

The failure of infrastructures of international student (im)mobility: Case of COVID-19

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Abstract

The paper makes visible and examines the failure of infrastructures of (im)mobility drawing attention to their entanglements that together shape everyday lives. It draws on the experiences of international students (IS) in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic to firstly offer a reading of the pandemic as a crisis which exposed the already failing of the infrastructures that are supposed to sustain everyday lives. Secondly, it draws attention to the entangled infrastructures of finance and knowledge to show these connections and disconnections have always been tenuous and wrought with issues which the pandemic exposed but have always constituted the everyday lives of migrants such as IS. The paper closes by exploring the implications of these findings for future research.

KEYWORDS

immobility, infrastructures, international students, migration, mobility, pandemic

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper offers a reading of the pandemic as a crisis which exposed the already failing infrastructures that are supposed to sustain our everyday lives. It draws on the experiences of international students (IS) in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic to show that these connections and disconnections have always been tenuous and wrought with issues which the pandemic exposed but have always constituted the everyday lives of migrants such as IS.

In the UK, IS are the largest single group of migrants by reason of entry (Office of National Statistics, 2024). This continued to be the case throughout 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, during which 48,704 entry permits were issued for studies compared to 40,480 for work (Office of National Statistics, 2021). Universities UK (UUK) estimates that the education sector generates £13.1 billion in export earnings. This helps underpin the employment of around 940,000 people across the sector (Universities UK, 2020). The pandemic was expected to generate a loss of £6 billion for the UK economy (London Economics, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the intermittent

periods of lockdown imposed to manage the pandemic resulted in IS facing severe problems in their mobility, education, and funding situation. This brought IS to the attention of the wider public and policy-makers. The key concerns were not around the welfare of students but on what a system of education which is based around mobility would do without IS. UUK argued that the potential loss in revenue worth billions of pounds if there was a decline in enrolment of IS could mean for the already declining financial health of the HE sector (Ahlburg, 2020). The infrastructural role that IS fees play in constituting educational institutions and systems, is little recognised and analysed, but became particularly apparent during the pandemic. It led to new registers of recognition of IS' role in higher education. It also started to become clear that the mobility of IS is constituted through infrastructures such as those of migration, finance and knowledge. These simultaneously support both the mobility and immobility of IS. However, the pandemic, as a moment of crisis, revealed that the infrastructures that support IS mobility have never been robust; they have always been entangled (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2021). This paper aims to examine these entangled infrastructures of IS mobility.

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The paper is divided into four further sections. The next section outlines how COVID-19 may be seen as a crisis and a conjuncture that exposes the infrastructures that make and shape student lives. Section three discusses digital methods that were employed to undertake research at a distance. Section four highlights two key entangled components of infrastructure IS mobility–financial and knowledge–to argue that crisis as a conjunctural moment exposes the continual liminal state of IS lives. The paper concludes by exploring the implications of these findings for theoretical and policy research.

2 | COVID-19 AND UNFOLDING INFRASTRUCTURES

2.1 | COVID-19 as crisis

In a short but intensely meaningful conversation between Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, published in *Soundings* in 2010, Hall continues his ongoing ruminations on crises, reflecting on the crisis as a conjuncture (Hall & Massey, 2010). Hall points out that crises are moments when the internal contradictions in society, of the systems that are fundamental to current arrangements, are exposed. Hall and Massey draw inspiration from the influential work *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978), where a group of authors analysed how the 1970s made visible the contradictions which were inherent to the making of the postwar UK. Hall argues that the period up to the 1970s, “which - despite its many contradictory aspects - was a conjuncture dominated by what has been called the postwar, social-democratic consensus. This political ‘settlement’ came apart in the crisis upheavals of the 1970s. Thatcherism, neoliberalism, globalisation, the era dominated by market forces, brutally ‘resolved’ the contradictions and opened a new conjuncture” (p. 56). Hall and Massey ruminate on how these moments were not just economic crises but also social and cultural ones in their complex entanglements. Crucially, they open up the possibilities that ‘crises’ afford for revealing how crises are made up of and through pre-existing socio-cultural and political formations. Crises, then are not events but moments that make visible internal contradictions. Understanding a crisis requires recognising its precursors, that is, what went before and how the crisis has always been in the making. This requires analytical work—a commitment to not reading things as entirely new but recognising and analysing the residual and the emergent and crucially their role in creating the dominant, as Raymond Williams has argued (Williams, 1977).

COVID-19 offers such a moment of crisis. IS were amongst the first to feel the impact of measures to curtail the mobility of the COVID-19 virus through disruption to the mobility of people. IS usually have temporary status. Initially, the response by both governments and the publics to COVID-19 was to see it as a temporary rupture in our daily lives. Therefore, there were no plans for managing IS during the pandemic. However, over time, as COVID-19 deepened and it became apparent that the effects would be prolonged, students in some cases were asked to go home. This temporariness became the basis for either neglect of students or, worse, for drawing to an interim close the stay of students. For instance, the Australian Prime Minister called for students to ‘go

home’ for fear of local infrastructures failing and resources such as health care falling short (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2020); these resources were to be prioritised for Australian citizens and those with permanent residence. However, many students could not ‘go home’ as the other components of infrastructures that are supposed to support and enable mobility were also failing, leading to immobilising students within their destination and sending countries.

2.2 | Infrastructures of mobility and immobility in COVID-19

Susan Leigh Star’s (Star, 1999) invitation to explore the ethnographies of infrastructure and why it matters has led to a plethora of studies on infrastructure (Kooy & Bakker, 2008; Larkin, 2013). Drawing primarily from science and technology studies and actor-network theory, the socio-material entanglements that shape everyday lives have been scrutinised in various sectors and sites (Graham & Marvin, 2001; Liu & Lin, 2017). This recognition of infrastructure as foundational is completely unsurprising for those in the global South. It is the stuff of everyday life, economics and politics. So much of development aid has focused on delivering infrastructures—roads, electricity, water, toilets and all the grids, the people and the technologies inherent to producing and maintaining these infrastructures. It is also what many people in the majority world see as the primary benefit of modernity; in fact, modernity is encapsulated in visions of infrastructure (Kooy & Bakker, 2008). Breakdown, one of the opening gambits by Star (Star, 1999) is an everyday occurrence; we do not need to wait for years, months or days to find infrastructural failure, and for infrastructures to insert themselves into our everyday consciousness. And infrastructures are the bases of political life and are ‘defined by the movement or patterning of social form’ (Berlant, 2016).

Migration and mobility scholars have also theorised the infrastructures of mobility (Hannam et al., 2006) and immobility (Breines et al., 2019). Xiang and Lindquist define ‘migration infrastructures’ as ‘the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility’ (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. S124). International migration and its infrastructures link ‘technologies, institutions and actors’ and differentially enable mobility. Infrastructures also actively immobilise migrants (Stockdale & Haartsen 2018), especially those from the global South. The technological, and military apparatus that come into play to prevent migration has grown rapidly in recent years with the construction of increasingly restrictive migration systems, physical barriers and surveillance systems amongst others to contain migration streams (Muller, 2011). However, mobility and immobility and their infrastructures are always intertwined (Breines et al., 2019). The infrastructures of immobility of people often involve mobilities of data, of coastguards and boats. Moreover, the routes through which this policing occurs leads Walters to argue for more focus on viapolitics, that is, the politics of the transportation infrastructures that shape migration surveillance (Walters, 2015).

The impact of the infrastructures especially on migrants and processes of migration are increasingly becoming visible. Kathiravelu (2021)

argues that infrastructures act as 'collusive actors' in the production of inequality and injustice for migrants. Extending this point, Cranston and Duplan (2023) argue that infrastructures act as collusive actors in producing privilege in migration. And simultaneously, Xiang (2024) points out that infrastructures, especially those of (im)mobility, will be crucial to support social resilience in future as we face crises. In this paper, we examine some of these inequalities and privileges resulting from interruptions and failures (Cheng et al., 2024) of infrastructures that were made visible through COVID-19 as a crisis.

2.3 | COVID-19 and IS (im)mobility

Scholars researching IS mobility have also explored the role of infrastructures in shaping student migration (Lan, 2019). Although IS migrants had not been central to many migration debates, they came to considerable attention during this crisis as the infrastructures failed. In fact, the infrastructuralisation of the migration, financial and education processes that form IS mobility played a crucial part in their failure.

The infrastructures of mobility and immobility are entangled and are often mutually constitutive. They shape IS' mobility in highly differentiated ways. Both class and nationality mediate access to consular services. Not all students have equal access to venues to go to get their visas as visa functions are centralised in major sending countries. Moreover, the financial and knowledge infrastructures around funding are variable based on whether students travel on scholarships offered through the HEIs or governments of sending or receiving countries, through personal funding or loans.

The pandemic brought IS to increased attention amongst policy-makers, the media, and researchers. Scholars discovered that IS are not as privileged and protected as assumed, and their status as migrants placed them in similarly precarious situations as other migrant groups. As a result, the pandemic has generated a host of studies shedding light on the experiences of IS, in particular, the focus on their education experiences of distance and online learning (Lee et al., 2021; Novikov, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), mental and social wellbeing (Firang, 2020; Susanto et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). Research also captured the more mundane matters of daily life by looking at local experiences in an environment that was becoming increasingly anti-Asian (Chen, 2021) and cross-cultural (Wang, 2020, p. 202) and transnational (Jang & Choi, 2020; Jayadeva, 2020) practices that IS undertook to negotiate their daily lives during the pandemic. This work aims to challenge the image of IS as privileged and demands that governments and the higher education sector act responsibly and provide care and support for IS (Blackmore, 2020; Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). In doing so, this work has also highlighted how migration, knowledge and finance are entangled. It made visible the dependency of higher education systems such as the UK on IS mobility fees, and the wider positive economic impact of IS on the UK economy (Conlon et al., 2021; London Economics, 2020, 2021). Most importantly, this research recognises that these challenges are not new or unique to the pandemic. The infrastructures that support IS mobility have never been robust; they have always been entangled. This paper aims to examine these entangled infrastructures of IS mobility.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS

This paper draws on research conducted between May and November 2020. The project entitled IS Experiences in the Pandemic emerged from concerns for IS during the first lockdown imposed in the UK in March 2020 (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2020). The survey aimed to capture the experiences of the pandemic on the 2019–2020 cohort of IS in the UK. The research was undertaken in partnership with UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA).

The study deployed a mixed-methods digital research approach: online surveys and interviews. For the duration of this project, IS were defined as those who were enrolled in UK HEIs as IS either on a Tier 4 visa,¹ and/or paying international student fees. Many if not most of these methods were widely adopted by research communities studying migration during the pandemic. The digital appeared in the research in four ways: an interface, a field site, field of concern and storytelling (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2021). In our project we primarily used the digital as interface. This method enabled us to engage with diverse student body including those experiencing mental and physical health concerns. However, we were aware that other forms of exclusion were operating such as digital accessibility gaps.

The online survey ran from August 2020–15 October 2020 and was administered through a secure survey platform. It was organised around seven themes: migration experiences, education, financing, housing, social exclusion/racism, institutional support, and future intentions. 85 complete responses were recorded, of which 60% of respondents identified as women, and the remaining 40% identified as men with a smaller group identifying as nonbinary.² The paper focuses on themes of finance and education from the survey results that align with the discussion of finance and knowledge infrastructures.

The survey results were complemented with 10 in-depth online interviews conducted between September and October 2020, as the UK emerged from lockdown. The interviews with undergraduate, masters and PhD students provided contextual information to supplement the survey data. Interview respondents were recruited from among the survey respondents. Each interview lasted an average of 45 min. The interviews, too, were organised around the seven key themes in the survey, and we turn to their findings focusing on finance and education below.

3.1 | IS and infrastructures of (im)mobility during the pandemic

International higher education was one of the first major global sectors to be significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic because of the closure of borders and radical reductions in air transportation. It led to a range of hardships for students, many of

¹Tier 4(General) Student is the visa category a person needs to have in hand if entering the UK for study. From October 2020, 'Student Visa' replaced the Tier 4 (General) category. This was because the UK moved to a points based migration system.

²Specific percentages are not provided because of data privacy issues.

which are discussed below. Moreover, it also showed the constitutive role that IS play in global higher education (Raghuram, 2013).

IS are often seen as migrants, students and workers. Thus the infrastructures of international student (im)mobility are a result of entangled infrastructures of migration, knowledge, finance, labour and others. We have examined the failures of migration infrastructures through its constitutive components of migration policies, consular services and travel elsewhere (Raghuram & Sondhi 2021). Below, we focus on finance and knowledge to first explore how respondents experienced the failures of infrastructures of finance and knowledge during the pandemic knowledge during the pandemic, which led to differential (im)mobilities of both students and the associated flows. Second, we consider those infrastructural failures temporally to reveal that breakdown was not exceptional to the moment of the crisis, but instead a result of pre-existing formations which had produced infrastructures.

3.2 | Financial infrastructures

By financial infrastructure, we refer to processes, institutions, stakeholders, mechanisms and systems that enable the movement of money. This movement of money is crucial for international student mobility, and some might argue that International student mobility is crucial to maintaining educational infrastructures in some countries, as well as contributing significantly to local, regional and national economies. IS bring in considerable income into the receiving countries through direct costs such as tuition, food and accommodation; and indirect costs such as visits from family, other leisure expenses.

In most countries revenue generated through IS is considered to be export services revenue within GDP calculations (see Table 1). The overall sums of money that flow from the global South to North through direct and indirect costs operate as *negative remittances* (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2017). While students' international mobility enables a positive inflow of revenue to the receiving countries, these capital flows simultaneously represent a negative flow from sending countries—but there have been few calculations of this. Student fees is a key modality of negative remittance, which is financed through various channels. This dependence on IS has often been masked in discussions of student fees, which largely focus on cost-sharing as an

arrangement between the state and domestic students (Johnstone, 2004; Teixeira et al., 2017). In 2018–2019, of the total fee income, international student fees accounted for nearly 40% of the revenue for Australian universities (Hurley, 2021), and 30% for UK universities (see Table 2 below). However, the constitutive role of IS in financing UK higher education became particularly clear during the pandemic (Britton et al., 2020; London Economics, 2020).

It is surprising, especially when the breakdown is examined across the four UK nations of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, that despite the importance of the overall contribution that students make to the economies of destination countries (Ahlburg, 2020), the financial infrastructures which enable the mobility of student finances are weak. The dominant narrative and image of IS is that they are privileged (Findlay, King, et al., 2011; Waters, 2006, 2008). However, as this crisis highlighted, not all students are well-to-do; many IS are from middle-class families with parents who work as professionals (Sondhi & King, 2017). Hence IS do not have access to unlimited funds to draw upon in times of crisis. Below we discuss some of the sources of negative remittances and examine the impact of the disruption to flow of the negative remittances as direct costs on the students—our respondents, UK HEIs and the wider UK economy.

The direct costs that students incur to undertake study abroad include fees, accommodation, food and air travel. Survey results showed that funding for fees was more heavily sourced from 'self-funding,' 'family or friends' and 'employer sponsorship,' with very few students using bank loans, work and sending country partnerships. For respondents in this study 'family and friends' were identified as the most significant funding source with nearly 30% of our survey respondents dependent entirely on personal savings, and family and friends, to fund their education. This aligns with existing research which shows that majority of the IS are self-funded, often drawing from family resources, and personal bank loans (King & Sondhi, 2018). In United States, nearly 60% of IS rely primarily on self or family funds to pay for their studies (IIE, 2021).

The lockdown resulted in disruption to the access to these different sources of funds.

For day to day costs, students supplement the family funds and loans they have taken with part-time jobs while studying, often in the hospitality industry. 40% of the survey sample indicated they

TABLE 1 International students by country of destination and their contribution to economies of countries of destination.

	US	UK	Australia
No. of inbound mobile students ¹	268,000	243,937	84,206
Percentage of all total student population	5	21	8
Average Tuition fees (annual) ³	24,914 USD	21,365 USD	24,081 USD
Contribution to the economy	38.7 Billion USD*	35.5 Billion USD** (25 Billion GBP)	7.7 Billion USD* (9.8 Billion AUD)

Note: 1 New enrolments for academic years 2019/2020; 2 Value for education HSBC report estimates (2014/2015 numbers).

*Direct and indirect costs for 2019/2020, data from NAFSA (US).

**Data from 2014–2015.

Source: IIE (US), HESA (UK), Department of Education and Training (Australia).

TABLE 2 International student fees in UK by country, 2018/2019.

Country	Total UK and EU fees (£)	Total Non-EU fees (£)	Total HE Fees (£)	% non-EU (£)
England	11,982,409	4,993,969	16,976,378	29.42%
NI	161,267	39,706	200,973	19.76%
Scotland	512,468	684,163	1,196,631	57.17%
Wales	688,309	176,826	865,135	20.44%
Total	13,344,453	5,894,664	19,239,117	30.64%

Source: HESA, reference: DT031 Table 6.

TABLE 3 Impact on finances due to the pandemic.

Impact on finances	%	Count
Ran out of money (savings)	30.00%	21
Reduced access to work	28.57%	20
Family are running out of money	27.14%	19
Scholarship not being transferred	4.29%	3
Loans not being provided	1.43%	1
Total	100%	64

Source: Author COVID ISM survey.

supported themselves through part-time jobs before the pandemic, working up to 20 h a week. Of these 40%, half lost jobs as a result of the pandemic. During the lockdown, these jobs came to an end. Where jobs existed, research shows that those from migrant and racialised backgrounds were more likely to face loss of income than UK nationals (Hu, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, survey respondents indicated they were concerned about running out of money (Table 3 above), and had reduced access to work therefore could not earn more support themselves during the pandemic and beyond. As one interview respondent expressed her anxieties:

I was regularly working 20 hours a week as that's what I was allowed to do (due to visa), and so I had a steady stream of income. But then it became challenging because everything is online. I couldn't go out to work more. The teaching opportunities that I was hoping to get from fieldtrips, those weren't going to happen as there were no more fieldtrips anymore. This made me very anxious, because I didn't know how it was going to impact my future finances... The teaching work would have paid me double what I make working for [organisation]. Since I can only work 20 hours, the pay would have made huge difference to me financially. (Female, PhD student).

Respondents were also concerned that their families were running out of money, and didn't want to impose upon them during this time for financial support. Interview respondents particularly expressed their concerns around asking their parents for money to be sent from origin countries, as they were aware that there might not

much money to be sent due to financial impacts of lockdown in their country of origin.

Financially, my parents had to send me money to support me. But I tried not to use it. (Female, PhD).

From friends and family, I had to borrow money from them from back home...I couldn't do anything. If I went back India, the cost of flight and then returning to [origin country] would have been financially stressful for my family members again. I couldn't tell them back home what was going on with me. My mother lives by herself alone, and so finances are not easy. (Male, PhD).

IS, therefore, had little access to the money required to live in the UK or to buy airline tickets to return home. Moreover, as countries limited air traffic to contain the virus, the price of flights went up, and students who had delayed their departure could no longer afford to go home. By the time they could access some money, often sent from home countries, the lockdowns had intensified, and they could not leave the UK, although this was class-differentiated.

Imposed immobility, and disruptions and delays in the mobility of people were mediated through stretched family relations, which have organised and conditioned international migration for students both before (Sondhi, 2013; Sondhi & King, 2017; Waters, 2006) and throughout the pandemic. The crisis made the 'family-mediated migration infrastructure' (Hu et al., 2022) amongst students visible.³ As the global recession hit, with people losing jobs and financial insecurity worldwide, families of IS were not always able to continue supporting the students. Hence, the concern about families running out of money, as indicated in the table above, was real. The delayed and disrupted mobility of the students and the accompanying financial flows had knock-on effects on everyday life as well as long-term planning of the international student status. Due to limited financial resources, students struggled with housing—a direct cost component of international student mobility. Some students, as respondents pointed out, who were stuck outside of the UK and unable to re-enter, were still obligated to pay for their accommodations.

"I initially went home for Easter break and stuck here since then. I haven't moved out from my accommodation and is continuing paying. I really hope I can go back soon! To retrieve my things and secure a job!" (Female, Undergraduate student)

On the other hand, those who were in the UK, some became part of the invisible homeless population. For instance, students who were dependant on the generosity of their friends to let them stay on their sofas, a one respondent experienced.

"I had to move out of my accommodation because I just couldn't afford to pay my rent, my funding had ended. For one to 2 months I was on my friend's couch, but that was not helpful in me getting my work done, because there were three of us in a small flat. Then I decided to return home because I just couldn't afford to live." (Female, PhD student).

³A detailed exploration of the emotional and familial practices of transnational care entered into by and for students is beyond the scope of this paper.

Others were faced with predatory private landlords who took the opportunity to increase rents, or force those out who could not afford to pay rent, as another respondent (male, PhD student) shared their story. While those interviewed did not indicate any shortage of food, anecdotal evidence pointed to IS having to rely on food banks for basic food necessities.

This also had an impact on students' poststudy plans and aspirations including if they could continue their studies beyond the academic term. We discuss this in detail in section below when we examine how financial, migration and knowledge infrastructures are entangled.

The impact of disruption to the sources of negative remittances, especially family resources in the sending country extended beyond the experiences of students and could be seen immediately on the supply-side of the international student migration equation (Findlay, 2011). The supply-side of the equation is comprised of those who 'organise, supply and market elite higher education opportunities within the global economy.' (Findlay, 2011, p. 163); and the financial interests of these stakeholders shapes international student mobility. Hence, the likelihood of a shrinking middle class due to the negative economic effects of the pandemic, poses one of the biggest threats to international higher education, as much of the recent increase in student migration has been through expanding aspirations for foreign degrees in these groups. This has led to particular anxieties in higher education markets that are dependent on international fees (Halterbeck et al., 2020).

The University management's fear of withdrawal of these direct financial flows into universities became immediately clear in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis in April 2020 when UUK published a proposal to support postvirus recovery of the higher education sector (Universities UK, 2020). A forecasted drop in enrolment of IS and consequent deficit in university operational budgets led to immediate cuts in staff for the following academic terms. These concerns also focused on the long-term effects in some subjects such as STEM, where both teaching and research are directly subsidised by international student fees (Universities UK, 2020). The uncertainty around lockdowns and how teaching would occur, in conjunction with how and when students could travel, led universities to, on the one hand, continue their recruitment of IS, and on the other hand, plan for systems (migration and education) that would enable students to delay their physical mobility, while taking up their studies at a distance.

The disruption continued further impacting the local area/regions where universities are located. In part Universities as businesses make direct contributions to their local and regional economies through their spending and that of their staff and students (Brennan et al., 2018). IS, through their spending on both direct and indirect expenses strengthen what Brennan et al. (2018) refer to as the multiplier effect of the Universities within regional economies. For instance in Wales in 2015–2016, IS made up 17% of all students enrolled across its eight universities. Of these, 25% were from the EU, and 75% from outside of the EU (Kelly & McNicoll, 2017). Altogether, IS added 0.5% to Welsh employment by supporting jobs across skills

levels and sectors—from research and teaching to cleaning and catering, and hospitality. More widely, negative remittances from IS' direct and indirect costs supported over 200,000 jobs across the UK in 2014–2015 (Universities UK, 2020).

The withdrawal of these financial flows resulting from the pandemic in the form of reduced revenue due to fewer students arguably had effects on the local and regional economies. The drop in income due to the IS is a significant revenue component of the university supply chains (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2021). Recent analysis has made evident the increasing dependence on revenue from IS to cross-subsidise higher education (PWC, 2024) in light of increasing financial constraints and drop in domestic enrolment that UK HEI are facing at present.

But during all this, the welfare of IS remained a secondary concern for universities and associated stakeholders (Raghuram & Sondhi, 2021). Little thought was given or is still being given, to the impact of COVID-19 and of how it was handled. There was very little financial support offered to IS. And where it was offered, there were bureaucratic barriers that prevented students from benefiting from the support.

Other than by UKCISA, a relatively small organisation, there was little collective effort to provide support for IS. While lecturers scrambled to shift their teaching online and universities attempted to provide support for domestic/UK students, IS, those who cross-subsidise education for domestic students were mostly abandoned, with limited information and communication, little support for housing, and even less financial support to overcome emergencies brought on by lockdown.

3.3 | Knowledge infrastructures

Despite the anxieties around the drop in student migration, the 'education' sector did not seem to 'lose' potential future students. In 2020–2021 international student numbers for undergraduate level studies showed an unexpected increase from 40,720 placements in 2019 to 44,300 in 2020 (UCAS, 2020). Arguably, concerns about loss of income due to low international student recruitment had been overestimated based on these numbers. Mobility is central to the production of knowledge and not just a financial instrument. For Madge et al. (2015, p. 688) 'mobility and encounter make knowledge,' rather than being an object students take 'home in the equivalent of lifelong shopping bags.' Mobility of different forms, across borders such as international qualifications, across sites such as through internships and levels, such as between different types of qualification are all highly revered in education (Waters 2006). However, IS don't get the same reverence. They are often side-lined as they are seen as liminal - between statuses (study and work), between countries (temporarily settled) and between different life-stages (between child and adult and their attendant framings, family and work).

The lockdown disrupted not only the physical mobility of students but also, crucially, their education and access to knowledge. As Jayadeva (2020) In her study of Indian students in Germany during

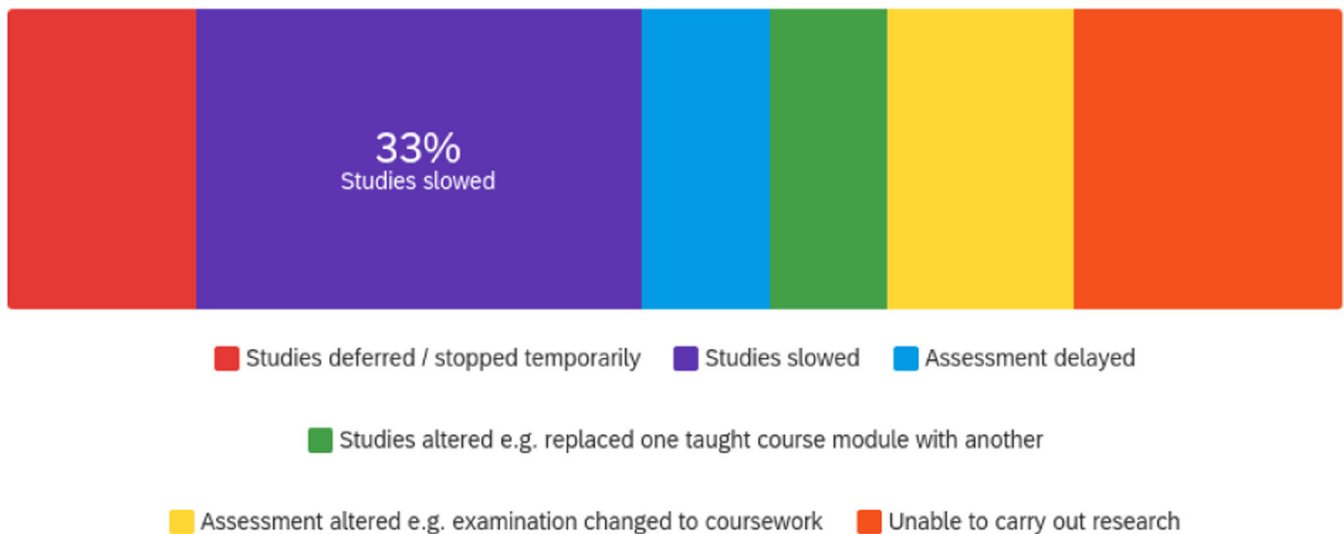


FIGURE 1 Impact of COVID on programme of study. Source: Author's COVID ISM Survey.

the pandemic, she highlighted immediate concerns about the completion of studies, the quality of distance education, and poststudy plans.

Our survey responses show that IS undertaking programmes with independent research components were particularly worried about their ability to complete their studies (Figure 1).

STEM students may, for instance, be required to undertake lab work. The sudden lockdown meant that students could no longer access their labs and their experiments thus, potentially leaving students without a project to writeup. Non-STEM students who may have to do fieldwork, conduct in-person interviews, and participant observations, or may have required international travel, could not follow-up on these plans in light of the uncertainty of the length and outcome of the lockdown. These challenges are not specific to UK-based IS but reflect the inherent quality of mobilities in knowledge production including in postgraduate studies and independent research globally.

The survey and questionnaires undertaken with our respondents captured the multiple ways students' studies were disrupted (see Figure above). As one respondent shared his experience:

"I was studying my MPhil and was needing to switch to my PhD, and I could not do so because the amendments to UKVI guidance did not include students that have not finished the current course to study a new one at a higher level (even if it is the same course). I had to recur to my local MP and he intervened on my behalf with UKVI and they approved my application exceptionally." (Female, PhD student).

For others, locked within their homes in the UK, the nature of their research meant that they could no longer access their participants even online. These disruptions during data collection phases of research have longer-term consequences for a PhD programme of study, which has knock-on financial implications. All of these concerns were linked to the acquisition of knowledge, its value and its mobility for their poststudy plans. These are issues IS shared with local students.

However, IS also faced other issues, such as the portability of education delivered online. Respondents enrolled in undergraduate and masters courses were anxious about the quality of their education—particularly distance education, and the validity and recognition of a degree obtained online and at a distance. The experience and concerns of disrupted education in the UK were in contrast to the experiences of IS in other countries such as South Korea, where students expressed positive sentiments around online learning and distance education (Lee et al., 2021). Though, in many countries and parts of their labour markets, online degrees are either not recognised or not viewed favourably. Hence, students were rightly worried about how their degree may be perceived by future employers, or other educational intuitions if they wanted to pursue further studies. Hence, the impact of the crisis on students' poststudy plans was acute. Following the lockdown many had changed their minds. The proportion of survey respondents who planned to find jobs in the UK after their studies fell from 53% to 46%. IS were concerned that the disruption to their studies, the ambiguity around visa rules and socioeconomic conditions of the UK would negatively influence their future careers and life plans. As several survey respondents expressed their thoughts on why they changed their poststudy plans:

"Political and economical situation too instable in the UK, new rules of TIER 2 VISA." (Male, Masters).

"It is noticeable that there are less jobs available [in the UK]. Post docs have been cancelled/postponed in my university, funding is going to new priority areas, mostly related to the effects of the pandemic upon education, online learning, etc. If I wanted to pursue any of those subjects, I'd need to invest more time in learning about them. Learning curve is unaffordable" (Male, PhD).

"My visa is due to expire in March 2021 and with very limited job vacancy, I may not be able to secure a job in time. I'm feeling a time constraint." (Female, Masters).

"I am not confident that I will be able to find suitable employment next summer due to the impending economic recession." (Female, Undergraduate).

The UK's handling of the pandemic was seen as potentially discouraging students who planned to come to the UK to study but also those who want to stay on in the UK to pursue further studies and career.

As Xiang & Lindquist (2014) have already pointed out, that while these infrastructures may facilitate mobility, they fail to take into consideration potential outcomes for migrants. Knowledge systems entangled with failing migration policies and programmes led to breakdown in short term financial security of the student. The cracks in the knowledge systems also impacted the longer term financial security of the student as disrupted education meant that students may not be able to draw on their cultural capital that is seen to be a crucial acquisition of international study (Waters, 2006).

This has implications not only for financial infrastructures but also on knowledge infrastructures. IS help sustain the host country's research and innovation base. This, along with other factors that shape IS' decisions to enter and leave a country appear not to be part of the decision making of UK HEI stakeholders. The universities and other key organisations within the UK HEI sector have been less concerned about the impact of online learning on the value of degrees and knowledge and its mobility. For UK stakeholders the concern continues to be how to recruit IS and how to build an educational infrastructure to ensure that there was no loss of revenue. In recognition of the invaluable financial contribution of IS to the UK economy, UK HEI sector in collaboration with the UK Home Office adapted the criteria for IS and encouraged IS' to continue enrolment, start their UK university degree at a distance, and enter the UK later, during the second term of the programme. Hence, full-time presence in the UK was no longer required for those enrolling into 2020–2021 (UK Home Office, 2020). Hence, the pandemic and disruption in the education enabled a shift in construction of international education that includes distance/remote learning hence enabling increased 'physical' mobility of knowledge over data networks to enable immobility of students globally to curtail the impact of the pandemic.

4 | CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored two types of infrastructures that have shaped IS' COVID-19 lives. In doing so, it points to the pre-COVID-19 lives of these infrastructures and how they appear as impediments selectively for some students and sometimes. The infrastructures of mobility of receiving countries are comprised of various components, the most visible of which are visa policies, visa offices, biometric centres, and language testing centres. This paper drew attention to the less visible components of finance and knowledge in shaping international student (im)mobilities.

A focus of this paper is the delays and disruptions in financial transfers and how they highlight the everyday presence of financial infrastructures in enabling international study. Crucially it is not the problems of money access or transfer faced by the students but its' effects on UK HEIs that came to attention. The constitutive role of

such financial flows in upholding UK's educational infrastructures were made apparent as attempts were made to mitigate the immediate anticipated impact on UK HEIs who are heavily dependent on revenue from international student fees through cutbacks and redundancies. As ever, the pandemic exposed the crisis in higher education funding and its' external dependencies, that is, it revealed the instability of the existing funding model. The core work of international higher education turned out to be profit. Through fees, housing and accommodations costs, IS provide positive inflows into the economies of receiving countries. However, these financial streams are a negative flow for sending countries. These negative remittances—money which has been removed from sending into receiving countries - is not circulated back into the sending country of the student. And while there was great concern about the viability of universities to continue to function in the potential absence of student fees, limited attention was paid to the well-being and financial stability of IS in the UK during the pandemic. The financial systems that remained visible were those of UK HEI, whilst the financial challenges of IS remained largely invisible.

Lastly, we examined the knowledge infrastructures which included not only HEIs (which have been cross-cutting actors across the infrastructures examined) but also the labour market. Students' key concerns were the value and portability of their distanced online education across countries, and labour markets across countries. Their apprehensions were compounded by uncertainty around future education and career plans which required continued stays in the UK. However, on the whole, UK HEIs have not adequately recognised the issues faced by students with regard to the international portability of distance learning, and how this influences students' transitions to the labour market. In particular, there is has been a failure to recognise the dependency of the UK skilled (particularly STEM) labour market on IS entering the labour market, especially over the long term.

In this paper, we have examined these infrastructures separately as an analytical tool. However, as it can be seen these infrastructures of migration, finance and knowledge are intertwined. The failures of these infrastructures led to disabled, delayed and disrupted mobility of IS. Crucially, these infrastructures always existed and particularly impeded those from the global South but the pandemic exposed not only the politics and operations of these infrastructures but also their failures. The paper suggests the need to see the importance of infrastructures to students and to recognise the failures of infrastructures in the global North. How and what do such failures expose? What is the work undertaken to maintain and repair (Cheng et al., 2024) these infrastructures routinely and how complete or incomplete are these operations of maintenance when it comes to intermediaries in the global South? In short, what are the routine failures that those wanting to pursue international study face on their route to becoming a migrant?

The pandemic brought on significant challenges to spatialities of practice associated with both the supply side and demand side of international student mobility. The infrastructures discussed above shaped both the connections in and across networks and the flows

within them. The infrastructures that differentially facilitate mobility have always needed a lot of repair and maintenance; when that maintenance could not be done due to pandemic disruptions, those connections became disconnections. What we now see is the work that is to be done to keep those connections going. The failures of these infrastructures led to disabled, delayed and disrupted mobility of IS, thus impacting the connections between people, places, money and knowledge across borders.

Throughout the disrupted, delayed and disabled mobility of people and knowledge, as well as failing infrastructures of those mobility and knowledge, the financial flows continued. While the physical mobility of people as students may not been desired to curb the mobility of the virus, it was still sought so as to ensure the financial flows were not disrupted. As we have seen over the past year, through the waves of virus, and lockdowns globally, HEIs across the world, particularly those of traditional receiving countries whose HEIs depend on negative remittances—such as UK and Australia continue to look for ways to ensure the financial transfers occur. Some of these strategies have included ensuring student's physical mobility such as Irish universities hiring charter flights for students; while others have encouraged migration policy makers to loosen the rules around requirement of physical presence to start their studies, hence taking advantage of the online distance education systems to ensure that fees are collected, and universities can continue their operations. In all of this, though, the wellbeing of the student and outcomes of international study abroad continue to be ignored. The problem we have now is that we don't know what the student numbers will be this year. This crisis has not yet ended, and its longer-term implications are yet to be considered. In the frenzy to emulate prepandemic normality, the long-term impact of the pandemic on these infrastructures is yet to be considered. But we don't know what the future holds.

These crises are moments which shed light on existing infrastructural arrangements that are often hidden from view. They point to analytical opportunities and to moments when change can be identified. This requires, going forward, that we also explore the emergent, that is, new arrangements of power and how they will operate to shape international student mobility. As Hall and Massey have argued, this requires analytical work. It requires that the analysis of COVID-19 goes beyond descriptions and beyond seeing it as an unprecedented acute event. IT is all those things but it also much more. It is an analytical invitation to reread the past and see how hegemonic systems have been maintained, who benefited and how infrastructures were shaped through very particular politics of operations, stitching together these multiple infrastructures. But it is also a political opening to think otherwise and to recognise that contemporary research on international study must take on the effects of negative remittances, to situate the class dimensions in international study and to read for how these intersect with gender and race. Infrastructures are themselves filtering in racialised, gendered and classed ways. These temporalities need to be extended to reread the past, see the residual in the contemporary moment, and recognise the emergent. While COVID-19 has exposed inherited

gaps, what are the implications of these failures for long term international migration flows? These are yet to be considered as the situation is constantly evolving.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no potential conflicts of interest disclosed by the author in connection with the research, authorship, and/or publication of this work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the study are available upon request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study adhered to all relevant ethical and legal principles. It received approval from The Open University, HREC/3610/Sondhi.

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