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New Dilemmas in Young People's Mobile Transitions during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

The impact of the Covid-19 on youth transitions has been potentially huge, due to the severity of the public health emergency and its prolonged duration. At the time of writing, December 2021, a fifth wave of infections has started in Western Europe, accelerated by the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, taking us into a second year of the pandemic. With thousands of people dead, millions more infected, some repeatedly, and the social and economic positions of practically everyone disrupted in some respects, we can say without fear of contradiction that the current generation of young people will be making a transition to a reality different to previous generations, characterized by changes that traverse socio- and geo-demographic boundaries. This is not to mention challenges which pre-date and will no doubt supersede the pandemic, including the climate emergency and rising geopolitical tensions in Central and Eastern Europe.

While its impact is diffuse, the pandemic has nevertheless affected certain aspects of life more profoundly than others. This includes losing the freedom, at times, to engage in unrestricted mobility, non-essential travel having being constrained by restrictions aimed at lim-

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iting the spread of the virus, alongside an understandable reluctance from many people to engage in activities that have come to be seen as laden with risk. Many of the limitations placed on mobility are general but some have had a more acute impact on young people and practitioners in the youth field, who in the years preceding the pandemic benefitted greatly through the integration of a mobility dimension into various forms of work, training, study and civil society projects, many of which were financed through the Erasmus+ programme. The pandemic has therefore meant not only less travel, but fewer opportunities to use mobility as a pedagogical tool in formal, informal and non-formal education. We should also acknowledge complications for young people with low levels of social, economic and cultural capital, who are seeking to move to another country to find work or escape hardship, and therefore face greater risk of greater exposure to virus, not to mention the various forms of labour market precarity and exploitation which, unlike other activities, have not ceased during the public health crisis.

In this chapter, we aim to look at some of the concerns that have arisen during the pandemic, affecting young people's ability to make transitions that rely upon geographical mobility, focusing on a number of key dilemmas that have arisen from the need to balance public health, personal safety and economic and political pressures to keep borders open. In doing so, we focus upon the Portuguese context, using examples from research conducted during the pandemic with young people and youth stakeholders, alongside reports of significant events. In addition to illustrating changes in the frequency of travelling, we also argue that the meaning of many mobilities have undergone a transition during the pandemic. It would appear to be the case that we are no longer living in an age when mobility can be taken for granted, a new reality that needs to be taken into account in our appreciation of the transitions of many young people.

The immobility turn in youth transitions

A large body of work has accumulated on the subject of various forms of geographical movement and the role of mobility in the lives of young people, an issue elaborated upon in many of our previous publications (see, e.g., Cairns 2014). The idea is that through moving abroad, the field of opportunities is made deeper and wider, and in principle more democratic in terms of acesss, something that is particularly useful for young people living in regions where there are fewer opportunities, giving the idea of 'mobile transitions' global appeal (Robertson et al. 2018). That we have a decade or more of scholarship means that we have a familiarity with the idea of youth transitions interpolating international circulation. Somewhat less visible, but no less important, is the value of mobility for educators, trainers and civil society agencies. These stakeholders were able to expand via hosting mobility platforms to cater for a wide range of young people, the most celebrated being Erasmus in its various forms. Additionally, we should mention that at a time when the practice of migration was becoming problematized and pejoratized, youth mobility was seen as relatively benign, even beneficial to societies. This was particularly true in the EU, with Erasmus-type mobility attaining political importance as a nascent symbol of European integration.

When most of this mobility stopped in the early months of 2002, the loss of this liberty came as quite a profound shock, especially to those doing what they felt were normal activities which they were entitled to do: completing education, finding work and becoming more cosmopolitan and independent.

Not only did mobility halt, so then did the transitions of many young people, whose

At the same time, host institutions were suddenly confronted with a loss of their client base, and perhaps feeling slightly guilty about being part of an infrastructure which had facilitated

We therefore recognize the interpolation of various forms of mobility – or mobilities (Urry 2007) – into the transition-to-adulthood, making reference to the processes that contribute to ontological development, and the significance of what we describe as the 'immobility turn' in interrupting these processes.

The end of the mobility turn

We begin with acknowledgement of developments in the mobility research field during the latter part of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first, coalescing around the idea of a new mobilities paradigm, encapsulating the multiplication and diversification of spatial practices (Urry 1995; Sheller and Urry 2006; see also Cresswell 2006; Faist 2013). We can also interpret this 'mobility turn' as an attempt to describe the fluidity and lack of spatial fixity that become prevalent during the expansion in global flows of people and capital (see also Bauman 2000), enabled by developments in information technology, communications and travel. Young people's mobility thus became associated with profit, mirroring the neoliberal logic of late capitalism found in other spatial practices such as tourism. However, while the mobility turn was widely celebrated by governments and corporations, and seen as academic endorsement of the expansion of mobility and a justification for creating more opportunities for people to travel between countries for education, work and leisure, the negative impact made upon the natural environment by expansionism was noted by Urry and other then con-temporary authors, and more recently, local communities in many of the most popular destina-tions have felt the ill-effects of too much travelling by too many travellers, enabled by the development of so-called 'lean platforms,' including low cost airlines and a mass proliferation

of Airbnb-type letting arrangements (Srnicek 2017, 49-50), alongside growth in international student populations (Malet Calvo and Ramos 2018).

At an institutional level, we can assert that expansionist principles employed in tourism (see, e.g., Milano et al. 2019; Higgins-Desbiolles 2021), were being extended to the multiplication of young people's mobility, especially in higher education and more surreptitiously in the labour market, where there was a desire to enhance profitability. Such developments meant that expanded mobilities came to be seen as a response to the deficiencies of late capitalism, including the 2008 economic crisis (Harvey 2010), replacing other revenue streams that had faltered (Yoon 2014). More mobility, and more young people on the move, also meant that when the Covid-19 pandemic began in early 2020, the number of people affected was huge, much more so than when practices such as studying abroad were the preserve of elites and thus quite exceptional (Murphy-Lejuene 2002). Added to the circulation of highly qualified young people are those who moved abroad seeking employment, whether on a seasonal basis or with a view to permanent settlement. While many of these young people are equipped for the rigours of migration, some lack the social and economic capital their better-off counterparts take for granted. As such, we cannot assume that all mobile young workers are able to cope with the challenges created by an unprecedented public health crisis, especially those with social support needs and in positions of economic precarity.

In our response to this situation, the generality of the shift away from mobility has led us to propose that we are in fact now in the middle of an 'immobility turn,' in regard to young people in particular, whose capacity to circulate has been suddenly and dramatically constricted (Cairns et al, 2021a). In more specific terms, **we define this turn as a decrease in the range and frequency of mobilities and the problematization of travelling due to epidemiological risks, alongside the decline of some travel-related industries including aviation and hos-**

pitality. Other aspects of the immobility turn involve a shift towards the use of virtual platforms as replacement or placeholder modalities, in an attempt to keep existing mobility programmes operational. The mass outbreak of sedentarism hence means that the expansionist phase of mobility is over, for now, and we are not the only authors to have formed this impression; many people no longer have the willingness or ability to circulate with impunity, and those who do risk elongating the crisis rather than bringing it to an end. This helps explain why the amount of accumulated literature on the impact of the pandemic on 'mobilities' is already formidable (see, e.g., Cresswell 2021; Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2021; Freudendal-Pedersen and Kesselring 2021; Lin and Yeoh 2021; Zuev and Hannam 2021), and while we do not have the space in this chapter to review these studies, we can confirm that immobility is global in terms of its spread and extremely deep in regard to its impact.

The immobility turn in transitions

These reflections take us towards considering the impact immobilization has been making on young people's transitions-to-adulthood, and the broader significance of the pandemic for processes such as completing education and training stages, as well as the difficult process of finding work and becoming independent. The removal of many spatial possibilities obviously makes these transitions harder to realize, with the geographical field of opportunities having dramatically shrunk, but we also know that young people can be stoic and resilient, meaning that many will not give up easily on their mobility. We are nevertheless faced with a situation, even if temporary, reminiscent of the pre-mobility turn era of the 1970s and 1980s, when youth transitions tended to be imagined as spatially static, taking place within the same country, and sometimes the same city (see, e.g., Furlong and Cartmel 1997), with mobility restricted to a few privileged members of society.

After the mobility turn, the integration of mobility into education, training and work, as well as into various aspects of youth work, obviously meant change. In the European context,

this was reflected in developments such as the gradual expansion of successive Erasmus programmes, and young people's own desires to broaden their internal and external horizons, leading to mobile transitions and the generation of various forms of highly sought after mobility capital, including international employability and heightened interculturality (Cairns et al. 2018; see also Robertson et al. 2018). Add to this is the desirability of Europe as a destination for young people from third party nations, with part of the attraction being the perceived higher level of personal freedom and economic libertarianism of the region.

Lest we sound too celebratory, we should also note that spatialized transitions nevertheless tended to be somewhat brittle, with a 'migration' trajectory having been constructed out of the bricolage of a wide range of intermittent mobility episodes, creating precarity for young people with lower levels of social and economic capital who found it hard to cope with the stops, starts and gaps that needed to be compensated for, somehow, issues we have addressed in a number of our recent publications on this topic (Cairns 2021; Cairns and Clemente 2021). Suffice to say, we might then say that an element of risk and instability was already present prior to the pandemic in relation to mobile transitions, related to the high cost and low levels of support on offer to certain mobile young people, and when the pandemic began, many more found their mobilities problematized. We should therefore be circumspect about demands to return to a normality characterized by inequality and exclusion, and use the current interregnum to make mobility more robust and societally valuable.

Approach

In what remains of this chapter, we will look at the immobilization of young people, focusing on our local Portuguese context. Before doing so, we should say that as well as somewhat disrupting the lives of young people, the pandemic has forced us to somewhat change our

methodological approaches, taking into account what is practically possible and ethically acceptable. Most notably, since it is imprudent to conduct in-person fieldwork, we have had to reply upon online methods. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs, with net-based research having been largely, and correctly, criticized due to superficiality and the numerous biases that arise in evidence gathering, and more recently the over-use of web-surveys has made such approaches unworkable. However, at the time of conducting this work, we have had no other option but to resort to the internet in order to collect information and recruit interviewees; however, we recognize that any results obtained via such means need to be treated with caution.

In practice, we are however able to reflect on outcomes from previous work on the impact of the pandemic conducted with 27 international students based at various Portuguese universities during Spring 2020, that brought to light problems experienced at this time. As outcomes from this research have been published (Cairns et al. 2021a, 2021b; Malet Calvo et al. 2021), we have recently gathered more evidence, during the fifth wave of Covid-19 in November and December 2021, this time with members of staff with responsibility for the management of mobility platforms at 20 universities across Portugal. Complementing this work is exploration of just a few of the many issues facing young people undertaking more traditional forms of migration, to Europe from third party countries, specifically for employment in precarious conditions, and some of the controversies that have arisen or attained greater visibility during the pandemic in relation to their stays.

In respect to the anticipated impact of this analysis, we hope to inform debates on internationalized higher education, and the broader field of young people's migration. We also acknowledge that there are difficulties to be overcome in the youth work sector arising from the inability or unwillingness of certain young people to travel, especially those with pre-existing or new vulnerabilities, and recognize that mobility policymaking is complicated by economic and political imperatives to re-start mobility at a time when doing so risks prolonging

the crisis. At the same time, we also recognize that some young people feel that they have no choice but to travel, even during a pandemic, despite the risks they are generating for themselves and for others. This explains why we focus upon the hard-to-avoid dilemmas, relating to the clash between the desire to continue mobility and the now endemic risks.

Analysis

In the remainder of this chapter, we will attempt to provide insight on the impact of immobility on young people's transitions, focusing on dilemmas that have arisen during the pandemic. While immobility is obviously not youth-specific, the discussion that follows generally relates to young people, especially those in full-time higher education or who are seeking work in Portugal. In what follows, we focus on three key mobilities, all of which relate to transitions in different ways. In this sense, we are following an existing approach, in acknowledging the importance of spatial movement at different points along a career trajectory, and also that young people from different geo- and socio-demographic backgrounds consume mobility differently, and consume different forms of mobility. The pandemic has however led to a rethink in regard to our appreciation of all these transitions, which have been literally and figuratively problematized and potentially de-valued. More specifically, while in the past we may have seen mobility as useful to developing independence and exercising agency, we are looking at how best to cope without such forms of movement; minimizing rather than maximizing travel. As such, we are marking the transition point at which mobility shifted from a being positive resource in life construction towards being somewhat suspect and seedy.

We start with a brief look at what has been happening in student mobility programmes, including Erasmus-supported exchanges, continuing to a discussion of the interruption in broader process of student migration. Complementing this analysis is an exploration of issues

that have arising in relating to more traditional forms of migration during the pandemic, affecting young people's ability to move to and settle in third party countries as workers.

Erasmus immobility

We will begin with some remarks about what has been happening in the world of student exchanges during the pandemic, many of them within Europe and neighbouring countries taking place under the auspices of Erasmus+. Such mobility should need no introduction, with practices such as spending a semester in a foreign university or engaging in voluntary or work placements abroad becoming commonplace in the decades prior to the public health emergency, attracting a large number of academic studies, including our own work (see, e.g., Cairns 2014; Cairns et al. 2018; see also Feyen and Krzaklewska 2013). During the initial stages of the pandemic, immobility obviously affected levels of circulation taking place between different countries, with students across Europe returning home early or choosing not to travel. This is self-evident, and while statistics have not yet been made public at the time of writing, it has been estimated in our own university that incoming mobility via platforms such as Erasmus halved during the 2020/21 academic year compared to the previous year.

Less visible, but no less important, has been the impact on what might be termed internal mobility. This includes the international conviviality that exists within international student networks, extending to travel with the host country and engagement with local communities. Erasmus and similar programmes were thus doubly-affected by the arrival of the pandemic, with the constriction of movement between and within countries undermining both the freedom to travel and to make mobility meaningful via intercultural exchanges. This secondary dimension is a transformation vitally important to acknowledge, since the raison d'être of these exchanges is to build and strengthen forms of mobility capital, such as international employability and interculturality, which are dependent upon social exchanges that cannot now take place to

a meaningful extent. We hence note that student mobility has lost much of its value during the pandemic, suggesting that there was no logical reason for continuing with Erasmus et al. during the pandemic beyond a desire to keep up appearances.

We hence have a situation in which multiple dimensions of mobility are problematized and de-valued, with a dilemma arising between the stoic but counter-productive continuance of the mobility status quo or a politically difficult decision to temporarily put on support for mobility programmes. The European Commission obviously took the latter position, and even consolidated this choice via the decision to renew the Erasmus+ charter for a further six years during 2020. Universities also continued to recruit new intakes of international students for 2020/21, albeit within incoming and outgoing mobility operating at lower levels than was previously the case. The impression created is that the integrity of mobility programmes was placed above the need to avoid generating non-essential mobility, with the survival of platforms such as Erasmus seen as imperative, given the sunk costs involved and the symbolic value of continuing with international circulation, regardless of the consequences.

Individual students may also have seen their mobility as still necessary, not wanting to miss-out on opportunities that might not arise again or not wishing to lose course accreditation. These fears are certainly understandable for those in situ when the pandemic began but much harder to countenance for those who travelled after the pandemic had started, knowing the risks they were generating and the limitations they would face on arrival in their host society. The consequences of their intransigence have been highly predictable, with numerous publicized cases of Covid-19 super-spreading at Erasmus welcome events in Portugal during the second wave of the pandemic, in Autumn 2020, becoming a brief media focus (see, e.g., Silva 2020). While we can view these reports as sensationalist, it is unfortunate that the opportunity was created to associate the programme with the spread of the pandemic, and re-activate out-dated stereotypes about the feckless hedonism of Erasmus students in the process. This does however

illustrate the risk involved in continuing mobility at all costs, suggesting that this was not a very wise decision.

Student Migrants

While most short duration exchange students can return home or refrain from travelling, perhaps only losing several months of optional internationalized learning, the situation is not quite so clear in regard to longer-term student migrants, specifically referring to those who have moved abroad to study at a foreign university for the entirety of a postgraduate or undergraduate degree course. Certainly, they have advantages over their more transient peers, being able to attain a degree of settlement in the host community, sometimes accompanied by family members or having established social links with local people rather than fellow international students, This relative degree of spatial fixity and higher stocks of social capital means a somewhat different set of circumstances during the pandemic compared to exchange students, and at the time at which it was thought that the pandemic would only last a few months rather than become the multi-year event it has turned into, they might have argued that they were better placed to ride out the storm where they were, and there was no need to return home.

Nevertheless, research conducted with international student migrants enrolled at Portuguese universities during the first wave of the pandemic suggests ambivalence (see Cairns et al., 2021a). For those in the most comfortable positions, with spacious accommodation and supportive housemates or families, it was possible to survive the most challenge months through being mutually supportive. Others who lacked such conditions were not so fortunate, having to endure stringent securitization procedures, particularly when living in university dormitories. The greatest concern has however been in regard to the generation of precarity among students with lower levels of economic resources. For them, there has been disruption not only to learning but also the financial integrity of their lives, with the loss of earnings from jobs,

parents and scholarships at a time when expenses are mounting, leaving some with no recourse but to engage in risky employment in hospitals, hospitality, food delivery and supermarkets; practically the only jobs available during the periods of lockdown.

Other issues relate to the challenges student migrants face in terms of their settlement, as they not necessarily recognized by universities or public authorities as full citizens, with access to health and other forms of support limited by being a non-national or resident alien. This liminal situation has implications for accessing health and welfare, and created problems in obtaining access to Covid-19 vaccines, which in Portugal were distributed using National Health Service registrations. While some 'open house' vaccinations were eventually organized, students with health vulnerabilities were not prioritized, and many actually resorted to travelling back to their home countries to be vaccinated, having retained access to health services there. Such situations imply that many of dilemmas arising from the pandemic for student migrants have been privatized: rather than relying upon policy decisions or institutional support, it is left up to individuals to determine the best course of action in regard to coping with the pandemic.

This is obviously an issue in need of more in-depth analysis, but for now, we can say that more support for student migrants would be welcome, particularly where financial and other forms of hardship have arisen during the pandemic. Our more recent investigations during the fifth wave of Covid-19 unfortunately suggest a lack of interest, or the lack of a capacity, to offer more support. The impression created from talking to university administrations is that their student migrants are somewhat invisible. Despite the fact that they often pay considerable fees, when it comes to providing help and offering support about pandemic-related issues, they tend to be lumped in along with domestic students. While there is no continuity across the various institutions whom we contacted about these issues, it was surprising that pastoral care

of student migrants did not feature prominently, and significantly, we did not receive any reports of universities receiving additional resources from the state, a somewhat disappointing state of affairs.

Migrating to work

On the subject of hardship, one final issue we want to consider in this chapter are the complications facing young people who have migrated to Portugal to work during the pandemic. This is not a field of experience with age parameters, but many of those who move to Portugal for seasonal or more permanent employment are within youth parameters. While there are (young) workers whose circumstances are relatively comfortable, some are in highly precarious positions, domiciled in conditions in which adhering to the necessary safety regulations is not possible. That many of these workers are from outside the EU further complicates matters, particularly where the stay in Portugal, even after a 'regular' entry, creates the need to deal with both practical barriers (contractually informal jobs, language barriers, hostility from locals, etc.) and bureaucratic procedures that have been complicated by those closure of offices and overworked officials.

The precariousness of the living and working conditions of these migrants was demonstrated in our Portuguese context during the most intensive periods of lockdown by the plight of agricultural workers from India, Nepal and Pakistan. They had migrated to the Alentejo region of Portugal at a time when most forms of international travel were prohibited or highly restricted. Their cramped and unhealthy living conditions - with no hot water and minimum conditions of comfort in over-crowded unheated houses – became a cause celebre in media and political debate on the occasion of a surge in covid occurrences – known as the 'Odemira case' – focused on these migrants. Consternation hence centred not only on possible effacement of

travel regulations but also the risk from Covid-19 arising among this migrant population, igniting the public opprobrium and threatening the local health system and the broader economy. The emergency rehousing of many of these workers by government authorities in a private eco resort in Odemira (see Dias 2021) was followed by the Government proposal to change the labour law to better control temporary work in sectors that rely on employing migrants. The debate around economic migration at national level has nevertheless remained generally mature and consensual, with no challenge to the idea that migrant workers and migration have a positive impact on the economic development of the country.

In assessing this situation, the question strongly arises as to which forms of travel can be considered essential during the pandemic, and by whom. We might argue that workers had no need to travel to Portugal to seek employment, beyond meeting their personal existential needs, and that their presence reflects an adherence to the values of neoliberalism and late capitalism, that 'permits' the importing of migrant labour, even during a pandemic. These concerns do seem to be over-riding by the humanitarian desire to see these workers treated with respect and dignity, with the political and public goodwill expressed towards the migrant workers in Odemira leading to a re-think of Portuguese labour laws. In this respect, we can view the treatment these workers received as a refreshing change from the distasteful, and often racist, stereotypes that are mobilized against economic migrants in other parts of the Europe, and the world. This leads us to end this analysis on a cautiously optimistic note, albeit taking into account the fact that this is a response to economic, as well as humanitarian, imperatives publicized via media debates rather than policy discussion, specifically the need Portugal has to attract rather than repel migrants.

Conclusion: Learning from the immobility turn

These three examples illustrate many of the complications that have arisen concerning mobility for young people during the pandemic. This includes the emergence of a number of dilemmas relating to the immobility turn, and important lessons to be learnt for international students, their host universities and the regulation of migrant labour. At the root of these dilemmas is attaining a balance between, on the one hand, personal and public safety, and on the other, the desire to get on with life as 'normal' as possible, whether this is managing mobility programmes, being a student migrant or working abroad.

While at a very general level, we might see this as a (re)manifestation of the 'risk society' paradigm (see Beck 1992), in more precise terms, we have examples of what might be termed a 'health' versus 'wealth' dichotomy, with mixed outcomes arising from this clash between imperatives. While we can describe these debates and controversies, thinking more sociologically, we might want to start acknowledging that the meaning of much non-essential mobility has changed: something that was valued but is now devalued, if temporarily, and with this mobility effectively losing its previously virtuous position, and much of its utility. This shift of meaning is perhaps the most fundamental lesson to be learnt from the immobility turn, and long after travel has resumed, a certain amount of reticence is likely to remain as a legacy of this unprecedented period of change.

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