Towards a ‘care-sharing’ model?  
Multilateral adjustment strategies 
for post-pandemic students’ mobility in Europe

Tiziana Gatti *, Dorota Maciejowska **, Luca Verzichelli ***

Abstract

The article draws on findings from two surveys on the practices of the Coimbra Group network universities in response to the COVID-19 crisis. We first develop a theoretical framework and raise a few questions connecting the short-term reaction to the outbreak to the dimension of long-term cooperation in protecting and improving academic mobility among universities.

After analyzing the variance across universities in terms of student mobility decline during the first wave of the pandemic, the article assesses the capacity of the network to prevent demotivation and mistrust by combining the benefits from ex-ante instruments of mobility protection with the implementation of ad hoc tools of crisis resolution.

The article’s final section elaborates an interpretation based on the multidimensional and multifunctional notion of ‘care-sharing’. We argue that multilateral actions may enhance a comprehensive and pre-emptive adjustment strategy. Such a broad and responsible strategy will concur to return soon to high rates of mobility, activating at the same time inclusive and innovative practices and disseminating the values of social and environmental sustainability within our community of learners.

Keywords: academic exchange, mobility, Europe, COVID-19, care-sharing

* Université de Sienne (Italie), Groupe Coimbra. Email: tiziana.gatti@unisi.it
** Université Jagellonian de Cracovie (Pologne), Groupe Coimbra. Email: dorota.maciejowska@uj.edu.pl
*** Université de Sienne (Italie), Groupe Coimbra. Email: luca.verzichelli@unisi.it
Résumé

L’article s’appuie sur les résultats de deux enquêtes sur les pratiques des universités du réseau du Groupe Coimbra en réponse à la crise du COVID-19. Nous développons d’abord un cadre théorique et soulevons quelques questions reliant la réaction à court terme face à l’épidémie à la dimension de la coopération à long terme pour protéger et améliorer la mobilité académique entre les universités.

Après avoir analysé la variance entre les universités en termes de déclin de la mobilité des étudiants pendant la première vague de la pandémie, l’article évalue la capacité du réseau à prévenir la démotivation et la méfiance, en combinant les avantages des instruments *ex ante* de protection de la mobilité avec la mise en œuvre d’outils *ad hoc* de résolution des crises.

La dernière section de l’article développe une interprétation basée sur la notion multidimensionnelle et multifonctionnelle de « partage des responsabilités ». Nous soutenons que les actions multilatérales peuvent renforcer une stratégie d’ajustement globale et préventive. Une telle stratégie, large et responsable, concourra à un retour rapide à des taux de mobilité élevés, activant en même temps des pratiques inclusives et innovantes et diffusant les valeurs de durabilité sociale et environnementale au sein de notre communauté d’apprenants.

**Mots-clés** : échange académique, mobilité, Europe, COVID-19, partage de responsabilités

Introduction

This article originates from a project of student mobility monitoring, run in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, among the universities included in the Coimbra Group (CG) network. The main goal of the article remains mainly descriptive: indeed, the results of this assessment may provide consistent and significant information about the effects of the pandemic on student mobility patterns in Europe.

However, we pursue a more ambitious and interpretative goal. Although the data we will present have been mainly gathered for practical

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1 The Coimbra Group is an association of long-established European universities of a high international standard. Today the network involves 40 universities (after the temporary suspension of St. Petersburg decided in the month of March 2022) with about 1.4 million students, and more than 230 thousand staff members (including academics and technical or administrative personnel). https://www.coimbra-group.eu/
purposes, we realized the potential of a systematic account of the recent trends of students’ mobility to improve conditions for long-term inter-university cooperation. Indeed, an in-depth analysis of these data may help to prevent the risk of a dramatic collapse of mobility within the networks of European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), thus improving our record of comprehensive internationalization.

In short, here we aim to offer a preliminary interpretation of the strategies taken by higher education institutions in the aftermath of the pandemic crisis and the consequent transition from short-term responses to the adoption of new wide-ranging plans to prevent a further and structural decline of the fundamental mission of mobility among the European universities.

We will start discussing a theoretical framework inspired by recent interdisciplinary studies on comprehensive internationalization and students’ mobility. We will then argue that HEIs should harmonically combine their acquaintance with multilateral cooperation and crisis resolution capabilities, to cope with the effects of critical shocks and we will measure the magnitude of the challenge represented by the first and most destructive wave of COVID-19 outbreak, looking at the rates of reduction of students’ mobility. The central section of the article will be devoted to a qualitative comparative assessment of what we define as *ex-ante* instruments of cooperation and *ad hoc* instruments of resolution of the problem determined by the pandemic outbreak.

The conclusive section will discuss the implications of our study, reconnecting them to the findings of other pieces of research. In particular, we will elaborate on the benefits of broad multilateral cooperation which, complemented by bilateral efforts (for instance, *double degree initiatives*) and more structured forms of teamwork (for example, the mobility schemes developed by several *European Universities*) may determine a significant improvement. We will conclude that timely multilateral cooperation and coordination practices represent robust tools to protect mobility from any other challenge, thus expanding the level of academic internationalization. We define this mid-level form of cooperation based on permanent and *ad hoc* measures as an effort of *care-sharing*, stressing that a comprehensive and cultural resemblance among the universities may work as a formidable multiplier of performance.
1. Theoretical framework and research questions

A large body of literature has recently developed to focus on several cultural and attitudinal conditions of student mobility among universities. Indeed, preparedness towards mobility is considered one of the main solutions to the internationalization problem (Wächter, 2003; Sanderson, 2008). The pandemic crisis has undoubtedly stressed the need for an in-depth analysis of the resilience of the mobility culture, showing the overall weakness of such academic practice (Kelly, 2021). In this context, the idea of a shared and comprehensive vision within every academic community (Hudzik, 2011) becomes a necessary prerequisite to implementing a truly European educational area (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018).

In this article, we want to produce an evidence-based analysis of the good strategies of preparedness towards mobility by exploring the linkage between some shared experiences during the recent emergencies, and new prospective problem-solving attitudes. The first element deals with the opportunity to develop similar levels of organizational institutionalization and consolidate a ‘culture of mobility’ among several institutions. The second element lies in the capacity of academic organizations to react to a specific thread (in this case, the pandemic outbreak). We argue that familiarity with a mobility culture and problem-solving attitudes may positively interact by sustaining each other and generating resilient levels of organizational performance. This assertion is based on the conceptualization of two types of instruments of internationalization: ex-ante instruments of mobility protection and ad hoc instruments of crisis resolution. Table 1 summarises the indicators we connect to these two analytical dimensions.

In the first column, we report the indicators of ex-ante instruments of protection. They are the duration of the experience of cooperation, the degree of involvement of the single HEIs in practices of mobility protection, the degree of readiness to adopt flexible strategies to cooperate with partners, and a consolidated attitude to problem-solving. The second column deals with ad hoc instruments to solve the mobility crisis generated by the pandemic. These are relying on skilled personnel, the availability of new budget instalments, the availability of technological skills to
manage the problem, and students’ positive attitude to cooperate during the crisis phase.

Table 1. Indicators of cooperation in post-pandemic protection of student mobility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ex-ante instruments of mobility protection</th>
<th>Ad hoc instruments to cope with pandemic crisis</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Historical record of cooperation</td>
<td>Availability of skilled personnel</td>
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<td>Comprehensive involvement of academic organisations</td>
<td>Availability of financial resources</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared attitudes to problem-solving</td>
<td>Student cooperation during crisis management</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Our working hypothesis is the following: an adequate combination of several elements included in these two categories (the development of *ad hoc* instruments of crisis resolution in a relatively rooted environment, with open-minded stakeholders and under a collaborative spirit among the actors involved) may be successful not just in a bilateral context, but even in a broader and multilateral environment, where multiplier effects of exchange can be reached. The conclusion of this article will elaborate on the notion of *care-sharing*: a comprehensive logic of protection of students’ mobility shared by institutional leaders, governance bodies, faculties, staff, and the same students. This argument therefore concerns the specific mission of mobility, which is anyway a necessary condition to realize the potential of internationalization, passing from the ‘desirable possibility’ to the ‘institutional imperative’ (Hudzik, 2011: 6).

More precisely, the concept of care-sharing embraces the added values of a broad cooperation and campus-internationalisation, promoting not just a mere performance of mobility (number of students, scope of the action, etc.) but qualitative indicators of internationalization as a larger involvement of personnel and the development of new skills and activities. Thus conceived, the notion of *care-sharing* encompasses both the dimensions defined above. In other words, an effective response to the
pandemic would be described as a satisfactory result in terms of short-term protection of student mobility, but also as a perspective of permanent improvement, thanks to the combined effect of consolidated practices and good usage of *ad hoc* instruments of crisis resolution.

This study is just an explorative attempt to assess the opportunity to enhance care-sharing practices based on recent experience. Two simple research questions are at the core of the article. At first, we want to test if a broad multilateral historical partnership has a relevant impact in preventing the loss of internationalization when an external crisis occurs. Secondly, on a more interpretative level, we want to understand what conditions may help develop a care-sharing system. Hence, the questions are: 1. Are the potentially rich *ex-ante* instruments of cooperation developed by long-term academic networks effectively efficient in enhancing students’ mobility in difficult times? 2. How may these existing instruments be associated with other contextual factors – i.e. common policies and shared best practices – to explain a more or less successful approach in dealing with the difficulties of a global mobility crisis?

To answer our questions, we offer a detailed study of the data gathered by the CG surveys of 2020 and 2021 (Gatti *et al.*, 2020, Coimbra Group, 2021), covering several indicators of the pandemic impact on the activities of the network’s members and some suggestions from the working groups operating within the network. Both the reports, and particularly the second one completed in December 2021, were indeed finalized to an interpretative goal, assessing the overall level of exchange, and sharing practices within the network in a difficult period, when the interactions among European HEIs have logically decreased, and lots of limitations and *ad hoc* anti-pandemic measures have been added to the traditional divergence in terms of higher education across Europe.

As said, in this article we take care of a specific aspect, assessing of the impact of the first wave of pandemic on students’ mobility. Hence, we will start analyzing student mobility figures within the CG as an example of resilience and mobility protection in the broader European scenario. We will also propose a deeper analysis, discussing the variance of this resilience indicator and its correlation to structural factors like size of the university, disciplinary scope, geographical area, index of country development and stringency of the COVID-19-related policies.
Towards a ‘care-sharing’ model?

The following part of our empirical study consists of a qualitative analysis of the reaction to COVID-19 from all the CG universities. Unlike other recent studies, mainly conducted on students’ attitudes (European Commission, 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020; Means and Neisler, 2021; Koris et al., 2021), we focus on organizational attitudes and academic staff feedbacks. More precisely, to check the consistency of our indicators, we have post-coded the responses to some open-ended questions addressed to the IROs executive chiefs. Summing the notes from the online questionnaires returned by 31 universities up to another ten interviews, we have conducted with mobility experts from other HEIs included in the network, we could achieve a significant dataset of predispositions from all the CG members.

2. Protecting mobility in pandemic times: the Coimbra Group experience

This section offers an assessment of the figures concerning our *explanandum*: the trend of student mobility decreases within the CG network in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, our study’s empirical target is represented by 41 institutions (from 23 countries) within the network. Thanks to the commitment of a few dedicated working groups (in particular, the Academic Exchange and Mobility WG), and a specific agreement with Erasmus Student Network, the CG has developed a consolidated area of ‘full circulation’ of mobility. Thousands of students are involved every year in the mobility among CG universities.

Moreover, the cohesiveness and the specific nature of the CG give all its members a chance to develop an intense exchange program at all levels and systematically compare best cooperation practices. As Figure 1 shows, 32 of the 41 universities included in the network count less than

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2 The survey and the qualitative interviews are intended to be anonymous, and all precautions have been taken to ensure anonymity. The responses have been automatically anonymized and aggregated in order to avoid the identification of individual respondents. We thank Emmanuelle Gardan and Catarina Moleiro from the Coimbra Group Office in Brussels for their help during the phase of data gathering.
40,000 students, and all of them are within the limit of 100,000 students. The degree of fit among the organizational structures of these institutions is also remarkable: all of them present a standard core of STEM and SSH faculties/departments. A medical school is present in 34 cases out of 41, while pharmacology and vaccine labs are present in more than half of these universities.

Therefore, we can argue that the CG network may represent a cluster of relatively cohesive European universities. To this general organizational outlook, one should add the original raison d’être of the CG membership: the common historical attribute of this cluster of European city campuses, which is supposed to provide a sufficiently developed requisite of cultural similarity.

What about the recent mobility performance within the CG? The first move in our analysis concerns the quantification of our explanandum: the extent of student mobility loss during the initial phase of the pandemic outbreak. To extrapolate such a measurement, we have used two questions from the open-ended questionnaire employed for the last report (Coimbra Group, 2021). Has your university experienced a decrease of incoming and outgoing mobility of students and staff in the first semester of 2020/21? 2. If YES, please indicate the amount of decrease. 3.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of the answers to the second question. Taking as a baseline the minimum threshold of each ordinal category and weighting by the university population, we estimate a loss of (at least) 35% student mobility (incoming plus outgoing) during the most critical phase of the pandemic. This figure is consistent with the results of other surveys run during that dramatic period, when the overall rate of renouncement was estimated around 40%. This basically means that even excluding the deviant 2.4% with no sign of mobility decline (just one university!), a minimal proportion of CG HEIs falls in the two

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3 Given the complexity of the data to be gathered, the question was metric and not discrete. The options were 1 = decrease between 10 and 30%; 2 = Between 30 and 50%; 3 = Between 50 and 70%; 4 = More than 70%.

4 This was the result of the survey launched in May 2020 by the European Commission (2020). Similar findings can be noticed in the ENS report of April 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on student exchanges (Gabriels and Benke-Aberg, 2020).
extreme categories (reduction under 30% and higher than 70%). Indeed, most of the CG universities fall in the two central categories including those HEIs that declared a loss of mobility between 30 and 70%. The statistical mode is represented by the ‘30 to 50% decline of mobility’, which confirms a lower or very likely close measure to the overall rate if decline observed around Europe.
Moreover, the data of the CG survey take into account all the *ex-post* adjustments of several students who could not fulfill their dream of European mobility during 2020 for several reasons. Indeed, the official Erasmus report indicates more than 50% of overall mobility loss in academic year 2020-21, and only a tiny part of this mobility could be rescued by blended or online mobility schemes (Farnell *et al.*, 2021). All in all, we can argue that the loss of mobility within the perimeter of the CG, still remarkable, was lower than the overall magnitude of the phenomenon in Europe.

Another significant piece of evidence concerns the relatively regular distribution traced in the chart corresponding to a somewhat similar diachronic trend across the CG universities. According to some of the

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5 For instance, a later decision of some universities to transform suspension into cancellation; a later decision of some governments to suspend mobility towards specific countries; the individual decision of single students to renounce to an already planned mobility after a new wave of outbreak, etc.
Towards a ‘care-sharing’ model?

Qualitative reflections we have collected, the significant loss of mobility occurring in the first year of pandemic emergency was immediately balanced by a sudden upswing (Coimbra Group, 2021). As a matter of fact, the long-term experience of mobility among CG universities proves to be consistent with expectations and quite effective from a comparative perspective.

Indeed, this is our point of departure: the comprehensive universities included in the CG network offer a good proxy of the European higher education community and, apparently, a cluster of well-organized higher education institutions able to show, overall, a comparatively satisfactory response to the pandemic challenge in terms of protection of student mobility. Such a short-time reaction seems to have developed similarly across the 41 universities under analysis. However, some structural factors may have worked as intervening or additional determinants in coping with the decrease of student mobility during the critical months of the pandemic outbreak.

The puzzle can be approached analysing the results of a correlation analysis matching several structural characteristics of the CG universities (table 2). The analysis suggests the following: first, the decrease of mobility is correlated neither to the university size, nor to an indicator of academic reputation as a general ranking of academic performance. Conversely, a weak correlation can be noticed looking to the academic profile of CG universities, and in particular to the dichotomic variable ‘full STEM profile’, which marks the presence of departments/faculties both of Medicine and Pharmacy besides the other scientific structures. Although of very little significance, this correlation confirms STEM students’ difficulty in maintaining mobility plans during the pandemic, as already reported by other studies (Farnell et al., 2021).

The pieces of evidence collected so far are not surprising since, as said already, size, and scientific profiles of CG universities look rather harmonized

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6 Due to its broad nature, we have selected the Times Higher Education World University Index (www.timeshighereducation.com), which measures the academic performance across four areas: teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook. In order to compare the reputational ranking of our universities at the time of the pandemic outbreak, we have selected the 2021 ranking.
in a comparative perspective. However, other factors are not correlated to the short-term decline of mobility: for instance, geographic area distribution (the two central columns matching ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ HEIs against the others), and the human development index for 2021. More surprisingly, we notice a weak significant negative coefficient between the decrease of mobility and COVID-19 stringency policies, measured across countries. This may be a spurious correlation, but also a sign of a positive attitude toward maintaining mobility plans in those countries where the pandemic had hit hard at the beginning (for instance, Spain and Italy), imposing severe measures.

Interesting evidence comes from the bivariate correlation between EU membership measures and a decrease of student mobility. The actual status of EU member does not matter: some British or Norwegian universities prove a much more resilient figure of mobilities in comparison to the universities of some EU countries. However, a convincing and significant (negative) correlation appears between the decrease of mobility and the duration of EU membership. This is, indeed, a measure that works well as a proxy of the goodness of fit among higher education institutions in Europe (including, to a large extent, UK) and also as an indicator of familiarity with several practices of inter-institutional cooperation, for instance, the procedures provided by the Erasmus+ scheme. This piece of evidence anticipates one of the points we will exploit in the qualitative analysis below: the existence of good ex-ante instruments of mobility protection is a fundamental requisite to build a solid system of solidarity among the European HEIs in pursuing their goals of internationalization.

Although still rather feeble, the correlation analysis we have presented seems to indicate that, at least within the cluster of CG universities, the only structural factor driving to a massive phenomenon of renounce of potential mobility experiences among students during the dramatic phase of pandemic is the lack of a strong and long-standing mutual familiarity between partners. This may have worked as an additional reason to convince the academic bodies to suspend the mobility. And, also, to persuade

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7 For the purpose of this analysis, we have adopted as a measure of stringency the 2020 average of the COVID-19 Oxford Stringency Index (Ritchie et al., 2021).
Towards a ‘care-sharing’ model?

the students to renounce to their plans, given their concern about ‘non-familiar’ academic environments and practices in the hosting institution.

Table 2. Impact of structural factors on the decrease of student mobility of CG universities. Correlation analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Univer-Size</th>
<th>THE World University Ranking (2021)</th>
<th>Full STEM academic profile</th>
<th>Northern Europe vs. others</th>
<th>Southern Europe vs. others</th>
<th>Human Development Index</th>
<th>COVID-19 Stringency Index (2020 average)</th>
<th>EU membership</th>
<th>EU membership duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson coefficients</td>
<td>-.134</td>
<td>015</td>
<td>-.332*</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>-.147</td>
<td>-147</td>
<td>-.269*</td>
<td>-.144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>034</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>037</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CG AEM Working Group Survey
Note: The table reports the correlation coefficients between the variables indicated in the first row and the figures concerning the decrease of student mobility (Graph 2 above).

3. Ex-ante protection of mobility and ad hoc measures under the pandemic. A qualitative analysis

The descriptive analysis of the phenomenon at the core of this article confirms what the actors engaged at the forefront in the protection of student mobility affirmed since the pandemic’s beginning: the problem is a serious one, since the loss of mobility is not simply measurable in terms of short-term damage, and it seems to be connected to several factors. Overall, the lack of readiness to cope with this problem severely

8 For instance, see the study of Erasmus Student Network (Gabriels and Benke-Aberg, 2020), or the reports from the European Solidarity Corps published on the webpages of Erasmus+ National Agencies.
tests the system of academic integration and the attitudes of future generations of students.

At the same time, our data corroborate the idea that a consolidated multilateral and intensive cooperation, like the one provided by the CG network, may constitute an ideal environment to respond to this complex challenge. Indeed, exchanging information on crisis resolution measures may work better where well-established practices of mutual recognition and familiarity are already developed.

In this section, we summarise a qualitative analysis based on the responses provided by representatives of the CG universities to the post-pandemic 2021 survey, complemented by the information extracted from 10 open-ended interviews we have collected more recently with experts from the same network, in order to have a fully comparable set of answers from the whole network. The basic idea is to assess the goodness of fit within this perimeter of CG HEIs, looking at the two conceptual dimensions mentioned above: ex-ante instruments of mobility protection and ad hoc instruments of crisis resolution. The two sets of indicators listed in table 1 will represent our checklist.

Therefore, we will connect the main findings from our assessment to a (more or less) efficient and homogeneous scenario observed in the aftermath of the first and dramatic wave of a pandemic outbreak. More in detail, we will clarify to what extent the CG members were responsive in all the dimensions of analysis represented by our indicators. This will allow us to get a better assessment of the performance of CG as a whole community, and identify the main points of criticality, before drawing some conclusive implications about the overall capability of a network (representative of the universe of European comprehensive HEIs) to trace a path of care-sharing practices.

Moving from an attentive reading of the comments of the interviewees, we will go through our theoretical framework in a reversed order, starting with the ad hoc instruments to cope with the pandemic. Table 3 below offers a summary of such a qualitative analysis, that will be complemented by a parsimonious commentary on a few excerpts extracted from the transcriptions of our interviews.
Table 3. Post-pandemic protection of student mobility. The experience of CG universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ad hoc instruments to cope with pandemic crisis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student cooperation during crisis management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Availability of technological skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Availability of financial resources</td>
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<td>Availability of skilled personnel</td>
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<table>
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<th>Ex-ante instruments of mobility protection</th>
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<tr>
<td>Historical record of cooperation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let us start with a fundamental element of innovation: the trend toward the responsible participation of the students in the construction of the new model of mobility. Although the tones used by the CG experts and the viewpoints about the choices of the European Commission may significantly vary, there is a unanimous recognition of the effort made recently and, significantly enough, several respondents stress the direct involvement (since the beginning of the emergency) of students in this process.\(^9\)

The increasing relevance of new strategies and specific material resources put in action by the CG institutions to improve digitalization and IT

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\(^9\) The answer we have chosen here to summarize this frequent assessment is: ‘our IRO has developed a new strategy in collaboration with the Education Division and the Digital-learning Office. The strategy foresees promotional activities as well as training courses and the development of recognition procedures both for staff and for students in terms of credits’. This seems to be a very shared approach within the CG network. Some respondents present even more advanced views. For instance, they announce the increasing involvement of the local Erasmus Student Network representatives and the student associations in the definition of new guidelines for international strategy.
skills among staff members and students has been also mentioned in several interviews. Overall, this remains a critical aspect since the problem of digitalization is still far from being solved, due to the discrepancies and the lack of homogeneity across and within countries. However, we have observed quite a widespread positive attitude towards the experimentation developed during the pandemic, which has involved a large part of academics and staff.

Reasonably, all the respondents have also stressed the development of attention of their HEIs to consolidate (and, in some case, to increase thanks to incremental budgetary decisions and *ad hoc* recruitment) the personnel and the financial resources deserved to student mobility. In particular, the *International Relation Offices* and the other services dealing with services to students.

As expected, the questions concerning the use of new schemes of funding for mobility and investments in skilled personnel look much more divisive since these issues recall, even within a cohesive network like CG, the variance due to the differences in the availability of resources and the legal framework across European universities. However, many respondents have stressed the importance of these actions. This particularly applies to the issues of reinvesting the leftovers and renovating a solid commitment toward mobility funding\(^\text{10}\), which are conceived as fundamental actions to be taken in a genuinely collaborative and well-rooted supranational network\(^\text{11}\).

\(^{10}\) A recurrent argument here is summarised by this answer: ‘*[our institution]* is reconsidering the amount of funding dedicated to physical mobility of staff’. Another important element is the attention towards the investment for adequate practices of online teaching and learning: ‘Investments have been made to equip lecture halls and meeting rooms with technologies enabling online interaction’. Finally, many respondents stress the specific point of reinvestment for innovative and collaborative cooperation: ‘Transnational dimension of teaching and learning continues to be of utmost importance for our university. […] Virtual forms of interaction among students and professors have been developed and fostered. […] This innovation has a cost, but it will bring important outcomes in the long run’.

\(^{11}\) An illustrative statement, recalling many similar assertions, connects the profitable use of innovation in academic exchange to the existence of a common culture of mobility: ‘New formats of blended learning will primarily be carried out with long-term partners, within our European networks’.
Towards a ‘care-sharing’ model?

Hence, the positive usage of *ad hoc* instruments to cope with the pandemic is associated by several CG officeholders to the impact of previous experiences and particularly to the persistence of shared attitudes to problem-solving, which is one of the indicators connected to our first theoretical dimension. This is a basic but relevant hint of the intrinsic value of the correlation between the two sets of indicators listed in Table 3. Of course, finding explicit assertions devoted to the acquaintance to shared practices is not frequent in a broad but still limited survey like the one we run. However, the association between the procedural flexibility employed during the pandemic (supported by political decisions in Brussels and at the national and local level) and the mutual knowledge among academic mobility partners is frequent in our respondents’ answers. This emphasis on mutual awareness about needs and practices from the partners is, in turn, connected by several respondents to the need to circulate full information about changing procedures and opportunities of mobility among all the actors of a given university: the governing bodies, the central offices (IROs and enrolment central services), the Heads of departments and faculties, the Erasmus coordinators and, of course, the community of students. Critical comments about the problems with this deep-rooted problem of comprehensive internationalization (Hudzik, 2011; 2015) are also frequent. But it is important to stress that, independently of a more or less favorable assessment of their context, several respondents underline the crucial role of inclusive involvement in academic organisations. Moreover, more than ever, students are at the

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12 We report an illustrative comment from one of our respondents who talks about communication tools: ‘The pandemic has certainly proven the flexibility of staff members in using diverse digital communication tools for the benefit of a continued collaboration. The key priorities of the programme address current pressing issues in societies and in general meet the main goals of the development plan of our universities. This goal can be pursued especially when mobility networks are established and the staff from the partner universities are in touch’.

13 Most of the time, this argument is presented as positive evidence from an ongoing learning process. For instance: ‘we tried to streamline procedures as much as possible and involved all faculties and various departments in the process of academic mobility’. In other comments, there is a clear awareness of the added value from the specific experience during the pandemic: ‘The result was that, even more than before, the outgoing mobility policy for semester 1 of academic year 2021-22 was established in close cooperation between the stakeholders in the central office and all our faculties’.
core of this ambitious goal of comprehensive sharing, as testified by the numerous mentions of collaboration with local associations and the Erasmus Student Network\textsuperscript{14} and with the reference on the impact on (international/visiting) students determined by new instruments/programs of involvement organized with the help of other (resident/older) students\textsuperscript{15}. Although the survey did not ask for specific assessments on the point, several respondents stressed the importance of historical cooperation records, connecting resilience and good practices to participation in networks, and the opportunity to exchange views and assess the successes of long-term partnership. This is particularly relevant in networks like the CG, where some working groups are composed mainly of staff members with extensive experience in the field of academic mobility. These actors have now the difficult task to lead the management of mobility out of the emergency, re-motivating the new cohorts of students and staff.

Conclusion. Nothing will ever be the same as before… it could be much better

In this article, we first discussed the protection of student mobility of the members of a well-established network of European universities, arguing that multilateral cooperation and networking are still relevant in defending this pillar of academic internationalization in a post-pandemic scenario. Subsequently, we have analysed the frequency and the scope of the attitudes of a sample of experts (staff representatives from the CG universities) by means of a broad qualitative survey.

\textsuperscript{14} Such an effort is explicitly recalled by our respondents who argue that some specific measures implemented during the crisis are true lesson learnt for future post-pandemic perspectives: ‘We have participated, together with ESN, in the transfer of repatriated students’ belongings. For instance, under the Solidarity Mechanism initiative, which has proved to be a very positive experience even for the future of mobility’.

\textsuperscript{15} The titles and the goals of such programs can vary (buddy system model, support to associations of international students, peer-to-peer students’ service, etc.) but there is a red line among several new initiatives finalised to students’ integration that have been developed during the phases of lock-down.
Towards a ‘care-sharing’ model?

The study produces several suggestions. Some of them will be useful in the perspective of a mere action of benchmarking of good practices for mid-term re-arrangements of student mobility in Europe. In particular, the experts from the CG universities clearly converge on a quest for a more productive alignment between European and local rules on digital procedures. Moreover, they wish to reduce redundancies experiencing some flexible mobility schemes even in a post-pandemic scenario. Finally, they argue that the adaptation of the channels of communication and support to international students, which already emerged during the pandemic, should be strengthened and consolidated.

In a more innovative and experimental perspective, our respondents seem to converge on the utility of a rapid implementation of virtual and blended-mobility experiences, not to decrease the figures traditional mobility, but actually to create further channels of transnational integration in addition to that. We are not going to elaborate further on the details of these messages, already presented elsewhere (for instance, Coimbra Group, 2021). Here, we are interested in the theoretical implications of our exploration. In particular, we stress a significative corroboration of our working hypothesis about the connection between ex-ante mobility protection instruments and ad hoc crisis resolution instruments.

This connection exists. Stakeholders are aware of it. In particular, they know that coherent academic profiles and mutual knowledge among universities are fundamental requisites to protect mobility beyond the short-term goals of the pandemic conjuncture. In the introduction of our study, we have argued that such connection can conduct to good practices of mobility protection adapting the new tools discovered after each critical conjuncture (crises, but also robust changes in the flow of mobility funding, relevant changes due to digitalization, etc.). The CG presents the relevant mission of preserving the characteristics of old European city campuses, that is not just a ‘brand’. Indeed, the role of this kind of academic institution has always been crucial in designing cultural integration in Europe. The revamping of this model after the crisis will also contribute to the economy in several countries (Likhovtseva, 2021). Of course, a similar argument applies to other networks representing other coherent academic missions: technological and specialised universities, metropolitan universities, territorial universities, etc.
We have defined such multidimensional and multifunctional logic as ‘care-sharing’. That is, a comprehensive and pre-emptive adjustment strategy benefits from multilateral actions. It is undoubtedly too early to define a precise operationalization of all the dimensions of a successful care-sharing strategy. However, it is evident from this exploration that such a responsible strategy will concur, after adequate fine-tuning among partners, to return soon to high rates of mobility, disseminating at the same time the values of social and environmental sustainability among European learners. This seems to be consistent with maximizing the opportunities (De Wit and Marinoni, 2021), avoiding the risk of ‘naive optimism’, and proposing a genuine and sustainable model of internationalization.

References


Towards a ‘care-sharing’ model?


