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Immobility in Mobility during COVID-19: Reflections on ‘Being Stuck’ in the Home Country of an International Doctoral Student

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ABSTRACT

While international education has long been characterized by mobility, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted our attention to immobility when thousands of international students have experienced immobility in various ways, one of which is being stuck in their home countries. This paper records how the new situation of immobility challenged an international doctoral student’s identity and presents her efforts to find and give a new meaning to her educational mobility. Through the sensemaking framework, this paper not only illuminates the consequences of disrupted mobility on an international doctoral student’s academic learning but also highlights the student’s sensemaking process, which then offers a research area that may yield interesting insights in this unprecedented time of uncertainty.

Keywords: mobility, immobility, sensemaking, international doctoral student, COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented changes to the landscape of international higher education, entailing unique structural and systematic challenges to the current cohort of international students. Its catastrophic fatality has put international students in multiple risks and threats. According to Firang (2020), international students are a vulnerable population who would likely experience social and psychological distress such as “emotional distress, impaired sense of personal self-worth, loss of interpersonal contacts, and impaired task (academic) performance” (p. 2). They might also be challenged by financial hardships, increased food and housing insecurities, uncertain future employment and migration possibilities, and discrimination (Zhai & Du, 2020; Bilecen, 2020; Jenei et al., 2020; Hari et al., 2021). In China and other parts of Asia, international

students experienced “social exclusion and xenophobic attitudes” and became “victims of discrimination and verbal assaults”, which calls for an urgency of their well-being protection (Bilecen, 2020, p. 263). Concerns over “a sudden loss of mobility horizons” as well as “mental and physical strain” are also expressed in Portugal (Cairns et al., 2021, p. 12). The novel coronavirus turned the sense of unlimited and desirable mobility into restricted and undesirable mobility as international borders were shut in many countries and international students were then trapped, either in their host countries (Cao & Chieu, 2021; Le, 2021; Phan, 2022a), or in their home countries like myself. However, little research has been conducted on the experiences of students who are stuck in their home nation and cannot fly back to their receiving country. In Phan (2022b), I charted my own emotional geographies, and sense of space and belonging as being a stranded PhD student. In this article, I attempt to offer insight into the impacts of disrupted mobility caused by the global crisis at the individual level of an international PhD student, and more importantly, the way I made sense of my immobility situation.

Like many other international PhD students who are often described as “mobile subjectivities, embedded in transnational social spaces and involved in cross-border activities and practices” (Bilecen, 2013, p. 670) and possess “a sense of unlimited global mobility” (Gomes, 2015, p. 10), I took mobility for granted. I was supposed to travel freely between New Zealand, my host country, and Vietnam, my home country, as long as my visa was valid. However, COVID-19, “a disruptive transformation of the world and of ways of sensing and making sense of it”, has marked “a break, shift or bifurcation in the way things are and the ways they work” (Ingram, 2019, p.11).

When I started my second year of candidature in early 2020, the coronavirus appeared in China, and countries around the world were alerted about the unprecedented rate of infection and casualty of the virus. The New Zealand government issued travel bans for passengers departing from China, including Chinese international students, with the hope of shielding the country from the new infectious disease. In March 2020, I returned to Vietnam for research purposes and was supposed to stay in my home nation until October 2020. Just two weeks after I left New Zealand, the country went into a national lockdown, and international students were not allowed to enter. I have been away from my campus and my host nation for almost two years. I am still waiting for the travel restriction to be lifted so that I can return to my study country. The pandemic has ‘broken’ my mobility, which has been the core of my doctoral pursuit. I asked myself many times whether I would have to finish my PhD programme from home in Vietnam. Like hundreds of international students who are caught stranded in their home countries due to the pandemic, I felt an urge to make sense of the new situation and give it a new meaning to my academic and personal development. Exploring my inward reflections on my immobility and disrupted international doctoral study due to the COVID-19 crisis, this article details my experiences as an active participant in international education amidst the pandemic that hindered physical mobility, leaving me ‘stuck’ at home and requiring me to reconfigure and find a new meaning for my learning process.

In response to Schewel's (2020) argument against the 'mobility bias', indicating the overfocus on cross-border movement and the tendency to see immobility as a "default situation" or a passive state of being, this article illuminates how being immobile does not necessarily mean being inactive or passive. It highlights how the sensemaking framework is important for international students to re-examine and reconfigure their learning to retain their academic progress and retain their identity as an international doctoral student. The paper will be of interest to institutions, supervisors and international students themselves to provide timely assistance to students against the worldwide chaos context. The article continues with the theoretical underpinning of the article, the sensemaking framework, before moving on to the reflection of my own experiences: being in a structural limbo, a weakened sense of belonging, and attempts to be digitally mobile. It concludes with implications for international student mobility and the global higher education landscape as COVID-19 has started to become 'the new normal'.

THE SENSEMAKING FRAMEWORK

To understand my immobility situation and the changing circumstances, I adopted the sensemaking framework to analyze my own experiences, which were recorded in my own research journals in various forms (poetry, short paragraphs, bullet points, and photographs) and on multiple platforms (a physical notebook, a research diary on Google doc, and the Notes application on my phone).

According to the sensemaking framework, individuals when faced with unexpected, ambiguous or uncertain circumstances will be engaged in a sensemaking process to not only understand the new situation but also plan further action (Weick et al., 2005; Mills et al., 2010). As Degn (2018) explains, sensemaking is an ongoing process through which individuals construct a plausible story of 'what is going on' by picking out cues such as events, ideas, and issues that are prominent and meaningful when placed in existing frames such as mental modes or cultural scripts. By that virtue, sensemaking can be summarized as a process that

unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage in ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances. (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409)

In that sense, the sensemaking process helps one to seek meaning in the new situation. According to Daft and Weick (1984), understanding and action depend upon the meaning assigned to any set of events. Meaning, however, is a socially constructed phenomenon that is subjective and constrained by the context of the goals that human actors aim to realize (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Weick, 1979). Through these sensemaking processes, I attempted to gain a better understanding of the disrupted mobility and its meaning to me as an international PhD student by investigating how it influenced my sense of belonging and my academic

learning. From there on, I tried to give sense or attach meaning to the situation to empower myself to overcome the immobility and recognize new forms of mobility. In brief, the sensemaking process helped me to unfold how the interrupted mobility due to COVID-19 influenced my doctoral study during the pandemic. In what follows, I story my experiences into themes that highlighted my sensemaking of my experiences of immobility and detachment and digital mobility. The themes related to the chronological development of my experiences of being stranded in Vietnam. Specifically, I selected experiences and events and ordered along a line of time from my viewpoint as an international PhD student and linked them to extant literature to integrate into my sensemaking processes.

MAKING SENSE OF IMMOBILITY

Disrupted Mobility And Identity Challenged: Finding A New Meaning

It is not exacerbating to say that the COVID-19 pandemic has become the defining event of my sojourn because it has paralysed my mobility and instead replaced it with immobility. While my doctoral venture should be characterized by *border-crossing* activities, it has now been reinvented to be *border-stopping* and *border-stopped*. There were cases when I strongly felt the ensuing disadvantages of my disrupted international education. For instance, I had to pass many chances of attending workshops and seminars hosted in my campus in New Zealand or opportunities to be a research assistant for ongoing projects in my institution. I wished I could have been able to be *there* for my study and academic development. Learning from *here* in my home country turned my international education into a lonely academic experience. My education mobility now is a *combination* of *here* and *there*, and a *separation* between *here* and *there*. That is a new meaning of my sojourn.

I was constantly asked by my family and friends in Vietnam and New Zealand whether I would return to New Zealand to resume my study, when and how, whether I had any online courses, or whether my study had to be suspended due to my physical absence from campus. I also asked myself whether I would have to complete my study in Vietnam and when I could fly back to New Zealand. These questions shook my identity as a doctoral student and a sojourner to the core (Phan, 2022b). While COVID-19 was not stopped at any border of any country, “borders continue to be a real force” (Dunn, 2010, p. 5) in my mobility for education. Borders even became the response to every question that I was asked about my doctoral sojourn: “I am not sure, I will fly back when they allow international students to enter”. While a PhD study is considered an independent project and a doctoral student the engineer of his/her own candidature, in my experience, it was no longer the case. I was dependent on the ongoing pandemic and the news of border reopening. I realized it was no longer me who was the protagonist of the PhD adventure but the COVID-19.

Doctoral student development is not only about “what is being developed, but where and how development takes place” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 34). The social spaces in immediate settings in which doctoral students experience in their

everyday life, such as the campus, and the direct interaction with people, activities, roles, and objectives (Engeström, 1987), which refer to supervisors, other faculty members, fellow doctoral students, and other academic activities, are believed to contribute to the emerging academic identity of doctoral students (Jarvec-Martek, 2008). When being separated from my circles of friends and the spaces in my campus, although I was still able to ‘meet’ them virtually through various platforms, the complexity, frequency and intensity of our interactions were greatly reduced. I was not able to attend my friends’ graduation ceremony or be there for their important candidacy milestones. Neither could I drop by and meet my supervisors in their offices whenever I had a question to discuss. The pandemic and immobility has taken me outside my academic milieu. I felt as if my academic and personal “footprints were wiped from my campus”, my doctoral office, and the whole academic environment in my institution (Phan, 2022b, p. 71). I practically lived in a liminal space, an in-between position when I should be in New Zealand but could not. I had to stay in Vietnam but was not entirely committed to life here because my study and schedule followed the New Zealand time zone. As such, I did not physically cross my national borders, but I was half living and working outside the borders.

Making New Sense Of The Doctoral Journey

The interrupted mobility, as illustrated above, clearly affected my identity as an international doctoral student and hence required me to reconceptualize and reorganize my academic learning. I felt an urge to make sense of the new reality and give it a new meaning so that my *international* doctoral study remained meaningful to me. In other words, I had to learn to give new meaning to this disruption and my PhD study within the limitations of geographic mobility. Before COVID-19 occurred, I thought my doctoral study was to *become* an academic. Now, it turned to *becoming* and *being* an independent academic. Furthermore, while I used to embrace mobility as the nature of my sojourn, I learned to appreciate and give new meanings to immobility during the global chaos.

Since I was aware that my physical absence from the campus reduced my interactions with my supervisors despite our regular online meetings and email exchanges, I considered it a signal to become more independent. I would prioritize only important matters to discuss with them during the supervision meetings and try to be more autonomous. Being stuck in Vietnam also allowed me to reconnect with my friends and former colleagues, and we took this chance to collaborate to publish articles about the Vietnamese education context during the pandemic. Although I did not stop feeling sorry for my interrupted sense of belonging in the academic community in New Zealand and I kept longing for the return, I found the new opportunities of reconnection with and the renewed sense of belonging to the Vietnamese academic setting a soothing remedy and compensation for my weakened sense of belonging to my New Zealand research community. With my supervisors’ constant support that I was competent enough to take charge of my own learning trajectory, I grew to become and be more independent. In that sense,

although my sojourn took a U-turn, it did not steer me away from the path of *becoming* an academic and instead allowed me to explore more opportunities to achieve that goal. I learned to *be(coming)* an (emerging) academic.

Although the immobility and restricted travel prevented me from returning to my host country and institution, it saved me from another type of precarity to international students emerging out of the pandemic: being stuck in the study destination and not being able to travel home (Phan, 2022a). The immobile situation now had a new meaning to me, *immobility in safety*. I could live close to my family, and we could be together while the novel virus continued to be a global threat. On the one hand, I did not totally escape the liminal situation of being both here and there but not completely here or there. On the other hand, I found this in-between space a space of negotiation in which I could negotiate immobility with other forms of mobility, such as digital mobility. As I could not travel the world of physical borders, I had to resort to traversing the borderless world: the Internet. I both created and found space to articulate my personal sense of belonging to academia and desire to be an independent academic. As I felt detached from my host institution and the immediate academic community, I learned new ways of working and interacting with others. The migration of educational events to online platforms such as lectures, workshops and webinars was helpful in creating new places of togetherness and new opportunities for learning. They allowed me to reach further to various corners of the world for academic enrichment. Through this digital learning space, I started to cultivate a new sense of place online and a renewed sense of belonging to the academic community. I now considered this digital space a new space of unlimited mobility. Digital mobility was not only a temporary replacement of physical mobility for me. It now acquired a new meaning of mobility expansion, allowing me to be adaptive and to gain a new skill.

CONCLUSION

The global health crisis, in international higher education and to international students, has been a global mobility crisis. What we, as border-crossers for educational purposes, are encouraged to do is not to expect to resume but rather re-envisioning and reimagining our international mobility in “the long comet tail of COVID-19” (Bissel, 2021, p. 157). In that sense, whether the world will return to that which we used to know is hard to foresee. Rather than restricting ourselves to thinking of the post-COVID world similar to the prepandemic world, we may prepare ourselves for a scenario when international education will be susceptible to the long-lasting impacts of the pandemic, including enforcing more border controls, stricter visa processing, limited travel and fewer economical flights. My immobility experience and the new sense I tried to make out of the new reality have urged us to understand international students’ (im)mobility in a new and more nuanced way. Specifically, we should acknowledge the complexities of students’ experiences in (im)mobility and how such complexities can become meaningful to students’ lives. It might weaken students’ sense of belonging and

require them to reconfigure their identity. However, the new situation of restricted and disrupted mobility can be a space where negotiation of meanings happens that subsequently enables international students to give new sense to reality and be empowered to tackle the challenges.

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