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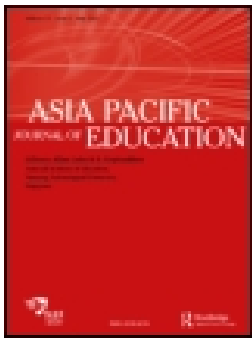
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Countering stuckness: international doctoral students' experiences of disrupted mobility amidst COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The paper, through the lens of positioning and agency theories, examines the experiences of being stranded in the home country due to the restricted mobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic of 10 international doctoral students of different nationalities (Chinese, Vietnamese, Malaysian, and Indian), majoring in different disciplines (Education, Linguistics, Applied linguistics, Economics, Public health, and Civil engineering), and studying in different countries (New Zealand, Australia, and the United States). With an aim to explore the abrupt immobility and its subsequent impacts on the students' learning, the article highlights the challenges that the students had to tackle including the feelings of being in limbo, nostalgia, and detachment, and faced with academic challenges due to the physical distance from the study destination. Accordingly, they had to self-position and reposition themselves and enact different forms of agency to confront the difficulties, including agency for becoming, needs-response agency, and agency as struggle and resistance. The findings highlight how the international PhD students mobilized resources to develop their independence as future researchers, as well as their connection with the academic communities in their home countries in various ways.

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Introduction

COVID-19 is having a profound impact on all aspects of life. To a large extent, the pandemic and, importantly, the responses of governments worldwide to it, has led to increased immobility in international and internal mobility worldwide. People's attempts to protect themselves from the virus have led to shifting patterns of mobility, such as cross-border return migration, or urban-to-rural movement (Martin & Bergmann, 2021). Another group of trapped populations affected by global restricted movement measures is international students, including international PhD students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed unprecedented changes to the landscape of international higher education, entailing unique structural and systematic challenges to international doctoral students. Its catastrophic fatality has shut down the movement between nations and put international PhD students at multiple risks and threat, including psychological issues, or matters of health care, racism, discrimination, and the shift to online learning. Recently, there have been more studies investigating how PhD students, especially international PhD students, have been affected by the global pandemic (Börgeson et al., 2021; Donohue, Lee, Simpson, & Vacek, 2021;

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Le, Tran, & Le, 2021; Sen, Huang, & Le, 2022; Phan, 2022b; Pyhäntö et al., 2022; Wang & DeLaquil, 2020; Xu & Tran, 2022). However, these studies skew towards the academic and social experiences, or well-being and student development of doctoral students. There has not been adequate attention to the interrupted mobility situation of international PhD students who were in a stranded situation, for instance, being stuck in their home country and could not fly back to the study country, and how this suspended geographic mobility directly affected international doctoral students' learning and living experiences (with an exception of Phan, 2022a, 2023a). In that sense, there remains a scarcity of research investigating how international PhD students perceive their navigation of a doctoral sojourn that has been geographically disrupted. In other words, we are still unaware of whether and how they position themselves and enact agency during the navigation of their transnational life and study amidst the pandemic when mobility is stalled. This study attempts to address the research gap by investigating the experiences of 10 international PhD students of different ethnicities (Malaysian, Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese) who were pursuing their academic endeavours (in Education, Linguistics, Applied linguistics, Economics, Public health, and Civil engineering) in different countries (the United States (US), Australia, and New Zealand). These students came back to their home nations for research purposes before the COVID-19 outbreak and could not return to their host countries because of international travel bans, which forced their educational mobility to be curbed and changed them from *geographically mobile* to *immobile students*. To this end, immobility in this article refers to suspended/disrupted/interrupted geographical mobility of international doctoral students. This article examines their lives and learning when their educational mobility was interrupted suddenly and they were caught stranded in their home nations without knowing exactly when their international sojourn could resume. Through the analysis and relevant discussion, this article contributes to the scholarship of international student mobility by reframing (im)mobility through crisis times and how this reframing creates new forms of mobility practices at a variety of spatial and social scales. These contributions will challenge the deficit view of international PhD students as less agentive and passive, advance our understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on students at the individual level, embrace the students' efforts to remain and reconstruct their learning process, and expand our knowledge on (im)mobility in international education landscape.

Literature review

From mobility to immobility

A variety of dimensions of student mobility have been well-explored in international education literature including push and pull drivers (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), barriers to mobility (Bianchi, 2013), or aspirations for education mobility (Phan, 2022c). Mobility, in the case of international (doctoral) students, characterizes themselves and is inherent in their experiences because without mobility, they will not be *international*. Immobility, therefore, seems less relevant to this cohort and therefore is under-researched. However, it is noteworthy that mobility and immobility are relational (Adey, 2006), since "immobility is inextricably, albeit often invisibly, linked to our understandings of human mobility" (2018, p. 71). While mobility is interpreted as desirable because of the significant social values that it entails (2019), immobility is usually conceptualized as obstruction and opposition to mobility, thus undesirable. In the novel context of the global pandemic, this study is going to examine how the mobility-immobility configuration is reframed in the global higher education landscape when mobility is stalled and becomes less desirable (Phan, 2022a, 2023a), and immobility is required and encouraged to stem the tide of the virus infection.

International doctoral students during the pandemic

Under the adverse impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, tension has emerged from constant changes in policy, program design, logistics, and financial support for international mobility of doctoral students. The tension is intensified given the distinct mobility features of doctoral students as well as the variation of socio-cultural and political settings of the local context where students are living. In China and other parts of Asia, they experienced “social exclusion and xenophobic attitudes” (Bilecen, 2020, p. 263). Concerns over “a sudden loss of mobility horizons” as well as “mental and physical strain” were also expressed in Portugal due to the destruction of free movement zones under the impact of the pandemic (Cairns et al., 2022, p. 1312). In the US or Sweden, “isolation inherent in the form of virtual education” is felt among PhD students (Börgeson et al., 2021; Wang & DeLaquil, 2020, 1346). Furthermore, national lockdowns and campus closure resulted in the limited accessibility to academic interactions and professional development opportunities (e.g. the postponement and cancellation of academic events and conferences), which is necessary for PhD students’ career growth and network building. For those studying in sciences disciplines, online learning limited their access to university facilities such as laboratories, which led to reduced research productivity (Börgeson et al., 2021; Donohue, Lee, Simpson, & Vacek, 2021; Kappel, Schmitt, Finnegan, & Fureix, 2021; Yıldırım, Bostancı, Yıldırım, & Erdoğan, 2021). Meanwhile, an absence of field work or change in methodology has been experienced by students in social sciences. PhD students in various studies struggled to keep their study progress while trying to manage their other roles as mother, teacher, or spouse (Börgeson et al., 2021; Donohue, Lee, Simpson, & Vacek, 2021; Phan, 2022b, 2023b). Some international doctoral candidates were worried about late submission and graduation postponement, which might affect their visa conditions and employment prospects (Donohue, Lee, Simpson, & Vacek, 2021).

Unlike other coursework students at bachelor or master level, PhD students need an extended and potentially stressful period of time to pursue their degrees. They also need to rely on collaborations and peer relationships, and formal and informal exchanges with academic communities to build their career. Restrictions posed by lockdowns could likely weaken the quantity and quality of such meaningful engagement and obscure the transnational mobilization of knowledge and resources, especially in the case of international PhD students who conducted their studies offshore from home countries since international travel was still forbidden. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally reshaped the sense of belonging relations between international doctoral students and their host institutions due to an involuntary absence from campus (Peacock, Cowan, Irvine, & Williams, 2020; Phan, 2022a). Nevertheless, among the research we have studied, very few of them have incorporated the issue of immobility or being stranded in the home country of border-crossing PhD students into the ongoing discussion. By examining the unique dataset of international students who were stranded over the borders, our paper is an attempt to fill this gap.

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by agency and positioning theories. Since agency is central to international students’ mobility aspirations and engagement, this notion has been utilized in research into international students’ mobility and learning experiences (Nguyen & Robertson, 2022; Tran & Vu, 2018; Xu, 2021). International students exercise agency through negotiating educational, social and cultural capitals, transnational social spaces, physical locales, and the geography of the mind (Gargano, 2009). Although international students are associated with mobility, their agency and self-forming capacities might be easily neglected because of the common view that the learning and cultural backgrounds of international students are deficit in relation to the standards in the host country (Marginson, 2014), which marginalizes international students’ agency (Fakunle, 2021). Furthermore, agency has been used in an emerging stream of literature that offers alternative perspectives and constructs international students as active self-forming agents who can act with

intentionality and rational choices, enact self-change and counter challenges (Marginson, 2014; Nguyen & Robertson, 2022; Tran & Vu, 2016, 2018; Xu, 2021). We further argue that international students also need to exercise their agency in the specific context of immobility, which will be illuminated in the Findings and discussion section of the paper.

In doctoral education, agency is argued to influence how international doctoral students judge, produce, and imagine relations, symbols, and activities in the in-between space of their home and host countries (Xu, 2021). For international students, agency is understood as people's response to not only structure and new situations but also their changing needs and outlooks in the host country (Kosic & Triandafyllidou, 2003). Hopwood (2010), in his study, specifies two forms of agency: *needs response agency* and *agency as struggle*. *Needs response agency* is exercised when students want to achieve particular learning, social or wellbeing needs. For instance, as illustrated later in this study, needs response agency was performed when the participants had to respond to the restricted travelling policies of their host countries, resulting in the involuntary immobility, temporary stuckness and subsequent changes in their supervisory pedagogies and learning process. Meanwhile, when students are challenged with injustices and inequalities, *agency as struggle* will be enacted. Tran and Vu (2018) develop another form of agency: *agency for becoming*, which refers to the potential that international students redefine their perspectives and their "selves" and hence their active engagement in constructing their own life-course. These three forms of agency are used in this article to uncover how international doctoral students manifested their agency to navigate the new situation of being far away from the host country and being stuck in their home country due to the global health crisis.

This research also adopts Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory as a conceptual tool to complement agency theory. Positioning theory attempts to describe the way people understand and see the world, which in this study means how international doctoral students saw themselves in the situation of disrupted mobility. According to positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), people's behaviour, in this case the students' behaviours, can be understood as being intentional in order to cope with particular situations that force them to act or change. Positioning theory highlights the shifts in positions, meaning that initial positioning can be challenged and requires repositioning when people cope with certain situations. In this study, the situations refer to the students' being involuntarily immobile and being stranded in their home countries. There are three main forms of positioning: *self-positioning*, *forced-self positioning*, and *positioning of others/other positioning*. *Self-positioning* arises when one wishes to express his/her personal agency in order to "achieve a particular goal in discursive practice" (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 24). This category will enable the analysis of students' agency revealed through the ways they positioned themselves in their PhD pursuit abroad. *Forced-self positioning* means that "the initiative now lies with somebody else rather than the person involved" (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 26). In this study, forced-self positioning is related to how the students self-positioned themselves as a result of the forced immobility so that they could still develop academically and socially. *Other positioning* means one's intentional positioning of oneself in a certain way that can lead to the positioning of someone else in the correlative position (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). This will be applied to analyse the students' agency in relation to their other-positioning with different actors such as their supervisors, as well as in various social practices with which they interacted. We employ another form of positioning in this study for analysis, *re-positioning*, where "an individual adopts a new position as a result of previous experiences and interaction" (Tran & Vu, 2018, p. 172).

In this article, agency theory and positioning theory are used together to illuminate student agency through their process of positioning themselves in relation to people and communities they interact with (Edwards, 2000; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Hopwood, 2010; Tran & Vu, 2018). Both agency theory and positioning theory are concerned with how international doctoral students positioned themselves and exercised their agency through accommodating or resisting the structures in both their home nations and their study countries. The forms of positioning will unpack not

only how the participants agentively responded to the disrupted academic sojourn but also why they acted and responded that way through the creation of new positions for themselves.

Methodology

This qualitative study is based on interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a branch of phenomenological research that aims to understand people's shared life experiences within a specific sociocultural context (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA preserves the authentic voices of the participants, without overlooking the sociocultural contexts in which human experiences come from. IPA is a particularly useful methodology for examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotional (Smith & Osborn, 2015) similar to the focus of this study: the experiences of international doctoral students when they were stuck in their home countries amid the pandemic. The IPA approach favours a small homogenous sample sharing a similar experience (in this case was the experience of disrupted mobility while pursuing an international PhD degree), embracing both the meaning-making process of people in a specific cultural context, and the idiosyncrasies in each individual's life (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

10 international doctoral students, 5 males and 5 females within the age range of 25–40 of different ethnicities (Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, and Malaysian) from various disciplines (Education, Civil Engineering, Public Health, Economics, Linguistics, and Applied Linguistics) based in various countries (Australia, New Zealand, and the US), were recruited through personal connections of all the authors and individual referrals (Table 1). We used purposive sampling as we wanted to find international doctoral students who (1) were in the middle of their doctoral candidature, and (2) were stranded in their home nations and could not return to their host countries due to the pandemic for more than six months (the usual amount of time that international doctoral students are allowed to be out of the host country). Among the participants, six are of Vietnamese nationality, two are Chinese, one is Malaysian, and one is Indian. Six of the participants are doing their doctoral studies in New Zealand, three in Australia and one in the US. At the time our data collection took place in September 2021, Australia and New Zealand were imposing restrictions on the arrival of international students. Exceptional exemptions were issued only to those who could demonstrate their research could not be carried out offshore. In the US, the online mode of instruction delivery was offered in a majority of institutions and campuses were closed, encouraging many international students to study offshore rather than resuming their on-campus studies.

Except for Yanxu who was able to fly back to New Zealand a month and a half before the interview, the other participants were still in their home countries at the time they participated in the study. We decided to include Yanxu because the duration of her stay in China, her home nation, was long (21 months), and she just returned to New Zealand where she was required to be isolated in a managed facility for two weeks. After that, she could only have two weeks of "normal" life in New Zealand before the whole country went into full lockdown again due to a recent outbreak. When we interviewed her, she had been in the nation-wide lockdown for over two weeks. Her particularity of being immobile both "here" and "there" made us decide to include her in the study.

The authors conducted an in-depth one-on-one interview with each participant. We used interviews as the reflexive moment of engagement to encourage our participants to discuss how the disrupted mobility might affect and mean to them. The participants were reminded of the purposes of the study and their anonymity and confidentiality before the interviews started. We also obtained their verbal consent at this point. All interviews were guided by an interview protocol listing questions about the participants' academic and life experiences before and during COVID-19, their experiences of "being stuck" in their home countries, their emotional reactions, the challenges they encountered in terms of social and academic development, and their strategies to cope with such challenges. All interviews lasted about 30–60 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed using pseudonyms. Six interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, and the remaining interviews were in English. For the six interviews in Vietnamese, the authors translated them into English by

ourselves, and we followed up with the participants when we wanted to make sure their experiences were interpreted correctly.

As guided by IPA, an insider approach was adopted in both data collection and analysis. As international doctoral students ourselves, the first and third authors have intersecting identities with several participants. The convergence of our identities and our participants' identities as international PhD students allowed us to build the researcher-participant trust and facilitate candid and authentic conversations. Still, we were aware of our positioning as researchers. The second author's outsider perspectives helped us to engage in more dynamic and critical discussions during our data analysis process. The cross-checking of understanding among the authors was to assure that we would not rely on our assumptions about the participants' experiences while analysing the data and instead, we kept a critical stance towards what the participants stated. This is important to the overall trustworthiness of analysing the data and writing up the findings that were connected to the extant literature and theoretical framework. This balanced insider and outsider positioning of the authors resonates with the double positional role that the IPA approach embraces (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The researchers divided the interview transcripts to independently conduct the preliminary coding of the transcripts and organize emergent themes. Each account was read and re-read, and line by line coding was used to identify categories and patterns such as the emotional responses of the students, their beliefs and attitudes towards their immobility and mobility, the difficulties they encountered to stay connected with peers and supervisors, or the support they received from family. After that, we discussed together to examine the similarities and differences in coding among us before developing a set of hierarchical themes. In order to understand and unravel how the participants positioned and enacted their agency in response to new situation, we highlighted the most prominent patterns and the key meanings associated with the process of positioning (self-positioning, forced self-positioning, other positioning and repositioning) and exercising agency (needs-response agency, agency as struggle, and agency for becoming).

Findings and discussion

In this section, we will incorporate the findings and commentary discussions associated with the data analysis, starting with outlining how the participants chose mobility, meaning an international degree, before moving on to detailing their experiences of interrupted mobility and their positioning and agency enactment to cope with such disruption.

Doctoral study overseas as voluntary and desirable mobility

Aspirations for an international PhD

The doctoral pursuit of the participants was seen as voluntary and desired mobility. Their accounts illustrated their self-positioning in relation to the context in their home countries, their present and their aspirations for the future. Ha and Thao stated that a PhD overseas, besides advancing their knowledge and career prospects in the future, offered them a break that they expected would transform their own and their children's lives. Meanwhile, other students opted for overseas academic sojourns because of English language improvement, academic freedom and academic culture, and better learning resources.

I believe they offer quality education [in New Zealand] that I may not be able to get in my home country. It's very hard to do a PhD in China. In China the competition is very fierce. I would have to go through hard exams against many candidates. [...] In New Zealand, I would have a much better education quality there. Also I was an English language major. It came as a natural choice for me.

(Lichen)

I embarked on my research into higher education through my master course in the UK where I luckily met a very kind tutor who inspired and wholeheartedly supported me to write a thesis. Thanks to it, I was accepted by a professor in the US for my doctoral study. I was overjoyed because teaching has always been my greatest passion.

(Nam)

I wanted to study somewhere different from my country to learn about a new country, a new culture. For my topic, New Zealand is also a good choice in terms of supervisors' expertise [...] I also intentionally avoid hierarchical systems like in Singapore, or perhaps the UK because India used to be colonized by them.

(Raman)

The mobility for a PhD abroad was aspirational, beneficial and appealing to the participants, both in terms of professional and personal development. The connection between the students' past educational experiences and their orientations towards the future were taken into account when it came to why and where to study. In addition, their agency for becoming was well manifested in the way they expected an international degree would benefit themselves, their family and their society. Dane's statements below could attest to this point.

I chose New Zealand because of its philosophy when it comes to English language education [...] In New Zealand I feel like they are more liberal. They promote the use of both English and Māori, in many cases Māori is the official language, not English [...] I generally find the country very inclusive. And this is one of the characteristics I want to bring back to Malaysia.

What Dane said agrees with the findings in Tran and Vu's (2018) study about international students' agency and reminds us of Marginson's (2014) notion of mobility as a means to transform the "space of possibles" (Bourdieu, 1993, cited in Marginson, 2014, p. 10). Dane's self-positioning shows that his pursuit of an overseas PhD study was for not only self-transformation but also positive changes at a wider scope, his home country. Furthermore, the students' past self-positioning also revealed their educational backgrounds of either being a teacher (Ha, Thao), a graduate majoring in English language and teaching (Lichen, Yanxu) or a student engaged with transnational education in their previous level of education (Dane, Lan, Minh, Nam). Their future self-positioning was attached to enhanced academic capacities, better language, personal development or intercultural enrichment. All led to the present self-positioning of themselves as those who wanted and needed to advance themselves through education in more developed systems like Australia, New Zealand or the US. In other words, their past self-positioning was indicative of the aspired future self-positioning, which in turn illuminated their present self-positioning and agency. Read this way, before departing for their study, the doctoral students had already had global imaginaries and positioned themselves in a transnational social field from which they aspired to succeed professionally and personally. As Cuzzocrea and Mandich (2016) note, imagining mobility may be seen as an expression of one's agency, specifically one's vision of future possibilities. Like the students in Tran and Vu's (2018) and Phan's (2022c) study, the international PhD students in this research had a vision of self-change, opportunities, transformation, and mobility even before their geographical mobility actually happened.

Returning to home countries during COVID-19

All of the participants, in fact, flew back to their home countries in the middle of their candidature for research purposes such as field trips, classroom observations and interviews. Some even returned home several months before the coronavirus broke out. In other words, flying home was necessary for their PhD projects, and it was voluntary mobility. Their being stuck in their countries of origin, however, was involuntary immobility. Yet, it was clear in their narratives that coming home was necessary, and the return of some participants even demonstrated their needs-response agency performance.

Most of the participants felt relieved, or in Lan's words, "lucky" when they could be with their family when the pandemic attacked all corners of the world. Hoan, for instance, was comfortable in Vietnam because at that time COVID-19 was put under good control there. Meanwhile, Lichen and

Table 1. Participants' information.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Marriage status	Programme major	Home country	Host country	State of Candidature	Duration of disrupted		Language of interview
							mobility	mobility	
Ha	Female	Married with 2 children	Education	Vietnam	New Zealand	Year 4/Thesis submitted	14 months	14 months	Vietnamese
Minh	Female	Married with 2 children	Applied Linguistics	Vietnam	New Zealand	Year 3	1.5 year	1.5 year	Vietnamese
Nam	Male	Single	Education	Vietnam	U.S.A.	Year 5	1 year	1 year	Vietnamese
Thao	Female	Married with 2 children	Linguistics	Vietnam	Australia	Year 2	1 year	1 year	Vietnamese
Lan	Female	Married with 2 children	Public Health	Vietnam	Australia	Year 2	13 months	13 months	Vietnamese
Hoan	Male	Single	Civil Engineering	Vietnam	Australia	Year 2	13 months	13 months	Vietnamese
Lichen	Male	Single	Education	China	New Zealand	Year 3	20 months	20 months	English
Yanxu	Female	Single	Education	China	New Zealand	Year 3	21 months	21 months	English
Dane	Male	Single	Education	Malaysia	New Zealand	Year 3	15 months	15 months	English
Raman	Male	Single	Economics	India	New Zealand	Year 2	9 months	9 months	English

Yanxu had returned to China before the pandemic, and when the virus became a global threat, they both agreed that being with their family created a sense of stability and safety. Yanxu said:

I spent two years with my family and I did enjoy the time with them. I actually enjoyed the family reunion because for me, since I started college [undergraduate level], this was the first time I had stayed at home with my parents, grandparents, and brothers.

For the PhD student mothers like Thao, Ha and Minh, returning home amidst the chaos was even more than a relief because the return allowed for their provision of mothering care for their children. Before coming back to Vietnam, they were alone in the host countries and worried for their families in Vietnam as the pandemic worsened, which caused them constant anxiety and uncertainty. Returning home provided them with safety and relief. In Ha's description, it was a feeling of "prison break" because she had felt so intense and homesick in New Zealand. For Minh, the return offered her a chance to reconnect with her parents and released her from an escalating "mother guilt" for being separated from her children to pursue her PhD study. Another female PhD student, Lan, was pregnant with her second child when the novel coronavirus appeared. According to her, bringing his first-born son back to Vietnam was a strategy to avoid inadequate family support, financial hardship, family care responsibilities, and accelerated stress as she was due in a few months. In that sense, flying home was a strategic movement of the mother students, highlighting their needs-response agency when they assessed the severity of the worldwide crisis.

In short, the return to their home countries was desired and voluntary. The accounts of the participants demonstrate their self-positioning as a son/daughter and a mother which required them to exercise needs-response agency in order to satisfy the specific demands of new social and family conditions (Hopwood, 2010). At the same time, their narratives reveal that the disrupted mobility and repatriation allowed for possibilities of performing other roles. While literature on international students often prioritizes their role as students and neglects their other roles such as being children, parents and partners (Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, & Lu, 2011), this study suggests that these responsibilities should not be ignored in international student mobility scholarship as they are part of the students' transnational lives, especially in the critical time of a global turbulence.

Staying put and being put on hold

The disrupted mobility and being stranded at home was what the PhD students had not expected or imagined it could have happened. For them, the global travel restriction has interrupted "the[ir] transnational biographies already in progress" (Nehring & Hu, 2022, p. 186). Instead of an outbound direction, their sojourns hit a pause, which led to their forced self-positioning, and the subsequent enactment of needs-response agency and agency as struggle.

The participants reported that their research progress was slowed down because of the pandemic. Hoan whose major was Civil engineering experienced substantial delays in his study as his project required him to work in an Australian-based laboratory with other technicians while he was stuck in Vietnam. Other students like Yanxu, Lichen or Dane also experienced study suspensions of at least four months. Furthermore, the social distancing protocol and the school closures prevented them from collecting data for their projects in their home countries, which further impeded their research progress. Dane even had to make modifications in terms of the methodology so that he was allowed to continue his field trip in Malaysia, and thus his absence from campus could be approved. Such changes in the students' research plans and enrolment status made Yanxu describe the time of being stranded in her home country as "messy" and Dane, "in limbo". Dane explained:

My status as a student on the system was like I'm suspended, and I'm also on the "leave of absence". Technically I'm not supposed to do any physical fieldwork. So there are lots of technicalities and red tapes I need to work around just to get things done [..] My study is now ongoing, but I have to continuously renew my "absence".

Dane's explanation offers us a glimpse into his agency as struggle to "work around" to keep his research project "ongoing". It also unravels his forced self-positioning, which, according to van Langenhove and Harré (1999), differs from self-positioning in that "the initiative now lies with somebody else but not the actor" (p. 26). Dane forced-positioned himself in response to the new situation in which he was not allowed to do physical fieldwork according to the university policy. However, he demonstrated his capacity to navigate the situations in both his home country where schools were closed and classroom observations were impossible, and his host country where university policies regarding fieldwork research were constantly changing to adapt to the worldwide crisis. This navigation was also indicative of his needs-response agency, meaning that he managed to act according to the changes so as to maintain his learning progress.

As they were miles away from the physical campus, and their work space now their home, the students had to navigate their positioning in different roles, including being a parent. The female participants with children particularly found it hard to focus on the study because of the intersectionality of their roles as a mother, a daughter/daughter-in-law, and a doctoral student. This repositioning led to their other positioning of their family as their priority, rather than their PhD learning. For instance, Ha admitted that as she was back in Vietnam, her daughter was her priority, which was similar to Thao's and Lan's experience. Minh, another student mother, mentioned in the interview her occasional fatigue due to increasing stress.

When we are in lockdowns, my kids must study from home, so I have to baby-sit and take care of them, cook for them, think of activities to cheer them up and tutor them [. . .] Since I am in Vietnam, I do not care what time it is when I check my mailbox. It can be 3 pm in the afternoon when my kids are doing their homework, or early in the morning when they are sound asleep and I am done with all the household chores.

Nonetheless, the students all agreed that however hard it was for them to balance the juggling roles, being with their family and children in this critical time was important for their own well-being. As Hopwood (2010) posits, students' struggle manifests their agency, which is evident through their "resilience, resourcefulness and capacity to change tack or break away" (p. 114). The agency as struggle was well observed in the way the female students managed to take care of their family and their capacity to mobilize their own family resources to help them with childcare in order to keep track of their work.

Feeling in-between, nostalgic, and detached

The disrupted mobility and the state of being stuck in the home countries invoked the feelings of in-betweenness, nostalgia, and detachment among the students. In-betweenness, as would be laid out in this section, was the feeling of not totally here and no longer there, which then caused the participants to feel vulnerable and nostalgic since their educational mobility and research process were not warranted. These feelings were the result of forced self-positioning, meaning that the pandemic and the suspended mobility forced the students to position themselves in a situation of vulnerability and uncertainty. Except for Yanxu who managed to get back to New Zealand to resume her study just over a month before the interview, all the other participants were unsure whether and when they could get back to their study destinations. Dane explained his concern:

I think we are in a vulnerable state. I just got a feeling that we might never actually get back to New Zealand until we finish [. . .] I am not so sure when I can actually come back. [. . .] I keep calculating in my head how many months I have left when I am able to go back to New Zealand [. . .] How do we even define that we are international students right now? How am I an international student?

The uncertainty as a consequence of forced self-positioning was still looming in the future. There were a number of factors listed by all the students contributing to this uncertainty: the ongoing pandemic, costly flights, long layovers, fully-booked quarantine hotels, ungranted travel exemptions, and borders shut. All of the participants demonstrated their desire to fly back to their host countries, but were not unsure if it was possible and when it would be possible.

I would say we are in a state of limbo [...] When I signed up for this [PhD study], it wasn't like this. This is definitely not how I imagined it [...] I think I deserve the opportunity to go back there, and have the satisfaction of having my workstation back again, sit there and do my writing without having anything else to worry about. After all, we haven't experienced it for the past one or two years. I think we deserve at least that.

(Dane)

I felt safe in China [...] but I was anxious because I didn't know when the border would open. It was hard to focus on studying at home. You know you have something to do and you have to do it, but you can't really do it because you feel relaxed at home [...] The COVID-19 makes our life a mess.

(Yanxu)

I successfully applied for a visa for my daughter [born in Vietnam in December 2020]. But I failed to have the TE, the travel exemption. It was rejected. Now if a PhD student wants to go back to Australia, he/she needs to prove that the travel is essential and the project brings benefits to the country. That document is a must [...] I am ready to be back, I just don't know when. I'm still waiting.

(Lan)

The situation of being in limbo described by Dane and his worry over the impossibility of return echoes Nehring and Hu's (2022) conceptualization of "fragile transnationalism" which indicates "the retrenchment of transnational social spaces and processes, fashioned by crisis responses and ideologies that centre on the nation-state" (p. 184). Similar to what Phan (2022a, 2023a) describes in her autoethnography work, this situation has left the transnationally mobile such as the participants in this study "hanging in a structural limbo, rendering them exceptionally vulnerable during the pandemic" (Nehring & Hu, 2022, p. 186). Adding to that was the nostalgic emotion evident in all of the students' narratives. Ha, for example, was in her final year when she came back to Vietnam. She assumed a return to New Zealand would be something far in the future.

I miss the air in New Zealand. I miss the evenings I had a walk with my flatmate. It was turning cold, and it was very quiet, peaceful. It provoked a feeling of in-betweenness inside me, an entanglement of emotions [...] New Zealand is dear to me [...] New Zealand is something very pure.

Similar to Ha, Minh anticipated that she would complete her study offshore from Vietnam given the pandemic situation. She felt "lost" and "regretful" as she did not manage to say goodbye to anyone, and even her room was not properly vacated. While Nam missed the tranquillity of the American university library, Dane shared his nostalgic feeling resulting from "spending more time outside New Zealand than in New Zealand".

The workstation, the building in the campus, the environment, all are the tiptop I would say. It's like the ideal [...] When I am in Malaysia, I try to replicate the kind of working environment [as in New Zealand]. It's just impossible, honestly not possible. [...] I miss the moments when I could just wander in the library. I just randomly strolled down the aisles and picked up books that caught my eyes. I could just sit there and read. These are the things, the discoveries, that I can't do right now.

Yanxu, the only participant that managed to fly back to New Zealand after spending almost two years in China, reflected on the distinction between being stranded in her home country and being back to her host country. The return was a reconnection to her academic space, although it did bring her a sense of strangeness because many of her friends had graduated, and there were not as many students on the campus as there used to be in the pre-COVID time. "I still need some time to get used to this environment", Yanxu said. However, she admitted that "now I can actually start writing my thesis and get more focused on my study".

None of the students experienced difficulties regarding offshore academic resources as their host institutions offered strong support. In addition, their social and psychological well-being were also cared about. However, resonating with what Phan (2022a) depicts in her study, the physical absence from the campus for an extended period of time rendered the detachment from the academic community in the host countries among the participants. They felt less connected to the academic space in their study countries. The lack of authentic interactions with their peers on campus and the reduced communication with supervisors sometimes made their learning experience lonely because they were "the only one in the journey, alone" as in Yanxu's word, resulting in the experience of being "isolated, and cut off from the community" as in Dane's description. Lan made a specific

comparison between the time she was in Australia where she was eager to join various academic activities to widen her network and while in Vietnam where, as she said, “the sense of relatedness disappeared”. This was also the case for Minh who reported a degradation of communication skills and missed networking opportunities because of her physical absence from her immediate academic community in New Zealand. Again, it should be emphasized that the new situation of being stranded rendered the participants’ forced self-repositioning. They had to re-examine their sense of connection to the academic space in the host country, and the awareness of increasing detachment required them to utilize their different types of agency, which is elaborated on in the next theme.

Immobile but not inactive: students’ resilience and regained sense of belonging

Although in a way, the international doctoral students in this study were stuck at home, the new situation of immobility did not mean they were inactive. Drawing on the concepts of agency, repositioning and self-positioning, the research findings revealed how the students mobilized resources to be resilient, active and autonomous, and to regain their sense of belonging to academic communities after several months experiencing interrupted mobility.

Due to the emergent challenges to the students’ projects and frequent changes in their enrolment status (leave of absence, suspension, and off-campus research), the students thought they would need more supervision from their supervisors. However, time differences and the physical distance required the students to reposition themselves and exercise their needs-response agency to become more independent and active to address their own learning needs. As Dane explained, now he could not just “walk in my supervisors’ offices and say “Hey, I have this idea””. Instead, he needed “to be mindful of the time difference and not expect them to respond to me immediately, it should be like a second-day thing because now everybody is receiving and writing so much more emails”. Lichen said he would contact his supervisors only for urgent matters or after he had thought everything through. These examples demonstrated how the students performed their needs-response agency and agency for becoming that reshaped and transformed their learning experiences.

What was also noted in the students’ narratives was their recognition of the increased workload their supervisors had to bear due to the shift to online teaching and assessment. They changed from going through their supervisors with “every research-related matter”, in Dane’s words, to taking charge of their own studies and making their own decisions regarding their learning. The supervision practices, in a sense, had to be adjusted in accordance with the new situation. Although the participants other-positioned their supervisors as an irreplaceable and valuable resource of guidance and mentoring, they found it necessary to reposition themselves to be more autonomous in their own learning process, not only to develop into independent researchers but also to alleviate the work burden of their professors. Hoan, the student who could not have access to laboratory infrastructure to perform experiments, overcame the challenge by conducting other parts of his project offshore. He collaborated with his supervisor to successfully publish several papers.

Through the lens of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) which posits that intentional acts are revealed through the way people position themselves and others, the students’ needs-response agency and agency for becoming were highlighted. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), by recognizing the “ambiguous, unsettled, or unresolved” (p. 998) of the particular situation which in this study indicates the abrupt immobility and reduced interactions with their supervisors, the students performed their problematization of the circumstances and the impacts of these circumstances on themselves and others. This is the first aspect of the practical-evaluative element of agency which can bring about changes (Tran & Vu, 2018). The participants conceptualized the process of being less dependent on supervisors as a learning process that would be helpful for their future career. We, therefore, can observe how the identity as an independent researcher started to be shaped against the context of their disrupted mobility in international education (Phan, 2022a, 2023a). The students’ agency in addressing their learning needs amidst the new normal was

opposite to the stereotypical portrayal of international students, especially Asian students, as being passive (Lacina, 2002; Samuelowicz, 1987).

The international doctoral students demonstrated their mobilization of resources to regain the sense of belonging to academic communities. Some of them started to reconnect with their existing professional network to prepare for their post-doctoral careers while others established new, cross-border relationships from virtual professional connections. Ha, for instance, knew that her return to New Zealand would not likely happen and therefore assumed that it was necessary for her to “reactivate the existing professional relationships in Vietnam and improve my network here”. Nam, another example, became an active member of national and international scholarly networks, and was invited to be a speaker in a number of webinars and symposiums. He also took on a teaching role at an international institution in Vietnam and enjoyed the vibrancy of this community. Similar to Nam, Dane found himself, in his words, “to be in a larger academic space”.

Because in my research, I need to work with teachers. Throughout my data collection time for my research, there were discussions and ideas coming up that we find interesting that we want to collaborate outside of my own research. Maybe I’m outside the usual academic space or the academic bubble I had, but I’m also creating new spaces, in the process of collecting my own data. People do say that a crisis brings you new opportunities, I think it’s quite true to my context. As I struggle to construct my own identity, I’m also negotiating and creating new relationships or new partnerships with my participants or my ex-colleagues.

Through enacting their agency of responding to their own learning needs and academic development, the participants were able to make their identities visible, and their contributions perceptible to other members in their immediate learning contexts both in their home countries and in wider academic communities.

Conclusion and implications

While previous literature on international students tends to essentialize this group as passive and deficit subjects in transnational mobility (Lacina, 2002; Samuelowicz, 1987) who often struggle with unique difficulties and challenges (Coate, 2009), through the lens of positioning and agency theories, this study demonstrates otherwise. We argue that international doctoral students are proficient in navigating their transnational learning to become independent and self-directing learners and emerging researchers, despite the interrupted mobility. In times of need, they enact their agency to reconceptualize and reposition to survive the new situation and mobilize resources to be active in their home countries. Read that way, international doctoral students are not “passive recipients of education in the host country” (Tran & Vu, 2018, p. 170) but can be active change agents in their individual learning course and academic development in communities in both their home and host nations (Phan, 2022a, 2023a).

It can be concluded that while to some extent the PhD students were experiencing a state of limbo, they were “not drifting aimlessly but in a strategic flow” (Soong, 2016, p. 45). Their narratives demonstrate their resilience in the face of a global health pandemic. Their repositioning and agency enactment prevented them from being passive and powerless victims of the unfavourable conditions resulting from the tension of being stuck in their home countries. They exercised different forms of agency to deal with the challenges facing them, responding to the new situation of interrupted mobility and the emerging needs to reconceptualize their learning journey, thus transforming themselves through (im)mobility. We argue that the international PhD students were primed to adapt and some could even thrive during this global crisis as they crossed multiple boundaries to pursue higher education in different environments. Their narratives illuminate their global connectedness and their agency as they navigated new and uncertain terrains. Furthermore, the students’ agency for becoming was embedded in their transformations of “space of possibles” for themselves and for a wider community in their home countries through their transnational education and involvement in social activities. This echoes the “transformative” characteristic that is

believed to be inherent in agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Meanwhile, since the participants were aware of their in-betweenness state and the tensions caused by immobility, they accepted it and performed their agency. They attempted and managed to turn the unfavourable conditions into opportunities. The in-betweenness, we argue, was the space for resistance and repositioning, which in return enabled the students to take action to regain their sense of belonging, maintain their study progress and even enhance their academic development.

We acknowledge the limitations of a small and self-selected sample in our study and henceforth remain cautious over generalizations to a wider population of international students. Our results do not seek to confirm that the experiences of being stranded of all international students are similar. However, the study can be the starting point for us to (re)consider what immobility/disrupted mobility and mobility mean to international doctoral students and their academic learning, as well as their agency and positioning in transnational education landscape. In this study, we propose that new forms of mobility are produced out of immobility, both social and spatial, as international doctoral students adopted a number of strategies that involved different mobility practices such as widening their network or getting involved in more academic and professional activities in their countries of origin. This paper will advance current knowledge of international education and international student mobility by emphasizing student's agency performance and their ability to position, reposition and self-position according to complex interplay of different factors. As such, we suggest that when students are placed amidst a global pandemic like COVID-19, they will enact their agency to, on one hand, preserve their identity and belonging, while on the other, reposition and transform themselves in response to the new international education agenda.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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