Outside Learning: Blending Formal, Informal and Non-Formal Higher Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Internationalized higher education underwent dramatic changes during the Covid-19 pandemic, with many mobile students confined to the domestic sphere for prolonged periods. While the dissatisfaction of these students at this time was made quite apparent, limited possibilities for social interaction also had pedagogical consequences, especially in relation to the impact on short duration stays abroad hosted by platforms including the European Commission Erasmus+ programme. These exchanges have typically entailed a blend of formal, informal and non-formal learning, and intense levels of social interactions. This arrangement became unfeasible during the most intensive lockdowns, with the closure of university campuses and restrictions placed on conviviality effectively moving learning outside its traditional spaces. Using findings of research conducted in Portugal during the initial months of the pandemic, the chapter discusses the pedagogical approach to what is referred to as 'credit mobility' and some of the transformations that took place during the pandemic, that resulted in a devaluation of the

internationalized learning experience. Looking towards future developments, although disruption appears to have been largely temporary, there are potential long term consequences for students and educators, with belated recognition that non-essential mobility is a contributor to the climate emergency.

Keywords

Credit mobility; Erasmus; Covid-19 pandemic; non-formal learning

Introduction

Education systems have undergone quite profound changes during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly during the most intensive periods of lockdown, with lessons cancelled or abruptly moved online. While many aspects of this disruption have been transversal, complicating the delivery of primary, secondary and tertiary education, certain aspects of higher education have been affected in more specific ways. In the European context, this includes universities' ability to host international students, including participants in exchanges facilitated by the European Commission Erasmus programmes, with the learning experiences disrupted by the measures taken to control the spread of the virus.

In this chapter, I explore this situation, focusing on how the pedagogical aspect of student exchanges and the impact of an extremely challenging epidemiological situation, rather than the social, political, cultural and economic significance of student circulation. In more precise terms, I conceptualize certain forms of internationalized higher education as dependent upon a blend of formal, informal and non-formal learning, requiring a high level of concentrated conviviality, something that was obviously not possible to engage in during the much of the pandemic.

Internationalized Higher Education

I start this discussion with a contextualization of internationalized higher education, including the philosophy behind the short-term, fixed duration exchanges associated in the European context with the Erasmus programme (rebranded in 2014 as Erasmus+). While student mobility has a long history, in the past it was seen as an elitist practice, involving relatively few people from privileged backgrounds (see Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). This exceptionality explains why it was for a long time ignored by academics, falling outside the remit of migration scholars and regarded as a marginal aspect of higher education (King, 2002). However, in the European Union, short duration exchanges of students between universities in different became a focus for policymakers, with the popularization of mobility platforms becoming a geo-political instrument for fostering unity between EU member states and legitimizing the European institutions, culminating with the introduction of Erasmus in 1987 and its subsequent expansion (Feyen, 2013: 22). Added to this development was recognition within universities of the economic value of overseas students as a revenue stream and source of internationalization within what soon became a highly competitive marketplace (Bok, 2009).

That the significance of student mobility was recognised first by politicians and stakeholders in the higher education sector rather than academics helps explain why much of the initial research on this topic focused on relatively straightforward tasks, such as mapping participation trend over time and between different European countries (see, e.g., Kelo et al., 2006; González et al., 2011). Such studies reflect the value of Erasmus and similar initiatives to EU policymakers host institutions, with success measured in quantitative terms: the number of incoming and outgoing exchanges taking place and, in regard to feepaying students, the amount of revenue being generated. A strong quantitative focus also meant that the task of defining key terms of reference was largely left to stakeholders. For example, exchanges hosted by Erasmus and similar platforms came to be known as 'credit mobility,' a descriptive

category, reflecting the fact that students receive course credits for time spent at a foreign university as part of the 'European Credit Transfer System' (ECTS), a process ratified by the Bologna Process that had also helped systematize the internationalization of higher education (Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013: 10). Mobility outside this framework meanwhile tended to be put into the category of 'degree' or 'diploma mobility,' again somewhat literally relating to the fact that people migrate to a foreign university for the entire duration of an undergraduate or postgraduate degree (Brooks and Waters, 2011: 77), but unlike credit mobility students, for whom specific pedagogies were developed, 'student migrants' tend to studying alongside domestic students and adhere to the norms of national education systems.

Theorizing credit mobility

Obtaining course credits is of course not the only outcome sought from credit mobility, and has also come to be associated with various transformative processes at institutional and individual levels, many of which have been covered extensively by research in the student mobility field. For example, mobile students are seen as contributors to the internationalization of host institutions, also helping to transform the materiality of learning, through learning from peers from different socio-spatial backgrounds as well as from lecturers (Altbach and Knight, 2007; see also Brooks and Waters, 2018). The cultural significance of 'the Erasmus phenomenon' has been noted (Botas and Huisman, 2013; Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013), including the potential benefits to European society of the expansion of various forms of cosmopolitanism (Cicchelli, 2013) and the generation of new possibilities in regard to future employment is also recognised (Teichler and Janson, 2007).

It might then be said that a wide range of theoretical and empirical perspectives now exist on student circulation in the European context, with a strong emphasis on the positive aspects of internationalized learning. However, studying abroad is also seen as a means of

extending the advantage of the already privileged (Waters and Brooks, 2010; King et al., 2011). Other concerns that have been noted include the culture shock endured by mobile students (Krzaklewska and Skórska, 2013), many of whom are young and inexperienced travellers. The high costs of living in some of Europe's most expensive cities is also hard to ignore (Malet Calvo, 2018), as is the integration of internationalized learning with leisure (Rodríguez et al., 2012), and the associated problems created by expanding the range of destinations frequented by international students outside the narrow range of traditional centres of learning (França et al., 2021; see also Van Mol and Ekamper, 2016). There are also individual – perhaps ontological – changes taking place. My own work as a youth sociologist initially focused on the importance of student mobility within transitions to adulthood, especially among young people living from regions where there are limited opportunities to initiate a professional career (Cairns, 2014), later expanding to look at the reality of social inclusion within the Erasmus programme (Cairns, 2017). Inclusion imbalances have affected both the development of mobility systems and the experience of studying abroad; participation levels have risen, but it has become harder for universities to attract students from less well-off backgrounds due to factors such as the low levels of support levels on offer.

These perspectives help us move towards a more theoretically and empirically informed view of credit mobility, acknowledging its strengths and weaknesses. It is also possible to state what short duration stays facilitated by programmes like Erasmus are not, namely examples of migration. While diploma mobility can be accommodated within traditional migration frameworks, with a significant degree of settlement taking place and, in some cases, the prospect of eventual integration into the host country labour market, credit mobility exchanges are designed with a guarantee of return to the sending country in place, an arrangement that reflects political opposition to migration within many EU member states (Cairns et al., 2022: 468). While this position helps explain the under-funding of exchanges, there is genuine

concern about initiating unwanted brain drain processes, especially the transfer of young people with valuable skills to core European nations from the peripheries, hence the requirement for exchange students to return home and use what they have learnt in the service of the sending society rather than the host.

Mobility capital

Having considered some of the macro level factors that have shaped participation in programmes like Erasmus, it is also necessary to consider what students actually want from the experience. Looking at credit mobility from a more sociological perspective, exchanges can be seen as instrumental in the generation of 'mobility capital' (Brooks and Waters, 2011: 164; see also Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). This can take various forms but two of its most prominent dimensions relate to intercultural skills and international employability respectively. The former can be seen as a form of cultural capital, akin to ideas explored by Bourdieu (1986), while the latter relates to the expansion of social networks. Both dimensions also possess an imagined relationship to future –not present - human capital concerns in laying the groundwork for activities such as transnational entrepreneurialism. Recognizing the existence of mobility capital helps explain the appeal of credit mobility, and helps us look beyond superficial and misleading narratives. For example, the promotion of programmes like Erasmus stresses the carefree, even hedonistic, aspects of exchanges – further reflected in the sponsorship of the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) by the drinks company, Pernod (Cairns et al., 2018: 120) – but there is also a desire among mobile students to distinguish themselves from their sedentary peers by having better foreign language skills or a broader range of future business contacts, something that in turn helps offset the high economic costs of credit mobility, providing a means of justifying the expenditure.

The need to generate and strengthen mobility capital means that credit mobility programmes require a specific pedagogy that goes beyond the standard forms of tertiary education. At an institutional level, this approach tends to be expressed in fairly loose descriptions like 'learning mobility;' for example, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the outputs of the European Platform on Learning Mobility, affiliated to the EC/CoE Youth Partnership, frequently use 'learning mobility' to distinguish internationalized higher education, and various forms of training and voluntary work, from more sedentary forms of instruction. In more precise terms, what is implied is that international students need to be able to learn from each other and engage with their host community, alongside participation in study programmes delivered on campus by professional educators to enable then to gain course credits.

In practice this entails a blending of formal, informal and non-formal education; formal, in the sense that instruction is being delivered in traditional settings like lecture theatres and laboratories, with set curricula and some form of evaluation; informal, in regard to learning from peers, perhaps on campus but also outside the classroom; non-formal, with structured and spontaneous social activities in local communities and even the domestic sphere. This latter learning process may involve 'youth work' type settings, facilitated by agencies like the ESN, or activities organized by students themselves, including parties, dinners and visits to historical sites. All three of these components are essential to the successful realization of a credit mobility exchange, although it is the non-formal activities that tend to be most visible to outsiders, presumably because this 'work' takes place in local neighbourhoods, to the point where conviviality comes to define the experience, making the 'party animal' Erasmus student a popular stereotype. This is obviously not a fair assessment of all international students, many of whom reject such lifestyles, but bonding rituals are nevertheless a fundamental part of the learning experience, and by association, a prerequisite to obtaining mobility capital.

The Erasmus learning bubble

Understand the Erasmus learning experience has become another important topic for mobility researchers, who have acknowledged the importance of curriculum development and academic performance, and social processes inside and outside the classroom (Brooks and Waters, 2021: 167-76). These reflections imply that while there are pedagogical overlaps between credit mobility and 'regular' tertiary education, including joint participation in the formal learning component, there are also substantial differences, with international students requiring socialization into an imagined community with a specific set of norms and values, and a specific set of bonding experiences, something that might interpret as the start of a kind of European bildungsroman (Cicchelli, 2013). In addition to generating and strengthening mobility capital, Erasmus students can become a living embodiment of European values, including the celebration of specific notions of freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, with the desire to promote peace, harmony and stability. People from different EU members states and affiliated nations should then have opportunities to directly engage with one another, so that they can learn to accept each other's differences and recognise commonalities. This is possible because unlike national, regional or ethnic identifications, 'European' identity is neither singular nor static but rather a fluid combination of often contradictory bricolage, its constituent parts arising out of formerly conflicting histories and cultures, and it is this tension that gives the 'European' a character distinct from other global identifications. It might then be said that in addition to gaining course accreditation, students are expected to become a certain kind of person through participating in Erasmus, and that their mobility generates political capital for the EU, thus providing a potential return on its investment.

It is also necessary to acknowledge where this process takes place. Obviously, the university campus is an important reference point, but also acknowledged are extra-curricular social spaces, including host communities. It is in these places that the formal, informal and non-formal elements combining to form what has been termed a learning 'bubble' (Cuzzocrea et al., 2021; see also Earls, 2018). While sounding slightly pejorative, the term originates from the policymaking sphere, specifically the insular world of the European institutions in Brussels, the 'bubble' being used to describe a working environment characterized by concentrated cosmopolitanism, but set apart from the world outside. This arrangement has a practical purpose, allowing policymakers and the select range of stakeholders with whom they collaborate to work together in an intense manner, without the distractions of the exterior universe. Without it, European policies would take on a distinctly Belgian tinge and lack applicability to a geographically wider frame of reference. We can hence deduce that EU policymakers have sought to create sites of learning for Erasmus students that reflect their own Brussels-based experiences, rather than following the norms and values of the individual host communities.

In practice, the Erasmus bubble is constructed out of the informal and non-formal pedagogical activities previously discussed, including social activities oriented around bringing together programme participants in convivial settings, where they can learn about each other, and reflect on their own Europeanism. This arrangement is, I should point out, a somewhat idealized picture, and in reality, not all Erasmus students take an active interest in identifying with Europe or want to spend all their spare time with fellow programme participants. Neither is this a generalized aspect of higher education. Most students do not participate in Erasmus at all, whether for financial reasons, lacking the need for mobility capital or a reluctance to take part in what is, in reality, a highly artificial learning experience that has no guaranteed outcomes in regard to future career development.

International student immobility

These remarks take us to the second part of the chapter, which addresses the impact of the pandemic on credit mobility platforms like Erasmus. This is an important debate, as we have recently passed through a period during which the ability to travel, and the rationale behind internationalization, has been seriously questioned, or at least should be seriously questioned given the role of aviation in spreading a potentially deadly virus. Also worth considering is the impact of the pandemic on the learning processes discussed in the first part of the chapter, including the ability to engage in the informal and non-formal aspects of credit mobility. Suffice to say, like all other forms of non-essentially mobility, the circulation of international students drew to a halt in the early months of 2020, with major disruption continuing during the subsequent two years.

At a macro level, the pandemic signalled the end of a prolonged period of expansion and diversification of programmes like Erasmus. This also meant that at the start of the emergency, large numbers of students were in situ at host institutions, making the situation harder to manage for these universities. Their presence required lecturers and administrators to rapidly improvise strategies to maintain the integrity of learning programmes, taking into account the well-being of students, and reassuring those who continued to travel that they would be safe. We can hence see that the impact of the pandemic on internationalized learning was multi-faceted, extending to the micro level of university life.

While it is possible to reflect on the impact of the pandemic in terms of a reduction in circulation, a more restricted range of destinations being open to international students and how 'mobility' itself is problematized within a wide range of contexts (Cairns and Clemente, 2023), the main focus in the remainder of this discussion is upon the impact on the learning experience. Not only the short-term, immediate changes at the start of the pandemic, following the closure

of university campuses and the rapid movement of teaching online but also the long term implications, including the ramifications of a shift towards the use of online platforms.

Researching the pandemic

In regard to research, after the initial months of the pandemic, a large body of literature started to accumulate, with studies attempting to make sense of the unprecedented disruption to international travel. While much of this work did little more than describe what was happening and did not relate to international students - and hence does not concern us here - there has been some questioning of the assumption that there ought to be a return to pre-pandemic levels of international travel after the lifting of the mandatory restrictions, particularly given the need to consider the adoption of low-carbon consuming lifestyles (Adey et al., 2021; Nikolaeva et al., 2022; Tseng et al., 2022). Neither does there appear to be a shift in thinking among European policymakers, who in fact took the decision to renew the Erasmus+ charter for a further six years in 2020, at a time even before the discovery of the first vaccines, suggesting an unshakable commitment to mobility. Needless to say, there is scant recognition of the uncomfortable fact that though its dependency upon non-essential travel, Erasmus mobility is out-of-step with the political desire to address the climate emergency, suggesting a lack of coherent thought within the Brussels bubble.

In regard to research that does engage with immobility among international students, a small number of studies have looked at the impact of the pandemic on their lives, despite the challenges of conducting empirical research during the lockdowns, being restricted to online methodologies. Arguably, the most important work on this topic has been conducted in Poland. One study has used evidence from an online survey of almost one thousand Erasmus students to illustrate the changes in their learning experiences (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska, 2021; Krzaklewska et al., 2021). These respondents describe how university life during the pandemic

became ‘constrained and challenging,’ with the social aspect of Erasmus seen as ‘lacklustre’ (Krzaklewska et al., 2021: 5-9). On the other hand, many of these students also demonstrated a high degree of stoicism, having been resilient and realistic about what to expect from the experience, explaining that they had decided to travel even though they knew about the risks they were taking. Contemporaneous work from Poland on student life in general in the city of Lodz also notes the impact on the pandemic on transformations in the urban experience, including the limited capacity to engage in consumer activities, making the hosting of students less profitable for destination cities (Zasina and Nowakowska, 2022: 2). In simpler terms, that hosting students - domestic and international - had become part of the leisure economy of the city meant that it was their presence as consumers, rather than international learners, that was lamented in Lodz.

These results from Poland are reflected in findings from research conducted in the Portuguese context, including reactions of students and staff to the transformation of learning during the initial lockdown, which was characterized by a high degree of confusion, followed by an acceptance of the need to adapt to changing circumstances (Cairns et al., 2021a, 2021b; Malet Calvo et al., 2021). During the first wave of the pandemic, the impact of confinement on physical health was noted, and the economic problems generated among international students from less well-off backgrounds, implying that the most vulnerable ‘suffered’ most. Problems were also noted in regard to the ability to engage in virtual learning due to the lack of personal space and the appropriate equipment, as well as an apparent lack of preparation from some lecturers. Needless to say, as in Poland, there were few opportunities for engaging in the kind of social activities Erasmus students had previously been taken for granted. On a more positive note, it was also found that domestic sociability assumed a heightened importance, with student residences becoming mini learning bubbles, making the people with whom one was living at the time of the first lockdown a vital source of reference. Intercultural development was

however compromised by the fact that many cohabitees were from the same national backgrounds, already close friends or in intimate relationships with each other, meaning prospects for expanding social networks were limited.

Reflecting on these findings in light of the previous remarks on the pedagogies associated with credit mobility students, it can be said that pandemic era Erasmus participants missed out on opportunities to gain mobility capital during their stays, including the gateway experiences that can lead to enhanced interculturality and heightened international employability. We might then say that there was a lack of personal and professional growth taking place that was only partly compensated for by spending more time with roommates. Furthermore, not only was informal and non-formal learning constrained, formal teaching was taken outside its traditional spaces and placed within the domestic sphere, representing a profound, if temporary, change in the materiality of student mobility, with the learning bubble effectively collapsing in upon itself.

Virtual mobility?

The final part of this discussion concerns the pedagogies used to cope with the restrictions of the pandemic, most prominently, online teaching. The ramifications of this shift have been widely documented in a large number studies from the field of education (see, e.g., Baber, 2020; Tesar, 2020; Unger and Meiran, 2020), although not specifically in relation to international students. This is surprising, considering the extent to which learning was transformed, and some of the ensuing paradoxes. Some had the strange experience of moving to a country to study at a university they could not actually attend, while many others choose not to travel at all, and following classes from a foreign institution while still living in their home countries.

While anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a strong dislike of virtual learning modes among students, and a lack of desire to return to online classes, views on online teaching and virtual mobility within universities can be somewhat different, especially in institutions where profitability remain paramount. This has led to a willingness to consider online approaches for practical reasons, with potentially lower costs for overseas students, who no longer need to book expensive flights or rent over-priced accommodation, and fewer overheads for their hosts. It might also be argued that online learning is more in tune with environmental concerns, since the carbon footprint of international students is reduced by not having to travel. On the other hand, as already discussed, virtual mobility is always going limited in terms of an experiential dimension, something that will not be popular with policymakers who see mobile students as a living symbol of cross-national unity, host cities whose economies have come to rely on large numbers of periodic visitors, or students who are seeking to generate mobility capital (see also Koris et al., 2021). These very real downsides explain why virtual mobility prior to the pandemic was largely confined to supplementary aspects of the internationalized learning experience, such as preparatory exercises or follow-up evaluations.

Virtual mobility is then something distinct from what has gone before, and perhaps not 'mobility' at all as we have come to understand it. This non-canonicity may explain why the shift to online mobility has not been particularly well documented by academic studies, since the topic is effectively moving into other disciplinary areas. In regard to what we do know, Krzaklewska et al. (2021) provide some insights relating to the 2020/21 academic year, but only to state that most teaching professionals viewed virtual mobility as an emergency solution that was better than no mobility at all, and it was not an effective substitute. Logistical challenges of blending virtual and traditional mobility were also noted, suggesting that a great deal of work would be required to make blended online and in person formats viable (Krzaklewska et al., 2021: 9).

A lack of gravitas helps explain why learning online tends to be seen as a heretical form of internationalized education, only to be used as a supplement or last resort solution, and that pandemic era remote learning experiment is not to be repeated. However, while many researchers of student mobility are leaving virtual mobility outside their research agendas, the possibilities it offers to further expand internationalization are noted by virtual host institutions. In a recent study, it was noted that Portuguese universities are actively seeking to expand their feepaying international student populations via hosting web-based learning programmes, the justification being that many overseas students lack the capacity to travel due to family commitments or adverse economic circumstances (Cairns and França, 2022). This is still a tentative position, and it remains to be seen if virtual mobility will displace corporeal exchanges to any meaningful degree, even in scenarios that invoke social inclusion. In regard to programmes like Erasmus, it is however unlikely that we will see a virtual revolution considering the need for in person conviviality in order to operationalize the learning bubble system, and generate sought after properties like mobility capital.

Conclusion

The preceding arguments can be summarized by saying that internationalized higher education has undergone significant duress during the pandemic, with a loss in popularity of short duration credit mobility exchanges, similar to what happened in other mobility fields such as international tourism (see Cairns and Clemente, 2023), and major impacts on the educational experience. In explaining what has happened in universities, student mobility moved from its traditional 'bubble' format of formal, informal and non-formal learning into a compressed online modality, which while expedient, raised questions about the capacity of programmes like Erasmus to deliver meaningful outcomes for students. The impression is that the virtual experiment was a superficial success, acting as a placeholder procedure for universities to avoid

atrophy within their mobility systems, but creating little of value for participating students beyond a token form of internationalization.

This change in the fortunes of international student mobility has personal and professional consequences; not only an interruption to learning, but also a disruption of learning processes, with what might have been imagined as a relatively pleasant, and highly social, experience becoming insular and isolated, something to be endured not enjoyed. We have also witnessed an intensified use of domestic space as a site for higher education, including attempts to replace an expansive range of international peers with introverted social networks. Later on, as students have started to re-circulate in large numbers, their mobility can be called into question for different reasons, such as the wisdom of high levels of non-essential forms of international travel that are contributing to a deepening climate emergency. We are therefore left with doubts about the long-term validity of high levels of student circulation, when the negative impact on society is becoming more profound.

Virtual mobility offers a possible solution, but is in all likelihood more of a supplement than a substitute modality. Important aspects of mobility capital, including intercultural competencies and international employability, go missing online, along with much of the joie de vivre of international student life. We might say that universities have yet to find an effective means of balancing the needs of international students and their own requirement to deliver quality teaching, and also creating a dividend to political backers such as the European Commission. Nevertheless, the long shadow cast by the climate emergency on programmes like Erasmus, that multiply non-essential mobility with impunity, meaning that it is imperative to re-think the place of international mobility in higher education, and to move towards maximizing the impact of time that is spent abroad and away from seeking to increase the numbers of people travelling for selfish and superficial reasons.

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