

Reflections on Covid-19 and Displaced Students: Movement as a Conceptual Framework and Suggested Research Avenues

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1. Introduction

The issue of access to higher education for displaced students is particularly relevant in times of pandemic as it invites us to look at the ways migration and higher education intersect from a new perspective, taking stock of the global disruptive force of COVID-19. Displaced learners are fundamentally characterized by movement, from forced migration to dynamics of inclusion and exclusion both during their journey and upon arrival in their host countries. Students with a forced migration background who try to access and complete higher education studies are faced with multiple and intersecting geographical, cultural, social, administrative hurdles (inter alia Détourbe & Goastellec 2018; Fleay et al. 2019 ; Goastellec 2018; Grüttner et al 2021; Jungblut & Pietkiewicz 2017; Naylor et al. 2019; McKenzie et al. 2019). By hampering the circulation of people across continents, countries, and even regions and cities within the same country via strict travel regulations and lockdowns, the pandemic has led to new mobility dynamics and shaped new migration patterns (inter alia IOM 2022, EASO 2021, Espinoza & Gandini 2020). The ways in which people move and connect at different levels have been deeply reconfigured, and displaced students in higher education systems are a case in point. In this short reflection paper, I purport to reassess the way we define movement through the pandemic in relation to “the figure of the migrant” (Nail 2015) in order to raise questions and open research avenues about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on displaced learners’ higher education pathways.

2. Redefining movement and the “figure of the migrant”

The issue of access to higher education for displaced students can fruitfully be re-examined through the lense of movement, at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped mobility dynamics across the world with such phenomena as forced immobility, or new migration patterns such as return migration or re-emigration (e.g. Espinoza & Gandini 2020). As insightfully recalled by David Madden about a different social issue, homelessness:

Social problems are inseparable from how they are defined, understood, and measured. Defining a problem is a political act itself. The ways that a problem is imagined and delineated shape the extent to which an issue can be acted upon. (Madden 2021, p.36)

Migration is a case in point. The definition of the “figure of the migrant”¹ by Thomas Nail (2015) stems a stimulating reflection on migration and movement. Rather than considering the migrant as a figure devoid of stability, and excluded from a certain number of rights granted to so-called “stable” social figures such as citizens, the author suggests that we shift perspectives and try to understand the figure of the migrant through its fundamental characteristic, i.e. movement:

[T]he migrant has been predominantly understood from the perspective of stasis and perceived as a secondary or derivative figure with respect to place-bound social membership. Place-bound membership in a society is assumed as primary; secondary is the movement back and forth between social points. [...] Thus, more than any other political figure (citizen, foreigner, sovereign, etc.), the migrant is the one least defined by its being and place and more by its becoming and displacement: by its movement. If we want to develop a political theory of the migrant itself and not the migrant as a failed citizen, we need to reinterpret the migrant first and foremost according to its own defining feature: its movement. (Nail 2015, p. 3)

Movement should not be considered in relation to stasis, i.e. to the forms perceived as permanent and stable in society, but as the very essence of social life:

¹ « [T]he figure of the migrant is a political concept that identifies the common points where these figures are socially expelled or dispossessed as a result, or as the cause, of their mobility » (Nail 2015, p. 11).

Society is always in motion. [...] Societies are not static places with fixed characteristics and persons. Societies are dynamic processes engaged in continuously directing and circulating social life. In a movement-oriented philosophy there is no social stasis, only regimes of social circulation. (ibid., p. 4)

Fundamental laws of Newtonian mechanics remind us that motion – the movement of a body in space – is driven by *and* generates a complex interplay of forces.² When applied to migration as movement, these laws allow for a deeper understanding of migratory movement dynamics and impact. According to Nail, the figure of the migrant is characterized by two types of movement. “Extensive movement” refers to “movement as change of place, or translation” (ibid., p. 13) between distinct points in space, which typically characterizes the migratory journey. From a qualitative perspective, “intensive movement” designates “a change in the whole, a transformation” (ibid.).

Movement should therefore not only be defined and understood as a displacement from one point to another, but also as a vector of change. By moving, the figure of the migrant generates transformations within the societies it leaves, crosses or enters:

The migrant is always in motion. The migrant only appears to have "permanently" settled from the perspective of its extensive movement between presumed static social points (sites, states, regions, etc.). However, from the perspective of its intensive movement, a migrant is continuously changing the supposedly static points from which it departed or to which it arrives. For example, by leaving, migrants may depopulate a labor force, break up a family, deplete the intellectual or cultural climate, be deported, or be deprived of social status in a variety of ways. This changes the qualitative character of the whole society. (Nail 2015, p. 30)

In the case of access to higher education for displaced students, the transformative power of movement intersects with access dynamics and rules. The concept of access refers both to the possibility *and* the ability to benefit from certain rights, services, statuses or goods, to share ideas, knowledge, to participate in networks, democratic processes, etc. It is necessarily a dual process which involves two parties – those who provide, open, or share access, either openly or under certain conditions, and those who gain, have, benefit from access, on the condition that they have the ability to do so (Détourbe 2018, pp. ix-x).

Successful access to higher education for displaced students therefore encompasses a complex fit between properly aligned migration, social, economic and educational policies and mechanisms, and students’ aspirations and choice within the specific context of migration. The disruptions generated by the pandemic on both the extensive and intensive migratory movement, and the way they impact access dynamics and rationale across the world raise new questions and call for new ways of understanding the complex issue of access to higher education for displaced students.

3. Some research questions

Physical movements across continents, countries, and within countries and regions themselves, have been hampered by the pandemic: travel restrictions, border closures, as well as lockdown and curfew measures across the globe have impacted mobility and migration. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2022), the pandemic has increased migrants’ vulnerability, not least by narrowing access to support and care facilities provided by civil society. Restricted international and national mobility and travel have also led to a sharp decrease in asylum

² One of Newton’s laws of motion states that “a force applied to a body can change the magnitude of the momentum or its direction, or both,” while another states that “when two bodies interact, they apply forces to another.” Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/science/Newtons-laws-of-motion> on 07/01/2022.

applications, especially in Europe³ (EASO 2021), while many resettlement programs were either dramatically reduced or cancelled (EASO 2021, IOM 2022). The extent to which the disruptive forces generated by the pandemic have impacted the dynamics of intensive and extensive migratory movement and access to higher education has yet to be further documented and researched, but the complex interactions at play for opening and sustaining access to higher education will undoubtedly be impacted at various levels, which raises several questions.

To what extent have travel restrictions and border closures narrowed or delayed access to the various legal statuses that frame displaced people's higher education access pathways? Which impact have they had on the complex web of actors which provide support and guidance to displaced learners and are key to access and success? Have the "gaps and overlaps in service" (Unangst & de Wit 2021, p. 8) provided to displaced learners worsened or been adapted, through digital tools for instance (Lintner 2021)? More generally, have some of the broader struggles and power structures that shape university access for displaced learners been shifted, reinforced or lifted? As "borders keep moving" (Messari 2018, p. 65) and "new forms of involuntary or forced immobility" arise (Lintner 2021), the impact of the pandemic on the many hurdles that displaced students face at a legal, administrative, social, cultural, economic and educational level needs to be better documented in the long run.

In line with the intensive movement concept, the ability of migrants "to redefine space according to their needs and to their priorities" (Messari 2018, p. 69), and to transform existing spaces within society and higher education should not be overlooked. Several authors and students themselves have called for a better integration of the student perspective in shaping learning spaces and curricula to better meet displaced learners' needs and aspirations⁴. To what extent have the new digital or blended spaces of teaching and learning which arose when campuses shut down impacted displaced learners? Have new communities of learners arisen in these virtual or blended spaces, and to what extent have displaced students contributed to shaping them? Have learners with a migrant background been more resilient than others in adapting to shifting learning spaces? Have these new digital spaces offered them new opportunities, or have they isolated displaced learners even more from the rest of the student community? Have not all learners been displaced through the pandemic, one way or another, and will this lead to a redefinition of teaching and learning spaces for all students?

While such questions open new research avenues, they also call for suitable scientific approaches.

4. Closing remarks on potential scientific approaches

The study of displaced students' higher education pathways, from one higher education system to another, or several others, calls for comprehensive and multi- or interdisciplinary approaches which can capture both the characteristics of certain national or regional higher education systems and institutions, and the social dynamics at work in each of them, which displaced students' trajectories shed light on but also transform.

Consequently, suitable scientific approaches should go beyond "methodological nationalism" (Dale 2005, p. 14) which often characterizes international comparative higher education research. The limitations of national scales for the study of higher education have largely

³ "2020 saw the lowest number of asylum applications in the EU+ since 2013. The 485,000 applications marked a 32% decrease compared to 2019 (716,000), and a 64% decrease compared to the peak in 2015 (1.4 million). [R]educed applications were primarily due to restricted mobility and travel", retrieved from <<https://www.easo.europa.eu/news-events/easo-asylum-report-2021-covid-19-exposes-strengths-and-weaknesses-eu-asylum-systems>> on 07/01/2022.

⁴ Several examples were provided in the webinar series organized in 2020-21 by the Working Group on Access to Higher Education, as part of the European Universities-Critical Futures project led by Prof. Susan Wright at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Recorded sessions and summaries can be accessed at <<https://projects.au.dk/european-universities-critical-futures/working-groups/refugee-access-to-higher-education>>.

been underlined and debated (see Kosmützky & Nokkala 2014, pp. 374-76) in so far as “higher education institutions and systems are locally, nationally and internationally bound at the same time [...], and thus, simultaneously influenced by global trends and forces and national as well as local traditions” (Kosmützky & Nokkala 2014, p. 375). Moreover, “migration is not about a single pathway but a multiplicity of reversible and unpredictable trajectories or circuits” (Nail 2015, p. 30). Therefore, tracing displaced students’ complex higher education trajectories in times of global pandemic, mapping the complex web of actors they interact with and the diversity of spaces they cross and (re)shape, and understanding the dynamics at play require attention to “naturally occurring data” (Kosmützky & Nokkala 2014, p. 377), and to students’ perspectives (Unangst & de Wit 2021). Tracing and understanding the constantly shifting group boundaries and “entanglement of interactions” (Latour 2005, p. 65) that arise from displaced students’ trajectories under the disruptive forces of the pandemic calls for “adaptable and sensitive” scientific approaches (Mol 2010) that use naturally occurring data. While Actor Network Theory purports to equip sociologists with conceptual and methodological frameworks for tracing such “fluid” social material (Latour 2005; Mol 2010), other approaches such as network analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, or self-ethnography have been put forward as interesting alternatives to more traditional international comparative methodologies (Kosmützky & Nokkala 2014, p. 377), whichever disciplinary perspective is chosen.

Bringing displaced students into the heart of research designs, understanding the impact of the pandemic from their perspective, as called for by many researchers, is also a way of acknowledging that “they have a significant impact on the space in which they find themselves” (Messari 2018, p. 64), and letting them drive the redefinition of the research space as well.

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BIOGRAPHY

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