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4. International Student Mobility and Immobility

This chapter looks at another form of international travel greatly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic: the mobility of tertiary education level students, again focusing on the Portuguese context. As in Chapter 3, discussion engages with developments before and after the start of the crisis, with the decade prior to the pandemic characterized by a sustained period of expansion, followed by a period of uncertainty. However, as noted in the statistics cited in Chapter 1, while the status of short term exchanges – or credit mobility – is unclear due to limitations in the data, there are some signs that levels of student migration to Portugal actually increased in popularity during the pandemic.

Such developments reflect the fact that the country has a distinct international student mobility profile, perhaps different to the European norm, having become a destination for visitors from neighbouring nations, travelling via programmes such as the European Commission support Erasmus platform, and further afield, including Africa, Asia and the Americas, with many of these students staying in Portugal for relatively long durations (Sin et al, 2017; França and Cairns, 2020; Malet Calvo et al, 2020). As noted in prior research on this topic, it may have been logical for these latter students to stay in place after the start of pandemic, due to the lack of opportunities for returning to sending societies that may have been more deeply affected by the pandemic than Portugal (Cairns et al, 2021a; 2021b; Malet Calvo et al, 2021).

Looking at the broader picture, we also wish to contribute to the student mobility research field. This is a topic that has attracted a huge volume of academic studies and grey area literature during the 'mobility turn' era (see Chapter 2), which suggests that there has been an expansion and a diversification of the internationalized learning experience, which came to integrate formal, informal and non-formal pedagogies as a means of generating valuable forms

of mobility capital (Cairns 2021a, 2021b). For this reason, having already looked at some of the available statistics in Chapter 1, the main part of this chapter looks at qualitative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, reflecting on international student life during the most intensive periods of lockdown. With the benefit of two years' hindsight, we can now see that a devaluation of the internationalized learning experience took place during the first wave of the pandemic, with less mobility capital being generated by students, and higher costs for host universities due to the increased duty of care. Also noted in this part of the discussion is the main means through which student mobility, and academic life in general, continued: the use of digital platforms for the delivery of teaching and support services, resulting in a re-discovery of the idea of virtual mobility.

Expansionism in student mobility

Like tourism, student mobility expanded considerable in scale and scope in the years preceding the pandemic. Before this time, spending time at a foreign university was something of a rarity, to the point of being seen as an elitist practice, with social distinction generated from the exceptionality of the experience (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). The value of mobility started to change as many more students began to travel, with short duration exchange visits becoming, if not the norm, then far from exceptional, especially in the European Union, where the focus was upon generating intercultural skills via relatively short stays abroad. At the same time as this form of expansionism was taking place, students continued to move abroad for longer durations, attracted by the prospect of gaining credentials at universities with globally-recognized reputations. These two developments coalesced into a two-fold model of international student mobility, centred on what came to be described by various authors as 'credit mobility' and 'diploma' or 'degree mobility' respectively (see, e.g., Brooks and Waters, 2011).

Since this time, this dual model has been superseded by recognition that there are in fact many different pathways open to people seeking international student mobility, now referred to as 'learning mobility' in European policy discourse, a term that encompasses not only undergraduates and postgraduates but also trainees, volunteers, work placements, vocational programmes and staff exchanges, to name but a few of the most prominent examples. This diversification was consolidated by the rebranding in 2014 of the European Commission supported Erasmus programme somewhat literally as Erasmus+. Hence, as was the case with tourism (see Chapter 3), 'student' mobility became multi-faceted and widely diffused, with the main focus on relatively short duration fixed duration stays. These developments raised levels of incoming and outgoing movement in many European countries, and increased the number of institutions hosting educational visitors.

This critical mass of mobility also attained geopolitical importance. In addition to programmes like Erasmus being seen as a kind of exercise in EU soft power, capable of spreading European values throughout the member states and beyond, the internationalized learning experience was looked upon by the European Commission as an opportunity to subtly intervene in young people's careers, focusing on heightening their international employability and strengthening interculturality through making use of the geo-demographically diverse conviviality that 'naturally' happens during stays abroad (Cairns et al, 2017). For higher education level institutions, involvement in student mobility may have been more pragmatic; a means of gathering funds from feepaying overseas students, with other forms of mobility used to enhance universities' internationalization profiles within what had become a highly competitive marketplace, reflecting a neoliberal philosophy, ubiquitous in tertiary education (see also Bok, 2009). As with tourism, marketing strategies gained prominence, with universities branding themselves as chic destinations for feepaying student migrants, leading to an obsession with 'strategic planning,' 'performance indicators' and 'corporate image'

(Komljenovic and Robertson, 2016). Finally, like the tourist industry, universities stressed the importance of attracting foreign students to national economies, viewing themselves as generators of wealth from tuition fees and subsidiary activities such as the provision of student accommodation (Malet Calvo et al, 2020, 130-1).

All these developments help explain the appeal of expanded 'student' mobilities, but does not of course mean that every aspect of this system functioned perfectly. In fact, major disparities emerged out of the international contest between universities to attract visitors and send as many of their own students as possible abroad; some institutions succeeded in mobilizing their students, while others struggled to find sufficient numbers who wanted to travel, leading them to accept subsidiary positions as dormitory destinations. A lack of balance between levels of incoming and outgoing mobility, partly a reflection of international disparities in support levels on offer to students, created a core-periphery dynamic within Europe that risked creating new forms of social exclusion in programmes like Erasmus that were, ironically, marketed in terms of their ability to deliver social inclusion (Cairns, 2017). This explains why the expansionism that characterized the pre-pandemic period can only be considered a partial success, and as was the case with tourism, problems tend to arise in places that become too popular with visitors, especially were there was limited capacity in local housing markets, suggesting a variant on the 'over-tourism' phenomenon discussed in the previous chapter.

Mobility capital and fractional migrants

As suggested in the preceding paragraphs, mobility in the EU was extended to a wide range of learning contexts, not just traditional academic teaching. In practice, this involved a fusion of formal, informal and non-formal learning in the programmes of Erasmus+ and other smaller scale platforms. The popularity of the approach suggests quantitative success, with an

estimated 640,000 people studying, training or volunteering abroad in 2020 according to Erasmus+ publicity materials.[1]

While we can write about this issue in terms of numbers participating, we also need to consider the implications for education and training systems arising from the blending of different learning formats, and the prospects for generating and strengthening certain aspects of mobility capital, including interculturality and international employability. As the authors have detailed in previous publications, this is quite a convoluted process, the idea being to produce mobility capital out of a reflexive learning process, and the building of competencies and skills that establish a capacity to work productively with people from a range of different backgrounds (see Cairns, 2021a; 2021b). While hard to achieve – and not easy to explain – these forms of mobility capital are outcomes from a synergy implicit in the internationalized learning experience, differentiating it from forms of travel that are explicitly oriented around more immediate forms of gratification; that is to say, the prospect of gaining mobility capital is what distinguishes learning mobility from holidaymaking. A distinction is also drawn between the classical idea of a migrant moving abroad with a view to increasing their economic capital and the mobile subject, with ability to capitalize on the experience deferred until a later, unspecified point in time.

Recognizing that a pursuit of mobility capital is taking place helps explain why mobility opportunities are not only being provided for a wide range of audiences, including young people participating in civil society or sports-related projects. While this diffusion of mobility to non-academic contexts is not necessarily problematic in itself, and may be beneficial for many participants, it is valid to ask just how much mobility capital can be generated in stays abroad that last for only a few days or weeks, with such durations being common in many mobility projects in the youth field (see also Allaste and Nugin, 2021). On the other hand, these short visits might function as an entrée to further, more substantial visits, that would not have

been contemplated without the existence of introductory activities. We might then regard a lot of the non-academic mobility that takes place in programmes like Erasmus+ as forms of preliminary learning rather than learning mobility in its own right.

More concerning is the impact of the fragmented mobilities on ontological development, and the threat posed to incipient transitions to the labour market, which can be needlessly interrupted or elongated by stays abroad, multiple times, an issue previously discussed in relation to involvement in international internships (see Cuzzocrea and Cairns, 2020). In this study, it was found that while many interns enjoyed the experience of living in some of Europe's most cosmopolitan cities, they also tended to find themselves stuck in a kind of exclusion loop, since the promised entry to an international career eluded them due to their position as eternal outsiders. This leads people to accept one internship after another in the hope that the next trip would be the one to take them to a point of job security, an expensive tactic in cities like Paris, London and Brussels. The volume of accumulated time spent abroad can also create a feeling of rootlessness and detachment, a separation not only from the places they had left but also in the host community, into which they never quite fit. This explains why, despite appearing to exercise an agency of sorts in regard to mobility choices, these 'fractional migrants' experience problems that can affect their sense of self and physical well-being, especially when it becomes difficult to access health support and other forms of welfare.

Precarious learning

One further aspect of the internationalization process we want to mention concerns the learning experience itself. As previously intimated, a relatively novel aspect of programmes like Erasmus is the use of pedagogies that capitalize on the internationalized conviviality 'naturally' generated within a group of co-resident students from different national and regional backgrounds, facilitated by the blending of formal education with extra-curricular activities.

The idea is that people learn how to be mobile from the other mobile people they encounter during their stays abroad, who pass their wisdom on to newer arrivals. Significantly, much of this learning taking place outside the classroom, in a range of different social settings and in the domestic sphere, rather than in the formal classroom.

Researchers view such arrangements as leading to the creation of a kind of 'bubble' universe; a space in which the main points of reference for intercultural learning are fellow travellers, not local people or professional educators (Cuzzocrea et al, 2021; see also Earls, 2018). Such bubbles facilitate the generation of the aforementioned forms of mobility capital, but with limitations. If an international student's social universe is limited to peers participating in the same or similar programmes, and perhaps those studying at the same university or living in the same accommodation, the form of cosmopolitanism produced will be quite artificial, bringing to mind a critique of student mobility expressed in existentialist terms, with their place in a host society being seen as one of alienating 'stranger' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). The historical critique from Murphy-Lejeune's book is rather harsh when applied to the present, since it assumes a homogeneity to the study abroad experience that has become somewhat dated with expansionism and diversification. Furthermore, students can find themselves distanced from peers and host country networks by their lack of social and economic resources, a situation related to the high costs of learning mobility and/or the fact that they are making financial sacrifices in order to pursue their 'mobility dreams' (Cairns et al., 2017, 3).

It is then important to remember that relatively undocumented problems emerged within the international student population during the time of expansionism, and within this population we have people with different levels of affluence, with the inevitability that some international students will be in vulnerable positions due to their limited resources. We might then characterize expanded mobility as incorporating an element of precarious learning, and precarious learners.

International student immobility

These remarks about vulnerability and precarity take us towards the turning point of the pandemic, and the impact of immobility on mobile students, a point in time when the learning bubble appears to have burst. In the case of tertiary education, this included a transformation of the materiality of learning, and change in the spaces in which international students live and learn. Traditionally, they experience a form of blended learning, combining formal, informal and non-formal pedagogies, and all three components contribute towards making the exercise a success. Studying abroad is not simply a case of obtaining credit for academic work but also a geographical widening of a participants social network, and possibly a broadening and opening-up of the mind.

This will inevitably involve engaging with the host community as well as the host university due to the volume and density of information that needs to be conveyed to establish intercultural connections, and avoid the kind of alienation experiences detailed in historical studies of student mobility. During the lockdown stages of the pandemic, not only were the informal and non-formal aspects of this learning process curtailed, formal education was transplanted into the spaces formerly occupied by the other pedagogies. This constitutes a huge change in what might be described as the materiality of internationalized higher education, one that was perhaps impossible to manage, not having been anticipated and without obvious replacement modalities (see also Brooks and Waters, 2018). What happens then, when internationalized learning become a highly insular experience? Expansionism in international student mobility also meant that when the pandemic began, more people were going to affected than would have been the case in previous times, creating difficulties for host institutions and funding agencies, as well as students.[2]

While a potential decline in numbers of exchange students is a serious concern, just as important then is the impact on pedagogies reliant on a high degree of international conviviality. Added to this is the social impact for students arising from the restrictions that became an integral part of pandemic life for many months. This impact has obviously been transversal, not specific to international students, but those in precarious positions may have endured additional stress, lacking a firm grounding in the host country's support networks. This explains why economic challenges emerged for such students at this time, a topic featuring prominently in prior work with members of this cohort in Portugal (see especially the accounts discussed in Cairns et al, 2021a).

Universities also faced awkward questions in regard to how (much) student mobility should be allowed or encouraged at times when travel is problematized, taking into account both the need to address public safety concerns and preserve the economic integrity of learning programmes; continuing to invite large numbers of students risked spreading the virus, but restricting numbers would potentially undo the progress made in expanding mobility prior to the pandemic. An additional concern we might also want to acknowledge relates to the ramifications that arose from expanded use of digital platforms for the delivery of teaching and support services, extending to a re-discovery of the idea of virtual mobility, providing us with an inadvertent opportunity to assess some of the strengths and weaknesses of remote learning formats.

The first wave of immobility

Before considering the possible longer term consequences arising from immobility in internationalized tertiary education, especially for host institutions, it is worth looking back towards the initial months of the crisis, revisiting evidence from the Portuguese research context to illustrate some of difficulties and controversies that emerged during the most

stringent periods of lockdown. Since this material has already been published in a number of journal articles (see also Cairns et al, 2021b; Malet Calvo et al, 2021), we will limit ourselves to highlighting a few of the most prominent findings, at times re-thinking earlier conclusions with the benefit of almost two years of hindsight.[3]

The initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic were characterized by the rapid shutdown of societies, including the closure of university facilities and the cancellation of international and inter-regional travel, at times extending to limited movement within neighbourhoods. In universities, the measures adopted to cope with the situation differed, but generally involved restricting access to campuses and moving learning online, with the results of this shift detailed in the findings of a range of studies from across the world (see, e.g., Agasisti and Soncin, 2021; de Boer, 2021; Pham and Ho, 2020; Mok et al, 2021; Veerasamy and Ammigan, 2021; Yang and Huang, 2021; Moscaritolo et al, 2022). The impression created by this large body of scholarship is that the international student world suddenly shrank, with major concerns for universities arising from the sudden contraction of catchment areas and the potential decline in recruitment. At this time, researchers of human mobility were also interested in finding more about students' experiences at this time given that, almost overnight, their 'super-mobile' (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska, 2021a) worlds were turned inside out. However, while there was considerable confusion, now immobilized students tended to adapt quickly to the changing situation, albeit recognizing that they were not able to enjoy an experience that corresponded to their pre-pandemic expectations.

This position is echoed in findings emerging from the authors' own research experience. Through the use of online methods to gather evidence at this time, it was possible to conduct 27 interviews with international students in Portugal between April and June 2020, the first lockdown, including credit mobility students and longer-term student migrants from Europe, Africa and South America. Reflecting on the main outcomes, two specific insights

were hard to ignore. A first observation relates to international students' experiences of living through the most intensive periods of lockdown, which involved a dramatic change in lifestyle and learning routine due to university closures and social restrictions, and limited travel possibilities. These conditions created a kind of externally enforced insularity, to the point of posing an existential threat to students whose lives were previously defined by the freedom to move, often in a relatively spontaneously manner. A second observation relates to the negative impact on mental and physical health. This is obviously a different form of stress compared to coping with financial difficulties – although economic and emotional matters can be linked – and one that crosses socio-demographic lines. In other words, it was not just people in economically vulnerable positions who suffered, but a much broader range of individuals, for whom the pandemic came as a profound culture shock that no one had adequately prepared for (see also Elmer et al, 2020).

In summarizing this position, we might say that international student life came to be characterized by rising economic and emotional costs. It takes a great deal money to sustain a stay abroad, and the sudden onset of immobility brought a new range of conspicuous costs; for instance, where educational courses were prolonged or needed to be repeated (see also Carolan et al, 2020). Among less well-off students there were the additional stresses of coping with lost income as many part-time jobs ceased to exist with the pandemic; some felt compelled to absorb these losses via finding new jobs, working in local supermarkets, courier services or hospitals instead of the now shuttered restaurants and bars, all of which brought significantly more risk of exposure to the virus. We might also add that some of the defining features of learning abroad – especially the ability to engage with people from different background and explore new places, especially the host city (Zazina and Nowakowska, 2022) – was severely affected, creating a very hollow experience indeed.

Immobilized higher education

How then are we to make sense of what happened in internationalized higher education at this time? In Chapter 2 of this book, it was implied that the expansion of various mobilities – including the popularization of the international circulation of students – could be seen as part of a broader 'mobility turn,' with authors such as John Urry recognizing the significance of 'mobilities' to transforming social and economic life. The success of this approach seems to have been predicated on relatively free circulation, meaning that during a period of immobilization, problems would emerge.

The evidence summarized in the previous section confirms the existence of practical difficulties created by the sudden onset of immobility in the Portuguese context, as well as the harder to quantify feelings of anxiety and isolation among students whose lives were previously characterized by a strong cosmopolitan disposition. This suggests that this is not just a question of consuming less mobility or experiencing more complicated travel processes but also a possible shift in the meaning of learning mobility, making what was once anticipated as a relatively pleasurable experience into a hardship to be endured. These were the authors' impressions at the time during which these changes were taking place. With the benefit of hindsight, we can now see that this shift was neither absolute nor irreversible, and as early as the second year of the pandemic, student mobility regained significant ground, while student migration was less affected in terms of popularity in our national context, and even increased in popularity (see Figure 1.3). This form of migration was not alone in withstanding the pandemic. As we will discuss in Chapter 5, labour migration continued throughout this time, albeit not without its own difficulties. We can then deduce that a certain amount of stoicism is present among students and others moving abroad for prolonged periods, who generally stayed in place when the pandemic hit for many reasons, including the difficulty of abandoning a degree course in progress and the limited or non-existent prospect of returning home.

The impact of the pandemic on short duration mobilities appears to have been more elastic. There were obviously fewer people participating in Erasmus-type exchanges during the first wave of infections, and some who had travelled before the initial outbreak were able to return home before the anticipated end of their visits, one reason being the relative ease with which students from neighbouring countries could travel. However, we do not have reliable statistics at the time of writing, but reports within the authors' own university suggest a drop in incoming Erasmus students of at least 50 per cent in 2020-21. There does seem, however, to have been a concerted effort to maintain the integrity of internationalized learning programmes, with universities continuing to host meaningful levels of students even during the first year of the crisis, a time during which domestic students generally worked at home. This might, on the surface, be seen as a positive development, although it would be interesting to learn what exactly people who engaged in Erasmus at a time of restricted internal and external mobility actually gained from the experience.

Virtual mobility

With the benefit of hindsight, much of what stated in our previous articles was stating the obvious in respect to the changes that took place in international student life during the early months of the pandemic, and really does not need to be repeated beyond a few reminders. Confinement in cramped accommodation. Anxieties about friends and family back home. Doubts about continuing with studies and the occasional rushed return home. Another common experience which does however merit some additional comment concerns the large scale moving of learning online, with lectures and other forms of teaching now being conducted via the internet. This form of remote learning is not a new phenomenon in itself in tertiary education, with many having 'open university' type institutions or other forms of long distance learning. However, prior to the pandemic, the use of online platforms in internationalized

higher education was limited. In regard to learning mobility programmes, virtual activities were in fact confined to specific, and relatively peripheral, aspects of the experience such as orientation prior to the point of departure and follow-up procedures after returning home. The pandemic obviously resulted in a rethink of this approach, with virtual mobility now acting as a placeholder for students who had become unable or reluctant to travel but who still wanted to obtain some kind of internationalization accreditation, with remote learning also used by those who had already moved abroad before the first wave and others who came after the crisis had started. However, if reports within our university are to be believed, the entire virtual mobility experience seems to have been a practice that was only briefly considered as a viable alternative.

Its unpopularity can be explained by a lack of enthusiasm, and exhaustion, among teachers and the impracticality of delivering pastoral support to students through online platforms. Also evident from our prior research was the poor quality of facilities many overseas students had at 'home,' with limited access to laptops and poor quality internet connections, not to mention over-crowding in shared accommodation making participation in online classes an additional challenge. At a more practical level, online pedagogies provide limited scope for encouraging the emergence of the kinds of interculturality and internationalized employability discussed previously due to the lack of opportunities for engaging in international conviviality. It was therefore no surprise that in the later waves of the pandemic, students in universities largely stayed on campus rather than work in their temporary homes, despite the risks they posed to each other and to academic staff.

Return to mobile learning

Those reflections take us to the final part of this chapter, and empirically informed perspectives about how mobility has been managed at universities during the pandemic. Having tempered

the somewhat downbeat assessment of immobility in higher education that characterized the authors' work in the initial months of the crisis (Cairns et al, 2021c) with the realisation that, on the surface, not as much has changed as we might have anticipated, it perhaps time for a rethink. Despite the highly visible problems, substantial numbers of students continued to travel, even during the most intensive periods of lockdown. When talking about a return to mobility, the quantitative changes might then have not been as profound as they could have been, after the initial drop-off in circulation levels. However, this impression disguises the deeper impacts, what might be described as the qualitative impacts of the pandemic, including the continuing problems with international travel and questions about the quality of the learning experience.

This is not an easy issue to assess. Host universities are reluctant to concede that they have problems, concerned about damaging their hard won internationalization profiles through deterring visitors, and losing the much needed revenue. To explore this issue, the authors have looked at how universities in Portugal re-started mobility during pandemic, or enabled its continuance, drawing upon evidence collected from 20 universities across the country. As fieldwork was conducted at a time of renewed restrictions on social contacts, during the fifth wave of the pandemic in the late months of 2021, as was the case with the empirical work in Chapter 3, all research had to be conducted remotely, involving the distribution of a questionnaire to university staff members located in international departments or units dedicated to the Erasmus programme, with later follow-up questions also delivered via the internet. Given the limited scope of this evidence, this will be an understandably brief assessment, but we will try to look beyond the more self-evident issues, such as the initial drop in numbers of credit mobility exchanges in the first year of the pandemic and the relatively stability of overseas enrolments, and look towards less prominent findings in relation to the future place of remote learning.

Pastoral care

While the respondents had relatively little say about the impact of the pandemic on the academic performance of students, perhaps a reflection of their primarily role as university administrators, a major concern related to the delivery of support services. This process became complicated at the start of the pandemic as a result of the need to adhere to the public health guidelines, as well as the understandable reticence of students and staff to take part in in-person activities. Most straightforward was the provision of information via the internet, both to visiting students in situ and those in other countries, who had travelled to universities outside Portugal before the lockdown started. This seems to have been accomplished without too many difficulties, including the offering of online assistance to those studying abroad who wished to return home, as explained by one respondent in a university in the north of Portugal:

> We tried to keep the outward students informed about the situation at home. As Portugal was not severely affected during the early months of the pandemic, it made sense for students in countries where there were greater numbers of infections to return. So, we tried to answer any questions they had about how they could do this without losing credit for the work they had already completed.

We can see that this was a relatively straightforward case of deciding which country – host destination or the sending society – offered the best prospects for coping with the pandemic at this time. In some ways, this was a balancing exercise in regard to the severity of the public health emergency, also recognizing the need to avoid punishing students for failing to complete their studies and losing course accreditation for pandemic related reasons. However, in respect to outgoing mobility from Portugal, the impression created by our

evidence is that returns from abroad were the exception, and most students stayed in the host country until they had completed their studies as planned, and by which time, more travel options were available.

The need to provide information seems to have abated in the later stage of the pandemic. Understandably, at the beginning, students wanted to be kept up-to-date about conditions at home and abroad, including travel options and the state of their educational courses where there were interruptions to study plans. However, students soon became adept at keeping themselves informed about what was happening – perhaps using the forms of 'non-formal learning' we previously mentioned – particularly after the more stringent social restrictions were lifted and people could socialize once more, thus making life much easier for the host universities. The impression created among the staff members the authors engaged with is also that there was a relatively rapid adaptation to the changing circumstances among international students (see also Czerska-Shaw. and Krzaklewska, 2021b), meaning that it was only during the first two or three months of the crisis that major difficulties were encountered.

Virtual solutions

Another issue for university staff during times of lockdown was the awkwardness of using virtual platforms as a means of supplementing or substituting in-person teaching, with some teachers doing this for the first time. This move was very unpopular, with learning online seen as a poor substitute for the 'real thing,' but accepted out of necessity. Another problem was the aforementioned students' lack of suitable domestic conditions, with their missing out on the convivial aspects of learning also noted. Staff members also acknowledged the limitations of online formats for teaching, and more specifically, the lack of opportunities for the development of aspects of intercultural competencies. As one respondent from a university in central Portugal explained:

> Mobility is physical and must be experience in all its richness only in this way, which goes far beyond scientific learning. European citizenship can only be achieved in this way. Virtual mobility is an extra, excellent for short mobilities, but it does not replace the physical mobility at all.

However, within several of the other universities the authors engaged with, there was a greater degree of pragmatism, and a somewhat different attitude on display. Having developed virtual teaching platforms during lockdowns, it was implied that such approaches would continue to be used by some international students. However, this was not seen as a replacement modality but rather a supplement to in-person mobility, and a means of enrolling students who were not willing or able to travel due to their personal circumstances.

> No, with the virtual mobility, it is a different experience. Students will always want to travel, and to experience the different aspects of life in another country. Not just teaching but the food and the different culture. It is not possible to do these things online. But we recognize that the online approach is better for some people. For example, where they do not have the money to travel or if they have family responsibilities at home.

In this sense, virtual mobility might be seen as a means to reignite expansionism through creating a new and quite separate stratum of internationalized higher education. While there may be some benefits in relation to social inclusivity, underpinning this development, as well as possibly wanting to include people for whom international travel is impractical, is the wish to recruit more feepaying students. We might then see virtual mobility as a means to not

only include more people but also generate greater revenues, and in a manner that is potentially safe and less injurious to the environment compared to existing approaches, echoing the sustainability theme mentioned in Chapter 4.

One other important finding emerging from our research has been that virtual mobility was already envisaged as becoming a reality before the pandemic, possibly forming part of the next phase of the Erasmus+ programme. This prolongation of the programme covers the years 2021-2027 but was in the planning stages long before the first lockdowns began. This suggests that there has already been a substantial degree of alignment between, one the one hand, what universities want, and on the other, funding agencies like the European Commission. We might them credit them with a certain amount of prescience since no one predicted that a pandemic would come along and momentarily increase the demand for online teaching. This is obviously an issue that we need to monitor carefully in future studies on this topic, but we can already see that virtual mobility might grow in importance even as we move out of the pandemic, becoming the next important revenue stream for universities.

Maintaining future mobility

Bringing this chapter to a close, given that the situation we are exploring is still in flux, we cannot realistically draw definitive conclusions about the future of student mobility, virtual or otherwise. The authors can however see that while there has been major disruption to learning mobility, universities in Portugal seem to have managed the initial trauma reasonably well and adapted to what were unpredictable circumstances, as have their international students. This is confirmed by the available statistics, with credit mobility exchanges affected in the initial stages of the emergency, not surprising considering the lack of opportunities for international travel per se, but rebounding relatively rapidly (see Figure 1.3). Longer duration degree enrolments seem to have been relatively unaffected, with numbers of incoming students

actually increasing according to the statistics reproduced in Chapter 1. This suggests that there has been no serious quantitative change in regard to the popularity of student migration, despite the difficulties created by the pandemic at this time.

Despite this apparent optimism, we should use the recent moratorium as a time for addressing some of the more problematic aspects of student mobility, including issues arising from existing and emerging fault lines. During the expansionist period, student mobility could re-enforce inequalities along both social and geographical vectors, with some countries, and certain universities, becoming adept at maximizing numbers of outgoing students while other places emerged as attractive destinations for incoming learners, with Portugal becoming a destination in the latter position. It remains to be seen how this arrangement holds-up, especially at a time when the cost of the student mobility is going to increase considerably, due to a rising cost of living in sending and receiving countries. Funding agencies, like the European Commission and the many private and public foundations that operate student exchange platforms, need to become much more generous in their financial support, even if this means fewer people travelling. Student migrants meanwhile need recognition of their status as citizens, and full access to health and other forms of welfare, a debate we will explore further in the next chapter in a somewhat different context.

Summary

To recap, the impact of the ‘immobility turn’ in higher education appears to have been time-limited, partial and perhaps reversible, that is if we accept the version of events presented in the available statistics, including the statistics we were able to include in Chapter 1. That there are discrepancies between different data sources – for example, European Commission statistics present a different narrative compared to the enrolment numbers collated by Portuguese universities – suggests that recording systems are measuring different phenomena,

thus clouding our impressions. A study by Sin et al. (2022) however suggests that while growth in the recruitment of international students has continued at Portuguese universities, the expansion has been at a much slower pace compared to the pre-pandemic years, a position consistent with the authors' own perceptions. Given the lack of clarity, any quantitative overview of international student immobility during the pandemic is always going to somewhat opaque, and incomplete, in ignoring the qualitative impacts arising from the disruption, including the erosion of value within the learning experience

From the point of view of international students, research conducted in Portugal during the early months of the pandemic revealed some of the structural faults that had opened up in their lives, partly as a result of objectively poor living situations, and also the more general feeling of isolation (see Cairns et al, 2021a, 2021b; Malet Calvo et al, 2021). This all painted a pretty grim picture in the spring of 2020, but later reports suggest fairly rapid adaptation and acclimatization to changes in living and studying conditions; basically, that international students are remarkably resilient. Institutions also kept going reasonably well, continuing to support the students they were hosting and recruit greater numbers, sometimes via online platforms. While there does seem to have been a dip in regard to participation in credit mobility, the enrolment of overseas students has grown in prominence during the pandemic in Portugal, suggesting that a different logic drives these mobilities, making them relatively impervious to the impact of COVID-19.