



Mobility in times of immobility: international students in portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic

*Juliana Chatti Iorio*¹ 
*Adélia Verônica Silva*¹ 

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis on teaching and learning by international students in Portuguese higher education. It also focuses on how new student mobility projects have been re-designed and re-negotiated during the pandemic. The methodology includes analysing the results of an online survey and individual online interviews. The former was answered by 703 international students enrolled at higher education institutions in Portugal; the latter was conducted with 22 of those students, as well as with students planning to study in Portugal. While for some students, the pandemic represented the possibility of enjoying “mobility” while being “immobile” (in their countries of origin or even in Portugal, provided they have a computer and an internet connection); for others, it enhanced social and economic inequalities, making this sort of mobility difficult, and often impossible.

KEYWORDS

mobility; immobility; COVID-19.

¹Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal.

MOBILIDADE EM TEMPOS DE IMOBILIDADE: ESTUDANTES INTERNACIONAIS EM PORTUGAL DURANTE A PANDEMIA DA COVID-19

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é compreender de que modo a crise provocada pelo coronavírus (COVID-19) tem impactado o ensino-aprendizagem dos estudantes internacionais no ensino superior português, e de que forma novos projetos de mobilidade estudantil têm sido repensados e renegociados durante a pandemia. A metodologia inclui a análise dos resultados de um questionário *online* — respondido por 703 estudantes internacionais, matriculados num estabelecimento de ensino superior em Portugal — para além de entrevistas individuais *online* — realizadas com 22 desses estudantes e também com aqueles que têm intenção de estudar em Portugal. Enquanto, para alguns, a pandemia representou a possibilidade de se fazer “mobilidade” estando “imóvel” (em seu país de origem, ou mesmo em Portugal, necessitando “apenas” de um computador e uma ligação à internet); para outros, potenciou as desigualdades sociais e econômicas, dificultando, e muitas vezes impossibilitando, a realização da “mobilidade” nesses moldes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

mobilidade; imobilidade; COVID-19.

MOVILIDAD EN TIEMPOS DE INMOVILIDAD: ESTUDIANTES INTERNACIONALES EN PORTUGAL DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es entender cómo la crisis causada por el Coronavirus (COVID-19) ha impactado en la enseñanza-aprendizaje de los estudiantes internacionales en la educación superior portuguesa, y cómo los nuevos proyectos de movilidad estudiantil han sido repensados y renegociados durante la pandemia. La metodología incluye el análisis de los resultados de un cuestionario en línea -respondido por 703 estudiantes internacionales, ingresados en una institución de enseñanza superior en Portugal - así como entrevistas individuales en línea - realizadas con 22 de estos estudiantes, y también con los que tienen intención de estudiar en Portugal. Mientras que, para algunos, la pandemia representó la posibilidad de hacer “movilidad” siendo “inmóviles” (en su país de origen o en Portugal, necesitando “solo” un computador y una conexión a internet), para otros, potenció las desigualdades sociales y económicas, dificultando, y muchas veces imposibilitando, la realización de la “movilidad” en estos moldes.

PALABRAS CLAVE

movilidad; inmovilidad; COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

According to the definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development — OECD (2013), an international student is one who has moved to another country for study purposes. Thus, in any reference to an international student is implicit the idea of territorial mobility. However, as the rapid spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) impacted on movement between territories, the ensuing pandemic imposed a new form of mobility on many students who were already out of their countries of origin and faced with sudden territorial immobility.

At the end of the 20th century, Giddens (1991) already drew attention to the fact that social relations were reorganising themselves across space-time distances, fostering relations between “absent people”, or people who were locally distanced from any face-to-face interaction, which allowed the reduction of costs with means of communication and transport and the connection of the local with the global in a way that would have been unthinkable before. According to this author, this “extension” of social relations on a global scale has provided greater international economic, social, cultural and political integration and, in this sense, the emphasis on free trade has stimulated an increasing mobility of those individuals whom authors such as Salt (1997) — still in the 20th century — and Brandi (2006) — in the 21st — called “highly qualified”; and Altbach and Knight (2007) called “academics”. In other words, as a way of promoting economic development, investment in knowledge (human capital) at the global level was stimulated and this led to the emergence of the so-called “Knowledge Society” (Frigotto, 2010; Santos and Almeida Filho, 2012).

In this way, universities opened up to the foreign (that is to say, they became internationalised), which accelerated the pace and scale of what Findlay (2011) called “higher education student migration”. Such migration was supported by the governments of students’ countries of origin, who believed that they would benefit from the transfer of knowledge obtained by their students abroad upon their return (brain circulation). However, there were always those who chose to remain in their countries of destination, triggering the so-called “brain drain”. Thus, student mobility/migration could be a deliberate strategy of the student to increase their opportunities for permanent migration, which also provided many destination countries with “brain gain” benefits.

In 1999, Mahroum (1999) noted that the proportion of international students had increased from 2.0% in the 1950s to 2.3% in the 1970s, reaching 3.8% in the 1990s. However, at that time, the author predicted that by 2010 this number would reach 2.8 million students, and by 2025 it would reach 4.9 million. However, according to OECD data (2013), in 2010 the number of international students had already arrived at 4.1 million, and data released in 2018 already pointed to 5.6 million higher education students who had crossed a border to study (OECD, 2020). Nevertheless,

[...] in 2020, higher education institutions around the world closed their doors to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, potentially affecting more

than 3.9 million international and foreign students studying in OECD countries. (UNESCO *apud* OECD, 2020, p. 227).

In this sense, it is natural that with the COVID-19 pandemic and the impediments to movement, governments and higher education institutions of countries of origin and destination, as well as the international students themselves, began to express their concerns with the imposition of a new scientific-technological paradigm which nobody as yet knows for sure the exact contours of. According to the OECD (2020), the blockage imposed not only affected the continuity of learning, but also altered students' perceptions of the value of their diplomas and the ability of their destination countries to safeguard their safety and well-being. Therefore, one can expect the occurrence of "dire consequences for international student mobility in the coming years." (OECD, 2020, p. 227).

In March 2020, the results of a survey published by the European Association for International Education — EAIE (Rumbley, 2020) already revealed that, to 74% of respondents (professionals in higher education institutions), outbound mobility had been affected due to COVID-19, and to 48% this impact had also already been observed on incoming international students (inbound mobility).

Thus, since the beginning of the pandemic, its impact on international student mobility was perceptible, both on inbound flows into the destination countries and on outbound flows from the countries of origin. At that time, still according to the aforementioned survey, the adjustments made by higher education institutions in order to minimise these impacts consisted of postponements and cancellations of enrolments, since classes held with the use of virtual tools were still very few.

In this regard, it is also important to highlight that, with the sudden introduction of remote classes in many Portuguese universities, which until then had not used them (or had, but little), the integrated learning experience, with the association of online and face-to-face practices (i.e., with the introduction of the hybrid or blended teaching method), failed to prepare the online structure in order to ensure access and learning of the contents that were previously prepared only for face-to-face teaching. Therefore, the methodological limitations, in addition to the technological ones, brought new challenges for both universities and students (Magalhães *et al.*, 2020).

However, it should be kept in mind that, since that time, the dominant concerns have centred on how mobility would unfold over time, i.e. what changes the COVID-19 pandemic would bring about within international student mobility. In this regard, Waters (2021) noted that the figures of the 2021 academic year in the Global North presented a mixed picture in this regard. While enrolments in the UK are increasing, enrolments in France are decreasing. The author also highlights that many courses have been moved to the online system, which allows international students to study "at home", and, in a way, reflects future developments in transnational higher education. Also in this regard, Lim (s.d.), reflecting on COVID-19, geopolitics and the concerns of Chinese international students, argues that students are extremely concerned about their body safety, which may have an impact on future decision-making concerning their international mobility.

These reflections bring us to the scope of this article, where we will try to contemplate

1. if it is possible to talk about student mobility in times of territorial immobility;
2. if it is possible to talk about opportunities for students and institutions that have been optimized due to the pandemic; and
3. to what extent the inequalities that stood out during the pandemic may impact the continuity of mobility projects for many students who chose to carry out such projects in Portugal.

According to the Immigrant Integration Indicators - Annual Statistical Report 2020 (Oliveira, 2020), Portugal has (2018/2019 academic year) 56,851 foreign students enrolled in higher education (26,186 in bachelor's degrees, 22,899 in master's degrees and 7,396 in PhDs). In the same academic year, the majority (31,558) were female and 40.6% were in an educational institution located in the Lisbon region. More than half (55.4%) are nationals of some country from the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP), followed by students from the European Union (31%). Among the nationalities, Brazilian (35.9%) stands out, followed by Angolan (7%), Spanish (6.8%), Italian (6.2%) and Cape Verdean (5.9%).

TOWARDS A NEW SCIENTIFIC-TECHNOLOGICAL PARADIGM: WHEN STUDENT MOBILITY MOVES FROM THE REAL TO THE VIRTUAL SPHERE

As Amaral (2016) states, new communication technologies enabled the creation of a “virtual public sphere” (cyberspace) in which, for the first time, it was possible to exchange information instantly and on a global scale. In this sense, the emergence of the internet has enhanced the phenomenon of globalisation, having in social media its greatest exponent — since they enabled the intensification of global social relations and the creation of ties and social capital.

Castells (1999), in 1999, already drew attention to the influence of the technological revolution, of innovation, of the expansion of communication and of the “informational age” on global geopolitics. The 21st century has therefore been one of fluidity and openness, driven largely by new information and communication technologies (ICTs) which, in turn, have given rise to new forms of transnational interconnectedness (Rizvi, 2011).

However, although Salt (1997) argued that the new ICTs could reduce the international migration of the “highly qualified”, since knowledge could be transferred in ways that did not necessarily imply physical presence; for a long time it was observed that, even if the new ICTs facilitated study and research at a distance, the same technologies sharpened the desire and curiosity of more students and researchers to go abroad to study, since, based on the imaginary of the global possibilities and conditions offered to them, they began to “calculate” ways to take advantage of all this “global interconnectivity” (Rizvi, 2011).

On the other hand, there was the view that

[...] the behaviour of the younger generations was being, progressively and with the introduction of the technique in the academic context and in everyday life, changed by the new technologies and the cybernetic network. (Amaral, 2016, p. 18).

Although the use of the internet remained restricted to a select group of people (Papacharissi, 2009), and that, in Amaral's view (2016, p. 19-20), it "should be equated in the light of the concept of digital literacy", "spaces of deterritorialised social interaction" (and deterritorialised educational interaction — our note) began to emerge, enhanced by computer-mediated communications (Amaral, 2016). Therefore, this change of social and communicative paradigm started to show also in the educational environment.

If, for some time now, social software has enhanced social interactions, transforming one-way relationships (provided by the mass media) into two-way interactivity, now such software has also begun to transform relationships between teachers and students. Thus, for those who have access to them, platforms such as Zoom, Google Meets, Teams, and even social networks such as Facebook promise to become essential to the learning and the relationships that will be established in the education system.

Therefore, even though the motivations for international student mobility are often related to an intrinsic need to "*have an experience in another country*" (i.e. to "*get to know other/new places/cultures*"), if this mobility is also motivated by extrinsic factors such as enriching the curriculum to meet the labour market, aiming at professional progression (Iorio, 2018; Iorio and Fonseca, 2018), "virtual mobility" may still be attractive for many students.

In this regard, the students' motivations will no longer be to leave their country of origin or to choose a destination country, but to choose a prestigious university that is supposed to offer quality education, so that in the future they can take advantage of this relationship. In this sense, it is to be assumed that the less bureaucratic the relations that are established between students and institutions, the easier it will be for these institutions to attract new students.¹ Obviously, the motivations for undertaking or continuing this type of mobility will also vary according to the degree of education (bachelor's degree, master's degree or PhD) and to whether it involves a degree (full mobility) or credits (partial/"sandwich" mobility).

In the macro-social aspect, a period of global financial crisis is foreseen in which subsidies for studying abroad are expected to be scarce. Although, as mentioned, inequalities are often also maintained in the digital environment (Papacharissi,

1 It is important to know that the Immigration and Borders Service (SEF) in Portugal, from 25 November 2020, facilitated the renewal of residence permits for students who were already in national territory, through a new feature of the SEF Portal, which allows the automatic renewal of this document.

2009), by saving on travel, accommodation, and all the living costs involved in studying abroad, it is likely that some students will still continue to carry out their “virtual international student mobility” projects.

However, for this type of mobility to become a reality, immobility infrastructures are fundamental to enable international students to choose whether to remain immobile. In other words, carrying out international student mobility while remaining immobile is only possible if students have the resources to access distance learning, and universities have the resources to reach those students (Roos Breines *et al.*, 2019).

In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges for educational institutions, as well as significant changes in the global geography of international student mobility. Therefore, what we propose in this article is to reflect on how the pandemic, which caused a whole scenario of interruptions and suspensions in educational institutions, and consequently altered students’ daily lives in terms of scientific orientation, assessment methods and school functioning, has led to new forms of interpretation and negotiation of student (im)mobility by international students in Portugal.

METHODOLOGY

This article is part of an ongoing investigation by the authors, which aims to understand the impacts of COVID-19 in the daily lives of foreign students in Portugal. The methodological proposal involves both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis.

Thus, in the first stage, data collection consisted in the completion of an online questionnaire — addressed to all international and/or foreign students enrolled in a university in Portugal — and sought to understand how the new coronavirus and the confinement measures imposed by the Portuguese government impacted the daily lives of these students.² The online questionnaire was available between April 7th and May 7th 2020, covering most of the first State of Emergency³ declared in Portugal. Although it was not a representative sample, a total of 703 valid responses was obtained. The profile of the respondents was made up of 450 (65.4%) female students and 242 (34.4%) male students. Only one (0.1%) student did not answer this question. The age of the interviewees ranged between 18 and 50 years old. As for nationality, notwithstanding the over-representation of Brazilians, 56

2 See the news about the impact of the containment measures in Portugal at: <https://observador.pt/2020/05/31/covid-19-os-tres-meses-que-mudaram-tudo-dia-a-dia/>. Accessed on: January 4th, 2021.

3 The State of Emergency in Portugal is a state of exception, which focuses on the protection of the fundamental rights of citizens. It is declared by the President of the Republic, after a hearing by the Government and approval by the Parliament, and cannot last for more than 15 days, although it can be renewed. The first State of Emergency instituted in Portugal due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19 was in force between 19 March and 2 May 2020.

different nationalities were present in the sample, and those that stood out were also the most represented in the 2018/2019 Education Statistics (Portugal, 2020). Grouping by the most representative groups, we have 61% Brazilian students, 16% from the African Portuguese-speaking Countries (PALOP), 15% from one of the 27 European Union countries and 8% from other countries. The majority were single, had been living with family members before emigrating and enrolled in 23 different universities in Portugal.

The second moment of data collection, on the other hand, involved online interviews, in real time, carried out through virtual communication platforms (Skype, WhatsApp). Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted between the months of September 2020 and January 2021, with international and/or foreign students who were enrolled in or intended to enrol in higher education in Portugal. A large part of these interviews were conducted during the new State of Emergency in Portugal, which started in November 2020 and was still in force when this article was written.⁴ Some students who had responded to the online survey volunteered to participate in this stage, and from them, through the snowball method, access to other students was gained. In this sample, the profile of the respondents was composed of 15 female and 7 male students, with a wide range of nationalities — Brazilian, Angolan, Guinean (from Guinea-Bissau), Argentinian, Colombian, Italian, Spanish, Chilean and Cape Verdean —, and encompassing bachelor's, master's degrees and PhDs. The students were enrolled at different Portuguese universities (Lisbon, Porto, Évora, Beira Interior, Algarve, Minho, European and Instituto Universitário de Lisboa — ISCTE [University Institute of Lisbon]).

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

As mentioned above, the online survey obtained responses from 703 students. Of these, 311 (44.2%) were at bachelor's degree level, 265 (37.7%) at master's degree level and 125 (17.8%) at PhD level. The vast majority (81.8%), due to the aforementioned State of Emergency, had to take distance learning classes. Practically all Portuguese universities sought to adapt their face-to-face classes to remote teaching.

A “NEW” MODEL OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN PORTUGAL

Faced with a “new” and unexpected model of higher education imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020, universities, teachers and students in Portugal were faced with several challenges.

4 The second “wave” of the pandemic in Portugal required a new State of Emergency, which was in force between 9 November 2020 and 7 January 2021. It was subsequently renewed for a period of eight days, but on January 16th, 2021, the frequency of the previous renewals was resumed (i.e. every 15 days). Until the submission of this article, the State of Emergency was still in force in Portugal.

Regarding the experiences of international students (the object of investigation of this article) we observed through the online questionnaire that, at the beginning of the pandemic, most of these students (402, or 57.2%) did not feel comfortable using the digital tools necessary to attend the online classes and do the exercises and tests requested; even though 97.6% had internet and 89.3% had a computer at home.

In the interviews, although all respondents mentioned that they had a computer and internet at home, the quality of this equipment was uneven among them, especially for those who had returned to their countries of origin or had not yet emigrated to Portugal. As we will see later on, the disadvantages mainly affected students who were in the PALOP countries. In addition, some students still have difficulties in using the digital tools necessary to pursue their studies remotely.

Still regarding problems of a technical nature, at first, only 133 (18.9%) of the respondents assessed the teachers' performance in online classes negatively; and 137 (19.4%) assessed the support material and student training for non-face-to-face classes in the same way. However, in the interviews conducted afterwards, many criticisms were made with regard to difficulties and lack of training, both by students and teachers, for the use of digital tools.

Despite this, the students recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic "*took everyone by surprise, unprepared*", and ended up marking a moment of rupture, breaking and change in the way things were and worked in the education systems of Portugal and the world. Thus, even though the students identified a lack of preparation and familiarity of teachers with this "new" teaching model, they also found that learning it has taken place in a joint and interactive way among all the intervening parties:

I think it was something that came so suddenly that nobody was prepared for anything! Some teachers get along better with technology, they already knew how it worked, but others not so much. We had to learn all together." (Argentina/Italian, degree mobility, Bachelor's degree, Évora)

In addition to the problems mentioned above, a criticism frequently levelled by the interviewees had to do with the low interaction with colleagues and teachers provided by the digital environment.

However, although in a very unequal way and depending on the country of origin, some students recognised facilities and advantages in teaching-learning in the digital environment, such as being able to access the contents from "home" and "saving" time on travelling.

Next, we will explore the experiences of our interviewees regarding the advantages and disadvantages of this "new" teaching model that has taken hold in Portuguese higher education.

RESOURCES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Not having internet at home, or having low quality internet, and not having the necessary equipment (computer, tablet, mobile phone, etc.) to attend classes

remotely are some examples of lack of resources and infrastructure which have caused difficulties for some international students to pursue their studies in Portugal:

[...] mine (internet), particularly, failed a lot. So, there were times when I had to turn off the camera or I would lose part of the content [...]. (Colombian, degree mobility, Master's degree, Lisbon)

[...] it is really difficult to do tests when the internet is not very good [...]. (Cape Verdean, degree mobility, Bachelor's degree, Évora)

The Internet was kind of bad here at home, so I had to buy those (signal) amplifiers [...]. (Brazilian, degree mobility, PhD, Porto)

Furthermore, some of these students also mentioned that, in order to overcome such difficulties, they were “obliged” to have “extra expenses”, which they often could not afford:

I was unable to carry out the remote studies [...] It only became possible because a friend, who lived with me [...] lent me her iPad. Because right after that, when everything was closed, my mobile phone was damaged and I had not taken a notebook to Portugal, because I did not have one. (Brazilian, credit mobility, Bachelor's Degree, Évora)

[...] I studied in the library, near my home and in the university as well. So, when it (the pandemic) started, we had no internet... And we were going to hand over the flat in June, so we had no way of hiring an internet package, because everything was a one-year contract. So we decided to stay without it. Then, my boyfriend got in touch with a neighbour... and got her password to use it at night, starting at 7 P.M., which was when her home office hours were over. (Brazilian, degree mobility, PhD, Lisbon)

Therefore, although 46.1% of the world population already had access to the internet in July 2016 (Amaral, 2016), this access is not equal among all social groups, as, in fact, Papacharissi (2009) had already mentioned.

If we look at the case of students who have returned to their countries of origin, the situation may be even more unequal. Considering that in 2009 the global digital diffusion was as follows: 70% North America, 54% Oceania, 39% Europe, 10.7% Asia, 3.6% Africa, 17.3% Latin America and 10% Middle East (Papacharissi, 2009); and that in 2016, Europe, Oceania and North America continued to stand out as the regions of the world with the highest internet access penetration rate (Amaral, 2016); and given that most international students in Portuguese higher education come from Brazil and African countries such as Angola and Cape Verde (Iorio, 2018), it is expected that many of them do not have, in their countries of origin, the same resources and conditions that they have in Portugal.

As an Angolan student in Évora, who is also a teacher in Angola, said: “[...] the reality of students in Angola is lack of water and electricity. So, more than half of our students don’t have a computer [...].” (Angolan, mobility degree, PhD, Évora). For this reason, this student preferred to remain in Portugal until she completed her PhD, since: “[...] I am sure that if I get home, I won’t be able to finish, because I have a lot of problems waiting for me.” (*idem*).

Another student, who is in Guinea-Bissau and could not get the visa for Portugal,⁵ said that even though he was enrolled at the University of Évora, he could not participate in the distance learning classes from his country of origin:

I tried a module, but unfortunately I couldn’t. And I couldn’t because the computer system... I don’t really know it... I don’t really know how to work with it [...]. (Guinean, degree mobility, Bachelor’s degree, Évora)

In addition to this student not feeling comfortable with distance learning methods, he revealed that being in Guinea-Bissau added another difficulty:

Here the internet is very expensive. Although I have my computer, accessing the internet is very complicated. It costs a lot of money. And even though I have internet, it doesn’t work in a very, very, fast way and that makes it very difficult. (*Idem*)

On the other hand, for some of the students who have the resources and infrastructure in place, distance learning was not seen as worrying or even problematic, quite the contrary: “I don’t feel any kind of pedagogical deficiency, no... I think that the difficulty, for those who are familiar with technology, doesn’t exist.” (Brazilian, degree mobility, PhD, still in Brazil)

A Chilean student even mentioned that one of the advantages of taking classes from her residence in Lisbon is: “[...] not having so many problems, because the internet in the university is bad.” (Chilean, degree mobility, Master’s degree, Lisbon). This shows that, although this student used the university infrastructure before the pandemic, she did not find it satisfactory.

Even though some students recognise the advantages of using digital tools for learning in higher education, others also claimed that, in terms of their classes, the benefits are not the same:

The virtual classes, I found that it impoverished a lot. But the events, we are attending events from home! Before, we had to go to this or that congress, to get access to this and that professor, now it is much more advantageous! (Brazilian, degree mobility, PhD, Lisbon)

It was therefore observed that, beyond the issue of having the resources and conditions necessary for distance learning (which was generally not the case for African students), those who are not taking this type of classes recognised more

⁵ This student mentioned that the slowness in authorising visas for Portugal is part of the “functioning of the Embassy”, but that “the pandemic has made everything worse”.

clearly the benefits/advantages of remote activities linked to learning than those who are taking online classes.

In this sense, as the Vice-Rector of the University of Coimbra, Cristina Albuquerque, mentioned during the seminar “The Brave New World of Higher Education in Hybrid Environments” (2020), it should be noted that “not all students are so prepared for this world of digital education”.

Therefore, info-inclusion policies have to be thought of, since inequalities in access to technology are inherent in students coming from different countries.

CLASSES AND INTERACTION IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

The poor quality of internet and unease with the platforms being used for distance learning can also hinder students’ participation and interaction in the digital environment. As mentioned by a student who is carrying out a master’s degree from Angola, because she has not yet managed to obtain the study visa to come to Portugal,

[...] sometimes we want to participate in the classes but we can’t because the connection fails. The message (from the teacher) reaches us very late and so does our explanation. It is a hindrance that stops us from actively participating in the classes. (Angolan, degree mobility, Master’s degree, Lisbon)

Moreover, for many students, the disadvantages of remote classes are related to the dynamics of these classes. They can be compromised due to the fact that many teachers are not familiar with the distance learning method: “[...] the teacher would stay in front of the video, as if he was in the classroom talking to a single person. He didn’t interact [...]” (Brazilian, degree mobility, Master’s degree, Lisbon).

It was also observed that online classes contribute to a lower interaction/participation of students, since, because they are used to face-to-face teaching, they often feel inhibited (or less confident) to participate in classes. In addition, the non-mandatory use of the camera during online classes contributes to less interaction.

It is important to highlight that criticism to the low participation of students in the classes has already been made by Brazilian students in Portuguese higher education (Iorio, 2018). In reference to the Brazilian educator, pedagogue and philosopher Paulo Freire (1997), they called education in Portugal “Banking Education”, claiming it is based on a vertical relationship between educator and student. In other words, the former “deposits” knowledge rather than stimulating its construction based on interaction with the latter.

During the aforementioned seminar (2020), the Scientific Officer of the European Commission, Andreia Inamorato dos Santos, reinforced this idea by saying that “Portugal until today has been criticised for the methodology of ‘banking education’ that is practiced in face-to-face teaching”. One of the interviewed students explained:

[...] here in Portugal the teacher is concerned with showing that he knows [...]. When he is giving a class, when he is giving a lecture, he is more concerned with showing his knowledge than explaining concepts for the student to understand. (Angolan, degree mobility, PhD, Lisbon)

It follows that, although physical distance implies greater distancing between teachers and students, the participation deficit of students is not something that has arisen from the remote classes, but may have been enhanced by this teaching method:

[...] you don't have sharing interaction [...]. It's harder to read when someone wants to talk, when someone wants to say something [...]. These things that get lost and for me it's harder, although I also don't have the confidence to participate in face-to-face classes. (Chilean, degree mobility, Master's degree, Lisbon)

[...] it's like there's a filter there, there's a third person controlling us, listening to us [...] so, we don't want to make a fool of ourselves. For example, yesterday I inhibited myself many times to question things, because there were other people, it was not a room [...]. Even to answer things that we are not sure about, there is doubt, but we don't want to make a fool of ourselves [...]. So, it inhibits us a lot. (Angolan, degree mobility, PhD, Évora)

Some students therefore describe greater embarrassment while participating in online classes, conferences and seminars, because as they know that these can be recorded.

In turn, this lack of participation and interaction also hampers the help that could be given by colleagues who understand the use of digital tools better to those who do not have the same easiness.

With the introduction of the hybrid or mixed teaching method in the 2020/2021 academic year (when many faculties and institutes divided the groups, and these started to alternate between face-to-face and online classes), the fact that teachers had to give classes to two audiences that were in different spaces at the same time generated new criticisms from students. Those who have not yet managed to achieve their territorial mobility to Portugal and are forced to attend all classes remotely believe they do not get the same level of attention that teachers give to students who attend classes in person: "Sometimes teachers forget that they have students in Zoom, because they pay more attention to the students who are in the room." (Angolan, degree mobility, Master's degree, still in Angola waiting for a visa).

However, while recognising technical and structural impediments in addition to constraints at the level of interaction, some interviewees identified the positive aspects of online classes, such as saving time on travelling and the possibility and comfort of accessing their content anywhere, anytime:

The advantage is travel, you don't have to do it. You can record the class to watch it later, if you are not available to watch it at that moment; you can be anywhere

and watch the class; you can wake up just one minute before the class starts... no stress... and you can do other activities, I'm not saying that you will neglect the contents of the class, but you can do another activity and, at the same time, watch a class. (Cape Verdean, degree mobility, Bachelor's degree, Évora)

The good thing is that you don't have to commute, you save on commuting, you save on food, because you will eat at home... You save time... And then it can be used on something else... on other efforts, including, even, studying. (Brazilian, degree mobility, Bachelor's degree, Porto)

Other students, who had the opportunity to be with family members in other countries during this period, revealed that:

I think the advantage was this: being able to be in another place (England) and study at the same time, without losing the year, without losing the subjects. (Argentinian/Italian, degree mobility, Bachelor's degree, Évora)

For example, my boyfriend lives in Germany and I can travel to visit him without losing something I'm following... Things being much more virtual than before, people don't lose notes... I can follow seminars from Germany even. (Italian, degree mobility, Master's degree, Lisbon)

Moreover, as pointed out by Lim (s.d.), body safety in pandemic times is seen as an advantage of the use of this teaching method. Thus, a student who is still in her country of origin revealed that, "if they give me the visa today, I won't go, because the number (of infected people in Portugal) is very high!" (Angolan, degree mobility, Master's degree, still in Angola waiting for a visa).

CHALLENGES OF DOING OR BEING MOBILE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

The vast majority of the students who answered the online questionnaire chose to stay in Portugal during the first months of the pandemic. Only 15 (2.1%) preferred (or had to) return to their countries of origin. However, the mobility projects of the students who stayed in Portugal were being re-assessed and reformulated throughout the period ranging from the beginning of the pandemic until January 2021. In the case of Brazilian students who chose Portugal as their destination country, mainly because of the language and cost of living, the exchange rate variations of the months in which the interviews were conducted contributed to the re-assessment of their student mobility projects in Portugal. Two of these students, when asked whether the pandemic had affected their stays in Portugal, stated:

[It did not affect my stay] by a hair's breadth, by a thread, because of the exchange rate. To give you an idea, we arrived here with the exchange rate of 4.30 and today the exchange rate is 6.50 (with 4.30 reais you could buy 1 euro and

now you need 6.50 reais to buy the same euro), so, there is no way, the resource is limited. It affected me and I almost left. (Brazilian, degree mobility, Master's degree, Lisbon)

[...] I put a little money together and came. But my whole calculation was made with the perspective that a euro would reach, at most, 5 reais. I couldn't imagine what was going to happen... Then I was caught off guard... the euro skyrocketed and that's when I got desperate. I had to change my course because of that, because the tuition fees were increasing... They did an emergency aid for COVID, and several international students received this aid, but I, for example, could not... They asked for some documents that, sometimes, we don't have... IRS (income tax), justification... (Brazilian, degree mobility, Bachelor's degree, Porto. Had to change from Engineering to Languages, because the tuition fee in Languages is cheaper.)

The students who were still in their countries of origin but were thinking of coming to study in Portugal (many of whom had already been admitted to Portuguese higher education), due to the pandemic, had to change, postpone or even cancel their projects of studying abroad. This was, for instance, the case of a student admitted to a Master's degree in Portugal, but who, due to the pandemic, could not get the visa to carry out her mobility:

I had the goal of being in Lisbon and in addition to the master's degree, doing a Communications course... It's one of the things I outlined and couldn't complete. I could do a basic course in Communication and Marketing. I also don't know how to speak English, I also thought that in those two years I could get into an English school, so it's something that the pandemic really blocked out. (Angolan, degree mobility, Master's degree, still in Angola)

For a Guinean student who did not get the visa to come to Portugal either, the pandemic meant that he had to postpone his study plans in Portugal for the time being, since he did not have the necessary conditions to attend remote classes. He had requested a transfer from his university in Guinea-Bissau to a university in Portugal, and despite having been accepted by the Portuguese university, he could not carry out his mobility project: "It postponed my plans, because the idea was for me to finish the degree (graduation) this year there, in Évora, but due to the pandemic that was not the case." (Guinean, degree mobility, Bachelor's degree, still in Guinea-Bissau).

Finally, a Brazilian student who was thinking of doing a Master's degree in Portugal preferred to cancel that project because of the pandemic, and may or may not resume it in 2022, depending on the evolution of the pandemic:

[...] I enrolled, but right away I was a little insecure because of COVID. Here (in Brazil) the situation only worsened... Then I thought, well, I think that this will become a very big insecurity, we do not know if there will be face-to-face classes, if there will be online classes, there is also the exchange rate, which makes a big difference for us Brazilians, so, suddenly I would have to stay in

Portugal, I could not return, so there were several factors, I was a little worried. So I was very insecure because of COVID itself, because of the pandemic situation, and I ended up giving up, leaving it, extending it now, this year, so that, if everything goes right, I can enrol at the end of the year and do the whole next year, 2022.” (Brazilian/Italian, degree mobility, Master’s degree, still in Brazil)

Once again we note the concern for body safety mentioned by Lim (s.d.).

CONCLUSIONS

Although the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a territorial immobility, many students who were in student mobility (degree or credits) in Portugal managed to maintain their initial projects. Access to technology (especially a computer and internet) made it possible for them, even while immobile (in their countries of origin or in Portugal) to pursue their studies. For them, the “positive impact of COVID” was the “naturalisation” of remote study as a way to study in another country, something that, until then, was only offered by distance learning universities.

However, the existing inequalities between students of different nationalities were also accentuated during the pandemic, since those who did not have the necessary equipment and internet access to maintain their distance studies had their student mobility projects hindered and often made impossible.

The young people of African origin who, despite having been admitted to Portuguese higher education, had not yet obtained the visa for Portugal, believe that they would have a better academic performance if they were in Portugal, even if the classes were online, since the quality and cost of internet in their countries of origin have not made this possible. However, the unease that these same young people have shown towards digital learning platforms can make it difficult, or even impossible, to complete their student mobility projects, even if they are already in Portuguese territory. As mentioned by Roos Breines *et al.* (2019), in addition to having access to infrastructure, these students need the support of their educational institutions, which do not always have the necessary infrastructure to ensure this support.

However, if on the one hand the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a period in which those with more favourable socio-economic conditions also had more opportunities to explore the technologies and different teaching methods that emerged with it; on the other, the social differences often inherent in the countries of origin of these students also became more evident.

In this way, international student mobility will depend on students’ access to the necessary equipment to be able to perform this “new” mobility model, and on the existence of conditions to operationalise this access (Papacharissi, 2009; Amaral, 2016).

When thinking about the conditions and skills of these students, we realise that education in this diversified context will demand from teachers a new way of teaching, in which their digital, methodological and pedagogical skill will also have to be revisited. If the integration of multiculturalism was already a challenge in face-to-face classes, now, in the digital environment, it is an even greater one.

Therefore, the question here is not just about adapting what has been done in face-to-face teaching to remote teaching, because it is not just about a “new” model of teaching that is now more technological, but rather about, once again, focusing on the students — who were no longer satisfied with the “old” method of face-to-face teaching (Iorio, 2018).

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This study showed that the pandemic had destabilising impacts on international higher education students in Portugal. The interviews conducted with these students allowed us to identify that there are still many uncertainties about their future, and that this has generated some discomfort for them. The data also allowed us to understand that there are gaps to be filled in the current support systems for international students in Portugal and that this will have implications for the internationalisation of the education system in the country (which is now intended to be hybrid), if nothing is done about it.

The results reveal, therefore, that there is an urgent need for educational institutions to rethink strategies to increase access and success for all students, especially because of the structural inequalities that have been perpetuated through socio-economic inequalities inherent in the realities of each country. In this sense, it is necessary to look critically at the advantages and disadvantages of digital and distance learning, so as not to contribute to “new” forms of exclusion. The pandemic and the experiences of these students through online education have thus revealed many of the causal mechanisms that have perpetuated these asymmetries.

The interviews allowed us to examine where these students are positioned, what resources they have and what opportunities and challenges they will have with distance learning and teaching. It must now be admitted that students who do not have the resources and/or the infrastructure to access distance learning will fall further behind, and may once again be excluded.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JULIANA CHATTI IORIO has a doctorate in Human Geography – Migrations from the Universidade de Lisboa (Portugal).

E-mail: julianaiorio@campus.ul.pt

ADÉLIA VERÔNICA SILVA has a doctorate in Human Geography – Migrations from the Universidade de Lisboa (Portugal).

E-mail: adeliasilva@campus.ul.pt

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