computers to participating in online teaching.
4. *Europe Goes Local* is an Erasmus+ linked initiative, started in 2016, involving cooperation between local level stakeholders in European Youth Work.

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