Transitions on hold?

How the Covid-19 pandemic affected young people's transitions to autonomy

Youth Knowledge #30

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth

Transitions on hold?

How the Covid-19 pandemic affected young people's transitions to autonomy

Editors
Ewa Krzaklewska
Howard Williamson
Amy Stapleton
Frank Tillmann

Project management
Tanya Basarab

Youth Knowledge #30

Council of Europe and European Commission

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Cover design: Documents and Publications Production Department (SPDP), Council of Europe
Layout: insécable, Strasbourg
Cover photo: Shutterstock

Council of Europe Publishing
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex
http://book.coe.int

ISBN 978-92-871-9341-4 (PDF)
ISBN 978-92-871-9340-7
© Council of Europe and European Commission, October 2023
Printed at the Council of Europe

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Author biographies

Claire Baker is an independent researcher. She was formerly at the University of York. She has, for over 20 years, specialised in research focusing on the experiences and outcomes for young people in and leaving care. Over this time Baker has worked in both academic and senior policy roles, influencing the legislative and policy context and advancing research knowledge. She has published nationally and internationally as well as creating tools for practice. For example, to fill a gap in service standards, she created the "Baker and Dixon" leaving care self-assessment framework, which is well regarded by organisations as a tool to understand strengths and areas for improvement.

Ryan Oliver Bautista SDB, MA, MATh is a priest member of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Originally from the Philippines, he was sent to Lithuania in 2019 as a missionary working for the pastoral care of young people. He arrived in Telšiai on January 2020 just before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. He was the founding Salesian animator of Wings of Don Bosco. Currently, he is the administrator of the Salesian community in Vilnius. He holds a bachelor's degree in Biology from the University of the Philippines–Manila, an MA in Philosophy from the University of Santo Tomas–Manila, and a bachelor's degree in Sacred Theology, an MA in Theology from the Don Bosco Center of Studies, Parañaque; he is an affiliate of the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome. He is actively involved in the fields of education and youth ministry, serving as an animator of various youth organisations. He headed the philosophy department of Don Bosco College, Canlubang, Laguna, and continued to give philosophy lectures online during the pandemic. His primary fields of research are philosophy of nature, ecology, youth culture, sacred scriptures and interdisciplinary (science, philosophy, theology) studies.

Daniel Briggs PhD is Professor of Criminology at Northumbria University in the UK. Previously he worked at the Universidad Europea in Madrid, Spain. As a researcher, writer and interdisciplinary academic who studies social problems, he has undertaken ethnographic research into social issues ranging from street drug users to terminally ill patients, from refugees to prostitutes and from Roma to gangs and deviant youth behaviours. He also lectures across the social sciences and has published widely. His book, *Dead end lives: Drugs and violence in the city shadows* (Policy Press 2017), won the Division of International Criminology's Outstanding Book Award 2018 (selected by the American Society of Criminology). His recent books include *Climate changed: Refugee border stories and the business of misery* (Routledge, 2020), *Researching the Covid-19 pandemic: A critical blueprint for the social sciences* (Bristol University Press 2021) and *Lockdown: Social harm in the Covid-19 era* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021). His latest book is *Hotel Puta: A hardcore ethnography of a luxury brothel* (Restorative Justice Publications 2022).

David Cairns is Principal Researcher at the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, ISCTE–University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal. His research interests include youth, mobility, education and employment. He has participated in numerous projects, including two large-scale European Commission studies, and is currently working on a project entitled Circulation of Science, looking at precariousness in careers in science. To date, he has over 100 publications, including eight books and numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, including *International Migration*; *Mobilities*; *British Journal of Sociology of Education*; *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*; *Social and Cultural Geography*; *Journal of Youth Studies*; *Children's Geographies* and *Young*, and is also the editor of the recently published *Palgrave handbook of youth mobility and educational migration*.

Cristina Calvanelli is a Researcher at the Istituto degli Innocenti for the monitoring of policies for the protection and promotion of children's rights. She graduated in Political Science and works in co-ordination with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies in the field of public policy and in supporting the institutional governance for implementation of the Project for Care Leavers.

Rosa Capobianco is Associate Professor of Statistics at the Department of Education of the University of Roma Tre, where she teaches Social Statistics and Statistical Methods for Social Research. She is the author of numerous essays on methodological statistics and data analysis.

Francesco Chezzi holds a PhD in Education and a bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Florence. He is Researcher in the research and monitoring service at Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence, and national co-ordinator of the project for the inclusion and integration of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children.

Adriana Ciampa is Head of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies Office for Social Planning, Secretariat of the Network of Social Protection and Inclusion, Management and Planning of Social Transfers, and Childhood and Adolescence Policies. She is an expert on policies for the promotion of children's rights and the fight against poverty and social exclusion. She is the head of the national project for the inclusion and integration of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children.

Mara Clemente is Integrated Researcher at the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology, ISCTE–University Institute of Lisbon, and an Associate Researcher of the Emigration Observatory (OEm) of the same institute. Her research interests are focused on migration and gender issues, and qualitative research methods, with her fields of expertise covering human trafficking, refugees, sex work, tourism and sex tourism. Through funding provided by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), Mara is currently working on the research project The Construction of Counter-Trafficking Regimes in Mediterranean Europe: Actors, Discourses and Representations, the main objective of which is to analyse anti-trafficking systems in southern Europe (2018-24).

Anna Dadswell is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University, UK. Her research interests are in the use of inclusive and creative methodologies to explore the mental health and well-being of different groups, including women and young people. She has worked alongside

Niamh O'Brien on participatory research projects with young people leaving the care system and in the field of bullying. Anna is currently undertaking her PhD research, which takes a feminist social constructionist approach to explore how young women with anxiety understand their experiences and find ways of living well with anxiety.

Sara Degl'Innocenti is a Researcher at the Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence in the field of sociological policy, with a focus on the topic of vulnerable children. She graduated in Education; she is part of the technical support team and co-ordinates activities in the field related to the Project for Care Leavers.

Miriam Della Mura is a Research Fellow at the Department of Political and Communication Sciences and a Researcher at the Youth Observatory, University of Salerno. She is currently in charge of a course of supplementary teaching in Sociology at the Department of Economic and Statistic Science. Her research interests cover youth studies, digital media and research methods.

Alonso Escamilla is member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) of the EU–CoE Youth Partnership. He has developed several research projects on youth transitions for the European Commission, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund and the EU-LAC Foundation. He also is a member of the Pool of Trainers of the European Youth Forum, Spanish Youth Council and Extremadura Youth Council.

Seana Friel is a Research Fellow at the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care at the University of Bedfordshire, UK, working on the Care Leavers, Covid-19 and Transitions from Care study. Seana is an experienced mixed-method researcher and has worked on various projects, such as a study for the Department for Education exploring pathways to employment for care leavers and an evaluation of Crisis UK's Tackling Multiple Disadvantage project for people experiencing homelessness. Seana is particularly interested in participatory research methods and has worked as a care-experienced researcher on a longitudinal study exploring transitions and outcomes for care leavers in Northern Ireland.

Dora Giannaki is a Political Scientist and Security and Justice Expert. She has been conducting research on youth issues for more than 10 years, publishing essays, articles and chapters in relevant books. Since January 2021, she has been a member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR). She is currently collaborating with the Centre for Political Research of Panteion University, Athens, Greece.

Mauro Giardiello is Associate Professor of Sociology of Cultural Processes at the Department of Education of the University of Roma Tre, where he teaches Sociology of Education and Families and Social Networks. He is the author of numerous essays and books relating to the themes of the study of local communities, youth mobility, social cohesion and generativity, and marginality.

Monica Grassi works at the Istituto degli Innocenti in Florence. She is a Sociologist specialised in Planning and Management of Social Policies and Services. She is national tutor of the national project for the inclusion and integration of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children.

Veronika Gyurovicsova was an undergraduate student at the University of South Wales during the Covid-19 pandemic. Studying social sciences (compulsory and optional modules in sociology and public services), her final year dissertation explored the impact of the pandemic on students in relation both to their academic learning and their social networks. She is passionate about current affairs and their implications on society, and she has recently been involved in a number of projects with a well-known research organisation in Wales.

Karen Hemming is a Senior Researcher at the German Youth Institute in the Youth Transitions department, with an interdisciplinary perspective including sociology and educational sciences on youth-related topics. Her research interests are non-formal education, social deprivation and, lately especially, the effects of the pandemic on school-to-work transitions.

Irene Hofmann-Lun is a Senior Researcher at the German Youth Institute in the Youth Transitions department. Her research interests are inclusion in formal education, inclusion in the transition from school to vocational training, and currently the effects of the pandemic on school-to-work transitions.

Gilda Isernia works for the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) as Research and Project Officer and as Social Media Manager for the Federation of International Civil Servants' Associations (FICSA). She holds a BA (Hons) in African Studies and Swahili at SOAS, University of London. Her primary research interests are labour rights, student rights, global inequalities, democracy and participation. Her latest research project: *Why vote? An investigation on the attitudes, challenges and views of youth on the vote for the European Parliament elections 2024* was published early in 2023.

Justyna Kajta PhD is a Sociologist in the Youth Research Center at the SWPS University in Warsaw. Her research interests include youth, political engagement, social inequalities and biographical methods. The author of works published in such journals as *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics*, *European Review* and *Qualitative Sociology Review*, she is a post-doc in the ULTRAGEN project.

Ewa Krzaklewska PhD is a Sociologist and works as an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Her research interests relate to youth sociology and transitions to adulthood, youth mobility and migration, as well as gender equality. She has published in relation to theoretical debates around the concept of adulthood and adulthood transitions, as well as diagnosing transformations in adulthood transitions with special emphasis on migration and mobility experiences of this young generation. Her contribution to debates on youth policy and youth work includes participation in expert groups, several reports and articles, as well as three books: *Youth policy in Ukraine* (with Howard Williamson, Council of Europe 2013); *Learning mobility, social inclusion and non-formal education: Access, processes and outcomes* (edited with Maurice Devlin, Søren Kristensen and Magda Nico, Council of Europe 2017); and *Youth worker education in Europe: Policies, structures, practices* (with Marti Taru and Tanya Basarab, Council of Europe 2020). She is a member of the Advisory Group of the Pool of the European Youth Researchers of the European Union–Council of Europe Partnership in the field of youth.

Jenni Lahtinen is a Researcher at the Finnish Youth Research Society. Her most recent research projects have focused on young people's experiences and well-being in the time of Covid-19. She is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Eastern Finland.

Stefania Leone is Professor in General Sociology and Director of the Youth Observatory in the Department of Political and Communication Sciences, University of Salerno. She teaches Sociology, Social Research and Public Policy and Public Communication at the University of Salerno. Her research fields are youth studies, social interaction, public space and policies, and research methods.

Irina Lonean PhD is a Researcher and Project Manager at the Centre for Sustainable Community Development in Romania. She has, since 2014, conducted evaluation studies of international, national and local initiatives promoting well-being and support services for children and young people. She participated in writing "Youth policy evaluation review" and drafted "Insights into social inclusion and digitalisation", both by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership in 2020. Since February 2021 she has been part of the team working on development of the online Knowledge HUB: Covid-19 impact on the youth sector, hosted by the Youth Partnership.

Marta Molina is currently a MA candidate in European Political and Governance Studies at the College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium). Previously, she graduated from the dual degree programme in International Relations and Global Communication at Comillas Pontifical University (Madrid), majoring in International Security and Foreign Policy. Her research focuses on European Union institutions and foreign policy instruments as well as climate security issues.

Emily Munro is Professor of Social Work Research and Director of the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. She is Chair of the International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (INTRAC), and co-edited *Young people's transitions from care to adulthood: International research and practice* (Stein and Munro 2008). She is currently Principal Investigator on an Economic and Social Research Council funded study on Care Leavers, Covid-19 and the Transition from Care.

Fiona Newlands is a PhD student at the Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health at UCL in London. Her PhD focuses on the mental health of children and young people with long-Covid. Prior to this, Fiona worked as a Research Fellow at the Tilda Goldberg Centre for Social Work and Social Care at the University of Bedfordshire.

Niamh O'Brien is an Associate Professor of Social Inclusion and Young People in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University, UK. Her expertise is in undertaking participatory approaches to research involving young people so they can have a voice in areas which interest and/or affect them. Niamh is particularly interested in hearing the views of young people in the care system as well as those leaving it. She has undertaken several participatory research projects exploring bullying, including her PhD research which explored bullying in a private day and boarding school using a Participatory Action Research framework.

Andrea Orio is a Research Fellow in General Sociology at the Youth Observatory, Department of Political and Communication Science, University of Salerno. His

research interests revolve around youth studies, analysis of youth policies and research methods.

Luisa Pandolfi is Researcher of Experimental Education at the University of Sassari. Her main research topics concern planning and evaluation of educational interventions for children in residential care and youth care, and transition paths of care leavers. A member of the INTRAC Steering Group, she is also a member of the scientific committee of the Project for Care Leavers.

Maria-Carmen Pantea is Professor in Sociology at Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania, and a member of the Advisory Group of the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership's Pool of European Youth Researchers. She is also a member of the European Commission Expert Group on Quality Investment in Education and Training. Her research interests are in young people's working transitions: vocational education and training, youth entrepreneurship and graduates' overqualification. She has an MA with Merit in Gender Studies (CEU 2002), an MSc in Evidence-Based Social Interventions (Oxford 2007) and a PhD in Sociology (BBU 2008). Her publications include *Precarity and vocational education and training* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019). She was the rapporteur for the Youth Partnership's 2022 symposium, Navigating Transitions.

Georgios Papanicolaou is Associate Professor at Northumbria Law School, Northumbria University, UK. His research interests include the political economy of policing and police reform and democratisation. He is co-author of *Organised crime: A very short introduction* (Oxford University Press 2018) and the author of *Transnational policing and sex trafficking in southeast Europe: Policing the imperialist chain* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011). He is an associate editor of *Criminology and Criminal Justice* and a member of the editorial board of *Trends in Organised Crime*.

Paula Pustulka PhD is a Sociologist in the Youth Research Center at the SWPS University in Warsaw, working at the intersection of youth, family and migration studies. Her research has been published in, among others, the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, the *Journal of Youth Studies* and *Education and Work*. She is the Director of the Youth Research Center and Principal Investigator for the ULTRAGEN project Becoming an Adult in times of Ultra-Uncertainty: Intergenerational Theory of "Shaky" Transitions, funded by the National Science Center, Poland.

Jowita Radzińska, PhD candidate, is a Sociologist and Ethicist. She works at the Youth Research Center at the SWPS University in Warsaw. Her area of expertise is solidarity and the sociology of morality. She holds a scholarship in the ULTRAGEN project.

Valentina Rossi is a Researcher at the Istituto degli Innocenti for the monitoring of policies for the protection and promotion of children's rights. She graduated in Law and works in co-ordination with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies in the field of public policy and in supporting the institutional governance for implementation of the Project for Care Leavers.

Mikko Salasuo is a Docent in economic and social history and works at the Finnish Youth Research Society as a leading senior researcher. He has studied youth and the lives of young people from different perspectives for over 20 years. His research topics include subcultures and popular culture, youth culture, life courses, the history

of youth culture, young people’s leisure time and hobbies and drug cultures. He is an adjunct Fellow of the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, Australia.

Amy Stapleton is a PhD Researcher at the School of Social Work and Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin, focused on separated young people's transition to adulthood. She is a member of the EU– Council of Europe Youth Partnership Pool of European Youth Researchers. She actively contributes to evidence-based European policy making in the field of youth and migration. Most recently, Amy co-authored *Turning 18 with confidence: A Practical Guide to the Council of Europe Recommendation on Supporting Young Refugees in Transition to Adulthood.* Amy is policy officer with the Irish National Contact Point of the European Migration Network in the Irish Economic and Social Research Institute. She holds a master’s degree in intercultural mediation and migration studies and has 10 years’ professional experience working directly with marginalised communities. Amy is also a freelance project manager and youth trainer with experience working on international, national and local commissioned projects. She focuses primarily on the areas of human rights education, social inclusion, youth and migration policy, youth transitions and youth participation.

Frank Tillmann is a Sociologist and a Doctor of Philosophy. He works as a Senior Researcher at the German Youth Institute, within the Youth Transitions research unit in Halle (Saale), Germany. His fields of research comprise school-to-work transitions, social exclusion in the youth age, growing up in rural areas and non-governmental welfare systems. Since 2020 he has been a member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers at the European Union– Council of Europe Youth Partnership.

Howard Williamson is Professor of European Youth Policy at the University of South Wales, UK. He is a qualified youth worker and volunteered during the pandemic as a Covid-19 community resilience youth support worker. He has worked on youth policy at many levels of governance and co-ordinated the Council of Europe international youth policy reviews. He has lectured and published widely on young people, youth policy and youth work. His latest books are *The Milltown boys at sixty: The origins and destinations of young men from a poor neighbourhood* (Routledge 2021); *About time! A reference manual for youth policy from a European perspective*, with Max Fras and Zara Lavchyan (Youth Partnership 2021); and, with James Côté, *Advanced introduction to youth studies* (Edward Elgar 2022).

Gabrielė Žalpytė is currently a 12th-grade student at Panevėžio Mikalausko menų gimanzija. She was an 11th-grade student at Telšių Vincento Borisevičiaus gymnasium, Lithuania, when she became the founding president of Wings of Don Bosco. Moreover, she has been participating in other environment-related organisations such as scouts and animal shelters. Her enthusiasm for nature’s well-being has led to her decision to make her lifestyle more sustainable and minimalistic. She strives to be a jeweller who will be repairing old, unwanted accessories and make sustainable jewellery from upcycled waste. By joining Wings of Don Bosco, she hopes to create and foster a more environmentally conscious and mindful community in Lithuania.

Introduction

Youth transitions in the Covid-19 pandemic: testing youth policy in uncertain presents and fragile futures

Ewa Krzaklewska, Howard Williamson, Frank Tillmann and Amy Stapleton

The epidemiological crisis of Covid-19 is also a youth crisis – a new condition deeply impacting the lives of young people, their well-being and their future perspectives. This book explores the impact of Covid-19 on youth transitions to autonomy and the policy response aimed at supporting young people during this never-ending pandemic. The reflections aim to generate knowledge regarding potentially effective and successful youth policy interventions in the context of youth transitions and the Covid-19 period, but also their potential in other crises that could "shake" youth and make their transition to adult independence riskier and more precarious, with uncertain outcomes in need of a robust policy response.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaped the recent years of the world's history and it is not yet over. Beyond its medical face and the human tragedy related to the deaths of loved ones or harsh health consequences, it has also been a social process reshaping the ways we live, communicate, educate and work. While the pandemic impact was ubiquitous, many of its effects were experienced in very different ways. One group that was strikingly affected, socially if often less so physically, was – and is – young people.

It is important to think of the ongoing pandemic as not just an external condition that shapes the lives, opportunities and choices of youth, but also as a liveable experience of young people, which may possibly be redefined as a generational one. It involves and shapes their practices, values, relationships, future plans, resilience and dissent. There is already popular reference to the "Covid generation". The Covid-19 pandemic has become an embedded feature of their youth experience, with mostly negative consequences in: the quality of education; labour market precarity; worsened mental health; the quality and bonding of personal relationships; the grinding to a halt of personal and sometimes social mobility; the occurrence of violence behind closed doors; and diminished democratic participation and representation.

The impact of the pandemic is palpably uneven, dependent on context and resources, both individual and institutional – suggesting the need for a diversified response on the part of youth work, wider national youth policies and the European institutions. The chapters of this volume point to the rise in inequalities and the particularly severe impact on marginalised groups of young people, such as care leavers,

minorities, migrants and those often so crudely depicted as NEETs (young people not in employment, education or training). Hence the clear interest in policy interventions directed at supporting those young people who are most disadvantaged and with the fewest resources.

Youth transitions to autonomy – theories and debates

The "youth" period is characterised by different challenging transitions, often related to each other, that mark young people's pathway into adulthood (Walther et al. 2002). The classic and widely agreed normative position, as reported by Williamson and Côté (2022: 10) has been that

> the transition to adulthood was a relatively linear process for the majority of young people making their way past the five milestones associated with modern Western conventions of adulthood … These five milestones are: completing education, adopting work roles, independent living, marriage, and parenthood.

After leaving school it is institutionally initiated but also normatively expected that young people will take up vocational, further or higher education and then enter the labour market later on, and also leave the parental home and form a family – even though life scripts have become more diverse (Heinz 2009). While some researchers may question whether or not the perspective of transitions serves very well to understand the biographical phase of youth nowadays (White et al. 2017), it is still valuable to emphasise the importance of timing and duration in respect of the social reality experienced by young people and the obstacles they have to face. On the one hand, youth researchers have highlighted the meaning of "agency" as an ability to take appropriate actions in managing transitions under conditions of given structures (Schoon and Lions-Amos 2017). On the other hand, they have criticised the concept of agency as a mechanism for blaming the individual for failure, in particular in times of structural difficulties and also when faced by persisting inequalities of access to resources (Walther et al. 2009). There is, therefore, agreement about the need to accommodate a subjective look at what counts as success in youth transitions and to reject any dependence on one-dimensional pre-defined criteria.

Even before the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, there was increasing empirical evidence that across developed countries within recent decades youth transitions have become less linear and less sequential, more prolonged and de-standardised (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Schoon and Silbereisen 2009; Jones 2009; Antonucci et al. 2014). This extension of the phase of transitions can shape space to gain new experiences and to find self-identity (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). At the same time, on account of de-standardisation (whereby youth transitions are more variable, complex and reversible), it has become more difficult for young people to anticipate the consequences of their transition-related decisions under the increasingly uncertain conditions of life planning (Heinz 2009). For this reason, some youth researchers also see enhanced risks in the prolongation of transitional phases – such as ending up in precarious work or missing out on family formation (Blossfeld et al. 2005).

Notwithstanding the agency and abilities of young people to shape their futures, the transitions of young people into adulthood are also strongly circumscribed by

social and legal institutions. In Europe different transition regimes (Walther 2006, 2010) can be identified – contextualising the decision-making processes, constraining available options and providing different agencies and avenues of support.

The Covid-19 pandemic threw the classic thinking about youth transitions into relief, calling for some reflection and review, though not necessarily producing complete revision of that thinking, even if the balance of issues and ideas (particularly the stretching of opportunity and disadvantage) required some theoretical re-appraisal. After all, as is pointed out in Chapter 1, like other social upheavals or economic crises, the pandemic proved to be an "abrupt confrontation of an entire society with new demands on the life course", a kind of shock therapy questioning the basis of society (Reiter 2010: 17-18). Emanating from this crisis, a far-reaching uncertainty developed among young people, which can be explained as insecurity in the "outer circle", which is related to external realities (Vornanen et al. 2009). At the time of writing, a hot-off-the-press study, "Class of Covid", published by the Prince's Trust, has reported that "Covid has left a third of young people feeling life is out of control".

The pandemic hit Europe after the social security systems in most European countries had been cut back over previous decades, and after social policy was often deemed inappropriate to mitigate transition-related risks for young people (Roberts and Antonucci 2018). The context generated for young people by the pandemic put this political ideology to the test. The editorial team collected experiences from countries that covered different transition "regimes" throughout Europe, acknowledging the variable nature of youth policy across these regimes, given its pervasive potential to enhance or restrict the life chances of young people in different ways.

All over Europe during the pandemic the extent of uncertainty has been increasing, and young people especially have had to face impositions on their activities and plans, such as going abroad for study, taking up an internship or other forms of learning mobility (Krzaklewska and Şenyuva 2020). The insights of youth research into the impact of the pandemic as collected in this book illustrate the manifold consequences of the changed circumstances surrounding the ramifications of and responses to Covid-19 – both direct and indirect. It becomes obvious rather quickly how well Ulrich Beck´s theory of the risk society (Beck 1996) applies to the ongoing crises when he describes new emerging risks produced by modern societies. Pandemics are risks produced by a world economy which draws from globalised supply chains and from the associated human mobility (Figus and de Serio 2020). Yet pandemics are also, no more and no less in some respects, just one of the many shocks that have affected and afflicted societies in general and young people in particular. The global economic crisis was not so long ago, and the ecological crisis as well as the energy crisis resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine have the potential to significantly lower the quality of life of European citizens.

Beck maintained that all groups of society are exposed to the consequences of new emerging risk, such as those accompanying the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, more or less in a similar way, since the risks are too ubiquitous to escape. Beck suggests this causes a dissolution of distinct social classes and the decrease of the formative power of vertical inequality, though some might well contest this assertion.

It is therefore of interest here to consider the extent to which such arguments apply to young people on their way to adulthood in times of the pandemic. Not only, arguably, have there been important differences in effect and experience between young people and other segments of society but there have been considerable differences amongst young people themselves, shaped both by their "structural" circumstances and their "agentic" motivations and capacity. The contributions to this book are a powerful testimony to this differential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's transitions to adulthood in contemporary Europe, revealing reassuring glimpses of resilience and adaptability as well as rather depressing confirmation of disadvantages and inequalities. They also point, implicitly if not explicitly, to the need for a critical assessment of how contemporary social policy for young people has played out under the conditions of the pandemic and what conclusions can be drawn from that experience.

Content of the book

The book is structured in five parts. Part I, "Support and institutional response", reflects on the institutional support for different groups of young people and young adults in their transitions to autonomy within diverse sectors, e.g. education, labour market, housing, social care. The chapters reflect on the consequences for youth well-being, social inclusion, participation, education and career pathways, suggesting strongly that some groups of young people were much more vulnerable – not necessarily to the Covid-19 disease per se but to the social consequences of regulations on social distancing, quarantine or distant learning/work. These chapters discuss how institutions such as schools or social care managed to adapt to the new conditions in order to best support young people, and also what support was crucially missing, with sometimes awful consequences for vulnerable young people. Karen Hemming and Irene Hofmann-Lun, in "Feeling (un-)certain? School-to-work transition during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany", look into the impact of the pandemic on vocational education and training students, revealing how – depending on their personal and social resources – students managed pandemic uncertainty, distance learning or lack of structural support in career orientation. Justyna Kajta, Paula Pustulka and Jowita Radzińska discuss, in Chapter 2, the impact of the pandemic on disruptions in housing transitions in Poland in the context of a general lack of housing policy solutions to support young people's transition to residential autonomy. Daniel Briggs, writing about "Covid-19, vulnerable children and young people, and the discontinuation of social care support" illustrates with three case studies from the United Kingdom (UK) the damaging consequences for young people of moving social care services online. Adriana Ciampa, Francesco Chezzi and Monica Grassi ("Supporting young people in the Covid-19 pandemic"), looking at findings from the Italian National Project for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children discuss the adaptation of support systems for excluded children and young people from minority groups in the light of Covid-19 restrictions, and the importance of necessary support, in particular in relation to online schooling. Luisa Pandolfi and her colleagues, in "Care leavers in transition to adulthood: effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, strategies and policy responses", consider new approaches to supporting care leavers' pathways towards autonomy. All chapters point to the importance of institutional support

in times of crisis, in particular for vulnerable groups, as the pandemic exacerbated their already difficult situation; every chapter underlines how the continuation of programmes and interventions by institutions, coupled with a more flexible approach demanded by the Covid-19 context, has been indispensable for supporting young people with fewer resources.

The second part of the book, "Mobility and digital space", debates the spatial dimension of transitions to adulthood in relation to young people's (im)mobility both within the physical places and countries that they inhabit and also within online environments. The Covid-19 pandemic was stringent in its restrictions on movement at all levels, from domestic arrangements and surrounding environments to international travel. For the first time in recent European history, countries introduced curfews as well as diverse regulations governing permissible movement. Such regulations sometimes addressed young people directly, causing them to feel scapegoated for spreading the virus and limiting their ability to move around the city if they were not with legal guardians. On top of restrictions at the local level, mobility between countries was blocked and severely constrained. David Cairns and Mara Clemente in their chapter "New dilemmas in young people's mobile transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic" suggest that there has been an "immobility turn" with regard to young people's transitions arguing that the pathways that previously incorporated diverse forms of mobility will now need to be seriously reconsidered, as the pandemic has revealed the inherent inequalities in international student mobility and on the precarious economic and social position of student migrants. Mauro Giardiello and Rosa Capobianco, in "How the Covid-19 pandemic affected 'the dream of mobility': transitions of young people in rural Italy", look at internal migrations and discuss the consequences of returning to one's locality in the southern regions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The "waiting room" forced young people to redefine their mobility plans but also, significantly, their relationship with their place of origin. Stefania Leone, Miriam Della Mura and Andrea Orio, in "Digital immersion during the Covid-19 lockdown: its impact on youth transitions through the eyes of young Italians", show how perception of the digital world has changed for young people as a result of moving education and work online, with reflection on the potential of this new space for knowledge, information and training, but also on its risks and inequalities. Finally, the chapter by Georgios Papanicolaou and Dora Giannaki, "Young people and the police during the Covid-19 pandemic: the case of Greece", makes the case that the Covid-19 related control regime featuring curfews and monitoring of movement in public spaces is related to the general trend of disciplining young people, with the pandemic providing mechanisms for accelerating this process.

Part III of the volume, "Participation and inclusion", explores the more participative experiences of young people during the Covid-19 crisis. The chapters consider not only particular topics but also research methodologies and approaches to interventions. Alsonso Escamilla and Marta Molina, in the chapter "The Youth Guarantee: learning from the experiences of young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Spain" look at the Youth Guarantee as a tool for ensuring the participation of young people, suggesting that in the Covid-19 pandemic the guarantee played a role for the social participation of young migrants and asylum seekers, but only to a limited degree in relation to their labour market insertion. Niamh O'Brien and Anna Dadswell,

in their chapter on "Listening to young people with disabilities: their experiences of support during the Covid-19 pandemic", discuss the experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their perspectives on the support provided during the Covid-19 pandemic in England. They stress the need to consider the voices of young people with disabilities in policy and programme design. Irina Lonean, in her chapter "Youth centres and youth workers' impact on young people and their transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania", points to the critical importance of youth spaces and physical presence to assure non-formal education and learning through youth work. She urges policy makers to find resources to re-establish youth work to "make up" for two years of ineffective support to young people. Finally, the chapter by Ryan Oliver Bautista and Gabrielė Žalpytė, "Wings of Don Bosco: the youth organisation as a youth-empowered emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic", looks into the specific case of a youth organisation created during the pandemic, to discuss the potential of participatory structures to support young people, even if online.

The fourth part of the book, "Well-being, education and social life", turns to the most emblematic issues connected to young people's experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. With online education and restrictions on social contact, questions of psychological well-being and mental health became very prominent, opening up a topic that hitherto had been to some extent taboo. Mikko Salasuo and Jenni Lahtinen's chapter "'At the moment I'm not happy with my life': the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and social restrictions on Finnish young people's sense of well-being" illustrates a decrease in subjective life satisfaction, which the authors interpret as a sign of the disruption of youth transitions. Veronika Gyurovicsova and Howard Williamson, in "Transitioning through higher education: how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the learning pathways of university students", look closely at the experience of online education of students in higher education, which for many – perhaps surprisingly – constituted a stable base in uncertain social conditions. However, social contacts were still missed during the pandemic and the online contact within education did not compensate for it. Gilda Isernia, in her chapter "Mental health and assessments: school students' perspectives and the implications for youth transitions", pays particular attention to the assessment aspect of online education. Her findings suggest that in the context of extensive school closures and emergency online learning, assessment was particularly stressful for students, contributing to their declining mental health and well-being. Finally, in the chapter "Adapting services and support for young people negotiating the transition from care to adulthood in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic", Emily Munro and her colleagues consider the deterioration in the mental health of young people in care during the pandemic, which coincided with reduced access to health professionals because of the pandemic. The chapter raises questions about the feasibility of virtual medical counselling and suggests that in the crisis the personal engagement of youth workers made up for system deficiencies.

Part V of the book, "Navigating transitions", provides an abbreviated and amended version of the report on the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership Symposium, held in Tirana, the European Youth Capital 2022, in June 2022. The symposium included a

presentation of the preliminary findings that are presented in this book, considering in particular how youth policy should respond and adapt to the changing realities of young people's lives.

At the heart of the book's reflections are young people facing the harsher conditions for youth transitions as well as the dismantling of youth spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic. But while writing this introduction, new crises in Europe are emerging or are in progress, with multiple consequences for all, but for young Europeans in particular. The futures of young people are now having to be scripted and reimagined in the context of profound uncertainties. The concluding chapter of this book comes back to the question of the policy response to the challenges that young generations are facing today within Europe, at its borders and beyond.

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Part I

Support and institutional response

Chapter 1

Feeling (un-)certain? School-to-work transition during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany

Karen Hemming and Irene Hofmann-Lun

Introduction

This chapter deals with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on transitions from school to vocational education and training (VET) among young people from low and middle educational levels in Germany. Specific challenges, helpful resources and potential risk factors for trajectories are identified and discussed, with the aim of feeding into policy recommendations.

In the biography of young people, the transition from school to vocational education and work is a major point for setting the direction of their life course, with far-reaching consequences. Besides, finding vocational orientation is an important developmental task in adolescence. However, trajectories have become increasingly uncertain in recent decades. Young people with lower socio-economic status and lower educational background are more likely to develop problematic transition pathways (MacDonald 2011).

The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced this situation in two respects. First, the effects on economic output and the labour market have been severe. The gross domestic product (GDP) declined, as did the number of VET positions. As a result, positions for lower qualified school leavers were much more affected than others. Second, a far-reaching uncertainty has grown among young people. They are increasingly concerned about their chances in the labour market by assuming that training opportunities have worsened or by fearing a shortage of VET placements. Even though the analysis of education-related effects of the pandemic is indispensable from the perspective of current education research (Moser et al. 2021: 267), there is a lack of studies addressing the effects on transitions from school to vocational education (exceptions include Dohmen et al. 2021). The focus of ongoing educational research lies primarily in the (pre-)school sector as well as in the area of higher education research (e.g. Moser et al. 2021; Wößmann et al. 2021).

In contrast, this chapter focuses on transition pathways into VET and the related uncertainties during the pandemic, which give rise to the following questions.

- Which kind of uncertainties and worries about their future do young people perceive during trajectories in times of the Covid-19 pandemic and to what extent? What types of future perspectives can be obtained on the basis of their stories?
- How are those anxieties and uncertainties linked to and affected by personal resources, transition pathways and other background indicators? What support was not available that might have helped them to cope better with these uncertainties? Which young people are more forearmed against uncertainties and worries?

Transition from school to vocational education and training in Germany

School-to-work-transition is a biographical phase in the life course that, on the one hand, offers the prospect of greater autonomy but, on the other hand, also places greater demands on young people's personal consistency and decision-making competence (Fischer and Lutz 2015). For several decades, trajectories from school to VET have been subject to social challenges. Linear transition pathways change into less linear and more variable trajectories characterised by more frequent changes, time-outs, and detours. At the same time, the degree of personal responsibility required of young people to cope with the transition has increased (Blossfeld et al. 2005). As a result, young people and their parents tend to make greater investments into educational attainment and certification, which can be seen by, for example, the rising rate of university entrance qualifications (Reißig and Tillmann 2020: 170). Thus, the institutionally induced end of schooling, which is nowadays not naturally followed by reintegration into follow-up options, can be characterised as a vulnerable biographical stage for young people (Harreveld et al. 2012: 116).

As a reflection of societal experiences during transition, a sense of individual insecurity may develop, and lead to an unclear picture of the present and the future, which can be associated with anxiety (Vornanen et al. 2009). Accordingly, trajectories are more challenging today and demand adapted coping strategies and agentic behaviour (Reißig and Tillmann 2020: 171).

The transition process takes on a key function for the social integration of young people (Kreher 2009). This chapter focuses on the first step in the transition, which in Germany mainly means transition to VET, either company-based (dual VET) or school-based. Taking up VET promises a high degree of continuity for the trajectory towards the labour market (Kotte 2018: 441).

There is, however, also a large proportion of less linear or non-linear trajectories, which are particularly common among young people with lower school performance and from lower educational levels (Brzinsky-Fay and Solga 2016). One of the main reasons for these young people becoming side-tracked is the strong emphasis on educational certificates within the German labour market, making the transition a crucial phase, particularly for young people from low and middle educational settings.

Transition pathways depend on structural and institutional factors as well as on the availability of individual resources. Without seeking to undermine the importance of structural factors, this chapter focuses on the individual level, where vocational goal orientation, school performance and educational background are important resources for successful trajectories (Solga 2005; Ulrich 2006). Young people with a less pronounced vocational goal orientation and less specific career ideas have more problems with managing their transition; once again, this applies more often to young people in low educational levels (Fink 2011). In addition, gender, family, migration background and socio-economic status act as important indicators for a successful trajectory (Granato and Ulrich 2014; Hillmert 2014).

Effects of the pandemic

The Covid 19-pandemic can be considered a global crisis that has affected a wide range of social and economic spheres (Baecker 2021: 71-8; Bunn et al. 2021). According to recent studies, however, there have been specific transition-relevant effects of the pandemic on the labour market as well as on the individual level of young people.

At the macro level, the pandemic's impact on the German and European economy and labour market was severe (Bunn et al. 2021; Clark and Lepinteur 2021). In 2020, Germany's GDP fell by 5.0%, and the unemployment rate rose by 0.9% (Statistisches Bundesamt 2021). According to estimates, in 2021 the GDP had risen again by 3.2%. Similar developments were observed in most European countries (European Commission 2021).

Against this backdrop, however, the European Council (2020) pointed to an aggravation of the situation of young people in Europe who were already in a precarious situation on the labour market or faced barriers to employment before the pandemic. The economic slump caused a reduction in German VET placements of about 8.8% and the number of applicants fell by 8.9% which resulted in a total decline of 11.0% of newly concluded VET contracts, while simultaneously the number of unplaced applicants increased by 6.6% (Oeynhausen et al. 2020). Among them, the proportion of young people with low or no educational qualifications was above average because of few alternative choices and, at the same time, placements for lower qualified young people were more affected (Maier 2020). In total, the number of unfilled VET placements increased by 12.8% (Oeynhausen et al. 2020).

Reasons for the shrinkage of the VET market included the closure of companies (e.g. in the cultural or catering sectors) and the absence of career guidance measures supporting and accompanying the transition process (e.g. career fairs, counselling services, application training, internships; see Wollseifer 2020). Newly developed alternative career guidance services in digital formats reached young people insufficiently (Forum Transfer 2021). Current estimated figures on the German VET market for 2021/22 indicate a continuing tense situation, even though the tumultuous effects of 2020 may slowly be softening (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung 2021).

In similar ways to other social upheavals or economic crises, therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be an event that Reiter would have depicted as an "abrupt confrontation of an entire society with new demands on the life course", a kind of

"shock therapy" questioning the basis of society (Reiter 2010: 17-18). Emanating from this crisis, a far-reaching uncertainty developed among young people, which can be explained as insecurity in the "outer circle", which is related to external realities (Vornanen et al. 2009).

For young people in particular, there is plenty of empirical evidence from Germany in support of this thesis. Among those aged 14-20, 60% assume that training opportunities have deteriorated due to the pandemic, while one in three of them fear that there are too few VET placements (Barlovic et al. 2020). In the JuCo study on experiences and perspective of young people during the times of corona measures, almost half of the young people (aged 15-19) agreed with the statement "I am afraid of my future" (Andresen et al. 2021). The COPSY study showed that the fears and worries of young people (aged 11-17) have generally increased significantly in the pandemic; young people in socially disadvantaged life situations were significantly more affected (Ravens-Sieberer 2021). Young people at the stage of high school graduation reported rising worries about their future (Anger et al. 2021). Due to the pandemic, a large proportion of young people in educational institutions were worried about reaching the levels of attainment required for their educational certificates (Walper et al. 2021: 12).

International studies have suggested much the same. For example, an American survey showed that young people's (aged 13-19) worries about the future, feelings of unhappiness and feelings of being depressed have increased (Margolius et al. 2020), whereas a UK study showed that inequalities in psychological distress among young adults had also increased during the pandemic (Gagné et al. 2021).

Even before the pandemic, however, quantitative findings of growing future-related uncertainty emerged from various studies, particularly concerning school leavers with lower qualifications. Accordingly, half of the low and middle secondary education graduates did not know what was to become of them later (Reißig et al. 2018). Likewise, the 18th Shell Study showed that, among young people with low and middle secondary school-leaving certificates, 40-60% felt affected by the worry of losing their job or not finding a training place (Schneekloth and Albert 2019: 59). However, a German regional study revealed that this trend cannot be attributed solely to concerns about not finding a VET placement or a job (Hemming et al. 2018).

Empirical evidence from current German research projects

Research design

In order to gain empirical insights from Germany and to answer the research questions, a multi-method approach was applied, combining quantitative and qualitative results from two projects.

The quantitative dataset derives from a longitudinal study, "Effects of organised leisure activities on the transition into vocational training", funded by the German Research Foundation, where n=169 young people were surveyed twice, before and during the pandemic, using a standardised questionnaire. The first survey took place

in 2019/20 in their last year of compulsory school in grade 9/10 before the official first lockdown in Germany. The follow-up measurement was conducted in autumn 2020 via telephone interview before the second lockdown.

For measuring pandemic-related future worries, young people rated the following statements: "I am worried about my future", "I am afraid that I will not find a job or a VET placement", "I am worried because I don't know what will become of me later on". For explaining determinants of future worries, the following characteristics were studied:

(1) Background indicators (migration background, socio-economic status (SES), gender)

(2) Personal resources (vocational goal orientation, determined goal tracking, level of education, school achievement)

(3) Trajectory characteristics (realisation of planned pathway, safety for a successful transition).

The qualitative data derives from the study "Future related uncertainty of young people at the transition from school to work in times of Corona", which was funded by the German Youth Institute. The aim was to provide information on whether and how young people's view of their own situation and their view of the future changed during the pandemic.

Some 17 problem-centred interviews with narrative parts were conducted in summer 2021 via telephone interviews with young people aged 15-19 in different educational tracks in their final compulsory year at school. Using their narratives of how the past few years had been for them, the current situation in the pandemic as well as their future prospects were elaborated.

The sample comprised young people with different characteristics regarding migration background, urban character of the region of origin, gender, type of school track and leaving certificate. Access to the young people was gained through partners from the field. From the six male and 11 female participants, six were taking the high secondary education track, four were completing middle secondary education and 11 low secondary education. The interviews analysed for this chapter were those from low and middle secondary education tracks. The quotations from the interviews that are used in the text for illustration purposes are smoothed, pseudonymised original statements from the interviews.

Uncertainties and future-related worries of young people during the pandemic

Young people in transition are worried about their future even without the challenges of a pandemic, especially those in lower educational tracks. A rising trend of uncertainty was observed already before the pandemic (Reißig et al. 2018). The following results, both quantitative and qualitative, illustrate the kind of uncertainties and worries about the future that young people reportedly perceived during the pandemic.

In the quantitative survey, 36% of the young people stated that they were "generally worried" about their future. Worries about their professional future were less prevalent, at 12% and 13% respectively. In calculating all those who chose any of the three options, we see an overall rate of 41% of young people who felt uncertain and worried about their future because of the pandemic. It turned out that the great majority of concerned young people reported worries in at least two different areas (87%). Therefore, although the results suggest that over half of the young people are, perhaps surprisingly, coping with the pandemic without worries, two in five young people are concerned. Moreover, the proportion is significantly higher in certain risk groups (see below).

For the supplementary qualitative analysis of the pandemic-related worries and uncertainties, we looked at the young people's time perspectives regarding "Past – present – future" as a whole, in order to be able to draw a more differentiated picture (Buhl 2014: 54). Although most of the young people expressed, according to the quantitative results, an optimistic view of the future, at the same time they described uncertainties, worries and impairments in connection with the pandemic. Their narratives show that their current uncertainties extend into the future and relate to changes and obstacles to their school graduations and their career prospects.

An important aspect that all of the young people mentioned in the interviews was the upheavals and uncertainties in school learning and the connected aspect of reorganisation. In addition to other uncertainties that young people are faced with, uncertainty associated with pandemic-related changes in school learning affected all young people equally. Directly or indirectly, this affects their academic performance and, by extension, their career prospects and their trajectories. All the young people interviewed had had experience with distance learning in the last two years. For the young people, this had meant a fundamental change in the form of instruction as well as in their social contacts with classmates and teachers.

Some of the interviewees reported that in this new teaching format their motivation for and their concentration in learning dropped significantly, as illustrated by the following quotation:

> So it didn't feel like school. It wasn't like this, feeling, this is important now. You're at home, you want to relax …. And when you're at school, you're more focused. Whereas at home you have 100 other things you can do. My school performance therefore really suffered. (female student M3)

This and similar statements show the extent to which distance learning disrupted young people's learning structures and routines as well as their motivation to learn. They do not associate their home with a suitable environment for receiving teaching. Young people are faced with a diffuse situation that confronts them with different opportunities for activities and, for some of them at least, makes it impossible to concentrate on learning.

Furthermore, the contact restrictions also had a physical and psychological impact on some interviewees. They gave up their sociability and instead retreated to their homes and experienced a great deal of fatigue. One perceived danger of the pandemic was that it could lead to a fear of direct contacts with other people, as the following statement demonstrates.

> Yes, well, when you go out, you are a bit afraid of another person, that the person has the virus – I think you are a bit afraid of all the people around you and so on. Hm, yes, I'm always more careful when I go out. (male student M8)

The constraints of the pandemic also shook young people's personal self-image:

> It just felt like a different life, like I was a different person – everything was different. … So, for me it was very bad, if I'm honest, because I was only at home and I ate a lot. … Well, I've put on a lot of weight. (female student M7)

Consequently, some young people also experienced the effects of the pandemic physically, through for example weight gain or through eating as compensation for frustration. The described psychological and physical impairments show how severely social relationships and familiar routines were disrupted by the pandemic measures and how they had an impact on young people's self-esteem and their experiences of self-efficacy. This has not only influenced their current situation but also their ideas about the future and thereby can also have an impact on the shaping of the future.

The results further reveal that, while preparing for the transition to vocational training, some young people's career plans began to shatter and collapse. Young people got anxious about their professional future, about whether and how they might currently find a job, either part-time or full-time. The anxious look at their personal future underlines a finding of another recent study which points out that future worries are particularly evident in the transition from school to vocational education and training (Andresen et al. 2021: 37).

Those young people who wanted to enter VET after school were confronted with the fact that the preparatory time at school, which is important for finding a suitable VET programme, was significantly limited. For example, school internships in companies could not take place due to the lockdown. Career fairs were also cancelled or only offered in online formats. Both factors severely impaired the ability to get to know a profession and made it (almost) impossible to get a "real" experience of working life or to have a direct exchange with trainers, other trainees or future colleagues. This confirms recent findings that, due to the pandemic-related restrictions on the labour market, young people were less able to shape their own transitions (Hemming and Tillmann 2022), in turn leading to worries and insecurities about their professional future, as revealed in the quantitative results (see above). The following quotation highlights the difficult phase of career orientation and application during the pandemic for one of the interviewees:

> I wanted to do an internship as a hotel manager. Unfortunately, it didn't work out because all the hotels were closed because of Covid. I also couldn't apply for vocational training in a hotel. (female student M1)

The statements show that in addition to the uncertainties regarding daily life and learning at school, young people's career plans were often disrupted by the pandemic. The support structures for finding a job could not be activated in the usual and expected ways, and company closures due to the pandemic led to worries and uncertainties about a successful career start. Personal and social resources could, however, help young people to cope with these uncertainties and fears.

Personal and social resources helping youg people to cope with uncertainties and worries

We wanted to look at the relationship of worries and uncertainties to different explaining indicators such as personal resources, background variables and indicators characterising the transition pathway. The research was interested in both the absence of support and resources to cope with uncertainties and worries, as well as protective factors against them.

Even though the average rate of worried young people is 41% in the quantitative findings, several risk groups are significantly more concerned. Figure 1.1 illustrates the worry rates of young people according to different explanatory indicators.

With regard to background indicators, it can be seen that young people with a migration background are particularly affected; two thirds of them are worried about their professional future. Furthermore, females are significantly more concerned. This finding is in line with the generally stronger disposition among women to worry (Schulz et al. 2002), which seems to have had an impact on their future perspectives in times of the pandemic (Gagné et al. 2021). Unexpectedly, higher socio-economic status is also positively related to increased worry. This means that the motives for worries have changed in the pandemic; they have become more diverse and higher social classes are affected, too.

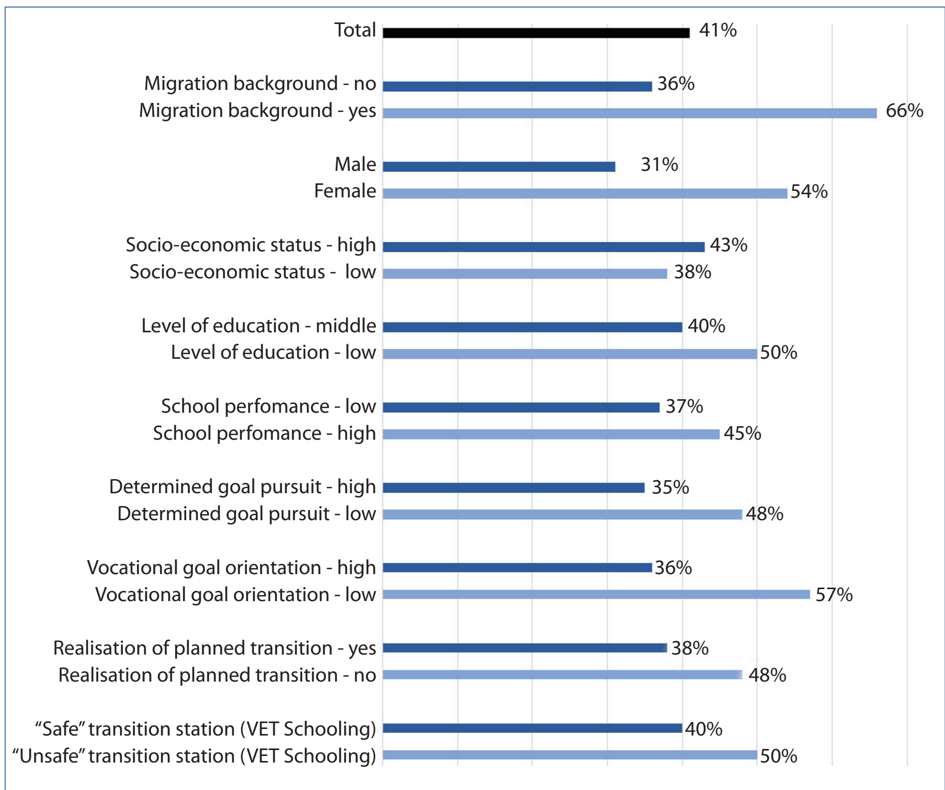
When looking at the results according to personal resources, less pronounced differences become apparent – except for vocational goal orientation. High vocational goal orientation applies when a person has a definite career aspiration and a good knowledge of (VET) professions in general. The results confirm its assumed protective effect: only one third of young people with high vocational goal orientation are concerned about their future, compared to 57% of those with lower goal orientation. Determination in pursuing a career goal can also have a positive influence on the transition; almost half of the less determined young people are worried, compared only a third of their peers with high determination. Other personal resources related to transition are the level of education and school achievement, which are both correlated to worries and uncertainties: young people with low secondary education report higher rates of worry than those with middle secondary education. Similar results were found in another recent study, which stated that those particularly affected by worries about the future were those with fewer resources, who were already limited or disadvantaged before the pandemic, and those who were facing an institutional transition (Andresen et al. 2021). Contrary to expectations, however, school performance correlates positively with perceived worry: young people with better performance report more worry (45%) than those with worse performance (37%). The finding is consistent with the above-mentioned assumption of "diverse motives for future worry" during the pandemic.

Trajectory characteristics describe the transition pathways of the young people surveyed during this period. First, we look at the realisation of their planned transition pathway from the first survey to the follow-up survey, to analyse the continuity of their trajectory, for example whether someone who wanted to start an apprenticeship in the first survey actually reported that he/she did so in the follow-up interview.

(The type of VET or profession was not taken into account.) To do this, the sample was divided into those who reached their planned transition station and those who did not. As expected, those who succeeded in implementing their plan had fewer worries about the future (38%) than those who did not succeed (48%).

We then examined the current transition station reported in the follow-up interview in relation to the "safety" it conveyed for a successful transition. For this purpose, we separated the group into those who had started VET or continued to go to school, which we defined as a "safe" station, and those who started vocational preparation or had taken some other path (e.g. internship, voluntary year, jobbing), which was defined as an "unsafe" station. Again, we see that those in unsafe stations are more affected by worries about the future (50%) than those in safe stations (40%). Thus, because of the restrictions on the labour market, young people during the pandemic were less able to shape their own transition pathways (Hemming and Tillmann 2022) and, as a result, the worries of those in unsafe stations intensified.

Figure 1.1. Future-related worries following background indicators, personal resources and trajectory characteristics



Accordingly, and complementing the above analysis, the qualitative analyses show how extensively the pandemic also negatively affected personal resources, such as school performance, social networks or young people's own vocational goal

orientation. Young people who were already receiving insufficient or no support from their parents or from their school network were increasingly left to their own devices during the pandemic; in addition to the social challenges thet had to be overcome equally by everyone in the pandemic, these young people felt more uncertain about their career paths. Overall, the findings reveal the sometimes strikingly different social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth transitions and future perspectives of young people as well as on the infrastructure of child and youth welfare and schools (Andresen et al. 2021).

The interviews show the important role of young people's personal and social resources when coping with pandemic-induced uncertainty. Low levels of worry about their current situation and their future career were related to well-equipped personal resources, such as support from their family in finding a VET position, good (German) language skills enabling them to follow digital content (e.g. lessons, career counselling) and benefit from additional support from teachers or career counselling.

Interviewees who did not do well with distance learning, for example because they lacked social support from teachers or classmates, reported concerns that their school performance had worsened, which would then also affect their follow-up options and consequently increase their uncertainty about future prospects. They felt, as described above, overwhelmed by the challenges of home schooling. When they had access to their own adequate personal resources, such as a good knowledge of the German language, as well as the support of teachers, combined with the opportunity and ability to receive good-quality distance learning, young people could succeed in home schooling and could maintain their school performance.

In contrast, the lack of direct, personal contact with teachers in digital lessons meant that some young people were unable to grasp the subject matter properly, which was particularly the case for young people with insufficient knowledge of German, as illustrated by the following quotation.

> So, in Covid time, that was of course hard for me at first, because I don't know German as well as the others, and, uh, I find it much better at school …, because at school I concentrate more and there is someone to help me. (female student M2)

It is clear that the young people interviewed with a migration background are often largely dependent on receiving external support from teachers and career guidance counsellors, because their parents usually cannot provide sufficient support and guidance for school lessons or for transition pathways.

However, there were also some interviewees who were able to improve their learning skills during the pandemic and who improved their school performance, as seen in the following quotation.

> To be honest, my school grades got even better, because in home-schooling you maybe got a bit more involved with the school topics. … in the first lockdowns, you had more motivation and were able to find out more about some subjects. (female student O5)

Thus, some of the young people were able to use the distance-learning situation to their advantage. Since they were able to grasp the learning materials well on their own, they developed a good learning strategy for themselves and had few

distractions in the learning environment at home. It is important to note, however, that this refers only to a few young people.

The analysis of the interviews shows that the organisation of distance learning and personal contacts and support from teachers and classmates are important resources for successful school completion and preparation for the school-to-work transition. Thus, the crucial factor for coping well with the challenges of the pandemic was very evidently the availability of suitable personal and social resources.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The research results indicate that a large proportion of young people managed their transition well, without future-related worries, and did so even during the pandemic; but future-related worries during transitions were already observed before the pandemic (Hemming and Tillmann 2022). Nevertheless, 41% of the young people were concerned, and the proportion was significantly higher in certain risk groups: young women, migrants and young people in lower educational tracks or with less goal determination were more at risk in terms of current worries and future worries. Accordingly, the analysis from the qualitative interviews indicates that young people with a migration background and with low school-leaving qualifications were particularly affected by the missing support structures at schools during the transition process, because they often had fewer resources in their personal environment to compensate for this. However, at the same time, motives for worries about the future appear more diverse due to the pandemic. Consequently, it can be assumed that in a crisis concerning society as a whole, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, social classes are affected equally by the consequences (Beck 1986/2020).

Furthermore, it is not only young people's school context and their professional perspectives that have been shaken by the pandemic. The results show that some of them also experienced insecurities about daily habits, social contacts, leisure activities and even about their own self-image, all of which are important for their future development. Not all concerns and uncertainties arose because of the pandemic; many problems already existed beforehand, such as uncertainty about career opportunities. However, it can be assumed that the pandemic, like a kind of "burning glass", magnified and intensified many (existing) problems or at least made them more visible.

In the wake of the pandemic, individually tailored career-orientation formats have been limited (Wollseifer 2020), as displayed also in the qualitative study. Since the development of a vocational orientation is an important resource for successfully managing transitions to the labour market, uncertainties can be amplified here, especially for disadvantaged young people. Consequently, in order to facilitate the freedom of occupational choice, especially for young people with lower qualifications, it is important to strengthen individual approaches in vocational orientation and transition structures, and to push back market-driven selection processes in the allocation of VET placements (Enggruber et al. 2021: 33). The demands on vocational orientation measures in school-to-work transitions are changing, especially

as a result of the pandemic. Ways should be sought to provide individual support to young people even under conditions of lockdown or when facilities are closed.

Thus, in a social reality characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Flume 2020: 9-10), there is a greater need to prepare individual young people to cope with unpredictability and instability, for example by having helpful institutional support resources to fall back on. It should also be considered that, besides vocational support, socially deprived young people especially need life-oriented support for coping with their trajectories successfully (Reißig and Tillmann 2020). This is where specific initiatives should be launched to further develop and expand (digital) offerings; nevertheless, pedagogical support is then particularly important to ensure the quality, accessibility and usefulness of digital formats (Forum Transfer 2021).

As the qualitative results show, some young people gave up participating in digital (schooling) formats because they considered them of little use, especially compared to face-to-face programmes. These problems apply to all formats of schooling and that means also to vocational preparation schooling and VET schooling. Performance in secondary education is an equally important prerequisite for successful vocational pathways, and so the improvement of school-based learning should be a central approach, including digital formats, when thinking of vocational orientation and school-to-work transition.

Our results show that the pandemic demanded a great deal of adjustment from young people, leading to school- and work-related problems. We also know from previous research that young people in the pandemic complained that their wishes and needs were not considered sufficiently in political decisions (Andresen et al. 2021). Thus, their desire for greater participation, especially when it comes to their own affairs, should be used to develop digital formats or needs-oriented career guidance services further.

From a macro perspective on VET and the labour market, it is particularly important to maintain and support young people's interest in VET. The pandemic-related slump in the VET market since 2020, together with demographic developments, has led to a worsening of the shortage of skilled workers in German companies (Mayer and Clemens 2021). At the same time, developmental conditions hardened, and insecurity rose due to the pandemic. In order to support young people's transitions, VET should be made more attractive. Therefore, it is particularly important to remove barriers that impede access for disadvantaged young people. At the same time, access to VET needs to be supported through specific measures, for example, through the individual adaptation of consultancy services, the use of training coaches, or the provision of (more) freedom for occupational experimentation (Beierling 2021).

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Chapter 2

Young adults and housing in Poland: short- and long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic

Justyna Kajta, Paula Pustulka and Jowita Radzińska

Introduction

As we might expect, emerging research points to the adverse effects that the Covid-19 pandemic may have on the broader transitions to adulthood (e.g. Settersten et al. 2020). Because of its multi-layered and all-encompassing presence, the pandemic exacerbates the sense of uncertainty on both an individual level of plans related to independence, and on the macro level that drives the capability of maintaining financial and employment stability despite looming economic crisis. It has been argued that "the disruption to young adults may *feel* especially heavy … because they do not yet have a long history of experience or accumulated resources to fall back on as they rework life goals or adapt to life's disappointments" (Settersten et al. 2020: 4). Perhaps more so than other groups, young people report the sense of "their life [being] placed on hold" (Vehkalahti et al. 2021: 400), since they can "think about the future" but are unable to ground these thoughts in the lived experience of the present (Bristow and Gilland 2021: 41; see also Worth 2009).

In this chapter, we see housing as the important link between individual and structural factors affecting young adults during the pandemic (see e.g., Evandrou et al. 2021; Lips 2021; Timonen et al. 2021; Vehkalahti et al. 2021; Waldron 2022). This is because housing independence hinges upon both a young adult's individual readiness to leave home and a desire to maintain autonomy, and whether the socio-structural context provides the possibility for financial, employment or housing stability (Cairns 2011; Scabini et al. 2006). Thus, we seek to explore the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for the housing situation of young adults in Poland, particularly paying attention to pre-pandemic contexts and temporal outlooks.

The chapter first provides an overview of structural changes and how the Covid-19 outbreak framed circumstances for housing independence, (in)stability and the phenomenon of "boomeranging". After describing the study and methods, the analysis focuses on Polish young adults aged 18-36, all residing in larger cities more exposed to the viral threat. The empirical sections provide a lens for distinguishing short-term housing disruptions or challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic

from the more long-term implications we see as related to wider structural forces. We highlight the situations of distinct groups of young adults, looking at their pre-pandemic situation as either co-residential (living with parents) or independent (having moved out prior to March 2020, the date when the pandemic took hold). Our conclusions on the Covid-19 pandemic as a factor affecting young people's housing situation in Poland translates into our recommendations offered in the final section.

Housing transitions and the Covid-19 pandemic

The complexity of housing transitions generally mirrors the contemporary, de-synchronised transitions to adulthood, wherein young people may veer and glide through bouts of transitional events and reimagine their futures across education, work, housing and romance (Worth 2009). In the realm of housing, this can signify interlaced phases of co-residing with parents, renting with friends, cohabitating with significant others, returns to the parental home and other places in-between (e.g. Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1996; Scabini et al. 2006). Patterns of moving out are dynamic and diverse, especially as they are more likely to be connected with non-permanence of living with peers rather than with marriage (Mitchell 2006; Sørensen and Nielsen 2020). Nevertheless, leaving home remains one of the important events and markers of adulthood for generations of young people (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005; Scabini et al. 2006; Sørensen and Nielsen 2020).

Housing transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic have been marked by instability, encompassing reversed transitions (Gillespie and Lei 2021) in the form of home-returns for adult children formerly launched from home. Known as "boomeranging" (Mitchell 2006), these experiences go hand in hand with both structural and relational aspects: socio-economic status (SES) and the quality of intergenerational bonds determine the likelihood of return. Moving back can be associated with early parenthood, undereducation and underemployment. It has also been found that returns are less stigmatised for young adults who positively evaluate their intergenerational bonds, as both generations are then less inclined to see yo-yo experiences as "failures" within their broader transitions (Gillespie and Lei 2021; Pustulka et al. 2021; Scabini et al. 2006).

Along with the above, the economic situation and local opportunities also matter (Jones 1995) because young people from less hospitable homes with lower socio-economic status (SES) are likely to experience greater "push" factors in relation to earlier housing autonomy, being expected to launch without assistance (Sørensen and Nielsen 2020). In contrast, middle-class parents offer encouragement and support to their offspring long into adulthood (Cairns 2011; Druta et al. 2019). As part of their efforts, which often act as prevention measures against too fast transitions (e.g. due to teenage parenthood), such parents may promote longer co-residence, alongside paying rents or partaking in property investments (e.g., Holdsworth and Morgan 2005).

Having analysed interviews with Polish university-educated adults, Pustulka et al. (2021) confirmed the significance of parents' capital and material resources that – in the context of the state's disengagement – strongly influence housing transitions

and make them much more difficult for young adults with lower SES. To reiterate, one can argue that housing transitions reflect the shakiness and chaos of modern youth transitions (Worth 2009), in which young adults stop and start their educational pursuits and experience prolonged "drifting": a precarious place in the labour market and romantic turbulence that can (for some) result in completion of the "Big Five" markers, including parenthood (Mary 2014; van den Berg and Verbakel 2021).

During the Covid-19 crisis, housing challenges have echoed a worsened economic standing of young people on the labour market (e.g. lack of job opportunities, especially in the service sector), unaffordability of housing and systemic challenges within education such as postponed graduations or dropping out (Settersten et al. 2020; Vehkalahti et al. 2021). These issues often intersect: the International Labour Organization (ILO 2020) called young cohorts (aged 18-29) the "lockdown generation" to demonstrate transitions in the shadow of the pandemic. Silliman Cohen and Bosk (2020: 6) further noted that the pandemic "has likely increased the already elevated risks for LGBTQ, maltreated, and homeless youth". This is in line with the Global Risks Report (World Economic Forum 2021) which called young people *pandemials* and drew the picture of a generation that is "scarred", "vulnerable" and potentially "doubly lost" because of the economic and societal shockwaves they experience.

Specifically considering housing before and during the pandemic, young Poles left their parental homes relatively late even in 2020 (the average age then was 28.1; see also Krzaklewska 2020; Piszczatowska-Oleksiewicz 2014). Recent data show that the pandemic has increased the percentage of young Poles staying with parents. In the younger cohort (aged 18-24) it changed from 88.4% in 2019 to 93.6% in 2020, while the older cohort (aged 25-34) experienced an increase from 43.9% in 2018 to 47.5% in 2020 (Eurostat 2021). Importantly, despite all the structural challenges and inequalities, Poland represents a type of housing regime in which home ownership is preferred over renting (Bryx et al. 2021). Thus, young people face high rental prices but also the limitations of home ownership. Yet, compared to the previous year, prices of residential units increased by 10.5% (by 6.2% on the primary market, and by 13.8% on the secondary market) in the Covid-19 era (GUS 2021).

Elsewhere, studies highlight that housing stability – defined as a situation in which individuals can find and maintain an affordable place of living that meets their needs – has become much less attainable for young adults. Luppi et al. (2021) specifically examined delayed transitions in terms of the "leaving home" marker across five countries, confirming that the objective conditions of lockdown overlap with pessimistic visions of the future in the revisions of housing-related life plans among 50% of young people who decided to postpone independent living. A Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) study into emerging adulthood by Vehkalahti et al. (2021) demonstrated the untenability of housing linked to studying in cities, manifested in Finnish young adults' personal choices to move back home (see also Gillespie and Lei 2021).

Although living in the family home during the pandemic can be seen as a kind of a privilege (Worth 2021), "it can also be an imposed lifestyle, a last resort when faced with an inaccessible housing market" (FEANTSA 2021: 34). On this aspect, research shows that "those individuals whose living arrangements have changed as a result

of the Covid-19 pandemic have a higher likelihood of reporting increased stress and interpersonal conflict than those whose living arrangements remained unchanged" (Evandrou et al. 2021: 11), albeit this effect might be mediated by the subjective evaluation of the quality of intergenerational bonds before the crisis (Walper and Reim 2020). Finally, material resources are relevant, because having enough space, their own room and an undisturbed place are reported as factors influencing young people's well-being at home during the lockdown (Lips 2021).

Methods and participants

The data are derived from the first wave of an intergenerational QLR study conducted in the frame proposed by Neale (2020) and implemented within the multi-component study titled "Becoming an adult in times of ultra-uncertainty: intergenerational theory of 'shaky' transitions" or ULTRAGEN, supported by Narodowe Centrum Nauki, Poland's National Science Centre, under grant no. 020/37/B/HS6/01685. Treating the ongoing pandemic as the lens for tracking social change in the making, the broader research project investigates the impact of social crises on transitions to adulthood.

The study includes two waves of interviews and at least one asynchronous exchange. In the first wave of this QLR, which took place from May to November 2021, 35 interviews were completed with Polish young adults. Given the unpredictability of the pandemic, digital research methods were chosen, and in-depth, individual interviewing techniques were adapted to an online research setting. Before the fieldwork commenced, ethical approval was granted by the relevant Research Ethics Committee. A comprehensive project information package and informed consent forms were sent to and filled in by the participants prior to the interviews.

Participant recruitment followed a purposive qualitative sampling and was based on several criteria. First, all young adults interviewed had to reside in larger cities. Second, heterogeneity and balance guided the selection process for gender, education and age, with two cohorts delineated as 18-25 (emerging adults, EA) and 26-35 (settling adults, SA). The 35 people who took part comprised 16 men, 18 women and one non-binary person of whom were younger than 25, while the average age was 24.2. In terms of education, seven participants were finishing secondary school during Wave 1, nine were enrolled in bachelor-level university courses and 12 were pursuing further (master's or PhD) degrees. Seven interviewees had exited education with a secondary school or vocational diploma and were not continuing education. Some 15 participants were working full-time and nine had temporary, part-time or odd jobs, while 10 were inactive on the labour market. More information on the housing situation of the participants is given below.

Audio-recorded interviews were meticulously transcribed. For this paper, thematic analysis was conducted via framework grids (Neale 2020), with preliminary summaries done with notes, paraphrasing and vignettes. At the stage of creating data displays, thematically and conceptually ordered approaches were used.

Mapping the impact of the pandemic on housing situations

While analysing the research material, we took into consideration two dimensions which possibly impact the housing situation of young adults. As the data confirmed that the pre-pandemic housing situation is of the utmost importance, this was the first dimension; the second one tracked the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Based on the collected interviews, four main scenarios could be distinguished:

- living with parents without a plan to move out;
- living with parents but wanting to move out;
- living independently without housing stability; and
- living independently after having achieved housing stability.

Out of the 15 respondents living with their parents, seven had plans to move out. While nine had achieved housing stability before the pandemic, another nine presented more mobile and shaky patterns in their transitions to adulthood, in particular with housing transitions. Only one respondent was able to realise his plan to move out from the parental home during the pandemic. In the second dimension of pandemic-driven housing changes, the temporal aspect has to be taken into account. The data here revealed two kinds of implications, either seen as short-term or forecast to have long-term consequences.

Continued living at home during the pandemic

Young adults living with their parents and having no plans to move out in the near future typically belong to the younger cohort (aged 18-24) of the interviewees in our study. They are high school or university students who picture their moving out as a vague venture that might possibly happen in a few years. Their housing situation is linked with currently having no financial independence, disclosing also the significance of local opportunities, since staying at their parents' home in the case of university students is possible because of continuing education in the city of origin (see also Piszczatowska-Oleksiewicz 2014; Pustulka et al. 2021; Vehkalahti et al. 2021; Jones 1995).

Importantly, the interviewees highlight the comforts of parental care, stressing unreadiness for (financial and practical) management of separate households.

> I'm thinking about [moving out], but it's a joint decision between me and my girlfriend. All in all, I think it will happen rather after graduation, when I change my place of residence and maybe go live somewhere else with my girlfriend. For now, living with my mom is comfortable and I don't have additional expenses. I can buy what I want and not focus on the fact that I have to pay bills, rent … I do not have standing charges, the only one is Spotify that costs me 10 PLN every month and that's really all I have to pay. If I had to pay all the bills at once, during my studies, I wouldn't like it anymore. … In the next five years, when I finish my studies, I will probably move out, this will be my goal in the next five years. And, by the way, it's not such a big plan that I have to do it for sure, but I think I will be willing to make that decision. (Mateusz, 21)

Drawing on the empirical data, we can see that the subjective assessment of the housing situation in a pandemic context depends on the spatial and relational spheres. This reflects the "temperature" of the bonds young adults have with parents or siblings, as well as evaluation of living arrangements linked to having undisturbed, individually available and properly equipped space (Lips 2021, Walper and Reim 2020).

> We had to change the internet provider because there was a huge problem with it, that either the internet was breaking for me or [for my brother], or, alternately, for both of us. Or there was no internet at all, so it was definitely that kind of frustration and nerves and everyone was annoyed a little bit with each other at home and everyone was fed up. Well, there were also situations where I had my microphone on, I was saying something [during the classes], and then suddenly it turned out that someone was coming into my room, or someone was shouting at home. [This] … is the dark side of remote learning. (Eliza, 21)

Still, Eliza – like many other students – was rejecting the idea of changing her housing situation because online learning challenges were seen as short-term as well as fairly solvable. Some respondents specifically mentioned that certain spatial and relational practices were more challenging in the beginning of the lockdown but have been slowly decreasing over time. Moreover, having one's own room has become a predictor of housing satisfaction during a pandemic.

> I'm a kind of a person who likes to be alone with myself, so I got through it [the pandemic] relatively calmly without any stress. Especially since I live more in the countryside now, I have lots of nice areas around me to go around, to relax, and I also have my own room upstairs and my own world. I didn't have a brother, sister in one room crowded together. (Anita, 18)

Importantly, not all adults residing with parents felt so comfortable in these spaces. It does not necessarily point to relational problems or conflicts but rather indicates a feeling that it is the right time to start an independent life (see also Holdsworth and Morgan 2005). A need to move out is often entrenched in romantic relationships and cohabitation readiness. However, a pandemic caused an increase in the prices on the housing market and signified disruptions on the labour market. As such, it has delayed some housing-related plans of the respondents, especially if they had insufficient savings, lost their jobs during the pandemic and, simultaneously, could not count on their parents' financial support. In this group, the young adults have to press pause on their independence plans.

> I would like to move out as soon as possible. It's obvious, I mean maybe there are people who don't want to move out. I would really like to live with my woman. She also wants to. But as you know, the prices of apartments are sky high, so, for now, I'm putting money aside as much as I can. I think there's still a long way to go before I can move out to my own [place]. (Eryk, 23)

Contrary to the potentially short-term pandemic influences (e.g., worsened quality of life during lockdown described above), the structural challenges will have long-term impacts on the young adults' opportunities of transitioning. These possibilities are strongly interlaced with SES and, not surprisingly, structural challenges were experienced more severely by those young adults whose parents could not sponsor

renting nor co-finance property investments (see also Pustulka et al. 2021). As some interviews showed, uncertainty and worsening circumstances can also be followed by some psychological consequences, including growing frustration.

> Now both me and my partner have to find a job, we have been together for three years and have a wish to live together. In order [for me] to move out, the two of us have to earn at least the minimum wage to rent anything. That is really difficult. … the pandemic certainly delayed … [the process and] made me feel like we have to deal with this invisible force, which is absolutely impossible and irrational, that all these initial assumptions I had about what the housing market looks like … I have this feeling of a constant struggle with this reality, which is absolutely not rational, and that one has to constantly try to gain something against the wind in order to be able to live a normal life. (Bartek, 24)

Continuing to live at home despite wanting to move out means that the parental home serves as a stable anchor during the pandemic. Immobility – even forced – is possible if one has a place to stay to wait out the storm. While it is difficult to predict scenarios and contexts for the first group, who want to move out in at least a few years, we can say that the pandemic and the economic situation have delayed or disrupted the second group's housing transitions and transitions to adulthood more broadly. Again, financial resources and work stability could serve here as a cushion that makes life plans more resilient to sudden changes and long-term crises.

Young adults living independently

Apart from young adults living with parents, there are also those who started their independent life before the pandemic. One category covers respondents who have not achieved housing stability and satisfaction just yet. As an obverse to the "forced immobility" experienced by some of those living at home, young adults who moved out but were severely affected by the pandemic often had to revise their plans around housing independence.

On the one hand, we observed boomeranging and going back to the parents' home because of remote education, disrupted employment, broken romantic relationships or an overlap of these problems (see also Vehkalahti et al. 2021, Gillespie and Lei 2021).

> The pandemic came and … I lost my job, generally because of the pandemic. Before, as I mentioned, I was working as a courier. So they fired people. I had no job; it was hard to find work. My [partner] also had a problem, because she was fired, too. In the meantime, we took out this loan, because we wanted to start our own business. … Later we calculated that if we continued to rent, we would simply run out of money. We asked my dad if we could live here again in the house where I lived. Of course he agreed, so we lived here for six months. During the pandemic period, however, I broke up with my fiancée. She went to live with her parents and we were left with a loan. I couldn't stand it mentally and after about two months I moved out of my dad's house back here and actually I've been living alone until now, I am renting an apartment. (Mirek, 27)

Today's intergenerational contracts are set up in such a way that parents have a sense of obligation towards supporting their offspring long into adulthood (Druta et al. 2019; Krzaklewska 2020). Therefore, relationships with parents allow some

better-positioned young people to experiment with independent housing and, if necessary, use a safe base in the resource-rich family home as a cushion (Pustulka et al. 2021).

On the other hand, the pandemic limited the options of travelling abroad. For instance, one of the interviewees, Laura, had to stop her gap year, return to Poland earlier than planned and go back to her former workplace, particularly as she was not sure what was going to happen on the labour market in the Covid-19 era. However, even forced immobility need not be experienced as difficult or challenging. On the contrary, it can be connected with looking for a better life and housing conditions, in relation to pre-pandemic plans.

> Actually, as regards the apartment, I have been living here since March this year, so I moved during the pandemic. But at the moment I am very satisfied with the apartment I live in, also because I do not need to commute and work remotely. When it comes to the university, everything was done remotely as well. The commute was not the key criterion, so to speak, when choosing an apartment. I live here on the outskirts of the city and actually getting to the city centre is a bit difficult. However, I did not feel it because of the pandemic. It is also a move to a slightly bigger apartment, but I am very happy that I rent the apartment in such a place and in such a state as it is. And this is also [possible], you know, due to financial aspects and the job change. (Ela, 22)

Importantly, safe employment and financial stability are significant factors in pandemic-related housing experiences. Again, in the case of those facing economic and work-related difficulties and disruptions, the negative impact of the pandemic can last much longer because of the ongoing interdependence between financial resources and opportunities on the housing market.

Stability can also be embedded in relationships and in living with a partner or one's own family. The respondents who lived independently in their own households prior to the pandemic usually had their own apartments (sometimes with a mortgage). That generally safeguarded them against housing uncertainty and hardships.

> We have our own apartment or, actually, we have a mortgage so it's not really ours, but still, we feel at home here. We have a place of our own here and we feel safe with each other in all that. Despite the fact that it is questioned on a philosophical level every day, I have this general feeling of being in the right place and on the right path. (Zofia, 29)

Satisfaction with the housing situation also referred to the accessibility of green areas: those with gardens or close proximity to urban parks presented them as important spatial factors in housing satisfaction. Like those living at home, some respondents living independently tended to experience short-term pandemic-related negative consequences for their housing situation. Once again, these problems mirrored the sudden need to share space with others.

> Because it was like I was tied down with something. The two of us in just 30 square metres, both working remotely. It was hard, and also just at work there were various turbulences in the sense that there were changes and I was experiencing that too. This winter was really so hard. (Luiza, 28)

In sum, certain spatial and relational challenges were experienced similarly, regardless of whether young adults lived at home or not. However, while these challenges mostly translated to short-term housing dissatisfaction that could be rectified, structural factors were much more crucial for long-term planning and a perceived suboptimal state of one's housing conditions and transitional potential.

Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

We conclude that the Covid-19 pandemic has had assorted effects on the housing situation of young adults in Poland. Our study confirms the findings from other European contexts (e.g. Luppi et al. 2021; Vehkalahti et al. 2021, Evandrou et al. 2021; Worth 2021; Lips 2021; Gillespie and Lei 2021) in terms of delaying the decision of moving out, boomeranging or coping with the changing rental market. As other studies have found (Settersten et al. 2020; Waldron 2022), we argue that pre-existing inequalities have been amplified by the pandemic, and that individuals' situations, including their housing, depended on their economic, material and social capital, as well as their pre-existing vulnerability (see also Silliman Cohen and Bosk 2020). Thus, to answer the research question about the implication of Covid-19 for housing transitions in a more detailed manner, we argue that two dimensions need to be taken into account: the pre-pandemic living situation and whether young adults perceive the pandemic-related housing issues as temporary or long term.

On the pre-pandemic aspect, it was absolutely clear that the pandemic moment within broader housing transitions predestined young adults to certain choices (see also Worth 2009). We can, on the whole, talk about those who were able to offset some pandemic-related stress through anchoring in the safe haven of a stable, home environment, either dependent or independent. This interestingly applied especially to adults at both ends of the 18-36 age spectrum. The youngest interviewees would have been disinclined to leave home, with or without the pandemic. It seemed that most of them expected their parents to provide housing security, matching the modern parental predilection towards supporting their offspring throughout their twenties (Holdsworth and Morgan 2005, Scabini et al. 2006). At the other end of the age bracket, those over 30 were more likely to have acquired housing stability prior to the pandemic (see also Vehkalahti et al. 2021, Settersten et al. 2020), so their satisfaction with accommodation was also less affected. The narratives of satisfied co-residential young adults and those successfully launched into stable independence (financial and housing-related) centred on ad hoc Corona-related woes. Their housing situation suffered from temporary glitches, rarely indicative of a major or long-term crisis.

Moving to consider long-term effects, we see them as tied to the broader societal context of looming visions of an ongoing crisis, which makes it impossible to plan for the future (Bristow and Gilland 2021; Luppi et al. 2021). Unfolding and persistent housing challenges take shape in the increases in housing prices, the upsurge in unemployment and a decline in job quality (see also Eurostat 2021, GUS 2021). In the narratives, this applies to young adults who planned to leave home but were unable to do so due to financial strain (see also Luppi et al. 2021). For many of them, the restricted opportunities for housing autonomy seem to impinge on other areas

of transitions to adulthood, especially in terms of satisfactory intimate relationships. Being unable to jump-start a career, these co-residential adults were forced to postpone moving out, often without a definite deadline because both labour and housing markets during the Covid-19 era strike them as hostile. Finally, possibly long-term (but mainly unknown) effects of the pandemic envelop young adults whose previously initiated housing transitions got disrupted. They engaged in boomeranging back to parental homes (Gillespie and Lei 2021) to varying degrees and also forged a number of strategies around tenuous living arrangements through friends and family, as well as giving up international mobility.

Although initially many young adults coped with the pandemic-related crisis by seeing it as a short-term disruption and delay rather than eradication of their plans, one cannot discount subsequent lockdowns and emerging crises (e.g. with the unknown effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Poland and beyond). These may bring significant changes such that young people may imagine their future (see Bristow and Gilland 2021) in more pessimistic and passive terms. This conclusion appertains to the recommendations stemming from this study, which confidently call for action to support housing transitions as part of a new era of transitions to adulthood during a prolonged crisis. Dedicated policy instruments – at national and, ideally, at EU level – should aim to structurally support those who find themselves at risk of housing instability and longer-term marginalisation because of losing the time and opportunities for accumulation of resources or lived experiences during the coronavirus crisis (see also Silliman Cohen and Bosk 2020).

At the national level, the Polish agenda should centre on introducing welfare programmes focused on the development of social housing, with an emphasis on co-operation between private and public sectors (national government, municipalities and private investors). What is more, the state could play an active role in shaping housing conditions for young people by regulating the rental market. This could involve rental conditions such as maximum rental cost or enhanced measures to support long-term and secure leases (Waldron 2022). In short, a more explicit focus on young people's resilience is needed. Given the cultural importance of the Polish ideology, which promotes ownership over renting (Bryx et al. 2021), specific solutions should consider the difference between Poland and other EU countries (see also Druta et al. 2019) in terms of aspirations.

Importantly, the pandemic has only accelerated pre-existing (mostly structural/economic) challenges in the housing market (see also Piszczatowska-Oleksiewicz 2014) and thus revealed the significance of housing policies. We believe that the EU-wide and Poland-specific structural problems are "old" but, now that the pandemic has impacted on the growing prices on the housing market (Deloitte 2021) and other new crises, it is time to put an effort into comprehensive support directed at young people. Instruments aimed at expanding the social housing sector and making it more affordable for young generations, together with fighting youth underemployment and unemployment, could help prevent further inequalities and growing precariousness (see also Waldron 2022).

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Chapter 3

Covid-19, vulnerable children and young people, and the discontinuation of social care support

Daniel Briggs

Introduction

The brutal consequences of locking down European countries in 2020 continue to produce serious ramifications for the social structure. Millions remain jobless, millions more are precariously poised to lose jobs, education has been interrupted and vital healthcare treatments and screening have been postponed. There are increased mental health problems in general and sadly, and particularly among young people, increased self-harm and suicide (Briggs et al. 2021a). In this respect, the Covid-19 pandemic and the government interventions meant to manage transmission, such as lockdowns and social distancing, had a seismic impact on the organisation of social life and social support mechanisms. In the context of vulnerable children and young people particularly, such interventions aggravated their already fragile position.

This chapter explores how this took place in the UK and is based on three case studies: a Child Protection Officer responsible for children's well-being and protecting them from harm or abuse; a Youth Offending Services Worker who actively meets and supports young people and addresses their problems; and a Youth Offending Team Manager who seeks to prevent young people from offending and reoffending. The workers come from three major British cities where deprivation is high and investment in youth services and support is low. The chapter shows how already reeling, austerity-hit children's and young people's services ("services" hereafter) in the UK moved almost all their service delivery online in accordance with political guidance on managing the pandemic.

This move online, however, prevented frontline child practitioners and YOT workers from properly assessing, monitoring and supporting young people. This made for irreparable damage, not only for the relationships that practitioners had with their clients but also in the physical and psychological well-being of the young people. These findings are framed more broadly within the expanding literature on the accumulated failures of child and youth support during the Covid-19 pandemic because of lockdowns and social distancing, not only in a UK context (Ferguson et al. 2022) but across Europe (Save the Children 2021) as well as worldwide (Bakrania et al. 2020).

Background context and literature

Interventions and restrictions to manage the Covid-19 pandemic generated multidimensional challenges to the delivery and management of education systems and youth services across Europe while simultaneously exposing their structural weaknesses (Van de Graaf et al. 2021). Quite quickly, however, the most socially disadvantaged young people across the continent became the biggest victims when the socio-economic impact of the crisis hit these families and their learning, well-being and, in some cases, safety was compromised (Van Laere et al. 2021). In England, the shift of service provision to online platforms (Munro 2020) presented unique challenges for both practitioners and vulnerable children and young people (Cook et al. 2020). Kim and Asbury (2020) assert that the "new normal" restrictions inhibited the usual safety nets for vulnerable children and young people, such as school and participation in community activities, and removed visits from health or social workers. The ability of practitioners to engage vulnerable children and young people was further complicated by the fact that many families from poor backgrounds had no access to the internet, making online assessments and general communications complicated (Newham et al. 2020). These factors contributed to reduced referrals to the services (Bhopal et al. 2021).

All this inadvertently resulted in increased vulnerabilities, since stay-at-home restrictions perpetuated the potential for contact with an aggressive and/or violent guardian (Bhopal et al. 2021). Green (2020: 1) calls this reduced ability to deliver services a "safeguarding failure". Lockdowns increased family tension, stress and economic insecurity and thus heightened the potential for violence (Ellis et al. 2021). Ellis et al. (2021) also note how child health was already at a crisis point because of pre-pandemic austerity measures, and lockdowns now have the potential to expose a new cohort of children to abuse and harm. In this way, any lifting of restrictions presents a double burden on services because new cases on top of the backlog of existing cases are too much for an already over-burdened system (Briggs et al. 2021b).

Youth offending services have also been severely impacted by the lockdowns and shift to online provision. Many youth workers fear that months of hard work with vulnerable children and young people has now been lost. Research confirms how vulnerable children and young people have been spending more time at home and are at increased risk of becoming involved in gangs as their contact with services has declined (National Youth Agency 2020; Pitts 2020). In addition, the ability of YOTs to both undertake assessments and contact vulnerable children and young people in custody was made more difficult by lockdowns, generating sizeable backlogs in cases (HM Inspectorate of Probation 2020). Though these conditions initially produced some worker resilience (Cook and Zschomler 2020), practitioners quickly became isolated, and they often missed face-to-face contact with their clients (Cook et al. 2020).

Methodology

The case study data presented here derive from a wider, international study of the pandemic in real time. This study started in March 2020 and is currently ongoing

(for more methodological information see Briggs et al. 2021a). For the purpose of confidentiality, all names and places have been anonymised to protect participants.

Findings

Fiona, a Child Protection Officer

Fiona says "the public sector shut its doors" with the arrival of Covid-19. The focus on Covid-19 measures and protocols became embedded in her work-life experience and there was "no legislation to help us to continue to do our job". She says that office politics revolved around "putting up Covid signs in the office and getting alcohol stations installed" instead of "focusing on child protection". Such a context generated different allegiances in office relationships because some were "scared, worship the vaccine, are obsessed with gloves, masks, PPE" while others "come in to do our job and work around the government legislation, and health and safety".

Remote online working became the predominant means of service delivery, which was "not the same as thrashing out difficult decisions about a child's welfare face-to-face". Fiona fought for the right to attend the office so that it wasn't closed down completely as it "was important to see colleagues, to share information effectively", otherwise "communications break down; when kids end up injured or dead it is down to poor communication". This was further complicated by staff leaving the service and others self-isolating after contracting Covid-19, which put additional pressure on resources. Fiona felt impotent delivering online service since she was restricted to "doorstep visits" or, at worst, "virtual visits" and gave an example explaining why.

She recalled a sexual exploitation case where the parents were taking advantage of their daughter, and there were additional allegations of physical abuse. The girl was not attending school, had a drug habit and actively sold drugs to support it. However, the father had declared himself "vulnerable", which meant that social distancing had to be honoured and protection workers could not access the property to assess the situation despite concerns that the girl had already overdosed and had suicidal thoughts.

Under the new conditions of work, Fiona saw her caseload drop and many vulnerable children and young people appearing as escalated police incidents, saying "where I live and work there is a lot of gun and gang crime, so we are just getting direct referrals from the police now. Teenagers out and about in the community, not at school, not supported by the services and they are vulnerable". In a post-Covid era, Fiona sees this new form of working as the future, particularly given the savings the authorities can make across a debt-ridden sector.

> The service has realised cost benefits of doing things like virtual work but the frontline changes then. Cost trumps the protection of the child and this will be worse for the children. This is a silver lining for local authorities because they are already in massive debt.

Diane, a Youth Offending Service Worker

Diane says the "online service" means she is no longer allowed to undertake home contact visits, a limitation which is "not ideal as young people are not getting the same engagement". The new distance created by lockdown-induced public health policies also created more "distance" which, in turn, resulted in "more boundaries". She has already noticed a big difference in the circumstances of vulnerable children and young people under lockdowns and social distancing.

> It means they are at even more high risk of committing offences. Domestic abuse between young people and parents has gone through the roof. Say if they were on a community sentence for car theft or robbery, their offending has changed, and they might now be attacking their mother because of lockdown. It has intensified the relationships. Lots of domestic abuse in the home, people are bored, schools are closed. Many of my medium-risk offenders are now high-risk offenders. We can't see them to do visits, and I can see it happening; I can forecast it but there is not much that I can do.

In addition to a higher caseload, there is also an intensification of other issues, such as "mental health", meaning "we don't even get time in many cases to deal with offending behaviour as we just try and make sure they are mentally stable". This was intensified by the lack of support from seniors and colleagues.

> I've had heated conversations with my seniors. They need to cover their backs and things like "we have been told by our seniors that we can't do home visits", but I know I need to do that because if I don't, I am the only person who can take care of these people. I have one young boy at the moment, he wouldn't open up to anyone, but he started to engage with me and talk about the trauma that had affected his life. My manager said we need to cut the visits, but I can't do that, and my progression gets lost. He knows that on Tuesday at 2pm I am his source of support.

What, therefore, does Diane do?

> I continue to see him; I tell them I have to take that risk. I have to do extra risk assessments and extra calls. But if he or I get Covid we can't continue the service so morally it is so difficult. So really, I am on my own. I want to deliver a service, but I have no backing if anything goes wrong.

In a scathing attack on the government, she described the lockdown decision as "ridiculous", claiming "they don't see the implications of it". Describing the current situation as a "shitshow", she added that vulnerable children and young people had not been considered in the lockdown equation: "these kids don't have parents, they have no stability, no consistency, they are high risk, and they are just worth a few phone calls now". Being "someone critical" in a "system of lemmings", she added that she "hated" the fact that her colleagues refused to do home visits because they "got anxious". The now static service makes things "much worse" because, as a consequence of lockdown, their "emotional well-being and mental health is at an all-time low" while some of her colleagues were "happy to sit back and offer a passive service" which, in her mind, "was failing them".

Sonya, a Youth Offending Team Manager

In March 2020, Sonya's team were sent home to work online and their client group in prison "lost contact with everyone, with the outside world" and "no one allowed in, no families, no support, no social workers". Within a month, online meetings had been set up but "it wasn't the same" she said. Half her team seemed content with the set-up as they "didn't have to deal with the young people face to face" while others "recognised how this new mode of working was failing them". Many of their clients were in prison and many families could not afford to travel: either that or they were "scared of getting the virus or couldn't because of the lockdowns". This was jeopardised by fluctuating levels of staff motivation because, as she estimated, "a good proportion" of her staff were "not bothered about seeing the clients and happy to social distance, they didn't want to see young people". A minority, however, tried to bend rules and find ways to engage young people: "it is like a false compliance where everyone is loving this idea of working from home and having loads of meetings, but no real intervention is being given to the young people".

When the team regained face-to-face contact with some of their clients five months later in August 2020, Sonya said the few staff that were prepared to return to in-person visits were traumatised by the difference in many of the young people. She recalled Billy, only 14, currently on remand in custody for a serious offence. While Billy was successful at school prior to the pandemic, and had no home or family issues, when the lockdowns ensued, he was confined to his home, stopped seeing his friends and his education suffered. Without supervision, because both his parents were working, he spent his days playing the computer game Fortnite. When the country started to open up again, however, he wasn't the same and in an altercation on a bus, he stabbed another young boy numerous times – similarly to how one might react in the game. He was sent to prison pending his trial but there were substantial delays to the case and his mental health deteriorated because the lockdowns confined him to his cell and prevented his family or workers from seeing him. He is now currently self-harming and having suicidal thoughts.

In Fortnite – a game in which you play online with random people from around the world and have to kill everyone else to survive – the violence is cartoon-like; it doesn't seem real. Perhaps Billy was swayed by the online game in real life on the bus. For those vulnerable children and young people like Billy who are in prison, however, Sonya continues to face an uphill struggle to repair relationships. It looks to be in vain as she remembers the downward spiral taken by Ismail, another young person under her care. Ismail, who already had significant mental health problems before the pandemic and was in prison at the time of the lockdowns, became more violent, was self-harming and experiencing psychotic episodes. The confinement induced by the lockdowns and the lack of supervision because of social distancing meant that Sonya was "starting from scratch with him" and, perhaps worst of all, Ismail was threatening to assault Sonya.

Discussion and conclusion

It is clear that moving the welfare and support services for vulnerable children and young people to online provision has raised new challenges for their professional workers as well as disrupting the general service and communication channels. For example, working online has significant ramifications for how practitioners communicate and how, in turn, they successfully engage and continue to support vulnerable children and young people: how they find out about their progress, assess them and refer them accordingly. However, these case studies highlight some deficiencies in this arrangement, given that vulnerable children and young people are potentially being failed and the risk to which they are exposed is intensified. Vulnerable children and young people have had broken contact with schools and support services, and important social and health service visits have not been able to take place. As we know, these are essential elements in their welfare, which dwindled dramatically during the restrictions around the Covid-19 pandemic. This raises fresh questions around the medium- to long-term sustainability of these approaches, should they be adopted and retained beyond the pandemic.

The evidence outlined here indicates that positive signs of online working transitions may have been fractured by:

- the continuation of restrictive measures;
- the appearance of vulnerable children's and young people's welfare cases as more "serious incidents"; and
- new divisions in workplace relations over the perceived risk of exposure to Covid-19 versus the risk of maintaining contact with vulnerable children and young people.

These factors now play an active role in service delivery – even if it is online. For some, working from home online is perhaps preferable to going into the office and facing the same, demanding institutional challenges of protecting vulnerable children and young people. If so, such a climate further polarises vulnerable children and young people's services and relations, leaving a minority prepared to break Covid-19 restrictions to do what they regard as both their job and duty: to protect them.

However, repeated lockdowns and extended measures such as social distancing are seen to have severed preventive interventions and in many instances led to more complex cases. These services, it should be recalled, were already subject to significant pressure pre-pandemic because of austerity politics eroding the quality of service delivery to its core. Though the workers' resilience is commendable under the circumstances, other colleagues are perceived to have literally (and cruelly ironically) washed their hands of responsibility for vulnerable children and young people, content to keep problems at bay and instead enjoying working at home (Briggs et al. 2021a).

Therefore, the emergency-mode collaborative working in these case studies is abrasively undone by Covid-19 restrictions and pressures, thus further grinding down practitioners' ability to work as a team to protect vulnerable children and young people. It could be argued that this divisive dilemma will continue for some time in these workplaces as services play "catch-up" while facing more profound pressures

on their workloads. Although there may be some political assurance that we have seen the last lockdown, the future looks uncertain, not only for workers' morale but also for protecting vulnerable children and young people.

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Chapter 4

Supporting young people in the Covid-19 pandemic

Findings from the Italian National Project for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children

Adriana Ciampa, Francesco Chezzi and Monica Grassi

Introduction

Our observation of the Covid-19 pandemic experience for young people comes from the National Project for the Inclusion and Integration of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti (RSC) Children in situations of educational poverty and extreme social marginality.

Roma, Sinti and Caminanti are the main ethnic groups in Italy belonging to the variegated and complex "world" usually referred to at the European level as Roma and Travellers. Among these groups the Roma are the majority ethnic group in Italy, spread throughout the country, partly a historical presence and partly the result of recent immigration, particularly from the Balkans and Romania. The Sinti have been present in Italy for centuries, especially in the north. The Caminanti are a tiny community historically present in Sicily. Recent estimates provided by the Italian Government speak of approximately 150 000 to 180 000 community members. Hereafter, we refer to them as a community either by the abbreviation RSC or by the more generic term Roma (UNAR 2011).

Before proceeding to the analysis of the case study and related reflections, we briefly present the national project framework and the reference context of the intervention. The main objectives of the national project are:

- improving school inclusion and educational success of Roma children and young people and confronting their early school dropout;
- improving access to social and health services for Roma children and young people and their families;
- consolidating multi-sector territorial governance;
- creating a co-operation network between the participating cities.

The priority of the national project is to promote the social and educational inclusion of children and teenagers from Roma communities during mandatory school age (6-14). The direct target groups of the national project are Roma children and young people and their families, particularly children attending primary and secondary school (aged 6-14). Recently, specific attention has also been paid to children enrolled in the first years of secondary school (aged approx. 14-16). The indirect targets of the

national project are all Roma and non-Roma students enrolled in the target classes, their teachers and all third-sector and social-health workers involved in supporting social inclusion. The national project also provides a valuable evaluation framework for the progress and impact of project activities through the use of numerous qualitative and quantitative tools. This chapter will therefore also use the multiple data and information collected contemporaneously by the national project during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The project focuses on schools, housing and the local service network. The work in schools seeks to demonstrate that an inclusive school is a welcoming and better school for all, not only for the Roma students. The activities envisaged are divided into three clusters: training for teachers and operators; curricular activities with co-operative methodology carried out by teachers; and classroom workshops. Work in residential settings aims to integrate the objectives of school support with those of promoting the child's overall well-being in their family by facilitating access to local services and fostering a pathway to independence.

The local service network is a specific area of work contextualising the national project in the territorial and geographical realities and in the need to give consistency and stability to mechanisms for managing social and socio-educational interventions in the form of multidisciplinary comparisons and co-planning spaces. The national project's approach is therefore not only to support Roma children and their families but also to promote a synergistic network of actors who can together support the social inclusion of these children especially within, but also beyond, school.

The National Project for the Inclusion and Integration of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Children is promoted within the framework of the National Operational Programme (PON) Inclusione by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and the Istituto degli Innocenti (responsible for scientific and technical assistance) in Florence. It involves the metropolitan cities of Bari, Bologna, Cagliari, Florence, Genoa, Messina, Milan, Naples, Palermo, Reggio Calabria, Rome, Turin and Venice. These actions are supported by the European Social Fund 2014-2020 programme.

Implemented since 2017, the national project continues the work started in 2013 under national Law 285/97 (promoting rights and opportunities for children and young people), significantly expanding over time the involvement of territories, schools, children and Roma families. The project has grown from 42 active classes and 152 target children in 2013 to 396 engaged classes and 590 target pupils in 2021 (Istituto degli Innocenti 2021).

Roma youth and marginalisation

As we know, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected all areas of society. Some have suffered more than others from the impact of the countermeasures to fight the virus, such as those implemented in the education system. The school, the principal educational agency of our society and a central place for defining the citizens of today and tomorrow, has slowed down (and, in some cases, almost stopped) its educational and training function. The impact on students has been very different depending on

their personalities and paths and, significantly, their families' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Indeed, among the children who have suffered most from the limitations and difficulties at school are ethnic minorities such as the Roma, who have always experienced widespread marginalisation and discrimination.

The problematic relationship between "Europe's largest minority" (Piasere 1999; FRA 2009) and majority society is a theme that recurs at the European level and not just in Italy. The low rates of schooling, conditions of extreme poverty, access to services and adequate housing for the Roma population, and discrimination are problems that prevail throughout the European continent. According to the scientific community and European institutions (ERRC 2000; ISTAT 2021; UNAR 2011; FRA 2009; Calabrò 2010; Sigona 2002), the dimensions of these critical issues appear even more evident in Italy than in many other countries, despite a numerical presence far lower than in most countries (and strikingly lower than in the countries of central and eastern Europe).

On the problematic relationship between the Roma and the majority society, the latest Eurobarometer survey of the EU Commission reveals that the Roma are the group in Europe that is subject to the most hostility, and Italy – by far – is the country where such hostility is most widespread.

According to the latest ISTAT surveys, 23 000 Roma live in authorised and unauthorised camps in Italy, a much higher proportion of the total population than in other European countries.

For schools, there is no precise information or data. Due to legislation, ethnic data on the Roma population have not been collected in schools for almost 10 years. The latest data reported in the Italian Strategy for the Integration of the RSC populations of 2012 indicated a very high dropout rate (about 42% in the first cycle) and a few hundred enrolled in secondary school. These are rough estimates that do not consider a substantial number of Roma people who, partly to escape social stigma and discrimination, do not disclose their identity. Nevertheless, they may indicate a trend, confirmed by social services and NGOs working in the field, of the great difficulty faced by these children in the process of schooling.

This particularly unfavourable situation of the Roma population, which consequently fuels difficulties in their relationship with the majority society, emerges through repeated and consistent evidence of the precarious and uncomfortable living conditions in so-called nomadic camps, which are widespread in Italy. For the first time in 2000, following the European Roma Rights Centre publication entitled *Paese dei campi* (ERRC 2000), the racial segregation of Roma in Italy and the evidence of Italian discrimination in the housing treatment of Roma populations became clear, both in the scientific community and in the political arena (Piasere 2006; Bravi 2009).

Prejudice-related discrimination, therefore, adds to (or causes) discrimination in housing, access to employment and, not least, schooling. The schooling rates in Italy of Roma communities are low compared to those of non-Roma, particularly with reference to cases of total school dropout. In this already highly problematic context, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a strong negative impact, slowing down

the fragile but essential improvements of recent years, also evident in the limited observations to date of the national project.

The severe impact of the Covid-19 crisis on a group of young Roma people already at risk of exclusion pre-pandemic

Generally, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing difficulties faced by Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children, such as complex family situations, poor health and school dropout. Fortunately, the national project was allowed to carry on the work being done with Roma communities even in pandemic conditions. Without these actions, it risked losing all contacts with the support networks, and an increasing number of young people would leave school for good, thus reversing all the previous efforts put in place. Moreover, the national project continued to vigorously pursue inclusion when the school was focused almost exclusively on health problems. Here are some figures from the project evaluation reports (Istituto degli Innocenti 2020, 2021). In the first period of lockdown, between March and June 2020, about 73% of the 565 children included in the project remained in contact with the educators. The other children, about one in four, left their precarious place and moved back to their countries of origin, Romania above all, and to other cities.

There were many issues with regard to online schooling. Of the children who attended school, only 8% had no problems connecting with distance learning. The difficulties were more significant among male students at primary school and female students at the first level of secondary school. The reason is linked to the social role of female teenagers within the community – in many families, girls are seen at a very early age as essential for the care of the house and of younger brothers and sisters. Therefore, their commitment to school often becomes unsustainable for the family, which prefers not to let them continue their studies so that they can devote themselves to domestic activities. Even if this does not happen in all families, it still occurs in a significant number of them.

Many families reported difficulties with the technological tools needed to support distance learning due to lack of a device such as computer/tablet/smartphone or because of connection problems; such difficulties occurred more often among the population living in authorised and non-authorised camps (about 65% of such students) than among students living in apartments (about 30%). A few months into the pandemic, most students received free devices from schools and other organisations to use during school hours. Moreover, some educators promoted the safe use of all these devices for children.

The educators present in the community created an essential link between the school and the local context by adapting their interventions to the different living conditions of the children. They managed to reach on site those living in social housing and settlements, authorised or spontaneous, to help them face different kinds of problems. The actions put in place locally were multiple: daily monitoring of school internet connections; the presence of the educators during distance learning (on site if necessary and possible, or outside during periods of total lockdown); distribution of school materials where needed; support in doing homework and communicating

homework to the teachers to check it with video calls, phone calls and WhatsApp in a family–educator–teacher relationship; and providing correct information about prevention of and protection against Covid-19. A closer look at this proximity work makes it clear how powerful, yet highly delicate, it is to let others (peers, teachers) "enter", through a webcam, the homes of children living in conditions of extreme marginality and housing segregation.

For the most vulnerable children and young people, online education has revealed many limitations. For these children, both boys and girls, it has been proven that personal contact is much more effective, through individual care and by paying attention to all the aspects that revolve around the children, not just their education. In this sense, the bridging role of the educators was also fundamental in promoting peer support, strengthening informal contacts between families and children, and enhancing positive relationships and friendships between them. In those phases of the Covid-19 pandemic when there were not total lockdowns, it was crucial to return from virtual learning at home to learning in the classroom to reinforce peer-to-peer relationships. It was essential to rebuild the habit of dialogue and the confidence created over the years between the Roma children and their peers, families and teachers, and between the Roma communities and the school and beyond.

On a more positive note, this period was also an opportunity to recognise new resources and abilities in the children that had not previously emerged. Resilience and motivation were shown by most of the children involved in the national project, even if they showed difficulties in achieving the didactic learning objectives; it seemed to the national project to be of extreme importance that these elements should be recognised and afforded some weight in the final evaluation by the school.

However, it is too early to assess how much the Covid-19 crisis affects the future prospects of a group of young people already at risk of exclusion before the pandemic. The national project observations underline old but more powerful trends and challenges for young people in dealing with different transitions: the increasing job insecurity of parents, who primarily work in the undeclared labour market, negatively affects their investment in learning processes of young people, who are increasingly called upon to play a role in supporting the family economy (in particular, this aspect is more severe for young girls, who are recalled to traditional family care roles or early marriages). The recent difficulties in schooling, especially in secondary school (11-14), also noted by the national project, could slow down and demotivate the enrolment of young Roma in training courses and higher technical specialisation with critical consequences for entering the labour market.

Implications for youth policy to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on Roma communities

In light of the worsening conditions during the pandemic regarding educational inequality and learning opportunities, segregation of space, peer relations, health and well-being, there is a need to address the root causes and not just the symptoms that manifest themselves in these moments of crisis.

Projects that aim to support the education and inclusion of Roma children should try to create structural and cross-sectoral changes at the grassroots level and go beyond emergency and crisis responses. In particular, it is important to plan interventions around the following key points: promoting the inclusion of the most vulnerable children means, first of all, creating a welcoming environment at school and making them actors in their growth and education. The school in the Covid-19 pandemic era has flattened the educational offer into a single, depersonalising mode that is incapable of identifying and responding to the different needs of each child in the individual learning processes connected to specific difficulties. These problems were often already present in schools before the Covid-19 pandemic but were unexpectedly worsened and exacerbated by it.

Society, and schools in particular, must open up to differences and know how to welcome them. Opening up to Roma children, often among the most marginalised, becomes a fundamental "test case". As has been said even more recently, it is necessary to rebuild links between children, between children and teachers, and between teachers and families after the Covid-19 pandemic. Attention needs to be focused not only on didactic recovery but also on relational skills through training methods such as workshops and co-operative learning. The experience of the national project has clearly shown that enabling everyone to participate is a powerful driver for inclusion. Building spaces and opportunities that give young Roma a voice leads to the conscious and proactive involvement, albeit sometimes critical, of the communities with which we work.

Other important aspects that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic through the work of the national project include:

- supporting the most vulnerable children and young people, and those with the most significant difficulties, through the individualised attention of a significant adult;
- involving experts from the communities as reference points of knowledge and planning to establish initiatives not simply *for* Roma but *with* Roma;
- investing strongly in building a productive, trusting relationship between schools and Roma families, recognising their mutual role as competent guides in the healthy development of growing citizens;
- placing even more emphasis on supporting boys and girls in the last two years of secondary school, by accompanying and supporting the transition to a new career and life cycle.

Finally, it is important, for Roma families and children in particular (though certainly not exclusively), to support, within the local network, programmes to promote and defend the right to health protection. This is not least because of the health inequalities highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the new public health challenges associated with it.

On a transversal level, it is essential to promote collective work with our local communities to lower the levels of antigypsyism (Pew Research Center 2019). The discrimination is widespread and constantly reproduced in common discourse and the media, and in political and institutional speeches and actions (Pontrandolfo and

Rizzin 2020). One of the most severe effects of this behaviour is the exclusion of Roma from the public arena, from speaking out and from being heard.

In conclusion, the topic of the community network deserves to be considered. Networking on the territory around each family made the results of the work exponential in their impact. Interventions have been increasingly effective the more adults and services have managed to network credibly and authentically, and thereby to pass on the message that "we are all there for you". No one was forgotten: where the connection with minors and families had previously existed and worked, it remained and was reinforced. The fact that the children – boys and girls – waited for and sought contact with their teachers and educators, and showed despite their difficulties an attachment to the work and a desire to stay in a relationship with significant adults, is the most important outcome of this complex process.

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Chapter 5

Care leavers in transition to adulthood: effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy, strategies and policy responses

Luisa Pandolfi, Sara Degl'Innocenti, Valentina Rossi and Cristina Calvanelli

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the significant transition phases that young people experience in their lives: transition from primary to secondary school and to university; from training to labour market; from care to autonomy. This last dimension specifically concerns care leavers, namely young people who are in the care system (including fostering, formal kinship and residential care) and must leave it at the age of 18, the legal age of adulthood. In 2018, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies launched, under the National Fund for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, a pilot National Project to Guarantee Financial and Educational Support for Care Leavers. The main aims of the project are to improve care leavers' social inclusion, to support them in their path towards autonomy and to implement new practices at national, regional and local level, developing social networks among all the institutional and non-institutional actors that support care leavers.

Background context and literature

Transitioning from care into adulthood is a difficult step for any young person; moreover, research studies demonstrate that care leavers are at significantly greater risk of negative outcomes than young people who have grown up in and transitioned from their own families, in relation to education, well-being and involvement in crime and substance abuse (Mann-Feder and Goyette 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified many issues already present in care leavers' lives, with negative consequences for the quality of educational support, learning experiences, labour market insecurity, housing and accommodation support, health conditions, personal and peer relationships and active participation (Munro et al. 2021). Some interesting results have come out of a qualitative study exploring views and experiences of young people leaving care in Northern Ireland during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kelly et al. 2021). This research shows that adversities for care leavers have worsened due to the pandemic and have a damaging impact, particularly on their emotional well-being.

In Italy, the pandemic had a negative impact on the vulnerable situation of care leavers. Before the national project, the measures for care leavers were scattered, not homogeneous, and were in any case linked to regional and/or third-sector experiences. Likewise, the approach and working framework of social and educational services were confronted with the need to "shift" from a focus on protection and care to a methodology more oriented towards promoting the active involvement of young adults.

The national project represents the first institutional answer at a national level to the needs of care leavers. The Covid-19 pandemic emergency entailed the need to rearrange and redefine the project's overall structure due to the constraints imposed by health restrictions, with complicated impacts on young people's life paths and operators' activities.

Project activities

In order to support young people in starting a path towards autonomy, the national project provides the following tools: a personalised project for autonomy, a tutor in that regard, economic support and youth conferences.

Each care leaver is in charge of his/her personalised project for autonomy, which is the result of a joint commitment between the care leaver and the reference team. It ends when the care leaver is 21 years old. The definition of the project requires a prior multidimensional assessment to identify the needs and resources of the beneficiary and the context. The project covers many areas of living: self-respect, education, training, safety, health, housing, environment, work and relationships. It identifies the objectives and accordingly the actions and network of resources needed to achieve them. Care leavers choose between higher education, vocational training and job orientation/employment.

The tutor for autonomy is involved in planning the project and represents a new educational reference point that promotes personal empowerment and the strengthening of the care leaver's skills to lead an independent life. She/he has a mentoring role and works jointly with social services, residential communities, foster families, local services and other care leavers.

The economic support available at national and local levels for care leavers includes, primarily, the Citizens' Income, the Youth Guarantee and the Right to Education funds. The project provides for an Autonomy Grant for those who do not meet the requirements for other benefits.

Finally, youth conferences are a public policy experiment, and young beneficiaries attend these participatory evaluation bodies at local, regional and national levels. They share with governance bodies the monitoring of interventions, facilitate the exchange of experiences and promote innovation. The active participation of young care leavers is thus implemented both in the choice of their own life path and in the evaluation of public policy.

The success of the project depends strongly on the willingness to rethink the professional cultures of reference. Training is fundamental for the acquisition of

knowledge and skills useful to support care leavers into adulthood by changing the context and by responding positively to new cultural and professional challenges. The measuring of actions is a fundamental requirement to monitor and assess the effectiveness, process and results of the project and to verify the adequacy and consistency of actions and their possible rescheduling. The aim is to evaluate its effectiveness in order to scale up from an experimental to a stable and consolidated intervention policy. Therefore, an information system collects both quantitative and qualitative information, to analyse the approach of the project in an extensive and multidimensional manner.

Outcomes of the project

The project involved 17 regions in Italy and has doubled the number of territorial areas since it began. As of November 2021, 500 care leavers had been involved, 60% of them girls, 60% coming from residential communities (40% from family foster care) and 65% in vocational training, work orientation and/or job placement (35% finishing higher education or starting university). There have been 700 engaged professionals including the territorial representatives, 105 tutors for autonomy and 416 social workers.

To put the project's strategy into action and to guarantee effective support for each care leaver, the tutors for autonomy and the care workers took part in specific training sessions. The training dealt with the project's framework, aims, methodology, tools and governance, alongside the acquisition by educators and psychologists of new knowledge, such as access to economic support and social benefits. The practitioners shared practices in order to identify the most effective strategies and actions for care leavers and young adults who face many choices if they are to empower themselves on leaving the care system.

The support team developed a Moodle platform with methodological and operational tools, national and local documents and all training recordings, an easy-to-read project guide, an educational tool for the management of financial support, a video where care leavers explain the self-assessment questionnaire and a monitoring tool addressed to young adults leaving care.

The first results of the self-assessment questionnaire have highlighted care leavers' expectations, such as becoming independent and achieving educational and/or work objectives, as well as the care leavers' mixed emotions of transition: fear of changes and responsibilities, anxiety, enthusiasm and a desire to grow up. After the first year within the project, care leavers declared that they had improved their skills in taking care of their health and in asking for help in case of need. They had better school results and had acquired practical skills for managing daily life. On the other hand, they still experienced problems dealing with their family of origin. Also, 98% of care leavers stated that they had established a good relationship with the tutor for autonomy and that they felt involved in the planning of their autonomy pathway.

Group activities and youth conferences were online until 2021; after that date they allowed people to be physically present. Almost all care leavers attended at least a local Youth Conference; at the time of writing, two National Youth Conferences have already been held.

The National Youth Conferences have been an opportunity to assess the project and to facilitate exchanges between care leavers and national and territorial representatives in order to co-develop and improve the project. Care leavers feel they are the main players and are aware of the great support from the tutors in their path to autonomy. However, they highlight the problem of accessing independent housing and the delays in bureaucracy to obtain the benefits to which they are entitled. Often, the problem is that local services are not up to date with the procedures for care leavers and do not always take young people seriously.

Finally, care leavers ask to be supported beyond the age of 21: those at university would be able to graduate with the project's support, and therefore they ask for it to be extended until the age of 25. Wherever possible, governance representatives have taken into account care leavers opinions in order to provide answers at national level.

Discussion and conclusion

The national project started in 2019, with establishment of the Citizenship Income, a measure to which the project refers for economic support. A few months after the start of the training, and under the responsibility of national and local governance, the Covid-19 pandemic became a turning point from both an organisational and a methodological point of view. The very structure of the project, designed to respond to a "normal" context, was overturned because of the emergency, and the real implementation of the project's actions was mainly online.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the temporary lack of face-to-face meetings represented a great difficulty for tutors in managing individual relationships with care leavers and in managing the groups for the preparation of the youth conferences. For these reasons, tutors gradually restored face-to-face contacts and meetings with care leavers to support them more effectively in the different aspects of daily life. This change affected not only national and local governance (the meeting between the stakeholders in the national steering committee, the regional and local boards), but also the training processes. Therefore, the project displayed, right from the start, the ability to react to unforeseen events in a positive way, showing internal resilience and making itself a reference point in terms of transferability of the experience.

Thanks to the fact that it is a public policy, and to the presence in the Ministry of Labour of the Steering Committee of ANCI (National Association of Italian Municipalities), and of Regions and Territorial Areas, it was possible to help care leavers in solving the problem of residence with the family of origin (changing the ISEE rules). This also facilitated their access to the labour market since a share of the *collocamento mirato* – targeted employment – under Article 8 L.68/1999 is for care leavers.

ISEE is the measure used to assess and compare the economic situation of families applying for social benefits. Access to services such as public utilities at reduced rates (e.g. telephone, electricity, gas) is linked to specific individual requirements and to the family's economic situation. ISEE determines fairly the citizen's participation in the cost of social and socio-health services and is subject to controls. "Targeted employment" refers to active labour policy actions to support disadvantaged and protected categories. It is a set of tools for people to develop work abilities through job analyses, forms of support, positive actions and solutions to workplace problems. Law 68/1999 identifies the beneficiary categories and establishes the obligations of employers, whether public or private, in recruitment.

Care leavers receive support from municipalities in residence and housing procedures, in job searches and in the path towards progressive autonomy. These elements represent the real strength of the national project, which has been able to guarantee strategic governance aimed at co-ordinating the entire normative-regulatory system in favour of care leavers, while also supporting all the stakeholders involved in activating local planning and good governance practices.

The expected outcome of the national project is to include its working methodology in the National Social Plan in order to focus attention on an essential level of services. The project represents an opportunity for service providers to rethink the professional reference points, to test new methods with a rarely addressed target (young adults) and to propose to care workers integrated operational methods for developing synergies between different sectors. The aim is to break down the logic of sectoral work in favour of integrated planning between services, to maximise results and optimise economic resources and joint efforts.

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Part II

Mobility and digital space

Chapter 6

New dilemmas in young people's mobile transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic

David Cairns and Mara Clemente

Introduction

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth transitions is potentially huge, due to the severity of the public health emergency and its prolonged duration. At the time of writing, December 2021, a fifth wave of infections has started in western Europe, accelerated by the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, taking us into a third successive year, with no end as yet in sight. With thousands of people dead, millions more infected, some repeatedly, and the social and economic positions of practically everyone disrupted in some respect, we can say without fear of contradiction that young people will be making a transition to a reality different from previous generations, characterised by changes that traverse socio- and geo-demographic boundaries. This is not to mention challenges that pre-date the pandemic, and will no doubt outlast it, including the climate emergency and rising geo-political tensions in central and eastern Europe, all of which complicate the process of growing up and becoming independent.

While its impact is diffuse, the Covid-19 pandemic has nevertheless affected certain aspects of life more profoundly than others. This includes losing the freedom, at times, to engage in unrestricted mobility, non-essential travel having been constrained by restrictions aimed at limiting the spread of the virus, alongside an understandable reluctance from many people to engage in activities that have come to be seen as inherently risky. There are many general limitations on mobility; however, some have had a more acute impact on young people and practitioners in the youth field, particularly those in universities, who before the pandemic all benefited greatly from the integration of mobility into various forms of work, training, civil society projects and (especially) higher education. The pandemic has therefore meant less travel and fewer opportunities to use mobility as a pedagogical tool in formal, informal and non-formal education. We should also acknowledge complications for young people with low levels of social, economic and cultural capital, who are seeking to move to another country to find work or escape hardship, and therefore face greater risk of exposure to the virus, not to mention the various forms of labour market precarity and exploitation that, unlike other activities, have not ceased during the public health crisis.

In this chapter, we aim to look at some of the concerns that have arisen during the pandemic and have affected young people's ability to engage in meaningful geographical mobility. Our focus is on a number of key dilemmas that have arisen from the need to balance public health, personal safety, and economic and political pressures to keep borders open, affecting both short-stay international exchanges and longer, more open-ended, forms of youth migration. We focus on the Portuguese context, using examples from research conducted during the pandemic with young people and youth stakeholders, alongside reports of significant events. In addition to illustrating changes in the frequency of travel, we argue that many mobilities have undergone a transition in meaning during the pandemic. It seems that we are no longer living in an age when mobility can be taken for granted, and this new reality needs to be considered in our appreciation of the transitions of many young people.

The "immobility turn" in young people's transitions

A large body of work has accumulated about the role of mobility in the lives of young people, an issue elaborated on in many of our previous publications (see, for example, Cairns 2014). The tantalising prospect for youth is that, by moving abroad, the field of opportunities is made deeper and wider; in principle making access more democratic by reducing the significance of their place of origin. This promise is particularly useful for young people living in regions where there are fewer opportunities, and is attractive to organisations like the European Commission that promote mobility as a form of free movement between countries. All this gives the idea of "mobile transitions" an international, if not global, appeal, helping to explain the apparent popularity of moving abroad for work, study and training (Robertson et al. 2018). That we have well over a decade of scholarship on this topic, with the main focus being on the international circulation of students (see, e.g. Brooks and Waters 2011; Raghuram 2013; Beech 2019), also means academic familiarity with the idea that youth transitions ought to include geographical mobility, as a means of ultimately triggering social mobility and generating capital in the knowledge economy.

Somewhat less visible due to the relative lack of robust academic research, but no less important, is the value of mobility for educators, trainers and civil society agencies. These stakeholders were able to expand the reach of their work via hosting exchange platforms to cater for a wide range of young people, the most celebrated in the European Union context being Erasmus+ in its various forms. Additionally we should mention that, at a time when the practice of migration was becoming problematised and often addressed pejoratively in media and political discourse, youth mobility was still seen as relatively benign, even beneficial, to societies. Again, this was particularly true in the European Union, with Erasmus+ mobility attaining political importance as a nascent symbol of European integration.

When much of this mobility stopped in the early months of 2020, this loss (which we define as the "immobility turn") came as a profound shock, especially to those engaged in or supporting activities that they felt entitled to continue: activities such as education and training in another country, finding work or simply becoming slightly more cosmopolitan and independent through spending time abroad. Certainly, in our national context of Portugal, there were difficulties in accepting

the idea that most, if not practically all, mobility was non-essential and had to stop. Some young people continued to travel even during the most stringent periods of lockdown, creating risk for themselves and for others, issues we will discuss later (see also Malet Calvo et al. 2021). The most obvious explanation of their apparently foolhardy behaviour is their dependence upon mobility, which formed an essential part of their transition plans, especially in higher education.

For now, we can say that mobility coming to a halt made life difficult for spatially transient young people, who were left literally grounded by the unfolding events or confronted with the prospect of a risk-laden mobility experience. At the same time, host institutions found themselves suddenly facing the loss of much of their client base for an indeterminate length of time, not to mention the sudden discovery that they were responsible for taking care of many of those who had already travelled to their universities, perhaps also feeling slightly guilty about being part of the mobility infrastructure that had partly facilitated the rapid spread of the virus in the first place.

At the outset, we therefore have to recognise that the incorporation of various forms of mobility – or mobilities (Urry 2007) – into the transition to adulthood became a problem during the pandemic, affecting youth in different situations and in different ways, while also having a major impact on institutions and industries that had grown dependent on open borders and the willingness of large numbers of young people to travel. This explains why we believe we are witnessing an "immobility turn" in youth transitions, which even if temporary has major consequences for young people's professional and ontological development, with wider implications for policy makers and stakeholders in the youth sector who may find themselves facing changes and fluctuations in demand for their services.

The "mobility turn"

Before we elaborate on this "immobility turn", it is worth outlining some features of the preceding period of mobility expansion. From a theoretical perspective, developments during the latter part of the 20th century, and the start of the 21st, coalesced around the idea of a new mobilities paradigm, encapsulating the multiplication and diversification of spatial practices (Urry 1995; Sheller and Urry 2006; see also Cresswell 2006; Faist 2013). There is much we could say about the impact of this "turn" on young people's lives, but it is important to stress the exceptionality of this epoch.

Moving abroad to study, and to engage in extended periods of leisure, has always been a possibility for children of the wealthy, or for exceptionally gifted individuals, making them a kind of migratory elite (Murphy-Lejeune 2002), but the intensification and diversification of global pathways for education, work and study, as well as leisure, was unprecedented during the pre-pandemic years, with millions rather than thousands of young people regularly spending time in one or more foreign countries as higher education students, interns or employees, especially but not exclusively in the European context, prolonging their transitions to adulthood via episodic mobile moratoria periods (see Cuzzocrea and Cairns 2020; Cairns 2021a).

While we can estimate the scale of this development in terms of the number of young people engaging in various forms of travel, with 9 million Erasmus+ exchanges thought to have taken place during the first 30 years of a programme that started in 1987 (Cairns et al. 2018: 8), and many more undocumented young people travelling abroad using their own (often quite limited) resources, we might also want to consider what was happening in their lives, socially, economically and even politically.

This "mobility turn" can be seen as an attempt to describe the fluidity and lack of spatial fixity that accompanies an expansion in global flows of people and capital (see also Bauman 2000), enabled by developments in information technology, communications and travel. From an optimistic point of view, this expansion implies significantly more possibilities for self-actualisation and the prospect of gaining forms of mobility capital, heightening internationalised employability and interculturality via participation in highly convivial exchanges with fellow travellers (Cairns 2021b). On the other hand, mobile students often pay a very high price for their internationalised higher education and "migrant" workers can endure discrimination and disadvantage in local labour markets, with those wishing to settle in third-party countries also facing barriers related to their non-citizenship, including restricted access to health and welfare services.

This situation suggests a large degree of ambivalence with regard to the actual value of the mobility turn to young people, particularly among those with vulnerabilities, and by association this brings into question the wisdom of endlessly expanding the numbers of young people on the move. It has certainly been significant over the past few decades that more young people were able to travel, to potentially enhance their lives and careers in new and exciting ways. There was, however, always an economic and an emotional cost to be paid, one that did not emerge as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic but became much more visible during that time. Added to this realisation we see the negative impact on the natural environment of maximised mobilities, something noted by Urry (1995, 2000, 2007) and other social theorists. This wider negative impact has not featured prominently in academic studies in the youth field, including our own work, which has tended to consider the negative impacts of mobility for individuals and the consequences in terms of the reproduction of social inequalities, rather than the literal erosion of societies through the destruction of the natural environment (Cairns et al. 2017).

The immobility turn in youth transitions

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, more mobility, and more youth on the move, meant that the number of people affected was considerable, much more so than in the past when practices such as working and studying abroad were merely elitist pursuits. In response, in recent publications we have been hypothesising that we may now in fact be in the middle of an "immobility turn" (Cairns et al. 2021a), characterised by the freedom to circulate being suddenly and dramatically constricted. More specifically, we define this turn as a decrease in the range and frequency of mobilities, and the problematisation of travelling due to heightened epidemiological risks. Other aspects of the immobility turn include a shift towards the use of virtual platforms as replacement or placeholder modalities within mobility programmes

as they attempt to remain operational and retain funding. More directly, immobility puts into doubt the viability of many youth migration trajectories and undermines the financial integrity of many youth transitions due to rising costs, alongside the obvious heightening of stress and anxiety (Cairns et al. 2021b; Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2021).

Naturally we sincerely hope that immobility is a temporary experience, for everyone, but its effects will be long-lasting and hard to reverse. This leads us towards considering the potential impact of immobilisation on young people's transitions, and the broader significance of the pandemic for processes such as completing higher education and specialist training stages, as well as the difficult process of finding non-precarious employment abroad. The removal of many international opportunities obviously makes mobile transitions harder to realise and more prolonged, with the geographical field of opportunities also having dramatically shrunk, but we also know that young people can be stoical and resilient; many will not give up easily on their mobility-related aspirations (Krzaklewska et al. 2021). We are nevertheless faced with a situation that, even if not permanent, is reminiscent of the pre-mobility turn era of the 1970s and 1980s, when youth transitions were imagined as being extremely static spatially, taking place within the same country, sometimes the same city or region and bounded by the limitations of locality (see, e.g. Furlong and Cartmel 1997), with mobility and migration restricted to a few privileged members of society or those who felt compelled to move abroad to escape hardship or persecution.

From a more positive perspective, we can now at least acknowledge that previously under-appreciated problems are becoming more visible, especially the economic vulnerability of many mobile students and the multiple forms of precarity facing migrant workers, issues that we address in the second part of this chapter. We can also see that, during the time of expansion, the more migratory forms of movement could involve enduring a quite ontologically brittle mobility experience. Instead of having a definitive starting point and a realistic chance of settlement, a migration trajectory more often tended to be constructed out of the bricolage of intermittent mobility episodes that created existential and material hardship for those young people without the social and economic capital needed to cope with the stops, starts and gaps that had to be compensated for (Cairns 2021a; Cairns and Clemente 2021). Suffice to say, even before the pandemic, mobile transitions already had an element of risk and instability, related to high costs and low levels of support. We should therefore be circumspect about demands for a return to a "normal" when such conditions were riddled with inequality and exclusion, an issue that we address in the concluding discussion.

Approach

In the rest of this chapter, we look at how the immobility turn has affected young people in our Portuguese context. Before doing so, we should say that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced us to drastically change our methodological approaches, taking into account what is practically possible and ethically acceptable at this time. Most notably, since it is imprudent to conduct in-person fieldwork, we have had to rely on online methods. While this is not entirely satisfactory, we have had no other option

but to resort to the internet in order to collect information and recruit interviewees while taking into account the limitations involved.

We have looked at three scenarios wherein dilemmas have arisen for youth related to the immobility turn: the problematisation of the Erasmus+ programme, new challenges in student migration and difficulties in migrating for work. In the last scenario, we put specific emphasis upon risk and precarity related to the pandemic. With regard to evidence, for the first two scenarios we have been able to re-examine evidence collected from previous work on the impact of the pandemic, conducted with 27 international students based at various Portuguese universities during spring 2020. As outcomes from this research had already been published (Cairns et al. 2021a, 2021b; Malet Calvo et al. 2021), we recently gathered more evidence, during the fifth wave of Covid-19 in November and December 2021, this time with members of staff responsible for the management of mobility platforms at 20 universities across Portugal. In order to better appreciate the challenges that are now facing migrant workers, we look at an example of what can happen when economic imperatives prevail over public health considerations, with the spread of Covid-19 among workers and in host communities. This part of our analysis is far from being systematic, given the limitations on research practice and the relative lack of knowledge about this cohort. We nevertheless attempt to provide insight into what has been happening through a look at communication on internet platforms in order to explain the main orientation towards these workers during the pandemic.

In the concluding discussion, we look at how these issues might affect mobility-seeking young people in the near future, and the implications for the previously mobility-dependent aspects of higher education and other sectors of the economy, including potential transformations in learning mobility pedagogies. This includes the need to recognise pre-existing and new vulnerabilities, and the incompatibility of economic and political imperatives that seek to re-start full-scale mobility with existential and environmental concerns. All these issues have consequences for young people's mobility, which we believe needs to become safer and more sustainable, even if this comes at the cost of less intensive and more infrequent mobility.

Analysis

In the remainder of this chapter, we attempt to provide insight into the impact of the immobility turn on young people's transitions, and the dilemmas that have arisen, especially for those young people in full-time higher education or in work who moved to Portugal before or during the pandemic. As well as revisiting some familiar themes in youth research, especially with regard to student mobility, we also note divergences related to geo- and socio-demographic background; while the impact of the pandemic is general, there are also specific issues that we want to highlight. We also want to rethink assumptions about transitions, based on what we have learned from our evidence, and to re-assess the role played by different mobilities in young people's lives. The aim is to inform future debates about mobile transitions, affecting policy and practitioners as well as young people.

Erasmus + immobility

We begin with a discussion of student exchanges during the pandemic, many of them taking place within Europe and neighbouring countries under the auspices of Erasmus+. Practices such as spending a semester in a foreign university or engaging in voluntary and work placements abroad became commonplace in the decades prior to the public health emergency, attracting a large number of academic studies (see, e.g. Feyen and Krzaklewska 2013). During the initial stages of the pandemic, immobility obviously affected travel between and within countries, with some overseas students returning home early or choosing not to go ahead with their plans to move abroad. Although statistics have not yet been made public, it has been estimated in our own university that incoming mobility via platforms such as Erasmus+ more than halved during the 2020/21 academic year compared to the previous year (see also Krzaklewska et al. 2021).

While the curtailment of mobility has preoccupied researchers and other interested parties, raising concerns about the viability of programmes like Erasmus+ during the pandemic, less visible is the impact made on international student life by restrictions on travel and socialising within host countries. This is nevertheless important, as conviviality is a key part of the learning experience (see Cuzzocrea et al. 2021) and arguably its unique selling point, making mobile transitions reliant upon the ability to travel within the host country and engage with other foreign students and local communities. Erasmus+ and similar programmes are hence doubly affected by immobility, with the constriction of movement between and within countries undermining the ability to move abroad and to engage in meaningful intercultural exchanges.

The dilemma created for prospective mobile students then is not simply "is it safe to travel?" but also "is it even worthwhile?", since even after the most intensive lockdowns appear to have ended in Portugal, "normal life" has yet to return in universities and elsewhere. With the problematisation of multiple dimensions of mobility, groups such as Erasmus+ students hence face a choice between stoical continuance of their stays abroad or losing sight of their mobile dreams by remaining at home, with both scenarios potentially disrupting transitions in different ways: not completing or prolonging courses, failing to enhance intercultural skills, missing out on meeting new friends from different countries and more generally a feeling of having an inferior experience compared to what previous generations of students enjoyed.

The choice then is between something that is better than nothing, or nothing at all. This dilemma is mirrored by similar choices facing stakeholders in the student mobility field, including host universities. Should they continue to support and host programmes that will be operating at less than full capacity? Or should they curtail their activities, and risk losing out on opportunities in the future due to the divestment of funding that follows a drop in numbers being hosted? There is also the question of whether or not to adopt virtual mobility or blended learning formats, the value of which has not been proven. For policy makers, especially at European level, there is also a strong imperative to maintain the Erasmus+ status quo, with so much already invested, economically and emotionally, in the programme, to the point of making it appear too big to be allowed to fail.

Our evidence, from students and host institutions, illustrates these dilemmas. For students who travelled prior to the start of the public health crisis, there was distress and disorientation, particularly during the periods of domestic confinement, leading to a preoccupation with the question of whether or not to return home, complicated for those who had been abroad for long periods, having engaged in multiple Erasmus+ stays, who had to decide on what place now constituted "home".

Even more concerning was the privatisation of risk. For example, one student claimed that his home university in Germany had required him to sign documents to release them from any indemnity should he decide to stay in Portugal (see Cairns et al. 2021a: 880). This suggests that the behaviour of Erasmus+ participating universities during the pandemic has not always been exemplary, characterised by self-interest rather than a preoccupation with student welfare. More promising is the situation within the Portuguese universities who responded to our questions about managing platforms like Erasmus+ under pandemic conditions. They were able to explain that while they had been put in the very awkward position of needing to retain their internationalised learning profiles, despite being aware of the risks of hosting international students (not least to themselves), no compromises were made in respect to health and safety, with guidelines and protocols put into place at each university and support available for those who needed it most (see Cairns and Clemente 2023).

Both student and institutional perspectives suggest that student mobility via platforms like Erasmus+ will continue in the immediate future, albeit at considerably lower levels, and there is realism about what can actually be achieved during time spent abroad. We might then want to temper our expectations about future participation levels, and also anticipate lower levels of mobility capital being generated. In the case of Portugal, there has also been some reputational damage, to Erasmus+ in particular, as a result of numerous cases of Covid-19 super-spreading at unofficial welcome events during the second wave of the pandemic (see, e.g. Silva 2020). These stories were front page news and have not been forgotten. But even leaving aside such sensationalised and hopefully exceptional incidents, the discomfort and inconvenience of international travel continues to create problems, as does the fact that many universities have yet to return to full-scale in-person operations. It would therefore seem to be the case that stays abroad will be something to be endured, rather than enjoyed by students for some time to come.

Student migration

Most short-duration exchange students were able to adapt their expectations, return home or refrain from travelling, perhaps only losing several months of optional internationalised learning in the process. The situation was not quite so clear cut with regard to longer-term student migrants: young people and older learners who had moved abroad to study at a foreign university for the entire duration of a postgraduate or undergraduate programme. These migrants include – it would seem with increasing frequency – students from non-European countries, for whom a study visa is often the tool to access otherwise unavailable transition pathways.

Optimistically we might expect to find less disruption in the lives of those able to attain some level of settlement in the host community before the pandemic, especially if they knew the local language, were accompanied by family or had established social networks with local people rather than fellow international students. More spatial fixity and higher stocks of various forms of social capital hence meant somewhat different circumstances compared to more transient exchange students, potentially lessening the feeling that there was a need to return home, even during the most intensive lockdowns. Nevertheless, research conducted with international student migrants enrolled at Portuguese universities during the first wave of the pandemic suggested ambivalence.

For those with spacious accommodation and supportive housemates and families, it was possible to survive the most challenging months through mutual support. Others who lacked such conditions had to endure stringent protection procedures, particularly when living in university dormitories. The greatest concern has however been the generation of precarity among students with low levels of economic resources. For them, there has been disruption not only to learning but also to their financial integrity, with the loss of earnings from jobs, parents and scholarships at a time when expenses are mounting, leaving some with no recourse but to engage in risky employment in hospitals, hospitality, food delivery and supermarkets, practically the only jobs available during lockdown (see Cairns et al. 2021a).

We might then say that the pandemic has revealed some uncomfortable truths about inequalities in student migration, exposing the precarity that persists among the less well-off members of the international student population in Portugal. Looking at our more recent material, collected during the fifth wave of Covid-19 as the pandemic situation had evolved, we can say that a greater degree of stability has been obtained, with many students' financial situations having improved, partly as a result of interventions from host universities, including in some cases the suspension of tuition fees. University staff have also remained reasonably positive about their capacity to maintain existing levels of overseas enrolments in degree programmes, noting that the pandemic may actually create a stronger imperative to engage in higher education, particularly at postgraduate level.

Migrating to work

One further issue we want to consider in this chapter relates to complications facing young people who have migrated to Portugal to work, including those engaged in seasonal and/or precarious work. The pandemic has raised the visibility of these individuals, and re-ignited discussion on issues like precarity among migrant workers and its intersection with public health. While there are many (young) migrant workers whose circumstances are no doubt relatively comfortable, others are low paid and domiciled in conditions in which adhering to the necessary safety regulations is not possible. That many of these workers are from outside the EU further complicates matters, particularly where their stays in Portugal, even after a "regular" entry, involve dealing with both practical barriers (such as contractually informal jobs, language barriers or hostility from locals) and bureaucratic procedures complicated by the closure of offices and the overworking of officials during the pandemic.

The precariousness of the living and working conditions of these migrants was demonstrated in our Portuguese context during the most intensive periods of lockdown by the plight of agricultural workers from India, Nepal and Pakistan. They had migrated to the Alentejo region of Portugal at a time when most forms of international travel were prohibited or highly restricted. Their cramped and unhealthy living conditions – with no hot water and minimum conditions of comfort in overcrowded, unheated houses – became a cause célèbre in media and political debate on the occasion of a surge in Covid-19 cases – known as the "Odemira case" (Clemente 2021: 10; Estevens et al. 2021: 11-12). Public consternation centred not so much on possible effacement of travel regulations, particularly as these arrivals had entered the country through ostensibly legal means, but rather the risk from Covid-19 growing stronger within this migrant population and in host communities due to poor quality living conditions, potentially threatening the local health system and economy.

Signs of this threat of stigmatisation were reported in social networks where measures to facilitate access to vaccination among migrant foreigners were posted. For example, the High Commission for Migration (ACM) Facebook page included the following comment from a migrant: "Finally! My family, we are foreigners in Portugal, and we had Covid-19 last year. A lot of people looked at us as if we were spreading death! Not cool!" The widely reported emergency rehousing of many of these workers by government authorities in a private eco resort in Odemira (see Dias 2021) followed the strengthening of a number of measures put in place to address the idea that migrant workers, and the idea of migration itself when conducted in the name of supporting the national economy, might be having a negative impact on the country. As well as rehousing, these measures have included, among other things, allowing some foreign citizens without national health service registration numbers to be included in the national vaccination plan, and the attribution of health card numbers to foreign citizens caught up in pending regularisation processes, using ad hoc digital platforms and an extensive plurilingual information campaign.

On the whole, the public and political debate around economic migration at national level has remained relatively mature and consensual, in possible contrast to debates about such forms of migration in other European contexts, that demonise migrants and assign a pejorative meaning to migration itself. This helps to explain why, during the prolonged periods when air and land transit, as well as travel within the national territory, was limited, and rates of Covid-19 infections were high, some foreign nationals seeking work were still allowed to enter and others able to stay, helped by the ability to renew their citizenship documents online. Furthermore, throughout the pandemic, Portugal continued to receive unaccompanied young migrants and asylum seekers. That they are frequently housed in inland areas of the country that have historically not hosted large migrant communities has encouraged among other things an attempt at a welcoming response, including the articulation by various national and local entities of their idea that migrants' contributions to the local, and national, economy should be valued, and hence these people should be looked after.

More specifically, the work of Local Centres to Support Immigrants (CLAIM Networks) was particularly encouraged. The mission of these agencies is to support the reception and integration of migrants, including young workers from overseas, by engaging with various local structures. Created in 2003, CLAIM Networks have been strengthened

during the pandemic and now number almost 150. They are traditionally opened in the presence of leaders of national authorities, and their importance is likely to grow in the future. These are promising developments, and they potentially make working abroad more manageable, even at times of heightened risk and stress.

Conclusion: learning from the immobility turn

These dilemmas illustrate many of the complications that have arisen about mobility, and immobility, for young people during the pandemic, often related to the difficulty of balancing personal and public safety against the desire to get on with life as "normally" as possible, whether this is participating in mobility programmes, being a student migrant or working abroad. At a very general level, we might see this as a (re)manifestation of the "risk society" paradigm (see Beck 1992); in more precise terms, we have examples of what might be termed a "health versus wealth" dichotomy, with mixed outcomes arising from attempts to simultaneously respond to these imperatives. Our evidence is designed to illustrate these problems rather than draw conclusions; however, it is probably true to say that the pandemic has made more visible some points of weakness and vulnerability that have the potential to constrain and complicate transitions, including the freedom to engage in activities such as working and studying abroad.

For a wide range of stakeholders, including student mobility facilitators, the Covid-19 pandemic has signalled the need for major changes in the way they work, with an enhanced duty of care towards incoming students. They also need to adjust their expectations, and budgets, to take account of lower levels of circulation, something that is likely to persist for many years to come. This also involves moving on from the expansionist ethos that characterised the development of student mobility platforms in the pre-pandemic era, exemplified by the exponential growth of the Erasmus+ programme. Erasmus less might now be more appropriate, considering that there is less to be gained by young people from moving abroad, besides the generation of avoidable risk and precarity. Student migrants meanwhile need to be better supported, especially those who need to travel in order to realise their ambitions; such a need suggests that they have in the past been undervalued by their host institution.

An important lesson for policy makers is recognising the need to support groups like young migrant workers, and this need may become even more pressing in the future despite the relative downturn in the frequency of international mobility. There are also new challenges. At the time this book goes to press, Portugal is showing signs of a sixth wave of Covid-19 infections, and the Russo-Ukrainian War has created a new migratory wave out of eastern Europe. This has created a new dilemma. Different European countries, including Portugal, are prioritising humanitarian concerns over public health, by declaring their readiness to welcome new "refugees" – many of them minors and young women, as well as vulnerable older citizens.

This situation immediately raises at least two questions. First, in the context of an immobility turn affecting what might be termed "mainstream" mobilities, such as student exchanges and other forms of non-essential travel, will (youth) mobility

become increasingly linked to emotionally charged categories such as the "refugee" movement? Second, how will the focus on reacting to an emergency situation change what migration means for its protagonists, including the role of what is effectively coerced mobility in their transitions to adulthood? We may be witnessing an immobility turn for some young people, and a new mobility turn for others, drastically changing the meaning of mobile transitions through an emphasis on basic humanitarian needs rather than more traditional concerns such as education, training and work.

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Chapter 7

How the Covid-19 pandemic affected "the dream of mobility": transitions of young people in rural Italy

Mauro Giardiello and Rosa Capobianco

Introduction

Mobility is a significant component of the life paths of young people and young adults. As underlined by Harris et al. (2021: 169).

> Being mobile is seen as a new identification space for young people, a constitutive element of the contemporary meaning of youth, an indicator of transition to adulthood and a creator of youth experiences.

It is a strategy implemented by a reflexive agency to solve the problem of job insecurity, to improve personal skills and to have brighter employment prospects; a conception of mobility that tends to evoke an individual who autonomously constructs his/her own biography (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Yoon 2014). This process is based on a doxa that can be defined as "the imperative of mobility" (Farrugia 2016) which brings to mind the inevitability of having to be mobile and creates a culture of mobility and an imaginary – "the dream of mobility" (Cairns et al. 2017) – that nurtures the hope for economic and personal success and requires an individual who is not rooted in a specific place (Cuzzocrea 2018a).

With the spread of the global pandemic, the young generations found themselves catapulted very quickly into an unprecedented reality in which a practice that had previously been considered ideal has been denied to them. The relation between transition (moving out from parents' home and establishing one's own household, cohabiting and raising children, moving from the education system to the labour market …) and mobility has been reformulated (Krzaklewska 2019), configuring suspended, interrupted or new forms of transitions. Some young people have come back to their original place and/or have managed to reshape their mobility project, others have postponed it and many have had to give it up altogether (Cairns et al. 2021; Cook et al. 2021).

This is particularly true for Italy, a country that has always been a crossroads, a meeting place for peoples and exchanges of human experiences, a location of both departures and arrivals. According to the OECD (2019), the Italian emigration phenomenon recorded a constant decrease between 1970 and 1990; in the following 20 years it remained stable and since 2010 it has begun to increase again. During the Covid-19

pandemic, mobility slowed significantly and, while it did not stop completely, for certain periods and in certain areas it almost came to a halt.

Young people's emigration is even more dramatic in the internal areas of southern Italy that are characterised by economic and social hardship, where mobility is one of the strategies implemented by the younger generations to cope with the crisis of the labour market in order to build a future in which they can feel fulfilled, both professionally and personally. These issues are common among young people who live in peripheral societies who have internalised a "culture of emigration" (Cuzzocrea et al. 2020; Franceschelli 2022).

This chapter addresses this context and seeks to analyse how the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the link between mobility and youth transitions in rural areas of southern Italy, paying particular attention to the inner areas of Calabria and Molise were given attention. Since the 1980s, these areas have been suffering a demographic decline caused by the ageing of the population and a resumption of youth emigration. Although these regions are very interesting from an historical and landscape point of view, they are also the least equipped with infrastructure and social and cultural attractions, especially for young people. Based on the ranking carried out on the quality of life of the 107 Italian provinces (Lab24 (2022)), the provinces of the Molise region are placed in the last quartile of the ranking (Campobasso 80th and Isernia 81st) while those of the Calabria region have some of the lowest rankings (Cosenza 88th, Catanzaro 96th, Reggio Calabria 101st, Vibo Valentia 104th, Crotone 107th).

In-depth narrative interviews were carried out with 70 youth and young adults (aged 18-35) who had left their village/city of origin to move to northern Italy or to other European countries and had come back home due to the pandemic.

The research findings show that the young people interviewed found themselves locked into their transition process within a new reality produced by the interrelation between imagined mobility and real immobility. It was a reality bearing a resemblance to a waiting room.

The issue of "waithood" has long been investigated in youth studies. The term is used to indicate a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood (Honwana 2013), as a new form of moratorium (Cuzzocrea 2018b) or as a metaphor, "homo promptus", to describe young adults (Walsh and Black 2020). Recently the concept has been used to describe the condition of young people who, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, have been stranded in a foreign country experiencing a condition of uncertainty and precariousness in work and suspension for the future and whose "ability to cope with the loss of work was mediated by the degree of family support that they could access", as argued by Cook et al. (2021: 331). For the young people that they interviewed, the waiting room has both a spatial meaning (the family's house) and a temporal one (the time of waiting for the end of lockdown). In this new condition there is a redefinition of one's transition, which implies both a greater emotional and imaginative investment in mobility and a recovery of the relationship with the place of origin.

Mobility and youth transitions

In recent years, the paradigm of linear and sequential transition to adulthood, which characterised previous generations, has been reformulated because it was considered unsuitable for interpreting the changes that take place for new generations within the context of the affirmation of late-modern society (Woodman and Wyn 2015).

The interpretive weakness of the linear transition metaphor is manifested, above all, with respect to the crisis of the industrial system, the affirmation of flexible capitalism, social acceleration and an increase in precarity. These processes have led to the crisis of the transition model based on the concept of the biography of choice (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), which underlies the paradigm of the "mobility turn" (Sheller and Urry 2006), and particularly, an idea of intra-European mobility characterised by freedom of movement. In such a structured reality, new generations are committed to building their lives along paths that are no longer linear and progressive but rather characterised by discontinuity and different trajectories (Cuzzocrea 2019). As a result, the relationship between mobility and youth transitions is based on ruptures such as "moving out, keeping in touch and coming back" (Botterill 2014: 1) or relational links with either the family dynamics or the place (Cuzzocrea 2018a; Holdsworth 2013; Robertson et al. 2018).

In Italy, before the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic and financial crisis had not only widened the gap between different generations but also the intra-generational differences between those who are privileged and have more economic, social and cultural resources and those who are less privileged and deprived of tools and resources (Spanò and Domecka 2020). This situation was exacerbated by the weakness of social investment policies that did not make use of young people's skills (Maestripieri 2020). This made the transition path of young people towards adult life increasingly delayed, postponed (Pastore 2017) and much more difficult than that of their peers from central-western or north European countries (Eurostat 2020); young people were obliged to develop different forms of skills and capacities to be creative and to invent solutions (Cuzzocrea et al. 2020) in order to overcome crisis and uncertainty.

The studies carried out on this topic show how realisation of and experimentation with transition processes in the field of mobility are related to different levels of privilege. In these analyses, the limits of mobility are well documented: the underestimation of the impact of the global economic structure (work de-standardisation and precarity) and the weight of class belonging, the socio-economic status of the family, and gender and ethnicity are all influential in shaping a successful or unsuccessful transition (Giardiello and Capobianco 2021).

The health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed restrictions on mobility, redefining the transition processes associated with it. The studies carried out in the last two years have shown how the pandemic – determining a turning point towards immobility – has produced a process of devaluation of mobility capital. The transition processes of young people have been conditioned both by "macro" factors (such as the economic condition of the country of origin, welfare systems, labour market structure) and "micro" factors (such as the socio-economic status of

the family) (Luppi et al. 2021), leading young people to seek safety, protection and guaranteed returns rather than adventure, acculturation and capital accumulation (Cairns et al. 2021).

In this body of research, however, the relationship between the aspiration to mobility and the condition of immobility has been little investigated. Drawing on the concept of "spatial reflexivity" (Cairns et al. 2017), which associates mobility with a high degree of reflexivity, it is possible to state that the passage in the "waiting room" has determined a reorganisation of transition strategies in relation to the rules required by the new condition where mobility and immobility coexist.

More specifically, if the new condition means that the mobility project is merely a possibility, at the same time it makes the experience in the waiting room very real, regulated by the principle of suspension, of a postponement that can become a trap, a rethinking but also the recovery of a new process of settlement, of living. Young Italians from rural areas of the south, during the Covid-19 pandemic, found themselves suspended between reality and imagination, entangled in a paradox between persistence, at least regarding their aspirations and/or their planning of the desire to be mobile and the reality of the pandemic that forced them to manage and build their own life path in immobility.

The socio-economic context of youth mobility in southern Italy

The data released by the SVIMEZ Report (2020) on the development of southern Italy illustrate a dramatic situation: in 2018 over 138 000 residents moved away from the south and officially changed residency. About 50% of them were aged 15-34, a quarter moved to a foreign country and a much higher percentage than in the past (one third of the total) had a master's degree. Since 2000 there has also been an increase in the number of female emigrants, which has now almost reached the same level as males.

The main reasons linked to this migratory flow certainly include university study (Contini et al. 2020) and work. Young people who are unable to find a job that is suited to their qualifications and aspirations are obliged to emigrate; their mobility is somewhat forced. Above all, those whose main field of interest is in the arts migrate to look for work in fixed-term and often unskilled jobs, in sectors ranging from hospitality to construction, from manufacturing to reception facilities, but the same is also, and increasingly, true of those with a high level of professional and cultural training who aim to move abroad for career and earnings prospects. The new emigrants are characterised by their higher average age, which has been increasing in recent years but is also due to the growing number of graduates who complete their studies when they are older than their classmates (SVIMEZ 2020).

With respect to local labour market conditions, in 2020 Calabria and Molise had very high rates of youth unemployment and NEETs (young people aged 18-24 who are not in study courses, training programmes or internships, or work), as shown by the data reported in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1. – Youth unemployment and NEET rate for Calabria and Molise in 2020

	Calabria	Molise	Italy
Youth unemployment rate, age 15-24	49.2%	39.1%	29.7%
Youth unemployment rate, age 25-34	31.0%	16.5%	13.9%
NEET rate (young people aged 15-34 years)	38.4%	31.0%	29.4%

Source: IStat 2020

Although in 2020 the lockdown caused by the pandemic reduced the emigration flow, southern Italy "remains the main reservoir for further departures despite the limits imposed on travel" (Licata 2021: 17). According to the report by Fondazione Migrantes (2021) mobility mainly affects the regions of the centre-north; however, when examining the ratio between the emigrated population and the resident population in regions of the south a completely different picture emerges. In fact, the incidence of departures is just as worrying for Molise and Calabria as well for the regions of the centre-north. Hence the need to analyse how young people during the pandemic have redefined their transition process, in which the desire for mobility and comparison with the place of origin are intertwined.

The case study

The research project "Italia In and Out: I nuovi paradigmi della mobilità", funded by the Department of Education of the University of Roma Tre, started in September 2020. It was originally designed to address two main research questions:

- How has the Covid-19 pandemic modified the mobility project/transition?
- Did the return home change the relationship with the place of origin?

Young adults (aged 18-35) from rural areas of Calabria and Molise were interviewed who, due to the pandemic, have returned home or have had to change their mobility project while waiting to be able to leave. Participants were recruited by adopting a snowball sampling design from initial contacts.

The research technique consisted of in-depth narrative interviews with 70 young persons (40 women and 30 men). Participants were heterogeneous with respect to their socio-economic and territorial origin; they were mainly graduates, employed in fields that, by and large, were compatible with their qualifications.

During the interviews, participants described their context of origin (family, friends, the place where they live, previous job, level of job satisfaction and quality of life), their experience of (im)mobility and the transition process.

All the interviews were conducted in Italian via Skype, and key parts were translated by the authors. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

Research findings

This section analyses the results of the qualitative research. The aim of the research was to listen to the voices and stories, and how the immobility experience has interacted with mobility. As can be seen from the stories of the protagonists, the way that each individual copes with his/her stay in the "waiting room" is not just an individual condition but represents the dynamic of several factors: previous experience of mobility, judgment of the life context before departure and the role played by the family of origin. Five case studies are described below, representative of the different ways in which the interviewees experienced the transition process in their own waiting room.

The anchored waiting room

Fabrizia is 28 years old. She has a degree in social work with a first level master's degree in international co-operation. At the time of the interview (September 2020) she was living in a small village in the province of Cosenza. Her parents are retired and they both have a high school diploma.

Fabrizia has had various experiences abroad: "I wanted to put what I had studied into practice." After graduating, she spent three months in China as a European Voluntary Service (EVS) volunteer. She then went to England for an internship in social work and subsequently returned to Italy, moving to Naples, where she began working as a sushi chef because of the lack of job opportunities related to her degree. Due to the Covid-19 emergency, she reluctantly had to return to her native village.

Fabrizia describes her condition as "rather hybrid and transitional":

> I was supposed to leave for a year of community service abroad, somewhere in Africa; unfortunately, departures came to a halt because of the pandemic and so I had to change my plans and here I am, back home …

The pandemic has resulted in a suspended reality.

> The lockdown is over, but I still don't have the green light to serve abroad, so I am in a phase in which I have to stay here at home because I could get a call at any time and leave.

A block of mobility takes place, which does not obstruct her completely, at least regarding imagination, but it does make Fabrizia rethink her mobility project. The waiting room, into which Fabrizia was catapulted, generates a complex process of adjusting her transition process and maintaining a delicate balance between the desire not to give up the dream of mobility – understood as freedom, self-realisation – and what the stay in the waiting room actually means. In the waiting room Fabrizia acquires and develops a process of reflexivity produced not by the experience of mobility but by the obligatory stay there itself. This process has two consequences. The first is the reformulation of her life projects, which also implies, if necessary, a lowering of her professional aspirations and a recovery of informal skills.

> I am willing to leave even tomorrow if I receive an interesting offer in my professional field but I'm also beginning to wonder whether it might be a good idea to look for another job; opening a sushi restaurant in Naples could be a safety net.

The second consequence of the waiting room stay is the rediscovery of her cultural roots and of their specificities, which leads her to rethink the life practices of the culture to which she belongs, for example, the ability to know how to use time as a social resource while living in a community.

> My fellow villagers and I know how to use time to talk and listen to others; this ability can also have an economic, commercial and social value because we are able to generate trust in others with lasting effects over time.

Fabrizia identifies, in this recovery of "slow" time, the process through which her own culture of belonging produces social capital.

Three months after the interview, Fabrizia accepted a job in Milan as an educator in a nursery school and sushi maker in the evening, in order to get out of the "waiting room". She has not given up on her project to be a volunteer in Africa but she does not rule out the possibility that in a few years' time she may return to her village or that her experience may be a stimulus for some of her fellow villagers.

Waiting room or cage?

Mariano is 34 years old. He graduated in Italian Literature and has a master's degree in political and economic journalism. He comes from a town in the province of Catanzaro. He works as a journalist and is press officer for an MP and an MEP. His father, who left school after the fifth grade, was a prison officer who has now retired; his mother has a high school diploma and is a housewife.

Mariano is inserted in a family context from which he has not received any support or stimulus for the realisation of his aspirations; indeed in many cases he has had to deal with the discouragement of his parents.

> I did everything alone, with great emotional effort. I often found myself facing situations alone and this made me very independent.

This attitude underlies all his choices and fuels his determination to do whatever he can to leave his original context. After graduation he wins a scholarship to do a master's degree, during which he has the opportunity to do an internship in New York. The American experience is the realisation of his "dream of mobility", an experience so radical and astonishing that, at first, he is incredulous about his luck and success.

The American dream ends in 2018. Mariano returns home and begins working as a journalist and press officer. He enters the "waiting room" of immobility, thinking that he will soon be able to return to the United States. A stay in the waiting room is justified solely for its practicality.

> I earn a good salary. I would be stupid if I were looking for a job as a journalist in Milan because I would earn less than 2000 euros a month. The thing that made me stay at home is the chance to save money to be able to return to New York and the fact that I have no monthly expenses.

The Covid-19 pandemic transforms Mariano's waiting room into a cage, limiting any possibility of leaving his town. Contrary to Fabrizia's experience, immobility exacerbates his lack of connection with his place of origin.

> I don't have a sense of belonging to these places, I don't feel that I belong in Calabria. Here I have family and many friends, but I don't feel linked to this place. There are no emotional reasons to stay here.

There is a dichotomous vision in him that contrasts mobility-abroad-realisation versus immobility-country of origin-dissatisfaction.

> I don't know how to describe these places from a social and cultural point of view, there is a tendency towards immobility on the part of those who live here. Many of them work abroad by pure chance because, if they had found a job here, they would not have left, they are not enterprising at all, they do not like exploration or being involved in it in any way.

At the beginning of 2022 Mariano is still trapped in his place of origin, waiting for the great opportunity that will allow him to go back to the United States.

A comfortable waiting room

Francesca, 26 years old, graduated in statistics and works for a consulting firm in the insurance industry. She is originally from the city of Reggio Calabria. Her father, who has a high school diploma, is a real estate agent; her mother has a master's degree and is a teacher.

In 2017, one month after graduation, Francesca receives an offer to do an internship in Dublin, Ireland, at the headquarters of an Italian bank. She accepts the proposal because she believes that she is in need of experience abroad, not having participated in the Erasmus+ programme, thereby showing how mobility is a cultural trait of her generation, a necessary experience within a transition process. Her family encourages and supports her choice of mobility, both morally and economically. After the internship, she is offered a full-time job and stays in Dublin for about three years.

> A good experience from a working point of view but I missed my family, my boyfriend, my grandparents: it was difficult for me to maintain these relationships from a distance, with a climate, a culture and an atmosphere that is totally different from ours. Even from a cultural point of view, I didn't feel comfortable: in Dublin you live indoors, you live in pubs, this clashed with my personality, I'm used to being outdoors and moving with greater freedom.

In March 2020, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, she returns home and starts working from home, thus entering the waiting room. Three months later she receives an offer from a company in Milan and changes job but continues to work from home: "I was in low spirits, I wanted to go back to work in Italy". In Francesca's waiting room a process of reflexivity begins, which leads her to compare the experience of pre-pandemic mobility with that of her stay in the waiting room. This reflexivity leads her to look at the culture to which she belongs in a different way, adopting

positive orientations towards aspects of life that, before departure, had been judged negatively for no apparent reason.

> I realise that I started to take a deeper look at many aspects of life that I previously only thought of fleetingly: the opportunity to take a walk, meet friends, live outdoors.
>
> The people from my city have a habit of always complaining, a provincial mentality of those who never leave home and don't appreciate what's beautiful and positive in their own city. I can't really say: I didn't like this before and now I do, it would be more correct to say that I didn't look carefully enough before, I just glanced at these things. Going abroad, realizing what I was missing when I was in Dublin, I learned to appreciate everything.

Francesca's re-evaluation of the place where she lives is constantly evolving, including activities that were unimaginable for her before leaving, such as doing voluntary work. This means that mobility was the catalyst that made aspects of her personality emerge faster that, according to Francesca, would have emerged anyway, but perhaps more slowly and in different ways.

Francesca's story overcomes the dichotomy mobility–reflexivity versus immobility–non–reflexivity. At the moment she is still in her comfortable waiting room and she hopes that this situation will carry on even after the pandemic, so that she can continue working from home, thus combining job satisfaction with the chance to stay in her context of origin.

A binding waiting room

Daniela, 25 years old, is from a town in the province of Campobasso and is attending a master's degree course in psychology. Her parents have a middle school diploma, her mother is a housewife and her father is a worker.

Daniela's transition process begins with the decision to go to study at a university far from home, against the will of her parents who would have preferred her to stay in Campobasso but "I wanted to study putting my heart as well as my head into it". At the root of this decision is her physical disability and the firm will to become independent from the family: "Mom and Dad won't be there forever, I had to learn to get by on my own", she says during the interview, with shining and moved eyes as well as a sense of revenge against her high school teachers, who had always discouraged her, and against her classmates who bullied her: "Their laughter is still present in my mind, I still struggle to forget them today". The "recovery towards life" is favoured by her friend Martine, of African descent and also disabled, who encourages her to "get out of her shell" and not be ashamed of her diversity. Leaving home is experienced with opposite feelings: "I was afraid of not making it, I had to do things alone that I was not used to", alluding to both a loss of security but also the happiness of putting oneself to the test and building a new life, "overcoming the physical and psychological limits".

Mobility favours a transition process that is not just acquisition of autonomy and the challenging of one's limits: "I learned to use the washing machine and to cook, trivial things for those without a physical disability" but, above all, a relational experience

that "opens your mind and puts you in contact with many people". Far from home, the values with her community are strengthened, remaining functional to the definition of her identity in the new context of her life: "Even if I don't want to stay in Molise, I will always take my village with me".

The pandemic obliges Daniela to return home. The waiting room does not allow her to experience the gains of autonomy she had achieved. On the contrary, it places her back into the family and social structure from which she had wanted to "escape".

> Seeing the same people always weighs me down. When I went to university I had a different rhythm. The social environment is restrictive, suffocating. At home I'm lazier, my parents do everything, why shouldn't I take advantage of it?

There is a suspension of the transition process that Daniela hopes will end as soon as possible: "I want escape from Molise, for the mental closure that characterises this place"; she can then go back to university, the place where her disability is a far less prominent feature of her now adult and independent identity.

The waiting room as a creative workshop

Andrea is 35 years old and lives in a village in the province of Isernia. He has a master's degree in architecture and a second level master's. His parents both have a high school diploma. His father worked for a public company and his mother works in an accountancy firm. Andrea is a social planner for a consortium of co-operatives.

He has had many experiences abroad, always supported by his family, both morally and economically: "I have always travelled, since I was 17. The word travel feeds the desire to leave. I fear static." He recognises mobility as a fundamental trait of his identity: "Mobility is something necessary, we cannot ignore it. It is a way to rediscover yourself." It is an identity that is constantly redefined in the relationship he establishes with the places visited.

The Covid-19 pandemic leads Andrea to return to his place of origin but in the waiting room the permanence becomes a fundamental element of his transition process.

> I'm happy when I'm on the move. Today, one cannot be a traveller or a completely permanent one anymore. You have to stay in the middle. Even if I'm still here now, I'm actually building things that will allow me to move in the future.

The waiting brings out a new biography in which permanence and mobility are intertwined, outlining a transition process in which the aspiration and the right to be connected with the world are only possible when starting from the experiences lived in other places.

Andrea's life plans take place within this biography in which, for example, starting a family does not imply giving up on mobility.

> I'm engaged, my girlfriend is like me. I like the idea of getting married, I think I'll do it next year. What I ask myself is: "Am I getting married and staying in Isernia?"

The experience in the waiting room is not idealised because he recognises that:

> Isernia is a safe place from which I can imagine starting again, but I am aware of the limits of the cultural environment and of the people who live here, it is difficult to do an innovative business, sometimes I feel a bit silly when I explain my projects.

The stay in the waiting room becomes a laboratory to define new strategies for future life projects.

Concluding remarks

The Covid-19 emergency has hit the new generations who represent the most vulnerable social group, both because of their precarious economic conditions and lack of job opportunities, and because being young means making choices.

From the interviews, the structuring of a new phase of the transition process, often depicted as a "waiting room", is configured in which the terms of the relationship between mobility and immobility are redefined, no longer seen as mutually exclusive but as two conditions which are in a continuous osmotic relationship with each other. Five types of waiting rooms are described in this paper: an anchored one; one which is like a cage; a comfortable waiting room; one which is binding; and one which is like a creative workshop. Fabrizia's stay in the anchored waiting room is short, but nonetheless, it makes her reconsider and recover her relationship with her place of origin. For Mariano, the waiting room is a cage from which he is unable to escape, aggravating the already conflictual relationship he has with his context of origin. Francesca's waiting room allows her professional aspirations to coexist with the bond she has with her context of origin and it is so comfortable that she hopes that it can be transformed into a definitive status. In Daniela's binding waiting room the transition to adult autonomy is suspended. And finally, the creative workshop that constitutes Andrea's waiting room is one in which he plans his future projects in ways that, hopefully, combine his link with his place of origin and his expressed need to remain mobile.

In conclusion, future areas of research should focus attention on how the waiting room could represent the emergence of a new biographical momentum in which the transition processes represent the product of a complex and dynamic combination of mobility and permanence. A second theme to be developed, connected to the previous one, is to understand how this new biography can represent a resource for the reactivation of those processes of accumulation of social resources and knowledge that are central to promoting the participation and recognition of young people's role in rural areas. This aim resonates with the policies of the National Plan of Recovery and Resilience (protection and enhancement of young people, overcoming territorial gaps and gender equality) and the National Strategy for "Inner Areas" (SNAI), funded by the Territorial Cohesion Agency, an innovative policy for development and territorial cohesion to counteract marginalisation and demographic decline within "Inner Areas" throughout Italy (Barca et al. 2018).

Acknowledgements

This chapter is a work of joint authorship. Mauro Giardiello wrote all the text; Rosa Capobianco elaborated the sampling plan, participated in the interview process and analysed the data.

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Chapter 8

Digital immersion during the Covid-19 lockdown: its impact on youth transitions through the eyes of young Italians

Stefania Leone, Miriam Della Mura and Andrea Orio

Introduction

This chapter engages with a reflection on two fundamental aspects of youth transitions. The first one involves the digital transition that permeates everyone's daily life in a different way, and which needs to be considered using a generational perspective. The second aspect concerns the condition of limited sociability and digital overload of young people, due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, with both positive and negative effects. In fact, the new generations – particularly Millennials, people born in the period 1981-1996, and Zea generations, those born after 1996 (Pew Research Center 2020) – differently integrate digital technologies into their own communication repertoires and into their everyday life. Thus, the digital sphere in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic has been evidently affected by a radical transformation of information and communication technology (ICT) uses and available digital devices, with an impact on everyday life in a pervasive and even substitute way for many activities that originally took place offline.

The chapter opens with a reflection on the pervasive digital condition resulting from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's life spaces and developmental paths. The experience that we can call "total digital" during the lockdown has produced changes that have transformed practices, narratives, life spheres, priorities and perspectives of Italian young people (Modell et al. 1976; Astone and Hogan 1986; Wyn and White 1997; Cavalli 1997). Due to socio-economic transformations and cultural changes, youth transitions have been redefined in the last 20 years as "non-linear" (Furlong et al. 2006) or "yo-yo" transitions (Bois-Reymond and López Blasco 2003), with scholars stressing the variability and de-standardisation of life courses (Shanahan 2000; Kohli 2007). In the pandemic context, when digital technologies have become central to work, participation in education and forming social relations, there is a need for further reflections to understand the changing conditions of youth transitions.

First of all, the scenario caused by the Covid-19 health emergency recalls, among the many social theories of late modernity, the dystopia of the "risk society" (Beck 1992). That theory recognises the limits of politics and institutions in dealing with the social awareness of living in a condition of risk, insecurity and uncertainty, caused by the

massive effects of the technological progress in many fields, from the environment to health. In that context, uncertainty and fears in relation to the future increase among young people (Buzzi 2002; Leccardi 2005, 2020; Mandich 2012; Colombo and Rebughini 2019). This condition of uncertainty to precariousness has been even more accentuated with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic (Leonini 2020; Bonanomi et al. 2021). However, though the current generation of young people may be the one most affected by precarious conditions (Benasayag and Schmit 2004), and while they understand the gravity of the situation, they also seem to display a good capacity to adapt to complex situations, to seek conditions of new normality and to find alternative solutions (Buzzi et al. 2020).

As ICTs have become increasingly present in the lives of young people, they have contributed to the identity construction of the new generations (Erstad et al. 2009), who indeed are acquiring great technological and networking skills that potentially could support their transitions towards adulthood (Cuzzocrea and Collins 2020). This influence of media and technologies on developmental pathways emerges in the studies on digital productions of young people in relation to the use of social networks (Robards 2014), the influence of smartphones in modelling social activities (Kim et al. 2016), and all the possible interactions that are triggered in the digital space (Ellison and Boyd 2013) at the intra- and intergenerational level. On the other hand, some studies have pointed out that the disintermediation of relationships formed online could lead to the loss of the aura of interpersonal communication (Bonini 2020) with the risk that loneliness "on the net" might appear (Marmion 2015).

With regard to distance learning, the increasing confidence with digital media among youth in recent decades has raised the possibility of drawing on a wider range of learning materials, modalities and other resources, making the learning process richer and more fulfilling (Furlong and Davies 2012). During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, when distance learning become the norm, the necessity of following classes (at school or university, but also beyond) produced advantages for the digitally equipped population. In reading the various stages of the path of growth of young people, the availability and managing of tools and digital resources, indispensable during the pandemic, can be seen as a positive factor for the acquisition of knowledge and skills – arguably a push factor in accelerating the achievement of educational goals (Mirkholikovna 2020). Some examples are online courses and other useful online content; flexibility and autonomy in the organisation of study and the possibility of video recording; saving time and money.

According to some studies carried out in Italy (e.g. Save the Children 2021; Mascheroni et al. 2021), alongside the positive aspects of online learning methods, students perceived negative aspects relating to technical difficulties, loss of concentration in front of a screen and general apathy due to lack of contact. Studies conducted in the first half of 2020, at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, also highlighted students' increasing inequalities and difficulties in following remote lessons, especially in places without adequate equipment or internet connection (Ince et al. 2020; Adnan and Anwar 2020).

Other considerations apply to the sphere of work. "Smart working" – using the expression that was established in Italy during the pandemic to indicate working

from a home office – has redesigned the boundaries of one's space in a continuous tension between home and workplace (Watson et al. 2021). In such circumstances, the worker is responsible for the organisation of her/his workplace, goals attainment and private time in conditions of greater flexibility (Introini et al. 2022).

Looking beyond its flexibility, smart working also seems to affect the employment opportunities and choices of young people. If, in general, the pandemic crisis will amplify the employment disadvantage of young people (ILO 2020; Palumbo 2020), the digitalisation of work could further reduce the possibilities for young people in the low or intermediate occupational groups (Blasutig and Cervai 2020), which do not include high technological skills. Other perspectives foresee that the effective adoption of smart working beyond the crisis could affect the perceived dichotomy between central, highly qualified jobs that can be done remotely, and poorer jobs that are dependent on a specific place (Kramer and Kramer 2020). The gap between these two sectors would make it more difficult for some socially disadvantaged young people to access highly qualified jobs, and the prestige perception of some professions could affect the career choices of younger people regardless of their vocation (Sarchielli 2020).

Consolidated studies look favourably on the role of digital media in young people's lives in fostering relations and connections with others and in coping with the difficult transition to adult life (Buckingham 2007; Brown 2006; Miles 2000). These perspectives have been re-proposed in more recent studies focused on the role of media and social networks in the management of intra- and intergenerational relationships that have affected young people during the pandemic (Thang and Engel 2020). Even before considering the use of digital tools for training or work, Italian young people experience a very intense daily immersion in the digital sphere. It is also worth considering that they were among the first of their European peers to experience the pandemic and therefore often had the longest time under Covid-19 lockdowns. We will discuss now their special characteristics and circumstances to understand both the advantages and the negative aspects of digital immersion as perceived by the Zeta generation.

Impact of Italian and European lockdown on young people

Before presenting the empirical analysis related to the impact of deep digitalisation as perceived by young people, it seems appropriate to describe the context of Covid-19 lockdowns in Italy, and in particular the social restrictions to which young Italians have been subjected.

Going back to the onset of pandemic, against a rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus in the first quarter of 2020, it can be observed that the restrictive measures imposed by European countries were not introduced uniformly and simultaneously. Since the initial stages of the emergency, Italy became one of the first European nations most affected by the virus in mid-February 2020 (Ministero della Salute 2020). According to the government stringency index (GSI) of the Oxford Coronavirus Government Response Tracker project, government measures in Italy have been more prolonged and more stringent than those of other European countries (Zupi 2021). The Covid-19

outbreak in Italy was addressed through a lockdown that gradually increased in space, time and intensity throughout 2020 until spring 2021.

In a few weeks the Italian Government went from restrictive measures applied only to red zones, the areas with the highest number of infections, to a national lockdown. According to GSI estimates, at the start of March 2020 the stringency of Covid-19 restrictions in Italy (69.9%) was second only to those in China, while other European nations, such as Germany (25%), France (34.7%), Spain and Austria (11.1%), had not yet adopted restrictive measures. Two months later (May 2020) Italy had the highest value recorded on the GSI index in Europe – 93.5%, compared to France (87.9%), Spain (85.1%), Germany (76.8%) and Austria (64.8%) (Hale et al. 2021).

Despite the severe restrictions imposed by the Italian Government, young people demonstrated a high sense of responsibility and intergenerational solidarity, respecting rules in the common interest, as shown in survey results derived from a sample of Italian young people aged 18-34 (Panarese and Azzarita 2021). The same research concluded that social distancing had a significant negative impact on the psychosocial well-being of young people. Nevertheless, recent research in Italy shows that the pandemic – along with the negative repercussions on psychological well-being and social relations, especially on those who lived in zones more affected by lockdown – has also returned some positive outcomes for young people, such as the fostering of individual growth through the elaboration of new personal perspectives and coping strategies (Migliorini et al. 2020). Data indicate that preventive measures of isolation challenge people, and especially young people, to keep responsive and resilient (Procentese et al. 2020; Polizzi et al. 2020).

Much recent and ongoing national and cross-national research focuses heavily on psychosocial and socio-economic factors to monitor medium- and long-term changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic related to well-being and mood, lifestyle, work conditions, learning approaches, leisure and use of media (e.g. Golberstein et al. 2020; Thorell et al. 2021). Some studies conducted in Poland, Spain and the UK have shown high levels of depression and anxiety among young people and women (Elmer et al. 2020; Okruszek et al. 2020; Bu et al. 2020).

With regard to leisure activities and routines, some data highlighted a large improvement in social and legacy media, especially of streaming platforms such as Netflix and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp (Aymerich-Franch 2020). Social media during lockdown have been useful for helping individuals to cope with the pandemic, including focusing on humour content (e.g. memes) in order to reduce negative feelings (Cauberghe et al. 2021).

Moving the reflection to another aspect of youth transitions, a comparative study on five European countries – Italy, Germany, France, Spain and the UK – found that the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed or diminished young people's intention to leave the parental home (Luppi et al. 2021). Another study on German, French, Italian and Spanish young people showed that the health crisis has also negatively affected plans to have children (Luppi et al. 2020).

Research on the prolonged and severe lockdown in Italy has identified and reflected on what has already changed and what is still changing in young people's representation

of different aspects of their life that were adapted, during the crisis, to digital modes. As discussed above, the main areas in which technologies were invested are work, education, interpersonal relations and effects, leisure and everyday life, which are also some of the key spheres addressed in analyses of the transition to adulthood. In the attempt to grasp these transformations, the perceptions of the Zeta generation of the digital sphere – during the time of extreme "mediatisation of all spaces" (Couldry and Hepp 2013) and during the redefinition of practices, contexts and visions of life (Lombardo and Mauceri 2020) – appear particularly interesting.

The impact of the digital sphere on transition pathways: research on perceptions and meanings of digitalisation by young Italians during the Covid-19 pandemic

Our research focused on digitalisation in order to explore the perceptions of young Italians on this theme, to analyse the consequences of the overexposure, and the pervasive use, of digital media and technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic, and its possible impact on their life paths in terms of transitioning to adulthood. As regards methodology, the data refer to an empirical base of 100 texts collected during the first months of national lockdown in Italy (March to May 2020). As highlighted in Chapter 5, the first months of the Italian lockdown were characterised by severe restrictions that, as confirmed by many researchers, produced in the following two years implications for and changes in youth behaviour, perception, practices, well-being and life planning.

Participants aged 18-24 were asked to provide a written text of around 500 words on if and how their perception of the digital sphere had changed. The research invitation was sent to the students of five faculties of social sciences at the University of Salerno (where in 2019/20 a total of 1 815 students enrolled in courses in sociology, communication science, economics, public administration science and political sciences). The selection of the texts was decided by the age range and the order in which the texts were received, until reaching the predetermined quota of 100 texts. Since digital platforms represented the only way of collecting data during lockdown, the texts were collected using Google Forms. The texts were then subjected to a qualitative content analysis to identify ideas, arguments and the most recurring perspectives of the young participants about the "digital sphere".

The texts showed the heterogeneity of ways used to express in narrative form one's opinions and attitudes towards digital technologies. First, the texts were divided into two groups depending on whether the text reflected a change in ideas or not.

On the one hand, there are those who have changed their attitude towards the digital sphere, sometimes finding themselves overcoming prejudices towards digital technologies as a result of the more intensive use of tools and applications required during the pandemic period. On the other hand, there were young people who have not changed their ideas or have further consolidated them. Subsequently, the content analysis focused on identification of the main "areas" considered as the contexts in which digital technologies have been most applied.

The impact of the digital sphere on youth transitions

The first dimension of analysis refers to the use of digital media in education (especially in distance learning) and work (in smart working). These are areas that have significant weight in reflections on individual life paths in the transition to adulthood. In these scenarios, the study participants reflected on their own role within society. During the Covid-19 pandemic, both distance learning and smart work became catalysts for reflection on one's condition as a student or worker. They are usually presented in positive words, as innovations necessary for the effective continuation of learning or working life during the pandemic. In general, emerging from the texts is the idea that everyday life without digital technology would have been slowed down or even blocked.

With regard to education, the study participants mainly emphasise the possibilities that online meeting platforms offer them (e.g. to follow the lessons but also to take exercises or exams) and recognise the impact of the new distance-learning practices experienced by both students and teachers. This change, given that it suggests new approaches and rhythms for study and teaching, triggers comparative reflections on teaching before and after the Covid-19 pandemic, often in terms of evaluation of both pros and cons. Among the negative observations, the presence of distractions or eye fatigue are mentioned. But the prevailing attitude towards distance learning is positive, being mentioned also by study participants who approached it with initial scepticism. Among the advantages, the convenience of following lessons from home was pointed out above all.

> But what has changed in this world is education. Specifically, e-learning apps that allow students and teachers to do distance learning are used even more than before. So a new way of teaching lessons has developed … even if it will be a bit difficult to change the method for all the teachers, who in particular will have to invent new methods for doing exams. (Respondent 18)

Similarly, with regard to the sphere of work, there is growing awareness of the digitalisation of working processes as expressed in the narratives by students. Most of the answers referring to working reaffirm the need for digital tools to allow the world to continue to function. In more enthusiastic accounts, the home office is framed as a revolution for the new way of interacting with customers and employees or even triggering virtuous competitive dynamics, drawing from the wide choice of strategies and channels that can be activated online to achieve better levels of involvement and interaction by users. Others reflect, however, on the limits of online work as a practice not applicable to all professions. Additionally, study participants reflect on the balance between work and private life, aspects that seem no longer to be separated but intertwined, with narratives indicating an improvement in the management of daily life, as explained in the following quotations.

> The exploitation of digital … has also had a massive use in the workplace. The data speak of many companies that have activated software and systems that allow their employees to carry out office work directly from home while also respecting working hours. (Respondent 74)

> All smart workers can better balance work and family, as well as increase well-being. They can be more satisfied with their leisure time, are more focused on work, can better solve problems and make decisions. (Respondent 30)

In addition to these two main areas of education and work, the narratives refer to views on leisure, including the use of digital technology for entertainment during the lockdown, to video call friends, to participate in online sports training, to watch films and TV series, and to engage in virtual games. Students also underlined the importance of digital tools for access to information on the development of the pandemic and its implications. On the theme of public services, which also appeared in the narratives, there are reflections on the role of digital tools in allowing both pandemic support operations (such as the dissemination of meaningful hashtags to activate users to do or share something to combat the pandemic; fundraising; governmental initiatives) and sharing activities of news or personal perceptions about progress in the medical and health sector.

Recurrent topics in the digital field and different perceptions of digital tools during the lockdown

In this section we present the main themes that emerged from analysis of the texts, tracing the main differences in the ways of conceiving the challenges resulting from the pervasiveness of digitalisation in the lives of these young people. The topics described below emerged from a content analysis and bring to light some issues associated with the pervasiveness, and sometimes the risks, of the digitalisation of multiple dimensions of everyday life. To clarify, multiple topics tend to recur within each text. The many elements that emerged from the texts were classified, then merged into a number of topics, discussed under four themes representing the main interpretations.

Relationships: communication and intergenerational rapprochement

The first theme refers to the ability of digital tools to consolidate the bonds between people in a scenario of "blocked physical relationality". With social distancing, regular human relationships inevitably underwent a phase of arrest, compromised by fears relating to the possibility of infection. In the analysed texts, the daily communication mediated by digital tools is valued as a resource to keep in contact with friends, partners and relatives, to remain "far away but close". It is considered sometimes to be a substitute for physical contact. From some answers, the conception of digital tools as an alternative way to socialise seems to assume more the traits of a "necessity" rather than a resource, when digital media are described as "the only way" possible at a given moment for dialogue and sociability. The quotations below illustrate the indispensability of digital tools for the maintenance of social contacts.

> This quarantine has personally had positive effects with regard to digital, because being in quarantine there was more time to reflect on my existence. In fact, I am quite a lonely type, who has never felt the strong need to socialise, but in this quarantine I am

> reflecting on myself and on the things I have done wrong, thanks also to the availability of my closest friends with whom I can confide in all honesty, of course all this in this period of quarantine could not have happened without the help of a technological tool. (Respondent 70)

> [The digital] represents a fundamental method of communication for keeping alive contacts that would otherwise die due to distance. (Respondent 31)

More rarely, the communicative potential of digital tools is recognised in terms of a possibility to communicate with the outside world or to make new acquaintances. Two tools are especially mentioned in this regard: social networks, whose communicative function appears to take precedence over content production, and video calls using instant messaging applications or web conferencing platforms.

Another topic considered here is the generational rapprochement, especially with family members. The Covid-19 pandemic has created an opportunity, but also a necessity, for adults to use digital tools more frequently for a wide range of activities. Some young people have seen the more intense use of digital technologies by the parent generation as an opportunity to bridge intergenerational distances, as expressed in the narrative.

> [T]here is a generation, that of our parents, which is finally getting closer to ours. A generation that finally not only looks at the negative sides of technological development but also appreciates it and turns it into its own means of communication. (Respondent 2)

Some answers also contemplated the possibility of using online tools to mitigate the risk of loneliness for older people, such as grandparents.

Digital progress and digital natives

The second theme refers to the relationship between digital technologies and social change with regard to technological progress. It was noticed that digital devices used in most daily activities can help people in facing the challenges of the "modern era", especially the difficulties arising from the Covid-19 crisis, thus stressing the need to accelerate the digital transition in different public and private sectors in order to cope with the many consequences of the pandemic, as expressed in the quotation below.

> Even if the situation we live in is quite negative, I believe it can be considered as an opportunity to continue to pursue technological development in order to make it an advantage and therefore to be able to exploit the benefits that digital offers us. (Respondent 71)

The other topic included in this theme could be named "digital natives", since the perception of the digital sphere seems to be conditioned by the belonging to, and awareness of, the generation of digital natives among the study respondents. The content analysis highlights an awareness among young people of a common generational identity. The participants of the study are aware of belonging to a generation in which the digital sphere and media tools shape both one's identity and everyday life. Moreover, being born in an already digitally advanced era has helped young

people to exploit deeply, as never before, digital technologies during the pandemic period by having greater confidence with them.

> For young people, already experts, born and raised with these technologies it was not difficult to conform to a state of virtual collectivity. (Respondent 69)

Digital differentiation: the digital divide; real and virtual; good and bad use of digital tools

This theme looks at three topics that consider digital technologies as an element of contrast between two different conditions and circumstances:

- the digital divide: the difference between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not;
- real and virtual: comparing actions performed online and offline;
- good or bad use of digital tools: the difference between virtuous use and negative use of technologies.

With regard to the first point, respondents' texts underline issues such as inadequate network infrastructure, economic disparity and the need to bring out the feeling of isolation felt by those on the other side of the digital divide, who find themselves during lockdown isolated from their peers and from the rest of the world. The study participants are clearly aware of existing social inequalities and of their privileged status.

> Thanks to the possibility of having a PC, having the internet at home is a great advantage. Unfortunately, there are people who do not have the opportunity to have these "lifesavers" at home during this important historical moment. (Respondent 64)

It is interesting to link this reflection on the inequality produced by the digital divide not only to professional life but also to access to entertainment opportunities. Many texts mentioned the positive function of digital technologies in tackling the monotonous routine of lockdown made up of too long and tedious days. Some participants valued, in their texts, the role of media tools in escaping, even if only for a short time, from fears and concerns about the health emergency, as expressed below.

> My idea about digital hasn't changed that much as I've always felt it to be something that allows people to be informed, to have fun, to work, etc. But in this period I realised that it has become the most important distraction not to think about everything that is happening. (Respondent 60)

In the perception of young people, reflection on the digital sphere during lockdown led to further comparison, between "real" and "virtual". Some participants compared activities carried out online with the same ones carried out offline, referring especially to smart working and distance learning. In other texts, however, an almost romantic position emerges which, without denying the importance of digital tools, emphasises that digital practices cannot really plug the gap left by a lack of "real" relationships, the joy of a hug and the collective euphoria of a festival, a concert or a dinner with friends.

> Despite being socially distanced, it must be remembered that we are human beings, not digital. We are human, not rechargeable devices, and we must be regarded as such non-machines, especially at a similar time in history. (Respondent 73)

The last point we discuss under this theme is an attempt to adopt a "neutral" attitude to digital tools, reflecting at the same time on the risks and on the positive potential of digital technology according to the different uses made of it. In these texts, digital instruments are not considered in themselves harmful or useful because their value depends on the responsibility and conscience of individuals. In an emergency context characterised by the pervasiveness of digital tools, these reflections appear as a warning to avoid inappropriate use.

> Digital is and will be an increasingly powerful tool, but it is the human user who with its use defines strengths and weaknesses (of digital). (Respondent 47)

Digital tools and risks: privacy and safety; effects on health and stress; cyberbullying and hate speech; fake news

The fourth theme shifts the attention to those topics related to digital tools that stress their negative use, or the negative impact on youth and society in general. According to the texts explored, there are four main risks perceived by participants: privacy and safety; effects on health and stress; cyberbullying and hate speech; and fake news. The first risk is related to young respondents' fear of privacy violations, of being monitored or manipulated, thus insisting on the need to be careful when disclosing personal data or documenting private aspects of personal life online.

> The benefits that citizens could derive from the use of digital technologies are limited by some privacy and security concerns and by the lack of internet access, usability, adequate capacity or accessibility for everyone. (Respondent 68)

If the behaviour during the months of the Covid-19 pandemic corresponded to greater exposure to digital screens, young people seem to be aware of the related effects on health in term of psycho-physical stress. Among the most prominent mentioned were difficulty in concentrating, eyestrain, a sense of apathy and loss of interest in more demanding physical activities.

> All this technology is stressing me out. After spending many hours in front of a PC (literally 10 hours every day, if not more), my eyes beg for mercy and my mind no longer works properly. (Respondent 26)
>
> Digital platforms are useful and necessary to continue to have a minimum of "remote social life" and to be able to continue following the lessons, but I believe that the situation has gotten slightly out of hand and is continuing to do so because we are only thinking about positive aspects and not negative ones such as joint/muscle pain, hearing and vision damage. (Respondent 73)

This sense of distress and apathy is, for some study respondents, also related to a sort of dependence on digital technologies during lockdown, as expressed in the following quotations.

> These days I am literally abusing technology more than I have ever done to try, but without results, to be able to keep going with my life, but I have never felt so empty. The tons of notifications that fill my phone aren't comforting me, whether these are a message or a call from a relative or a friend, I still feel caged. (Respondent 13)

> What worries me in this period is, above all, the possibility that we may become even more subservient to digital technology, so that, once the pandemic emergency has been overcome, we will face an even greater danger: self-induced social distancing. (Respondent 16)

The third risk concerns cyberbullying and hate speech, which have a central role in the debate on content management and freedom of expression online. The risks associated with online misconduct have received increasing attention in recent years from different actors, including from younger users, as highlighted by the analysed texts which report reflections or testimonies about the impact of cyberbullying, especially on young people who might not be able to deal with the negative side of being exposed on social networks. That risk is perceived to be amplified when it affects the most sensitive young people, or people with psycho-physical issues.

> Technology has saved many lives but, sometimes, it has also taken it away since the most fragile and sensitive young people are unable to face the offences and insults that often everyone does against everyone. (Respondent 23)

The fourth risk identified by participants was that of fake news. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the study participants revealed a maturity in their awareness of the importance of the role of media and journalists, in terms of the growing need to monitor the virus' progress and government decisions in response to it. However, one participant also pointed out, especially in contexts of uncertainty, that "the risk of running into fake news increases". Some respondents took issue with the manipulative view of online publishing, and were aware of the power of fake news and clickbait phenomena in creating panic among the population, as expressed below.

> These days digital and technology are a very powerful medium that can also be used in a not entirely positive way. Think for example, especially in this difficult period, of the spread of fake news regarding Covid-19. One of these referred to the end of the quarantine which was to be extended until 31 July. (Respondent 54)

Conclusions

According to the analysis of texts produced by young people about their experience of digital tools during the Covid-19 pandemic, they were strongly aware of living during an unprecedented context characterised by a more immersive digital condition. The exceptional nature of the pandemic is a generational experience of the Zeta generation of young people, and it will be interesting to monitor possible permanent effects, in the future, of the role of digital tools and technologies in all spheres of their lives compared to previous generations. Indeed most of the texts emphasise that one's idea of digital tools has somehow changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, this change reflects a representation far from techno-sceptical rhetoric,

being generally positive towards the digital sphere, even among those participants who also considered potential digital risks and negative effects.

As regards the most often mentioned areas of digital change, many study participants referred to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on study and work, considering these to be fundamental stages in defining young people's lives, in terms of both present management and future planning. Distance learning and smart working became elements through which young people looked at the possibilities of continuing training and work during the pandemic, recognising these new modalities as useful resources for their personal growth, even beyond the pandemic. Reflecting on the results of the content analysis, it seems that the use of digital technology during the lockdown has given concrete examples on how to exploit the internet as an infinite potential for knowledge, information and training. The multiple platforms hosted (often with open and free access) content, opportunities for discussion, seminars, webinars and conferences, including international ones that have overwhelmed the agendas of students, scholars and professionals. These phenomena have opened new perspectives for policy to increase educational and professional opportunities for young people.

Highlighting the effects of inequalities, or the digital divide, including access to digital equipment or high-quality internet connection, the Covid-19 crisis has clearly indicated the weak points and therefore the possible next policy objectives. These should work towards greater inclusion in terms of access to technologies, strengthening the digital network infrastructure both to ensure the possibility of internet access for young people in the most marginal and remote areas of the country and ensuring that public and private bodies offer better online services. Moreover, looking at the current state of the labour market, socio-economic policies should ensure guidance services for young people in their choice of jobs, and insist on improving the work/life balance for those already in the world of work.

Work and education are traditionally seen as central in the transition to adulthood. However, in young people's perception of the digital sphere, they coexist with everyday elements such as cultural interests, leisure time, hobbies and (most of all) interpersonal relationships. All these elements in the perceptions of study participants appear, in general, to be positively influenced by digital tools, because even in critical conditions digital tools broaden the opportunities to relate to others, to use the resources available online to cultivate their passions or simply to make their leisure time more interesting.

The elements emerging from the analysis of youth perception of the digital sphere can therefore be further discussed in terms of "resources" on the one hand and "risks" on the other. Digital technology as a resource highlights the possibilities offered by digital tools to improve the regular development of the individual during the life course, impacting positively on the relational and cultural capital of young people. A romantic vision of digital technology as a way to maintain relationships and to reduce distances is present in many of the texts. Even the consideration of digital technology as a "distraction" emphasises a positive perception it being a useful tool in the attempt to regain psycho-physical well-being in a difficult period.

Moreover, the perception of digital technology as a resource can also be recognised in the discussion on "digital natives", as young people believe that through digitalisation it is possible to anticipate future challenges for their generation and to propose adequate solutions for problems, including health problems related to the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. On the other hand, the texts produced by the young participants discuss various digital-related risks. Despite the variety of these critical issues, compared to topics that characterised digital technology as a resource, they are less recurrent and refer to problems and dangers of cyberspace, especially for younger or novice users, rather than the negative impact on youth transitions and life courses.

Finally, the recurring comparison between "real" and "virtual" is an indicator of the pervasiveness of digital technology in the lives of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic days. The pandemic has been a stimulus for them to reflect on the possibility of replacing activities conducted offline in the pre-pandemic era with alternative online modalities, in order to provide new instruments and broaden the field where young people can shape and reshape their own pathways to adulthood and independence.

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Chapter 9

Young people and the police during the Covid-19 pandemic: the case of Greece

Georgios Papanicolaou and Dora Giannaki

Introduction

Young people have occupied a prominent place in Greek public discourse and actual history, either as an active social and political force for change or as a preferential scapegoat social category, depending on the vicissitudes of the country's social and political situation. For example, strong social movements of young people, particularly student movements (see Lazos 1987; Rigos 2010, 2016), have shaped Greece's political history at critical turns, such as the 1973 Polytechneio revolt against the military dictatorship or the sustained radical political mobilisations of the late 1970s; equally, in the more socially and politically oppressive times of the post-civil war period, the vilification of attitudes and lifestyles of young people even gained legislative footing with the notorious Law 4000/1958 severely penalising young "troublemakers" (Avdela 2013; Valsami 2017).

The Covid-19 pandemic and its management have added yet another intriguing episode in the tense history of modern Greek society's relationship with its young people. The prompt for this latest wave of tension and conflict can be readily found in Greece's approach towards controling the pandemic, which at the time was recognised as one of the strictest pandemic control regimes in Europe, recording moderate to major violations of pandemic management aspects such as "discriminatory measures", "derogations of rights" or "abusive enforcement" (V-Dem. 2021). Greece's Government introduced a control regime featuring curfews and monitoring of movement in public spaces, as well as fiscal and other administrative measures, as early as mid-March 2020. This regime also brought the police to the foreground as the predominant mechanism for the enforcement of the various measures; accordingly, police visibility in public spaces has risen to unprecedented levels since then. The force of these controls has affected disproportionately a range of economically and socially vulnerable populations, but their effect was particularly severe on young people.

Arguably, however, there is a more complex reality shaping the present situation of young Greeks. This brief case study offers a chronicle of the increasing tension between young people and the police as a device to unpack the longer-term structural factors driving what we understand as the redefinition of youth as an economic and social category in an increasingly neoliberalised Greece. The chapter is structured straightforwardly in two sections: the first examining the official responses to young people in the context of management of the Covid-19 pandemic, the second outlining how these relate to wider recent economic and social policy trends in Greece. The concluding section offers some reflections on the longer-term implications of the pandemic management for the position of young people in Greek society.

Covid-19 in Greece: managing the pandemic, controlling young people

With news of the rising death toll in neighbouring Italy, and the first confirmed cases of Covid-19 reaching the country at the end of February 2020, the Greek Government laid out its reaction by means of a series of special legislative decrees, issued on the basis of the extraordinary procedure of Article 44 of the Greek Constitution – essentially, time-limited executive orders requiring retrospective ratification by parliament. This exceptional framework authorised wide-ranging interventions and restrictions in the operation of public services and private businesses, as well as restrictions on transport and on access to, and movement in, public spaces.

Initially, in early March 2020, this practical response involved an escalation of daily public health advice and partial measures, including local lockdowns, with closures of schools, restaurants and other entertainment venues. The full gamut of the government's preferred approach, which would define the character of the lived experience of the Covid-19 pandemic in Greece for approximately a year, was revealed on 23 March with the imposition of a full national lockdown. In addition to social distancing guidelines and closures, the lockdown involved severe restrictions on most movement in public spaces, except for six types of movement (e.g. on grounds of healthcare, essential goods shopping and carer duties). This system, which remained in place for more than a year, required any individual to give prior notification, and receive approval, of any movement via a special SMS message, as well as to carry personal identification documents and proof of the declared approval for the movement at all times.

Complementing this system, additional restrictions in interregional and intercity movements were introduced, giving the police a prominent role in the enforcement of the measures. Additionally, another controversial provision, arguably in violation of the constitutional right of assembly, authorised the police to issue bans on any assemblies in open spaces, regardless of the observance of social distancing precautions. Overall, with the capacity of the Greek Government to invest substantially in public health infrastructure remaining doubtful (Lytras and Tsiodras 2020, 2021), the key characteristic of the country's response to managing the pandemic has been a heavy emphasis on restrictions on movement in, and access to, public spaces.

While the onus of such severe restrictions was felt across the population, particularly by those who still had to be physically present at their workplace, patterns of tension between police and young people spontaneously congregating in squares and other open spaces began to emerge soon after the imposition of the measures. Such gatherings were arguably an inevitable effect of the restrictions, since the latter were particularly disruptive of typical young people's activities, such as school, after-school education (Kassotakis and Verdis 2013) and youth lifestyles more generally. In line with wider public-order police tactics in Greece, the police response involved the deployment of riot or other specialised police squads, often leading to violence including the use of tear gas, in the effort to disperse the targeted groups (Proto Thema 2020; Tvxs.gr 2020). The frequency in the use of such tactics in public spaces, not only in the capital city of Athens but also in smaller towns, marked the everyday experience of young people, triggering growing discontent.

As a result, in early 2021, young people's attitude to the Covid-19 pandemic control measures gained a more consciously oppositional character as the government proceeded with controversial new legislation and other public-order measures, such as the enactment of new legislation on demonstrations, university access and campus security, and the establishment of a special public police body intended to operate on university campuses (Dimou 2021). Confrontations between young people and the police culminated in March 2021, when following an incident of the police beating young people in the square of Nea Smyrni, a residential suburb in Athens, a large spontaneous demonstration ensued, leading again to a violent police crackdown (Papanicolaou and Rigakos 2021).

The tough police stance has not been unrelated to what appears to be the official government approach towards young people in the context of pandemic control. In November 2020, Prime Minister Mitsotakis identified young people as nothing less than a public health enemy (Hellenic Parliament 2020: 2321, our translation).

> We know today which were the causes of the spreading of the virus. We know it. … The basic cause of the spreading of the virus in Greece and across Europe was young people having fun. … Obviously young people are more prone to such behaviours. … we have given constant battles … against the public health enemy.

This vilifying view of young people, which has been amplified and reinforced by the largely government-friendly mass media in Greece, has created considerable political controversy. As the case of young people stands out among a range of political debates surrounding the handling of the pandemic, in the next section we proceed to explore more closely the wider context of these events.

A bleak future made worse: what do young Greeks react against?

Arguably, the conservative Greek Government's approach towards the population of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic has been a conscious extension of the neoliberalisation process that Greek society has been undergoing since the 1990s, and particularly since the onset of the austerity economic adjustment programmes of the 2010s. In this context, young people are being shaped as a flexible

and obedient social category under expanding free market conditions. What cannot be achieved directly by neoliberal economic and social policies is managed by increasing police coercion.

Let us consider more closely the deteriorating economic and social condition for young people in Greece. Insecurity, poverty and extensive disparities between those in and those out of work shape a reality for young people that is markedly harsher than high general poverty levels, the inevitable result of a decade of austerity, would justify (UNICEF 2021). It is characteristic that, during 2019, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children and adolescents in Greece amounted to 21.1% after social transfers, while the at-risk-of-poverty rate for unemployed persons (including youth) was even higher and amounted to 45.3% (Hellenic Statistical Authority 2021).

The growth of youth unemployment, a dearth of adequate training schemes and the cuts in social security have all meant that young people leave full-time education facing an uncertain, precarious future – for many, no future at all. In November 2021, youth unemployment rates in Greece reached a staggering 39%, the highest rate among EU countries, where the average rate was at 15.4% (Eurostat 2022). Moreover, in July 2021, 19.4% of Greek young persons under 25 were reported to be in the NEET category (OECD 2022). The economic crisis, now ongoing for more than a decade, combined with the Covid-19 pandemic, has affected not only the lives of the less-advantaged young people, but also the lives of middle-class youth. They are affected by spiralling downward social mobility, and the opportunities for a better life are extremely limited, even for university graduates and highly qualified individuals (ILO 2020a; Labrianidis and Pratsinakis 2016). As a consequence, a considerable number of highly skilled young Greeks have been emigrating, mostly for reasons related to employment, in order to improve their career prospects and earn a satisfactory income (Labrianidis and Pratsinakis 2016).

The initiatives taken by the government to address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people have focused on doubtful measures, including: the provision of computers and tablets to pupils and students – through vouchers worth 200 euros (within the framework of the Digital Care programme); provision of a prepaid credit card (known also as a "freedom pass") worth 150 euros and a month's worth of free phone data to young people aged 18-25 as a reward or incentive towards vaccination, called "a gift of gratitude"; the introduction of a new supplementary pension plan (based on choosing among three investment plans); a bonus of 1 200 euros for all those aged 18-29 who would get their first job in 2022 (i.e. those who would contribute to social security for the first time), for the first six months of work; the exemption of young people aged up to 29 from a flat-rate tax on new mobile phone connections; and a reimbursement of fuel expenses for young farmers during 2022.

Theoretical approaches to youth – and accordingly, to the way political authorities treat young people and develop policies for them – in Greece fall basically within two general categories: the first perceives youth as a "danger and threat to the stability of the status quo", whose violent, reprehensible, problematic behaviour needs to be controlled; the second approaches young people as the valued *a priori* hope of society for its improvement and reproduction, also including a group deemed vulnerable and in need of protection.

> [I]t would perhaps not be an exaggeration to argue that in some cases, the concept of youth is conceived as an axial co-contextualisation of Good, through the idealisation of the young, or as an axial co-contextualisation of Evil, where the young takes the form of the "folk devil". (Giannaki 2016: 79)

The neoliberal approach to young people clearly falls within the first category of the above scheme; what occasionally differs is the emphasis that political authorities place on addressing the problem of "youth", depending on political orientation. The logic of neoliberal governance is characterised by a downgrading of the value and the role of young people, who are often seen as another intractable and complex social problem.

In this context, and as ties to family, work, the welfare state and other formal institutions are disintegrating, young people are forced to deal alone with a series of emerging risks, crises and opportunities. In other words, there is a "privatisation" of (youth) problems. Thus the interpretation of youth unemployment "as a consequence of a lack of qualifications on the part of the individual" (Furlong and Cartmel 1997:4) seems to be underpinning official discourse in today's Greece; in this respect, young people are called upon to deal with their own problems by creating their own jobs. This is a typical example of the neoliberal logic that underpins most of the youth policies in Greece today. This neoliberal logic suggests less governmental involvement and greater reliance on market forces, resulting in the construction of "a new and increasingly exclusionary condition of being young" (Mizen 2004: xv). Thus, the problem of unemployment is put on young people, welfare programmes are withdrawn and replaced by training programmes as a means "to discipline the young to the new economic environment and job market" (France 2007: 19) and welfare benefits are connected to job searching and availability (Pechtelidis and Giannaki 2014).

Conclusion

It is a well-established fact in the research literature that young people are typically treated by the police as second-tier citizens or non-citizens (Waddington 1999; Loader 1996). As police scholar Egon Bittner once pointed out, juveniles are subject to almost continual surveillance and are accountable to adults for virtually everything they do; they not only cause trouble, they are trouble (Bittner 1976). However, when we consider the wider evolving structural context of young people in Greece, their experience of escalating police authoritarianism goes beyond this "typical" friction.

The relationship of young Greeks with public space, more than an expression of being young (moving in public space, meeting their peers, expressing themselves freely without the supervision of their elders, enjoying life), has been inextricably linked with the lifestyles and patterns of social and political activity of the period before the Covid-19 crisis and the neoliberal transition. The newly emerging police authoritarianism in Greece has been targeting these patterns of activity by young people and, equally, the characteristic vehicles of such activity, such as social spaces for political activism, cultural creation and experimentation and acts of social solidarity. In this new context, shaped by neoliberalism, public space has become the

laboratory where a new disciplining of young people is being moulded, the pandemic providing an opportunity and mechanism for expediting this process. While the more immediately measurable impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth mental health, well-being, socialisation and lifestyle are considerable (ILO 2020b; Boscovic and O'Donovan 2021), we would argue that this wider transition is just as consequential.

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Part III

Participation and inclusion

Chapter 10

The Youth Guarantee: learning from the experiences of young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Spain

Alonso Escamilla and Marta Molina

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to identify the effect the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the delivery and experience of the European Union (EU) Youth Guarantee programme in the context of Spain. More specifically, this analysis focuses on the aftermath of the programme and its effects on young migrants and refugees living in Spain at the time of entering the labour market, as well as their experience of being part of the Youth Guarantee scheme during the pandemic.

To provide an holistic approach to the issue at hand, the chapter is divided into five sections. The first outlines the Spanish Youth Guarantee in contrast to the European Youth Guarantee programme, to have a better understanding of the specificities of the programme in Spain. This is followed by an overview of the situation that young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers resident in Spain face in the country's labour market. We then present the specific methodology of the research. Fourth, we deep-dive into the effect the programme has had on the insertion of its participants into the Spanish labour market and the role it has as a space for social inclusion. The conclusion invites the reader to reflect on the programme's efficacy, its connection with other national policies, and the real impact it has had on its participants.

The European Union Youth Guarantee

The EU Youth Guarantee was implemented as a response to the challenges that young people were facing during their school-to-work transitions (STW) in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession (Visconti 2017). The transformation of the labour market throughout the 2000s had serious effects on job quality, youth unemployment and vulnerability of low-skilled workers, among others. In 2013, EU youth unemployment peaked at 24.4% (Varvaressos-Drosos 2021: 63). Following the 2013 Council Recommendations, the Youth Guarantee programme was introduced by the Council of the European Union. Building on the example of countries in northern Europe that had implemented similar policies in the mid-1980s, the Youth Guarantee programme aims to give every young person a good-quality offer of employment, continuing education or an apprenticeship/traineeship within a period

of four months after becoming unemployed or leaving formal education (Council of the European Union 2020; Caliendo et al. 2018). With the aim of adapting the Council's recommendations to Spanish institutional idiosyncrasies, Law 18/2014 was approved by the Spanish Government, thus setting up the Spanish Youth Guarantee (Tálens 2017: 109).

In line with the general European framework, the European Youth Guarantee was designed with two elements in mind. First, the measures should be flexible and tailored to the needs of the people enrolled in the system. Second, the measures and their implementation should be targeted especially at the most disadvantaged young people (Bussi and Geyer 2013).

Following these principles, the European Youth Guarantee is implemented differently in each EU country according to the strengths and weaknesses of their respective labour markets (Besamusca et al. 2012). Data on the results of implementation of the Youth Guarantee in the EU and in Spain are still very scarce. This chapter, therefore, is a first approach to reflect on the application and effectiveness of the Youth Guarantee in different European countries. In Spain, for example, Rodríguez-Soler and Verd (2018a: 5) conclude that the measures deployed under the Spanish Youth Guarantee are excessively rigid and generalist in nature, which means ignoring the specificities and different characteristics of the target group, especially the most disadvantaged youth, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Reis and Nofre (2018) studied the Youth Guarantee in Portugal and their findings are not very flattering either. For example, most of the young people surveyed go for long periods of time without receiving a single job or internship offer, and those who have entered the labour market have done so by their own means. In the case of Italy, Pastore (2015) highlights that the Youth Guarantee is like a strange and distant entity; it is perceived as an ideal model that the Italian labour market and institutions cannot take on in the way that is required for the programme to function properly. In the context of Bulgaria, Yakova (2018) points out that, although certain improvements in labour indicators are found, there is not enough evidence to claim that these changes are solely due to the Youth Guarantee.

Variations in the implementation of Youth Guarantee programmes nevertheless provide an opportunity for EU countries to learn from each other. They can tackle their programmes' weaknesses by following the good practice of other Youth Guarantees. In the case of Spain, the areas for improvement can be summarised under three different categories: partnerships, personal attention, communication and engagement.

For the programme to function well, effective co-ordination among all stakeholders is essential. In Spain, according to the European Commission, improvement of "coordination of efforts between different stakeholders at state, regional and local level" might well be needed (European Commission 2020a: 6). Also, the Spanish Government's delegation of power to the Autonomous Communities has caused disparities in Youth Guarantee implementation (ibid.). To date, regional differences and political priorities remain a great concern, an unresolved issue which is affecting the proper functioning of the Youth Guarantee in Spain. In contrast, other states such as Portugal and Austria score better in this area, because their partnership networks

are not only extensive but also specialised in terms of the services provided (Anghel and McGrath 2018: 20 and 46), which significantly benefit those enrolled on the Youth Guarantee through a more tailored response to their competencies and needs. In Spain, this is not the case, and different stakeholders need to devote greater effort and resources to strengthening collaboration and partnerships.

The lack of resources seriously affects both personalised attention and the capacity to respond to diverse user profiles, as well as efforts to promote the value of the Spanish Youth Guarantee. In the case of Portugal, a profiling system and mentoring lies at the core of the programme, which "takes account of their skills and competences and personal interests" (ibid.: 46), thereby improving Youth Guarantee performance in terms of labour market insertion. Youth Guarantee participants often need assistance to address their personal circumstances and achieve their professional goals, which makes the lack of resources for this purpose a focal point for improvement.

With regard to efforts to communicate the Youth Guarantee to young people who may need it, Austria provides a good example where "there was an emphasis on early contact through the school system" in order to highlight the benefits of the programme (ibid.: 21). The communication and engagement dimensions of the Spanish Youth Guarantee are indeed possibly the greatest concerns for the EU, as communication presents itself as essential for the efficacy and sustainability of the programme.

The Youth Guarantee programme in Spain during the Covid-19 pandemic has been an important part of the state's social shield. A reinforced Youth Guarantee programme is part of the "Next Generation EU" recovery funds, which can "contribute to creating youth employment opportunities, promoting youth entrepreneurship and help to harness the opportunities arising from the digital and green transitions" (Council of the European Union 2020: 9). The EU Youth Guarantee should be perceived by governments as a state tool to improve the socio-economic situation as well as a mechanism aimed at fostering opportunities for young people who have become disengaged from education, training and employment.

Young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Spain

The Spanish labour market is characterised, among other factors, by an excessive dependence on sectors that are intensive in unskilled labour, as well as high rates of temporary employment and little investment in welfare policies (Arnal et al. 2013). This systematically gives Spain one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the OECD. From 2008 to the present day, Spanish youth have become one of the most vulnerable groups: their unemployment rates are double those of the active population; they have serious difficulties in purchasing or renting their own accommodation; and therefore they often have to delay setting up a family. Furthermore, those who are fortunate enough to enter the labour market do so mostly through temporary and part-time contracts, making their personal and professional situation precarious (Alonso et al. 2017). In 2020 the State Public Employment Service has shown that 56.74% of young people had full-time temporary contracts, 35.60%

part-time temporary contracts, 4.85% full-time permanent contracts and 2.82% part-time permanent contracts (SEPE 2021).

These are some of the circumstances that young Spaniards have to face as they move into adulthood. Youth transitions are often viewed through the lens of the increasing precariousness for young people in accessing the job market or the continued delay in moving from dependent to independent living. Gentile (2014) points out that young people often put off their desire for "residential emancipation" due to uncertainty and little security in the future, prolonging their residence in the family of origin, where they also enjoy a level of well-being that they fear losing. Santamaría-López (2012) confirms how the work situations of youth and their transition to adulthood are increasingly woven from instability and economic insecurity.

Youth transitions, even under ideal conditions, tend to be less and less linear: finding work, leaving home and establishing relationships now combine in many different ways. This is due to the fact that, among many other variables, sex, social class, economic conditions or the educational level reached can cause transitions to take place at different rates and with different levels of success. Furthermore, it is logical to think that migration could be another variable that affects youth transitions.

Several authors (including Martínez Pizarro 2000; Martí 2011) point out that young migrants and refugees experience segregation and discrimination when entering the labour market in the host country. In Spain, exclusion is even greater for asylum seekers because they have not been granted full citizenship, do not have a work permit (or, if they have one, it is temporary), and go through a slow administrative process to regularise their situation as a refugee (if their application is accepted). This exclusion continues with refugees and migrants who, despite having permanent residence and work permits, have to match their original qualifications with the equivalent in Spain, assimilate into another culture and experience greater difficulty in accessing stable jobs (Rodríguez 1995; Herrero et al. 2017).

As a result of these challenges and difficulties, the migrant population has higher unemployment rates than nationals. According to data from the National Statistical Institute, in the first quarter of 2021 unemployment among Spanish nationals was 14.40%, while among foreigners it was 26.19% (INE 2021). These data are even more significant if we break down the foreign population into EU citizens and non-EU citizens, where the unemployment rates were 20.53% and 28.87% respectively. According to Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta (2020), 300 000 non-EU immigrants are currently employed in the informal economy in Spain, either because they do not have a work permit or because they have one but seem to have little choice other than to work in the informal economy. The same authors estimate that around one in five immigrant workers are employed in the informal economy.

According to the Refugee Aid Commission, the Covid-19 pandemic severely adversely affected migrants who were enrolled in an internship as a pathway to employment, especially during the initial months of lockdown (CEAR 2021). Although administrations and social organisations were able to adapt their training activities to online delivery, the vulnerability of migrants made it impossible for them to continue their training courses and obtain their professional certificates. A study by López-Sala (2021) found that the pandemic had devastating effects

on young migrant women, particularly among those employed in the informal economy and those with irregular status, as their livelihoods were severely affected overnight. Saulesleja and Pena (2020) noted that the pandemic led to paralysis of the processing of residence permits and refugee status decisions. This, in turn, led to young migrants being excluded from the support system during the Covid-19 pandemic, for not having documentation or even for fear of being fined, detained or deported for not having valid documentation.

It seems reasonable to think that the Spanish Youth Guarantee, which is intended for the most disadvantaged young people, should support young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Spain. However, this does not seem to be the case. According to Rodriguez-Modroño (2019), the Spanish Youth Guarantee did not adopt a comprehensive policy approach addressing the multitude of factors that affect vulnerable young people's access to the labour market (including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers). Along the same lines, Cabasés and Úbeda (2021) have shown that the programme failed to take into consideration different aspects of young people's lives beyond their occupation – factors such as country of origin, migrant background and ethnicity. As a consequence of this situation, the authors call for a rethinking of the Spanish Youth Guarantee to ensure the participation of all young people on Spanish territory, regardless of their origin or background.

Methodology

In this study, the qualitative methodological approach was based on in-depth interviews, with the aim of collecting data and learning about the experience of the participants in the Youth Guarantee programme during the Covid-19 pandemic and its role in the transition to the labour market. For this purpose, in-depth interviews, both face to face and virtually through Zoom, were conducted between September and November 2021 with six young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (three young women and three young men) who were part of the Youth Guarantee programme during the pandemic. The interviewees were under 30 years old, coming from Africa and Latin American countries.

According to the Spanish National Epidemiological Surveillance Network (RENAVE 2021), at the time of the start of the interviews, Spain was in the fifth pandemic period with an accumulated incidence of approaching 5 million cases of the Covid-19 virus, as well as a daily rate of 222 cases per 100 000 inhabitants. Although measures against the virus were decreasing in those months, the advice was still to avoid unnecessary social contacts and to respect social distancing, and there was still mandatory use of face masks indoors.

The interview guide had questions related to the registration process for participation in the Youth Guarantee, the frequency of receipt of job offers, the suitability of these offers in relation to their qualification and occupational profile, the support of the programme in their transition into the labour market, the effects of the pandemic and their vision for the future. The objective of these questions was to learn about the personal experience of each of the participants during their involvement in the Youth Guarantee provision.

In order to obtain the necessary information for this study, we joined forces with several social organisations, which facilitated contact with the participants, given the specific characteristics of the interviewees. Prior to the research, participants were asked to sign a document informing them of the terms of confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, this document included a clause of consent to participate in the study and a clause regarding the processing of personal data to achieve the purpose of this research. The information obtained was compiled and classified for later analysis of the most significant results.

The experiences of young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers resident in Spain in their "youth transitions" within the framework of the Youth Guarantee

The administrative process

From our analysis, the first and main obstacle that young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have to overcome to access the Spanish labour market is the acquisition of a document that authorises them to work. All the interviewees have a Foreigner's Identity Number (known as an NIE by its initials in Spanish) that allows them to reside legally in Spain, but not all permits authorise them to work. Although the Youth Guarantee does not discriminate when registering as unemployed (as long as you have an NIE), the interviewees reported that they often received job offers that they could not access due to the type of documentation they have.

> It was very easy to register and receive offers, but since I do not have the NIE with a work permit, I can only do training courses in warehousing, cooking, construction, electricity.

In addition to the above, the approval rate for applications for international protection is very low in Spain; it was 5% in 2020 (CEAR 2021), a figure very far from the EU average of 33%. Moreover, asylum seekers spend six months after arrival before they receive their work permit, although even then a decision on their refugee status may still be pending. If their application is denied in the following months, the NIE with work permit is immediately blocked and therefore the individual cannot continue to be enrolled on the Youth Guarantee or access a formal job.

> The pandemic has affected international protection resolutions (as is my case), as well as the homologation of my studies. I do not have access to the documents, you have to make an appointment, it takes weeks or months to give it to you …

At the same time, the pandemic has delayed the administrative processes to acquire an NIE, to obtain the resolutions of international protection and to approve parity for educational qualifications acquired elsewhere. The interviewees highlighted that this situation has caused them to stay in a kind of loophole, where they are waiting for documentation that not only allows them to work, but also to open a bank account, rent a flat or buy a mobile phone. Consequently, these delays in the administrative processes due to the Covid-19 pandemic can also mean that young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers living in Spain have to enter the informal

labour market in order to survive. From these testimonies, it seems that the Youth Guarantee in Spain is not adapted to the Spanish migratory and labour legislation (and vice versa).

The Youth Guarantee: expectations versus reality of entry into the Spanish labour market

The interviewees claimed that the number of job offers is much lower than that of training offers. The majority of those enrolled in the programme, after registering, chose to embark on training or educational courses. This trend was a direct consequence of the need for prior training in most of the job offers published by the Youth Guarantee. One of the participants claimed that he had a university degree in his country but, given the time taken for the approval of its equivalence by the Spanish authorities (to a year and a half from three years), he had to take courses in the meantime. However, the courses he took were not related to his area of expertise, but rather training that allowed him to apply for the job offers within the Youth Guarantee programme, even if those job offers still did not materialise.

> Since I finished the internship (of a course provided by Youth Guarantee) at the end of June (until September 2021) I have not received any job offer.

Part of the dynamics described by the interviewees is that job offers inside the Youth Guarantee programme are scarce. Those that exist usually have conditions to carry out prior training (without a guarantee of being hired) and there is no consideration of an individual's documentation or their migratory status. Interviewees with partial documentation or unresolved migration status highlight that companies do not dare to hire them because it represents more of a risk than an advantage. Despite the fact that the Youth Guarantee offers hiring grants to SMEs, a significant number of these companies do not hire young asylum seekers because if the resolution of their status is negative, they would have to fire the person and return all the grant.

> The company that wanted to hire me investigated the grant offered by Youth Guarantee, and when they saw everything that involved hiring a person who still did not have a favourable resolution and who would have to repay the full grant if they denied it, they drop out.

The interviewees also highlighted that the training and job offers within the Youth Guarantee are not personalised. The individual has to delve into all the offers that exist until they find the ones that they can access.

At the same time, they point out that there is very little information not only about the Youth Guarantee itself, but also about what to do after one has signed up for the programme. If it were not for the support of social organisations, it would be very difficult to know about the Youth Guarantee and how to access it. Apart from official registration information, public institutions do not offer any kind of support to enable individuals to really take advantage of the programme's opportunities. In contrast, social organisations offer personalised guidance, including appointments to analyse their case, inform them about the programme, support them in their

registration, remind them that they will receive offers, motivate them to apply for these offers and contact the contracting or training institutions.

> The information does not arrive personalised. I have to go looking through the offers to see if there is one that fits me. …. It would be good if, once registered, they gave you at least a few steps to follow to access the platform and the offers.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Spain decreed a State of Emergency and mandatory lockdown for its entire population (Real Decreto 2020). Spain was subjected to a total of 100 days of quarantine. During these months, the national economy took an enormous hit, and the effects were also noticeable in Youth Guarantee activities. The interviewees commented that finding a job was an impossible task and that all the training courses were suspended without any other possibilities.

> In my personal case, I did not have great difficulties due to the pandemic, but the professional internships of most of the courses were suspended … The companies did not want us to go there to work.

The Youth Guarantee as a space towards social inclusion

Access to the labour market is one of the main levers for youth to transition successfully to adulthood. This is due to the fact that employment occupies a central role, insofar as it structures the rest of the economic, social and personal dimensions of young people (Iglesias-Martínez and Estrada 2018; Williamson and Côté 2022).

However, the language, culture, customs and rhythms of life of the host locality are also factors that have an important influence on getting a job (Osorio-García de Oteyza 2013). According to the interviewees, enrolment in the Youth Guarantee has allowed them to access spaces where they can learn about the locality of reception and adapt to it. Despite them not having work permits or receiving job offers, training activities have served as catalysts to accelerate their social insertion processes. Due to the command of the language and the similarity of the culture, it seems that young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from Latin America have a slight advantage in this social insertion than those from Africa.

> Being part of the Youth Guarantee allowed me to learn Spanish, the culture. Before it was difficult for me, and now I handle myself much better. It was amazing.

This echoes the finding of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), whose report of good practices in the integration of young migrants (FRA 2019) highlights that the Youth Guarantee in France has helped them to access training that conferred greater independence and confidence to face issues related to language, administration, health, transport and culture, thereby supporting their social inclusion. Interviewees with many disadvantages emphasised that the training spaces allowed them to look to the future with more hope and optimism.

> I see myself living here. [In a few years] I hope to have my university career quite advanced.

> I imagine myself with a stable job, that's the first thing I want to find: a permanent job. I hope I can get my driving licence.

Another positive side effect of these training activities is that they foster social interaction between young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and other local organisations (as well as their staff and networks). Creating these direct links and relations can be efficient alternatives to learning the customs and habits of the host community, as well as strengthening the likelihood of success in their socio-professional insertion. In addition to training, education, languages and validation of acquired experience, this kind of "social capital" can, in the mid-term, be another path to establishing contact with possible employers who are willing to offer professional training. In at least some cases, these employers may offer scholarships or pocket money to those involved, providing financial support for the trainees. It remains essential, however, to have a work permit, as these payments are linked to training employment contracts.

Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter has increased our knowledge about implementation of the Youth Guarantee programme in Spain, as well as exploring whether this initiative really helps young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to access the labour market, arguably the most pivotal of the multiple transitions to adulthood and autonomy.

Although the objectives of the Youth Guarantee were to support the youth population facing the greatest difficulties with labour market insertion, it seems that its design and implementation in Spain has been far from these intentions. The results suggest that the Spanish Youth Guarantee does not seem to have taken into account the profile of young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, nor national labour and migratory legislation. Therefore, it can be inferred that, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Spanish Youth Guarantee suffered from limited flexibility and from not having been able to adapt to the real needs of the diverse profiles of young people eligible for the programme (Rodríguez Soler and Verd 2018b), including young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Moreover, this initiative seems to be, albeit unintentionally, more of a social or training programme than one really dedicated to employment (at least with the target group of this study). Without a doubt, learning the language and adapting to the host location are essential prerequisites for accessing the labour market (Osorio-García de Oteyza 2013). However, it is not known whether these objectives would be better linked to other European or national programmes rather than the Youth Guarantee. At the same time, there seems to be an excess of training that allows young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to be highly prepared but unable to enter the labour market (Ordóñez Pascua 2016).

Regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's transitions, our analyses are less clear than on the previous points. Although from a review of the literature we can observe that the pandemic has had devastating effects on young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Guadagno 2020), the interviewees have not made that so obvious. Nevertheless, we can infer that in the lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers lost those

spaces for socialisation and adaptation in which they could practise the language and became familiar with local customs.

The results of the study should be considered in the light of the following limitation. The small sample is clearly not representative and, therefore, the results shown here do not seek to be generalised. The sample was limited in number partly because of restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic and those of the international protection system that prevented us from interviewing more people. Therefore, though the existing data illuminate some interesting issues, an increase of the sample is needed with the addition of other analytical criteria such as the gender of the subjects or their country of origin, which would help us to confirm the trends presented here and understand more deeply their trajectories.

Nevertheless, we would like to conclude with some recommendations that pose a considerable challenge to the EU and to the Spanish state. First, we would suggest an improvement in the administrative process of authorisations for young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, so they have the possibility to enrol effectively in the Youth Guarantee programme from the start, with all the legal permissions needed to apply for a job in the formal economy. These inequalities at the administrative level seriously affect participants in the programme and have a significant impact on the time it takes for people to receive their official documentation.

Second, it is of the utmost importance to have greater adaptation within the Youth Guarantee to the profiles and circumstances of young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, providing a more personalised service and professional guidance. Participants in the Youth Guarantee too often receive job offers that do not reflect their professional profiles. This lack of counselling becomes a serious obstacle to those resources allocated to the programme actually being effective for the young people who need it most. Even when the policies to improve young people's integration into the labour market are making progress (European Commission 2020b: 50), personalised attention might reach more young citizens in a meaningful and relevant way.

Third, it is important to continue working to follow a cross-sectoral co-operation model involving government, social agents and companies, in order to improve the visibility of the programme while maintaining their targets' interest in the Youth Guarantee. This co-ordination is essential to provide a good-quality service accompanying the process from their enrolment in the programme until they find a formal job.

Finally, we hope that, in a modest way, this text can help political decision makers, both European and Spanish, to improve the new, "enhanced" Youth Guarantee programme, so that it really helps young migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to access the formal labour market and consolidate their youthful transition to independent and autonomous adulthood.

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Chapter 11

Listening to young people with disabilities: their experiences of support during the Covid-19 pandemic

Niamh O'Brien and Anna Dadswell

Introduction

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, in early 2020, a considerable body of research has focused on its impact on society. Though they are often invisible in studies of the general population, there is now some research on the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities. However, there is a paucity of research on the experiences of young people with disabilities as they lived through the Covid-19 pandemic (Lebrasseur et al. 2021; Toste et al. 2021). The few studies that do consider these experiences are often only from the perspective of parents and carers, not young people themselves (e.g. Disabled Children's Partnership 2020). Meanwhile, there has been a surge in research into the impact of Covid-19 on young people more generally.

In this chapter we present the findings from a small-scale study that contributes to the gap in knowledge relating to the lived experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) – which is the term we use in this chapter unless we are referring to literature, when we use the authors' own terms (such as "disabilities" or "intellectual disabilities") – and their perspectives of support during the Covid-19 pandemic in England. The research sample was 21 young people with SEND aged 16-24 making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Wider research suggests that this transition presents additional challenges for young people with disabilities, not experienced by their peers without disabilities, including isolation and loneliness (Pearson et al. 2021). Our participants were receiving support from social care and in some cases had spent time being cared for by the local authority that had responsibility for their practical and emotional needs and development. In England, this responsibility is given to local authorities either through a voluntary order from parents or a legal order from the state. We begin the chapter with a review of the English policy context for young people with SEND, including those with experiences of care, and we pay particular attention to their lack of voice in decision making about their own transitions and support. We then present our study and discuss the findings alongside the literature, before making some reflections for services and research.

The English policy context

Numerous policy reforms addressing the education, health and social care planning of young people with SEND have emerged over the last 40 years in England, reforming the way that local authorities assess, plan and deliver services (Robinson et al. 2018). The Children and Families Act (2014) instigated a move towards a more person-centred package with a strong emphasis on joint working between education, health and social care; consequently, Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) were introduced. EHCPs are individual legal documents describing the special educational, health and social care needs of a child or young person aged 0-25 and are regarded as the most significant reform within this act (Robinson et al. 2018). The SEND code of practice (Department for Education 2015) shortly followed, stipulating that local authorities must ensure the participation of young people and their parents/carers in decisions made about them in relation to their immediate and future needs and aspirations (Pearlman and Michaels 2019).

These were welcome measures, although Robinson et al. (2018) raised concerns about the implementation of EHCPs and the stretching of resources in an already underfunded system, which in some cases has resulted in patchy provision of services for young people with SEND. In England, the number of children and young people given a statement of SEND or an EHCP rose by 32% between 2010 and 2019, and significant financial pressures on local authorities have had a fundamental impact on the delivery of essential services to young people with SEND and their families (Children's Services Development Group 2020).

Young people with SEND in the transition to adulthood

On top of these concerns, the number of young people with SEND requiring support increased due to the extension of provision to support the transition to adulthood for those aged 18-25. Robinson et al. (2018) claimed that this transition might be particularly challenging for young people with SEND as they move from school to employment, higher/further education or training, and begin taking an active part in wider society. Indeed, Pearson et al. (2021) highlighted that young people with SEND have been isolated and excluded during the transition process, making this a major policy failure. In a review of the literature, Kaehne et al. (2018) acknowledged that the needs of young people with learning disabilities (LD) vary depending on the severity of their disability and the personal supports they can draw on; therefore, person-centred planning is essential. While Kaehne et al. (2018) found planning generally started at around age 14, Young-Southward et al. (2017) found that some young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) experienced short-term planning, resulting in uncertainty and anxiety about their future.

Young people with SEND who have spent time in care face further challenges in their transition to adulthood. In the UK, a care leaver is defined in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 as a person who has been in the care of the local authority for 13 weeks or more before leaving care at age 16 or 17. Compared to their non-care-experience peers, care leavers are more likely to have SEND: almost 60% of those in care for one year have SEND, compared to approximately 15% of the wider population (Tactcare

2016). While parents of young people with disabilities are often a key support in the transition to adulthood (Kaehne et al. 2018*)*, care leavers are unlikely to have this fallback. Roberts et al. (2017), who explored transitions from the care system for young people with LD in England and Sweden, acknowledged that, without parents dealing with services and authorities on behalf of their child, care leavers with disabilities can fall off the professional radar.

In a review of the literature, Kelly B. et al. (2016) highlighted that the challenges faced by the general care leaver population – in education, health, employment, housing and social support – are further compounded for care leavers with disabilities, who are more likely to experience poorer outcomes including homelessness, exploitation and contact with the criminal justice system (Bennwik and Oterholm 2021; Kelly B. et al. 2022). Additionally, a government strategy for supporting young people leaving care reported that, in the year ending March 2015, over a third of the 39% of care leavers who were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) were "NEET" due to either a disability or being a young parent (Department for Education 2016).

Voices of young people with SEND

Given the challenges that young people with SEND face, it is paramount that their experiences inform policy and practice to enhance the support they receive in the transition to adulthood. Nevertheless, the literature shows that young people are largely excluded from planning their transitions and plans are made for them, rather than with them or even by them (Kaehne et al. 2018).

Pearson et al. (2021) reflect that, traditionally, transitions work has often ignored or muted the views and experiences of young people with disabilities and focused on structural inequalities including class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Meanwhile, Kelly B. et al. (2016) found a paucity of empirical research on the experiences of care leavers with disabilities due to issues of access as well as lack of clarity around definitions; for example, care leavers themselves may not identify as someone with a disability despite a diagnosis as such. Roberts et al. (2017) also noted the lack of academic literature on the voices of those with LD when leaving care; the issues were more likely to be present in grey literature and, even then, views were usually from parents and carers rather than young people. This was also the case in the literature on the impact of Covid-19 on young people with SEND.

The Covid-19 pandemic context

In March 2020 the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, which saw most countries implement restrictions and "lockdowns" to curtail the spread of the Covid-19 virus. During lockdowns in the UK, people could leave their homes once a day for exercise or to shop for essential items such as food or medicine (Cowie and Myers 2021). Most support services and education providers were forced online to prevent face-to-face contact between people. This had pervasive impacts on everyone and perpetuated the challenges that young people with SEND already faced. Shakespeare et al. (2021) suggested that people with disabilities experienced

a triple jeopardy in the Covid-19 context, with an increased risk from the virus itself and reduced access to their normal support and provision, as well as the adverse social impacts of lockdowns and restrictions.

Dickinson and Yates (2020) noted that, in Australia, the level of support and consideration needed by people with disabilities was not recognised in the provision of wider government support systems, therefore restricting their participation in society. Indeed, in the UK, Courtenay and Perera (2020) emphasised the importance of supporting those with disabilities to help them comprehend the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions so they could understand what was happening and why. In Spain, Navas et al. (2021) explored support systems for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from their own perspectives; of the participants, 84 (14.4%) were aged 3-21. Within this group, 76.7% reported a reduction of professional services and other necessary support during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared with 42% of those aged 22-44 and 43% of those over 45. Similarly, in a review of European policy on health and social care access for people with autism, Oakley et al. (2021) found that more than 70% did not have access to the everyday support provision they needed, due to increasing demands on services. In England, research by the Disabled Children's Partnership (2020) found that 76% of families previously in receipt of support from social services saw it all stop during lockdown. Certainly UNICEF (2022) assert that, since the pandemic, the inequalities experienced by children with disabilities across Europe, including vulnerability to exclusion and discrimination in wider society, have intensified.

In terms of understanding more about the lived experiences of young people with SEND during this time, research is scarce. The present small-scale study aimed to address this gap and is concerned with the lived experiences of young people with SEND in their transition to adulthood before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, from their own perspectives. This included the practical and emotional support they received from a range of public services as well as non-government organisations and local communities so we can learn from these experiences and suggest changes that might have better supported young people with SEND during the pandemic and should do so in the future.

Exploring experiences of young people with SEND

This research was part of a wider project exploring social work practice during the Covid-19 pandemic across six local authorities in England (Kelly L. et al. 2021). Due to their experience in carrying out participatory research projects alongside research participants, academics from Anglia Ruskin University were invited to join the project to work with care leavers and young people with SEND to explore their lived experiences. Consequently, two studies took place. In the first, we worked with a research team of 25 care leavers without disabilities aged 18-25 and their support workers from the six local authorities. We identified priority areas and questions to explore in care leavers' experiences of practical and emotional support during the pandemic through a qualitative questionnaire and focus groups (Dadswell and O'Brien 2022). These priority areas and questions were adapted and formed a

semi-structured interview template for the second study to explore the experiences of young people with SEND.

The template was used by support workers who worked closely with the young people, and data collection was framed as a "guided conversation". Accordingly, support workers could use their discretion to help participants understand the questions by explaining terms and concepts in language they understood and relating questions to their known experiences. Of the 21 young people with SEND aged 16-24 who participated, 16 told us their age and 17 told us their gender (10 male, six female, and one transitioning). To participate, each young person needed to be able to consent for themselves, have an EHCP and have their cases open to social care, which meant they were still entitled to support under prevailing policy in England. Thematic analysis was conducted by the two authors, using the priority areas as overarching themes. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Education and Social Care in the Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care at Anglia Ruskin University.

Findings and discussion

Findings around young people's experiences of support (both during the Covid-19 pandemic and previously) are presented under four themes: practical support, education and training, mental and emotional well-being, and social contact and support. We then consider what this means in terms of support from services during the pandemic and the importance of listening to the views of young people with SEND. The themes rely on quotations from the young people to demonstrate their views, which are critically discussed alongside the literature. To protect confidentiality, the excerpts from the guided conversations are followed by the young person's gender and age only, or "N/D" where no data were provided.

Practical support

Young people with SEND experienced a range of impacts on their practical supports, including accommodation and finances, during Covid-19. While there was support in place for some participants, this was not the case for everyone. Most participants were living with family or in supported accommodation before and during the pandemic. For example, one participant was living "with my mum at home" and another was living "with my grandparents". These young people were supported by family members with practicalities and finances.

> I am lucky to live with my grandparents and they look after my day-to-day needs. I pay £80 a month under the staying put agreement and I had some savings in my bank as well. (Male, 18)

Similarly, some in supported accommodation received various forms of practical support: "I have help with shopping and ironing … I see the staff every day and they also help with meals" (Male, 24). Being in supported accommodation also impacted on finances before and during Covid-19, and young people had access to support with managing their money.

> I didn't really worry about money as I lived in supported accommodation. The only thing was, I struggled to manage my own finances. But, when I moved to Adult Services, [financial service] now manage my money. (Male, 18)

However, a few were living in chaotic, unstable environments even before the pandemic: "I was living alone in a men's homeless hostel as I had just moved out of my flat" (Male, 21). This participant described various safety concerns, including being approached by drug dealers. A report from the Department for Education (2019) showed that many young people leaving care are living in unregulated accommodation that can impact their successful transition to adulthood. It stated that "there are no hard and fast rules on whether accommodation is deemed "suitable"; the decision will depend on the circumstances of the individual case" (ibid.: 14). Such issues were intensified by the Covid-19 situation; eight participants experienced changes to their accommodation during this time. While some of these were temporary moves, for example living with friends or family short-term before transitioning to supported or independent living, three portrayed unsuitable and chaotic moves.

> During lockdown I lived in a variety of placements, none of which I felt were right for me … One was a supported placement that I didn't think was safe. I was only 17 … I saw someone assaulted at the house. [At] Another placement … I was being bullied by some of the other residents. I didn't feel safe … I was moved to the place I am at now, which I do think is right for me … The staff are very supportive … I feel like I can be myself. In other placements I felt like I had to take a lot of drugs to keep up with the others … and be like them. The other young people here aren't like that, they're all nice. I honestly think, if it wasn't for this new placement, I wouldn't be here now. (Male, 18)

Although some young people with disabilities choose to delay leaving the family home due to a lack of practical or financial preparedness (Mackie 2012), this is not always an option for care leavers with SEND, and consequently many may find themselves living in unsuitable accommodation. Safe accommodation that considers potential vulnerabilities should be prioritised in decisions around living arrangements because this underpins the welfare, safety and sense of belonging for young people with SEND.

In contrast, other participants experienced positive changes in their accommodation.

> I moved to another flat … It is still supported with staff helping but I don't have to leave after two years … My flat is better, and I have made it my own, I still don't like being nagged to do things, but I understand why they do. Yes, I think I am happier here. (Male, 24)

One participant described how moving to living independently with his partner promoted his mental health during the pandemic.

> It was different being in my own house … it massively helped my mental health and how I was feeling as I was in control of my day and who I saw. I feel okay with paying [my] own bills and cleaning, cooking … and I have liked doing it up as it's kept us busy in lockdown. (Male, 19)

In terms of finances, several participants said they were "pretty much always worrying about money". Numerous factors underpinned this, such as uncertainty with benefits,

not having enough money to cover their bills and outgoings, and challenges with managing money: "I did worry about money. My benefits weren't stable and I was struggling on my own and with my drug use with managing money which has now really improved" (Male, 19).

This was impacted by Covid-19 and interlinked with mental health.

> Mainly due to mental health during the pandemic … I struggled to leave the house for shopping, so I bought more takeaways which had a massive effect on my money. I am getting support with this now. (Female, 21)

Certainly, research has shown that the pandemic has had a disproportionately negative effect on the financial and socio-economic circumstances of people with disabilities (Shakespeare et al. 2021).

Our findings show that financial concerns around budgeting and overspending were a concern for our participants regardless of how their finances were managed, but particularly for those living independently. Therefore, the provision of basic education is needed to support a level of financial management and independence that is suitable for the individual, while ensuring their safety. Furthermore, additional check-ins and support need to be made available in times of increased strain, in situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Education and training

Most participants were in education or training before the Covid-19 pandemic, though this was not the case for all, as one young person shared that they "struggled to find an appropriate setting that I liked and could meet the needs outlined in my EHCP". During the pandemic, some were able to continue as before, sometimes with adjustments such as reduced timetables, short periods at home or being in "bubble groups" (pandemic support groups of up to six people).

> I am in a student bubble with other day students but am pleased that I have been able to stay with my class teacher and LSAs [Learning Support Assistants] throughout. My school day starts 30 minutes later during the pandemic at 9:30 so my timetable is a little different; it continues to include my physio programme in the mornings then onto my curriculum. (N/D, N/D)

These participants expressed a feeling that the ability to continue education or training in person was valuable for them: "I like this as I've been able to go in still, twice per week". Furthermore, in some cases classes were smaller or one-to-one, which meant they were better supported.

> I enjoy the learning I am doing at present … I like their approach as the classes are small and I find it much more tailored to what I need … It's more like one-to-one tuition, which I like and works much better for me. (Male, 18)

However, our findings also showed that certain educational activities or training were unable to continue: "We used to do cooking but that's been stopped because of Covid. I really would like to go back to doing that" (Male, 21). Additionally, some

participants were anxious about attending education face-to-face during Covid-19 and made the difficult decision not to attend.

> The pandemic has affected me because my course was still happening in person in September 2020 as it was an electrical practical course, but I felt very anxious about mixing with people during Covid and it meant that I didn't attend my course which I was disappointed about as it could not be done online. (Male, 19)

This meant they missed out not only on education, but also on the support they would have received. Indeed, it has been reported that many children and young people with SEND were unable to receive the services that are usually delivered through education settings during lockdown periods (Children's Commissioner 2020; Lebrasseur et al. 2021).

Meanwhile, some education and training moved partly or entirely online during the Covid-19 pandemic. This experience was difficult for many young people with SEND, with participants expressing a lack of motivation and not enough support or contact.

> I was supposed to progress to the next course, but it went online, and I don't like doing stuff online. I have recently started a study programme with a training provider. I can go in there one day per week, because I'm classed as a vulnerable learner, and they work with me on a one-to-one basis, which I like. (Male, 18)

Research also found that managing home schooling was particularly difficult for families of children and young people with SEND (Disabled Children's Partnership 2020; Couper-Kenney and Riddell 2021). Moreover, moving education and training online meant fewer opportunities for socialising.

> It has been alright. It has been very up and down. Up points have been obviously emails and time to talk with the teachers. As much as possible has been in person. Down points – social interaction has been up and down; it is the one time I get mixing with people in college and stuff. (Female, 19)

Young people missed seeing their friends in person, with one participant stating: "I have felt sad at times when I have not seen all my friends." The experiences of loneliness and feeling disconnected will be picked up later, but education and training is clearly a key facilitator of relationships for young people with SEND.

The literature suggests that inequalities experienced by students with disabilities in the education system have been intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic (Dickinson and Yates 2020; Toste et al. 2021). This suggests the need for increased and tailored support for young people with SEND, particularly on the return to face-to-face learning. This may include the possibility of blended or entirely online learning for those with continued anxiety about the virus. Within schools in the UK, Clarke and Done (2021) proposed that Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) should act as advocates for students with SEND, who are at further risk of marginalisation as a result of the pandemic. Our findings suggest that this role needs to be extended beyond schools to other education and training providers to support young people with SEND in their transition to adulthood.

Mental and emotional well-being

Some 11 young people told us that before the Covid-19 pandemic they regularly felt sad, upset or anxious. However, most mentioned someone they had been able to speak to about this among their family, friends, supported accommodation staff, social workers or mental health service staff.

> My leaving care worker was there to talk to, as were the staff and my keyworker at my supported accommodation. Yes, it was helpful to unload. I phoned or made appointments to access the support. (Male, 21)

However, for some this was not enough, as one participant emphasised: "My social worker, I used to ring her five times a day. But she was the only one who helped me. Apart from that, I had no help from anywhere" (Male, 18).

Furthermore, a few participants did not talk to anyone about their mental and emotional well-being even before Covid-19, which was subsequently exacerbated during the pandemic.

> I didn't manage my feelings well and was struggling with my drug use and mental health before the pandemic; the pandemic made me feel even more anxious and I didn't talk about how I was feeling very easily. (Male, 19)

Some 13 participants said they had felt sad, upset or anxious during the pandemic, with one participant stating that he felt "anxious and stressed" and another reporting that she was "sometimes happy and sometimes sad because I have not seen all my friends at school". As the last quotations suggest, this often linked with the next theme on social contact and support, as well as young people feeling bored as their social life had been halted. This supports survey findings from the Disabled Children's Partnership (2020), where parents/carers reported that the emotional and mental health of their child with disabilities got a lot worse (30%) or a little worse (41%) during the pandemic. Courtenay and Perera (2020) acknowledged that many people had anxieties associated with the Covid-19 situation but those with ID may have experienced a greater effect, with lockdowns triggering possible behaviour problems.

In our study, participants tended to seek support from those closest to them. For some this was family: "I have felt sad, anxious and upset almost every day. I speak to my mum about it and it is helpful" (Female, 16). For others, it was the staff from supported accommodation or ongoing support from mental health services when this was already in place: "I still talk to my staff when they are in, and my psychologist I see on a video session" (Male, 21).

For the most part, this support was considered to be helpful and certainly the literature emphasised the importance of addressing the psychological well-being of young people with disabilities during the pandemic (Toste et al. 2021). However, some participants spoke about feeling let down by mental health services. One stated: "I'm not getting the mental health support that I really need" while another described limited support, which further deteriorated.

> Mental health – yes it could be improved, I've not got much to say as didn't see them very much. I only had two appointments before lockdown and then the service stopped other than telephone calls and I didn't have many of those. It could have been improved with more contact … It took a long time to get started with the mental health team and this wait could be improved as I had to go to hospital a lot before I was helped. (Male, 19)

Clearly, some young people reached crisis point before receiving adequate support: "There were times where I lacked support and felt alone during the pandemic due to lack of involvement with services, and lack of contact" (Female, 21).

Feeling alone and isolated in terms of support was echoed by many and demonstrated the clear inadequacies of services in providing appropriate support for the mental and emotional well-being of young people with SEND during the Covid-19 pandemic.

> [I] felt isolated, unable to really talk to friends and they don't get my autism. My doctor wants me to see a psychiatrist, but I have refused as I get sick of talking. I also get very angry about rule breakers as I'm very sensitive to this. (N/D, N/D)

Young people shared how their anxiety and mental health problems sometimes prevented them from reaching out to others, which added to the difficulties in receiving support as well as the loneliness they were feeling. This finding is supported by Roberts et al. (2017), who reported that although little is known about loneliness for those with LD leaving care, it was a key concern for two of their four participants. To address these issues, our findings highlight the importance of young people with SEND always having someone to talk to.

Social contact and support

Social contact and support were extremely valuable for young people with SEND before the pandemic, with 15 young people reporting regular contact with family and friends: "I used to see my mum once a week. I also used to go out shopping with my friends quite a lot" (Male, 18). This included various ways of staying in contact with different people: "I would see my family and have an overnight stay. I would have phone calls. I would be able to have contact with my sister. I would see my friends at college" (Male, 21).

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, people with disabilities in England were four times more likely to feel lonely "often or always" (13.9%) compared to their peers without disabilities (3.8%) (Office for National Statistics 2020). During the pandemic, some participants were able to maintain contact with their family by being in the same bubble: "I speak to my mum and dad; my dad is in my bubble so we have a fish and chip night every week. I play games with my friends online" (Male, 24).

However, most experienced a significant reduction in face-to-face contact, which shifted to phone, text or online platforms: "I text and visit my mum and brother" (Female, 16). Though participants cited the restrictions as hindering their contact with family and friends, this was also compounded by issues of mental and emotional well-being discussed in the previous theme.

> Friends, because of restrictions with Covid I couldn't meet them anymore. Also due to my mental health I struggled to get out and message online, felt that others were busy. (Female, 21)

Additionally, some participants explained that they had less contact due to the inappropriate behaviour of others surrounding restrictions: "I have fallen out with a friend due to how selfish people have been and breaking Covid rules. I have had good and bad experiences with contact with people" (N/D, N/D).

On the other hand, technology enabled many participants to stay in touch with family and friends.

> Circumstances of lockdown and family living across the country has stopped me seeing them, but I have been able to stay in contact, I have Wi-Fi at home and use technology to stay in touch. (Male, 19)

This also enabled some to engage with education, relating back to the second theme, and was sometimes supported through education and training providers.

> Facebook / mobile phone / Zoom meetings / some face-to-face contact with family and at college. Recently received a laptop from college … to complete online learning from home. (N/D, N/D)

Despite this provision, some participants needed support with technology. Moreover, Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021) found that unequal access to technology exacerbated existing inequalities for children and young people with SEND during the pandemic. Some participants in our study reported that, although they used online platforms, they still lost contact with friends that they did not see regularly. Such experiences are important for building back social contact and support as restrictions are lifted. This was reflected by Toseeb et al. (2020), who asked 339 parents/carers of children and young people with SEND in the UK about the support they needed while not in school and in the transition back to school. One of the most frequent supports identified was seeing familiar faces. Indeed, people with disabilities often fare better if they are surrounded by supportive communities (Shakespeare et al. 2021).

Reflections for services and research

Listening to the views of young people with SEND about their experiences of transition support, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, can help us to support young people now and in the future. Our participants had been in contact with an array of services before the pandemic, including social care and leaving care teams, mental health services and charitable services. In general, they expressed positive feedback: "I have had lots of social workers … I do think it's been helpful" (Male, 21). This seemed to be particularly true for specialised services or support. For example, one participant stated: "the drug worker has really helped me; they spoke to me on a weekly basis", while another appreciated the one-to-one support they received: "they had the knowledge of LGBT". Nonetheless, some participants suggested areas for improvement, such as "more consistency of carers".

Inevitably, the pandemic impacted both the need for support and its delivery, as well as experiences of support from services. In England, the Children's Commissioner (2020) found that many parents and carers struggled to meet the needs of young people at home, and this was intensified by reduced support from social services. This conclusion supports findings from Navas et al. (2021) who reported a reduction in services and support for the younger age cohort in their study when compared to those over 25. In our study, it was clear that certain services managed to continue providing support, in some cases face-to-face or otherwise online; this was hugely important for our participants. However, the issue of consistency in the people providing such support was still problematic and perhaps exacerbated by the Covid-19 context: "I had two new social workers since the pandemic started. I would have rather kept the same social worker" (Female, 16). Consequently, joint working as directed through the Children and Families Act (2014) and SEND code of practice (Department for Education 2015) is needed between education and support services more generally, to improve the quality of services provided to young people with SEND both during the pandemic and in the future.

Although some research suggests that transition planning in education is better developed than transitions in other areas, including social care and employment, (Kaehne et al. 2018) further research exploring the lived experiences of young people with SEND is needed to explore the rhetoric versus the reality. Kavanagh et al. (2021) note that governments have been slow to react and respond to the diverse needs of those with disabilities during this time. Accordingly, in Australia, Dickinson and Yates (2020) have made a call for their government to address the many inequalities faced by children and young people with disabilities and their families both during the pandemic and beyond; our research supports this call to the UK Government at both central and local levels.

Shakespeare et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of consulting and communicating with people with disabilities and of ensuring they are involved in policy development, programme design and implementation. In exploring a disability-inclusive Covid-19 response in the UK at the start of the pandemic, Kuper et al. (2020) concluded that this response is indeed paramount. Additionally, we propose that the views of young people with SEND need to be gathered, alongside those of parents/carers and other advocates, to generate a wider picture of the pandemic. Although Navas et al. (2021) included those aged 3-25 in their sample, the wider literature tends to focus on the views of family members, rather than young people with SEND themselves, demonstrating the lack of inclusion of this group.

The views of our participants certainly illuminated their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it was clear that sharing their experiences was valued by them. For example, one participant had started using social media during the pandemic to do so, which had a positive impact for her personally.

> I've started a YouTube channel …. I talk about my feelings, updates about my seizures, routines, what I do at lunch time or evenings. I couldn't believe it that I have 22 subscribers … That put me in a really good mood today. (Female, 20)

These unique views can help in planning for future pandemics or other times of crisis and restriction as well as enable the voices of young people with SEND to

be heard after the pandemic in relation to decisions made about and for them. Indeed, Courtenay and Perera (2020) suggest that if lessons are to be learned from this pandemic, then rigorous evidence about what works needs to be collected to empower those with disabilities in the face of future pandemics. However, Robinson et al. (2018) also stress the importance of not viewing young people with SEND as a homogeneous group but as one with a variety of support needs and transition experiences. They recognise that a fundamental challenge for both policy and practice is removing this homogeneous view to facilitate achievable and helpful transitions.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light the existing challenges and inequalities faced by young people with SEND. It has also presented an opportunity to learn about how they can be better supported in their transition to adulthood. Our findings add to the literature about the challenges experienced by these young people before and during the pandemic, but they also demonstrate the importance of listening to young people with SEND and providing the support for inclusive services and research during the pandemic and beyond.

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Chapter 12

Youth centres and youth workers' impact on young people and their transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania

Irina Lonean

Introduction

Although youth work is organised in many diverse ways in different countries and contexts, there was some agreement on the impact of youth work before the Covid-19 pandemic. Youth work was found to effectively provide young people with a broad spectrum of experience, allowing them to relate to others, build meaningful relationships with their peers and adults and develop a sense of self, in particular to gain confidence. Youth work also provided the framework for experiential learning through non-formal education and learning, supporting young people to develop competences and skills, especially cross-cutting soft skills needed in any activity (such as communication, teamwork, time management). Youth work was recognised as a means to support young people's transitions through school, into employment and into active civic and political participation, as well as help young people to resolve difficulties in their lives (Ord et al. 2018: 227-8).

Yet the impact of non-formal education and learning gained during youth work activities in youth centres used to be inseparable from the informal learning that also took place thanks to unplanned interactions during these activities (Morciano 2015). Therefore, the most important result of youth work was linked to opportunities for young people's transitions to employment and to civic engagement developed through social networking, and not necessarily linked with any specific competences developed (Ord 2012).

It is important to understand whether the impact of youth work on youth transitions, including the transition to employment and the transition from political socialisation and learning about society to active civic and political participation, remained strong in the context of digital youth work, which prevailed as the form of youth work during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is the purpose of this case study.

Evaluating the impact of youth work during the Covid-19 pandemic needs to be contextualised, because youth workers and youth centres were gravely affected by new restrictions. From the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, many youth

organisations and youth centres provided virtual engagement using games, music, art, craft and food, mobilised volunteers to support the elderly, carried out activities to ensure correct information reached young people exposed to fake news, produced podcasts allowing young people, youth workers and leaders to share their experience of the pandemic with a larger community, and organised online support groups for young people emotionally affected by the lockdowns (OECD 2020; ERYICA 2021; McArdle and McConville 2021; National Youth Council of Ireland 2020; Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021). This short case study assesses how the impact of the pandemic on youth work hindered its benefits for young people, considering what youth workers were able to do under the limitations imposed due to Covid-19.

Surveys conducted by the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership and the RAY Network showed that youth workers and youth leaders evaluated the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth work and on services provided to young people as strong or very strong. According to youth workers and youth leaders, each and every aspect of youth work was changed by the pandemic and lockdown, including collaboration and communication, co-ordination and decision making, leadership and management, feedback, mentoring and support, and volunteering. For example, 49% of organisations reported a decrease in their budget, 38% of organisations reported a reduction of work time of paid staff members, 12% had to let staff members go and over 10% of volunteer participants in the European Solidarity Corps programme cancelled their activity. Moreover, many respondents to these surveys reported significant difficulties in finding and/or developing new methods and techniques for youth work and non-formal education and learning in online spaces. From a previously rather marginal contribution to the repertoire of youth work practice, online and digital approaches became overnight the only possible form of youth work – a challenge identified by all studies (O'Donovan and Zentner 2020; RAY Network 2020; European Commission 2021).

The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak was especially strong for Romanian youth workers and youth centres, given that their capacity was limited even before the pandemic. Youth workers and youth centres are presented in policy documents (Romanian Government 2015) as key actors helping young people to achieve their full personal and professional development. However, little support is provided by the state to youth workers and youth centres. Romania has 4.8 million young people (defined by the Youth Law as aged 14-35) according to the National Statistical Institute (resident population, indicator code POP105A). Youth work is mainly supported by the national budget through funding of projects that reach about 48 000 young people (1% of the total). Only 36 youth centres have been funded directly by the state budget of about 100 000 euros each year in the last five years (Romanian Ministry of Finance 2021). Many youth centres are run by youth NGOs alone or in partnership with municipalities, and their activities are dependent on project-based funding, with limited security for long-term service delivery. Their main sources of funding are the EU youth programmes, especially Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, rather than national or local budgets (Youth Wiki on Romania 2022).

The main public support for Romanian youth workers during the Covid-19 pandemic came in December 2020, when the Ministry for Youth and Sports organised the training of 40 youth workers in digital youth work methodologies.

Methodology

My evaluation of the impact of activities and support for young people provided by NGO-led youth centres in Romania aims to answer questions about the results of face-to-face and digital youth work during the Covid-19 pandemic – the advantages as well as the bottlenecks and shortcomings of youth work in a time of crisis.

The evaluated cases include four youth centres in different regions and settings: Baia Mare (a city in the north of Romania), Izvoarele and Teișani (two rural communities in the Carpathian Mountains) and Timișoara (a large city in the west of Romania). These youth centres work with local youth, but also with international volunteers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, in order to keep their funding and secure salaries for employees, they needed to continue the implementation of several projects involving international volunteers and the provision of services for young people in their communities. They also started online activities and developed their capacity to carry out digital youth work and learning activities.

Based on the data collected through interviews with youth workers about their activities and achievements from May 2020 (after the end of lockdown in Romania) until December 2021, I built a theory of change underlying the impact of youth work and youth centres on young people's transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic. This theory has been tested using process tracing, a qualitative method investigating causal inference by assessing congruence to an expected theory of change in a particular case. Process tracing uses ex-post design, where there is no control group available. Unlike other, more common approaches to evaluation, it focuses on increasing our level of confidence in a causal story rather than trying to measure impact and attribute it to a particular event. It rests on the belief that all processes, if correctly identified and specified, would show empirical manifestations that (if observed) would increase our confidence in its existence (Wauters and Beach 2018).

In general, the theory of change focuses on mapping out or filling in what has been described as the "missing middle" between what an initiative addresses (problems and needs), what it does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved (Douthwaite et al. 2003). In this particular case, the theory of change represents:

- activities and outputs of youth work, including digital and outdoor activities, as well as outreach activities and youth activities in youth centres (when they were possible) during the Covid-19 pandemic; and
- the impact of youth work on the transitions of young people participating in activities organised by youth centres (in general, Romanian) and on the international volunteers in youth centres.

When looking at the data, the focus was on opportunities generated by youth work and youth centres, not necessarily on readily measurable outcomes, considering that these opportunities are the most specific result of youth work (Morciano 2015; Ord 2012) and considering that other outcomes of youth work will potentially occur in the future.

Data used for the case studies were collected through observation of youth centre activities and interviews with youth workers and youth centre managers. In total, five interviews were conducted between December 2021 and January 2022, referring to youth centre activities in 2020 and 2021, and four online youth work activities were observed in 2021.

Findings

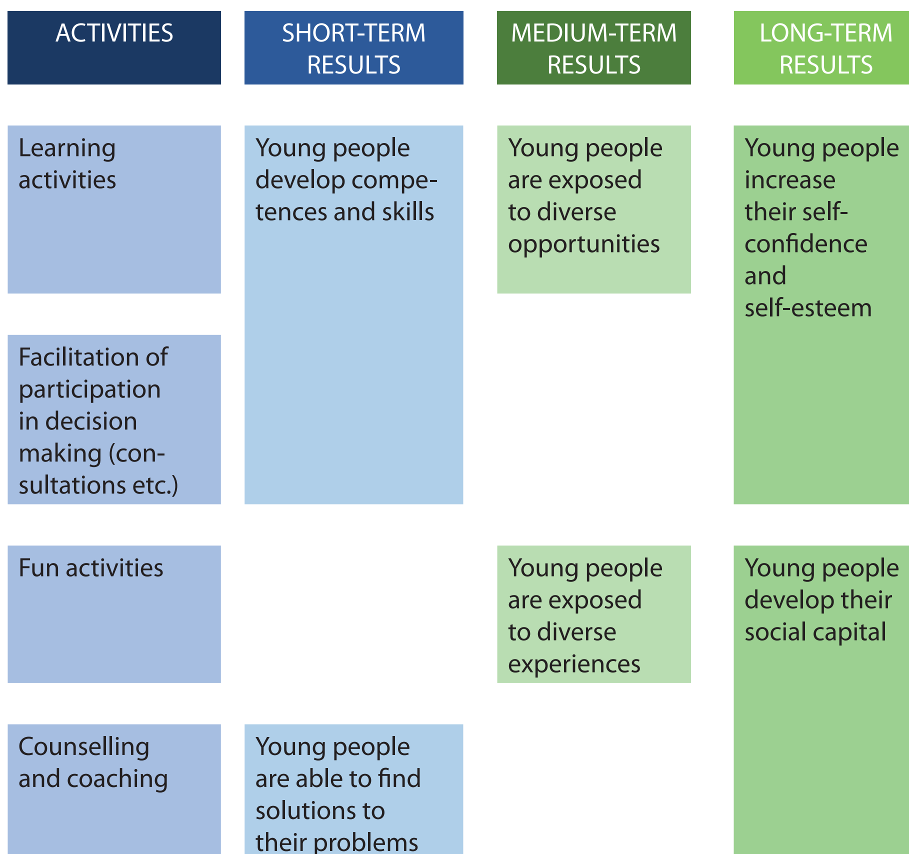
The analysed youth centres in Romania offer four main types of activity: learning activities, activities facilitating participation in decision making, fun activities (games, film nights), coaching and counselling (psychological, educational or occupational). The learning activities aim to develop horizontal competences (e.g. foreign languages, learning to learn), psychosocial competences (e.g. communication, teamwork, understanding their own emotions) and sectoral competences (e.g. photography). In all cases analysed, the principles of youth work were explicitly formulated and followed: activities were youth-led and inclusive, based on respect and aiming at youth empowerment, and the safeguarding of young people and the protection of those most vulnerable were considered at all stages of the youth work practice.

Due to their unstable funding, Romanian youth centres are dependent on a very small number of experienced professional youth workers and managers and a larger number of volunteers, usually young international volunteers in the European Solidarity Corps. In this context, the dependence on project funding and the small budgets offered for online activities meant that Romanian youth centres were often determined during the pandemic to continue some activities involving on-site volunteers. They also continued organising some face-to-face activities (in the summers of 2020 and 2021). Therefore, all the activities mentioned above were carried out online, in some cases with large groups of young people, but some were also conducted face-to-face with small groups. These activities included language lessons, craft lessons, debates, cultural activities, documentary projects for intercultural learning, seminars on well-being and small participatory projects involving young people in the renovation of youth centres.

The theory of change for all these activities includes clear outputs related to competences and skills developed as a result of the learning activities and participation in consultations on decision making. Games and fun activities were also provided, though youth workers see them mainly as learning opportunities for young people to develop communication and teamwork competences. Counselling and coaching have specific short-term results, and they mainly contribute to young people's capacity to find solutions to their problems, from deciding on their careers to better communicating with their families. The main medium-term result that was envisaged through all these activities was the exposure of young people to diverse experiences and opportunities. The long-term results that are expected from experiential learning and valorised opportunities are related to the self-confidence and self-esteem of young people and the development of their social capital, with networks of trustworthy relationships with their peers

and communities (Bolin et al. 2004) supporting young people's transitions from school into the labour market, and also strengthening capacities for active citizenship. This theory of change is captured diagrammatically in Figure 12.1.

Figure 12.1. – Theory of change for youth centres in Romania



Data collected about the four Romanian youth centres corroborates the findings of other studies in concluding that the continuing presence and actions of youth workers played a significant role in mitigating some of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as isolation and its potential mental health impact on young people (Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021; McArdle and McConville 2021; Marshall et al. 2021; UK Youth 2020; UK Youth 2021; National Youth Council of Ireland 2020). Very quickly, youth workers (either professionals or volunteers) made changes to their activities and methodologies, creating content to meet the new needs of young people and adapting their programmes to new delivery channels: online broadcasting, webinars, virtual workshops and outdoor meetings. In this process, youth workers developed their capacity and competences to face new challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. These developments could be considered as long-term gains for the practitioners, a finding which is consistent with those of other recent studies

(Boskovic and O'Donovan 2021; National Youth Council of Ireland 2020; UK Youth 2021); it is definitely a very positive outcome of the pandemic for the volunteers.

Moreover, interviews with youth workers and managers of youth centres produced evidence that all the activities implemented during the pandemic, both online and face-to-face, generated the expected short-term results. Unsurprisingly, digital youth work activities contributed to the development of digital skills among young people from vulnerable backgrounds who previously had less opportunity and incentive to use a computer. The specifics of online activities, which hinder non-verbal communication, encouraged the development of competences to communicate in foreign languages among the young people in Romania who participated in webinars or virtual workshops organised by international volunteers in Romanian youth centres. Learning to learn and analytical skills were also developed. When provided, counselling and coaching proved instrumental for young people in need of emotional support.

Using digital youth work methods, more young people benefited from the activities and their short-term results than would have been the case with face-to-face activities. Online activities involving young people in consultations about decisions – whether for renovation of the youth centre, for new projects in the youth centre or for local and national policy proposals – proved to be very effective. They allowed young people with very different backgrounds and from different places to meet in a single virtual space, hear different opinions and better understand the diversity of viewpoints in decision making. According to youth workers, this was only possible on a much smaller scale in physical consultative meetings. Therefore, young participants in virtual consultations developed their citizenship competences more effectively than participants in face-to-face consultations.

However, Romanian youth workers remain very sceptical that the medium- and long-term results of digital youth work will be positive for young people; evidence for these results is as yet very scarce. This is explained by the general absence of informal virtual spaces that are effective in encouraging casual conversations, catalysing informal learning and generating social networks for young people. There is anxiety among youth workers about how to transfer these kinds of engagement skills from the physical space to the online world. In youth work, non-verbal communication, group work and ad hoc conversations have proved to be among the most important contributors to long-term results. The youth work activities organised online during the Covid-19 pandemic rarely provided opportunities for these interactions and were therefore perceived as much less impactful compared to the in-person youth work delivered before the pandemic.

Without the space for informal learning and social networking, young people's capacity to use and consolidate their new competences in a safe space in youth centres was hindered. They were also less capable of developing relationships with others who could help them find a job or could associate with them as active citizens in future civic or political initiatives.

In contrast, international volunteers were constantly challenged to adapt to changing circumstances and regulations affecting their activities. They formed cohesive groups within their host organisations, and mobilised and encouraged each other to be innovative in their activities and to learn as much as possible. They had more

opportunities and diverse experiences, although many of these were not planned. In addition, the extraordinary circumstances of their voluntary activities empowered them. The restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic may have limited their capacity to learn about Romanian communities, but other benefits of voluntary service were by no means eliminated, and the host organisations focused on providing them with the local experience that any international volunteer is looking for. Thus, evidence from observation and interviews with their co-ordinators showed that international volunteers in Romanian youth centres developed both transferable competences for their life transitions and their self-confidence.

Conclusion

Although the scope of the empirical basis is narrow, this case study suggests that digital youth work – which most youth workers had little choice but to adopt during the Covid-19 pandemic – had limited impact on the transition of Romanian young people, especially their transition to employment and their transition from political socialisation and learning about society to active civic and political participation. It was, however, better than nothing. Young people in Romania still needed new opportunities and experiences, self-confidence and a network of relationships they could trust in order to achieve their potential in their transitions. In that context, the creativity of professional and volunteer youth workers, by exchanging their experiences even more and learning from each other the digital youth work methodologies that had the most impact, was critical in maintaining youth work services for young people. Such creativity will need to continue in all youth work practice, but particularly if the digitalisation of youth work remains a significant part of the post-pandemic "new normal".

Considering the lost impact of in-person youth work due to the forced digitalisation of many activities, youth centres in Romania need additional post-pandemic support to extend their projects and practices, to reach young people who were left behind by digital youth work and school in the last two years. In this context, young people who were left behind are not only the ones who had limited access to online activities, but all those young people who lost, during the pandemic, the opportunities otherwise available through a wider repertoire of youth work opportunities and experiences.

Moreover, most of the observed impact of the pandemic on youth workers and youth centres in Romania is consistent with other studies on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the youth sector in Europe. In this context, the findings of this case study can be used as a working hypothesis for further research. This hypothesis refers to the limited impact of digital youth work on young people's non-formal education and learning, their informal learning and their social networks, hindering their capacity to find quality employment and to be active citizens. If this hypothesis is confirmed, it is important for the youth sector to reflect on improving its digital youth work methodologies and its capacity to share the most effective methods. Youth policies should also consider the fact that for about two years youth work had a limited impact on young people's transitions and that youth centres have also been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, more assistance is needed for both youth workers and youth centres within national youth policy frameworks.

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Chapter 13

Wings of Don Bosco: the youth organisation as a youth-empowered emergency response to the Covid-19 pandemic

Ryan Oliver Bautista and Gabrielė Žalpytė

Introduction

Youth organisations are venues where young people find mutual support and a sense of self-discipline, needs which were highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic (Harvard University 2021). The pandemic expanded the horizon of youth organisations by exploring the possibilities of virtual gatherings and online projects which had never been fully maximised before the pandemic. Wings of Don Bosco (in Lithuanian: Don Bosko Sparnai) was a school-based youth organisation formed at the peak of the pandemic. It began as a youth pastoral project in a proposal submitted to the administration of the Telšių Vincento Borisevičiaus Gymnasium, a school for basic education located in Telšiai, Lithuania, where the Salesians of Don Bosco serve as chaplains.

The Salesians of Don Bosco, a Catholic religious order present in 133 countries, works for the benefit of young people across various cultural, social and religious traditions (Salesians of Don Bosco 2020). Salesian pedagogy, in the tradition of Don Bosco himself, emphasises the active role of young people in their total personal development and the animating presence of educators. Youth organisations, as an educational tool co-ordinated, promoted and accompanied by the Salesians, are varied in scope and purposes (e.g. religious, social, academic, technical-vocational) to ensure inclusion, empowerment and participation. Within them, young people find a place to come together with their peers to pursue specific aims and goals. Whereas school class levels are generally determined by age and academic aptitude, youth organisations are more open, flexible and heterogeneous in membership.

Salesian youth organisations are generally run and managed by the young people themselves, with the prudent guidance of responsible adults who serve as their advisers and animators. Youth organisations are contexts where young people are able to gradually take on roles of leadership and animation. Through group dynamics and activities, young people gain the confidence and responsible independence essential for human development. In that way, their transitions towards adulthood are supported in positive and purposeful ways.

Background context and literature

According to the Salesian Youth Ministry Frame of Reference:

> in groups people are accompanied, always taking good care of individual differences or different stages. An effort is made to meet the diverse interests of the people, treating each one in a unique way. Different levels of belonging are blended on a personal level in a form of active learning, which makes use of experiment, research, active participation, and the discovery of new approaches. (Salesian Youth Ministry 2014: 123)

Wings of Don Bosco was a typical Salesian youth organisation formed during the Covid-19 pandemic and shared the values and aims of the wider Don Bosco Movement. Many youth organisations became very active and innovative in offering alternative options or transferring face-to-face activities online during the pandemic (O'Donovan and Zentner 2020: 31).

In Lithuania, nationwide lockdown of educational institutions began on 7 November 2020 (Ministry of Health 2020). It was initially planned to last only three weeks but continued until the end of the academic year 2020/21. The lockdowns accelerated digitalisation, transformed organisational structures, mobilised resources and empowered young people to volunteer, provide initiatives and support institutional efforts in addressing the pandemic (Escamilla and Lonean 2021: 5-8). This was an experience shared by Wings of Don Bosco.

Methodology

This case study on the process of forming and organising Wings of Don Bosco employs phenomenological research. It gathers and reports the lived experience of the animators, leaders and members of the youth organisation. It presents descriptively the journey of the youth organisation and analyses it from its proposal to its eventual dissolution. The co-authors provide a dual perspective on the experience, coming from the Salesian animator and the youth leader.

Findings

The youth organisation experience

Wings of Don Bosco was officially formed and organised during the Covid-19 pandemic with 17 pioneering members from the 8th to the 12th grade (aged 13-18). The first General Assembly was held virtually on 5 March 2021, one year after the pandemic broke out and in the wake of the third wave of infections. Its conceptualisation and formation were conditioned by the pandemic. Though there was initial scepticism during the proposal for its formation, the general positive youth response affirmed the possibility and even the necessity of having youth organisations. After the initial proposal, it was the young people themselves who decided on the name, logo and constitution of the organisation.

By its nature, it was a social youth group with a three-pronged objective of developing youth leadership and animation, learning EU culture and language, and caring for the environment. In a short span of time, Wings of Don Bosco was able to accomplish various initiatives, such as the formation and organisation of the youth group, online formation talks (on subjects such as personality types and group dynamics), affiliation to the Don Bosco Green Alliance, whose primary goal is to promote care for the environment, and networking with Don Bosco International and Don Bosco Youth-Net. It successfully raised funds, together with the local city government, and volunteered for Don Bosko Vasara 2021, a summer camp designed for children aged 7-13. A shared vision and good relations among the animators, leaders and members ensured productive activity. These initial successes of the organisation provide some valuable insights into the very essence of youth organisations, which is summarised by the "3Ms": motivation, membership and mission.

Motivation, internal and external, is an essential prerequisite. This is the driving force that generated the impulse needed to start the process of conceptualisation, organisation and sustainability. From the animator's perspective, the main motivation was to offer and propose real pastoral, educative, social and psychological aid to young people who were struggling to cope with the rapid and sudden changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. A youth organisation focuses on "developing, promoting and fostering access to online or alternative forms of interventions to promote sense of belonging and social connectedness in isolated youth" (Mastrotheodoros and Ranta 2022: 15). From the leaders' and the members' perspective, the main motivation was to create a safe space for students with similar interests to acquire better communication and organising skills. Moreover, the pandemic itself provided an occasion for reflection on the current ecological crisis.

In the proposal, it was suggested that a minimum of three and a maximum of 20 members would ensure effective group dynamics. The three-pronged mission of the youth organisation was presented to interested students.

Essential resources and competences

Based on our experience, there were at least three essential resources and competences required for the smooth running of the youth organisation during the pandemic: the digital platform, the organisational leadership and structure, and networking with other youth organisations. Though structure and networking have always played a critical part in youth organisations, even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the digital platform through which these could be carried out and consolidated was essential during the pandemic.

The main digital platform where the members met regularly was Microsoft Teams, provided by the educational institution. This also made it easier to identify the organisation as being school-based, since it was the school which allowed the use of the necessary online platform. Aside from Microsoft Teams, various video and social media platforms were also used to address a certain digital fatigue when using just a single digital platform. Other digital platforms used were Zoom, Facebook and

Gather. The main goal of using multiple platforms was to mimic the real-life face-to-face situation of a typical youth organisation meeting.

Another essential resource that helped in the development of the organisation was its networking with other established youth organisations that share common goals and objectives. Since Don Bosco International and Don Bosco Youth-Net had already been co-ordinating the activities of various youth groups within the EU before the pandemic, tapping into their experiences and resources greatly helped in achieving organisational goals (Don Bosco International 2015; Don Bosco Youth-Net 2015; Meus 2019); and, although Don Bosco Green Alliance (Don Bosco Green Alliance 2021) is relatively new, its network is more global and addresses specifically the goal of care for the environment.

Post-pandemic prospect

With the rise in the number of people being vaccinated, effective health protocols and the slow but sure decline in the number of cases and deaths, the end of the Covid-19 pandemic was in sight. This transition from the period of the pandemic to normality posed questions about the future prospects of youth organisations. Are we going to return to the former ways of conducting youth organisations? Or will we move forward using other ways, based on the learnings and insights that we have gained during the pandemic?

Wings of Don Bosco was eventually dissolved on 7 October 2021. With the gradual return to normality, most of its members were by then engaging with other school and extracurricular activities that had existed before the pandemic. The value of real contact cannot be replaced by online meetings. The youth organisation and its practices served as a stopgap emergency response during the pandemic. At the same time, the change of residence of the Salesian animator and some of the key members of the organisation meant that the organisation lacked leaders in the school.

To the animator, the organisation's dissolution was a positive sign of youth empowerment. Members were able to analyse the situation and make decisions based on current exigencies. It was not the end, but merely a means to reach the end, and the initial formation of responsible, critical and responsive young people had led to them actively shaping and taking part in the society.

From the leaders' and members' perspective, this group provided an environment in which to experience what it means to build relationships with other organisations, how the funding for projects works and, most importantly, how to manage personal needs and work in harmonious and synergistic ways. Certainly, the experiences have only been embryonic ones, but some great memories were imprinted on members of this group of young people and provided them with abundant knowledge and experience for managing and participating in other groups in the future. The majority of the young people who took part in Wings of Don Bosco are currently active leaders and members of other youth organisations, including the student council, academic clubs and local Scout organisations.

Discussion and conclusion

The pandemic forced a process of creative rethinking and re-evaluation of the essence and necessity of youth organisations. In order to curb the transmission of the Covid-19 virus, it was important to discriminate between what is essential and non-essential in the policies and programmes crafted during the emergency situation. Are youth organisations essential? If physical interactions are impossible, what are the essential requirements and resources needed to form and accompany youth organisations?

The formation of Wings of Don Bosco is a genuine sign that youth organisations are essential during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Young people must be treated as not merely recipients of formation and education but active and engaged collaborators in their own development as responsible members of educational institutions and society, which must come together to provide safe and functional digital platforms for youth organisations.

Though Wings of Don Bosco was eventually dissolved, its short but meaningful life span emphasises the critical role that youth organisations played in the education and formation of young people during the pandemic. It engaged and empowered young people. It also highlighted the need for educational and social institutions to promote and sustain youth organisations. Young people can responsibly, effectively and efficiently respond to emerging and developing situations. Decision making in emergency situations should also include the young people. They should be involved in order to take account of their agency and creativity for finding appropriate (interim) solutions.

The personal and collective experiences of the animators, youth leaders and members of Wings of Don Bosco reaffirmed the vital role that youth empowerment has in equipping young people with the necessary skills and aptitudes to respond to emergency situations, explore new horizons and chart innovative projects.

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Part IV

Well-being, education and social life

Chapter 14

"At the moment I'm not happy with my life": the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and social restrictions on Finnish young people's sense of well-being

Mikko Salasuo and Jenni Lahtinen

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected young people's well-being in many ways. Restrictions intended to prevent the virus from spreading have had major consequences for young people's education and learning, employment opportunities, leisure activities and opportunities for social interaction. Considering the vast implications of the restrictions for young people's lives, it is important to know how young people coped during the pandemic and how this exceptional time has affected the important transitions of young people to the next steps in their lives.

Children's and young people's views and perceptions of their own lives have long been seen as important in the basis for policy interventions (Bourke and Geldens 2007; Haanpää 2020). From the 1970s, in well-being research with a social policy orientation, the subjective assessments of well-being have risen in importance to stand alongside economic indicators (Vaaramaa et al. 2010). Young people's subjective satisfaction with different dimensions of life can be seen as a signal of well-being or ill-being. Subjective well-being has been captured by studying, for example, their life satisfaction, happiness and assessment of quality of life (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014; Eckersley 2000). In Finland, such research has a long tradition: the life satisfaction of Finnish young people has been measured since the start of the 21st century, and young people's satisfaction with leisure time and social relationships has also been extensively studied (Salasuo et al. 2021).

The measurement of subjective satisfaction was included in the surveys conducted by the Finnish Youth Research Society during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results show that the largest decline in life satisfaction in the entire history of measurement

occurred in autumn 2020, when average life satisfaction among youth aged 15-25 fell from 8.5 to 8.0 on the Finnish school grade scale 4-10 (Lahtinen and Myllyniemi 2021). Although an average grade of 8.0 could still be interpreted as "good", Lahtinen and Myllyniemi point out that the decline of 0.5 in grade was exceptionally large and fast. Young people's satisfaction with leisure time has also declined since the autumn of 2020. While the average leisure-time satisfaction was 8.3 in early 2020, by autumn 2020 it had dropped to 7.9 and in spring 2021 the average was 7.8 (Salasuo and Lahtinen 2021).

As the drop in life satisfaction and leisure-time satisfaction shows, the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions have been felt profoundly in the lives of young Finns. However, not everyone experienced the pandemic and its social restrictions in the same way or equally negatively. In this contribution, we look for signals of the well-being or ill-being of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic by studying the changes in life satisfaction, leisure-time satisfaction and satisfaction with social relations among young people who are in the midst of important transitions towards adulthood. We are particularly interested in comparing the changes in different dimensions of satisfaction and finding out whether changes were larger for some dimensions than for others. We are also interested in the satisfaction levels of different groups of young people. How have the social restrictions affected the satisfaction of young people who have just moved away from their parents? Are there substantial changes for satisfaction among young people who have just started their working life? How about the satisfaction of young people who have experienced job loss during the pandemic or have been unemployed during the social restrictions?

As is known from previous research, disruptions in important transitions in young people's lives can have long-term consequences (Hughes and Smith 2020). Mont'Alvao et al. (2021: 15) have concluded that Covid-19 crises have diminished "youth's capacity to acquire adult markers, including finishing school, the acquisition of stable employment, obtaining an independent residence, marriage, and parenthood".

This chapter is also part of the Finnish Youth Research Society (FYRS) Study of Young People's Experiences in Times of Covid-19 Pandemic. During the pandemic, three surveys were conducted to find out the experiences of young people and their use of youth services. A point of reference for these surveys has been provided by data from the Youth Barometer and the Youth Leisure Survey, which were collected in early 2020 just before the start of the pandemic. Some results of FYRS's Covid-19 project have previously been reported in Finnish, as an important purpose of the project has been to quickly generate information to support decision making in youth policy (e.g. Salasuo and Lahtinen 2021; Lahtinen and Myllyniemi 2021).

Data and methods

This chapter is based on two datasets. Primary data are from the second wave of FYRS "Covid data", which was gathered by phone interviews with young people aged 12-24 in May and June 2021. Secondary data are drawn from the Youth Barometer 2020, gathered through phone interviews with young people aged 15-29 in January

and February 2020, just before the pandemic hit Finland. We use the data for 15-24-year-olds (Covid data N = 776; Youth barometer N = 1212), which is the age group common to both datasets, as we wish to compare young people's answers before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of data collection in May and June 2021, there had just been an easing of restrictions and people were hoping to have a free and easy summer.

Our interest is in changes in general life and leisure-time satisfaction, and satisfaction with social relations in the midst of youth transitions. Young people's perceptions of their life satisfaction, and their satisfaction with social relations, were explored by asking similar questions in both datasets. The question was "How satisfied are you at the moment with the following things: social relationships / life overall?" In the Youth Barometer, leisure-time satisfaction was asked about in the same way. In the Covid data, however, leisure-time satisfaction was explored by the question: "How satisfied have you been with your leisure time in this year (2021)?". This slight difference in the questions on leisure-time satisfaction must be noted when interpreting the results. Answer options for all questions covered a scale from 4 to 10 – the usual marks in Finnish basic education (ages 7-16) from the fifth grade onwards. Those who answered "I don't know" (n = 8-10 in each dimension) are excluded in the analyses. Satisfaction levels are presented by means (averages) and 95% confidence intervals.

In the first analysis we compared changes in the mean satisfaction level by gender (boys / girls), principal activity (students / employed / unemployed) and household type (lives with a legal guardian or guardians / lives alone / lives with a roommate or in a commune / lives with a partner or with a partner and children). The significance of the changes was analysed statistically using the t-test. In the second analysis we compared satisfaction levels in the Covid data among those respondents who had or had not experienced job loss, reduction of job hours or lay-off during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the third analysis we compared satisfaction levels in the Covid data among those respondents who had or had not experienced interruption of leisure-time activity during the pandemic. Differences between the groups were analysed statistically using the t-test.

Changes in satisfaction levels before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, young people's life satisfaction decreased by 0.26 of a school grade, leisure-time satisfaction by 0.54 and satisfaction with social relationships by 0.28. Table 14.1 shows the changes in satisfaction in general and by gender in three different dimensions. All three measured dimensions of young people's satisfaction decreased significantly. Both boys' and girls' satisfaction levels dropped in all three dimensions. Leisure-time satisfaction faced the largest drop among both genders.

Table 14.1. Changes in satisfaction before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

		Youth Barometer 2020					Covid data					
					95% Confidence interval					95% Confidence interval		
		N	%	Mean	Lower	Upper	N	%	Mean	Lower	Upper	P-value
All	Life satisfaction	1210	100.0	8.53	8.47	8.59	777	100.0	8.27	8.19	8.35	0.000
	Leisure-time satisfaction	1212	100.0	8.16	8.09	8.23	778	100.0	7.62	7.54	7.70	0.000
	Social relationships satisfaction	1211	100.0	8.52	8.45	8.59	778	100.0	8.24	8.15	8.33	0.000
Girls	Life satisfaction	584	48.5	8.49	8.41	8.57	376	48.5	8.14	8.03	8.25	0.000
	Leisure-time satisfaction	584	48.4	8.11	8.02	8.20	376	48.5	7.47	7.35	7.59	0.000
	Social relationships satisfaction	584	48.5	8.59	8.50	8.68	376	48.5	8.21	8.08	8.34	0.000
Boys	Life satisfaction	620	51.5	8.58	8.49	8.67	399	51.5	8.4	8.30	8.50	0.012
	Leisure-time satisfaction	622	51.6	8.21	8.11	8.31	399	51.5	7.77	7.66	7.88	0.000
	Social relationships satisfaction	621	51.5	8.47	8.37	8.57	399	51.5	8.28	8.15	8.41	0.018

The results show that the period of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions have adversely affected young Finns' subjective well-being. Experiences of leisure-time satisfaction seem most negative, because leisure-time satisfaction declined most. The Covid-19 data presented in Table 14.1 illustrates that boys are slightly more satisfied than girls with their life in general as well as with their leisure time. The findings are similar to previous studies, which show a decline in girls' well-being during the pandemic (Helakorpi and Kivimäki 2021; Lahtinen et al. 2021; Ranta et al. 2020). Although an individual's satisfaction might relate to personality and coping skills (e.g. Ziarko et al. 2020), it is important to consider gendered consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions. For example, national lockdowns have disproportionately affected many female-dominated occupations, such as service sectors and healthcare.

According to surveys (e.g. Citizens' Pulse 2021), the pandemic has been felt differently in different age groups. Young people aged 15-29 have experienced more stress than older age groups. On the other hand, it seems that there has been only

a small decline in satisfaction among young people under the age of 15 (Salasuo and Lahtinen 2021; Lahtinen and Kauppinen 2022). At a general level, therefore, it seems that the pandemic has been felt most negatively among young people who are in their older teenage years or in their twenties and are in the midst of important transitions towards adulthood.

Living on your own during the Covid-19 pandemic

Young people leave the family home early in Finland. According to Eurostat (2019) the average age of leaving the family home in Europe is 25.9 years, while in Finland it is 21.8 years. Finnish young people consider leaving the family home to be the most important marker of adulthood. According to Isoniemi (2018), young Finns differ from their peers in Britain, for example, in that leaving the family is perceived as a more important transition than the first full-time job. Rather than perceiving adulthood as the sum of several demographic transitions, as in many southern European countries, young Finns underline the importance of this single transition. That's why it is important to look at the satisfaction of young people living alone during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We compared the satisfaction levels of those who live with a legal guardian or guardians (45-54% of respondents), live alone (30% of respondents), live with a roommate or in a commune (3-8% of respondents) or live with a partner or with a partner and children (13-16% of respondents). The satisfaction levels of those who lived alone had decreased in all three dimensions. The biggest drop was in leisure-time satisfaction, which declined 0.69 of a school grade, from 8.03 to 7.34. Life satisfaction dropped 0.51 of a school grade, from 8.38 to 7.87 and satisfaction with social relations 0.45 of a school grade, from 8.31 to 7.86.

All three satisfaction levels dropped also among those who lived with a partner or with a partner and children. Their leisure-time satisfaction declined from 7.96 to 7.31. Life satisfaction dropped from 8.75 to 8.3 and satisfaction with social relations from 8.73 to 7.44. Leisure-time satisfaction (from 8.33 to 7.86) and satisfaction with social relations (from 8.59 to 8.4) also dropped among those who lived with a legal guardian or guardians.

For all three dimensions the drop was greater among those who lived alone than among young people living with parents or with other people. Haikkola and Kauppinen (2021) also found that young people living alone felt most lonely during the Covid-19 pandemic: 28% of young people living alone said they had experienced loneliness, compared with 15% of those living with their parents.

The decline in satisfaction among young people living alone suggests that they have been more strongly affected by Covid-19 and social restrictions than other groups. The natural change in daily social encounters caused by moving away from parents was severely disrupted when the arenas of social life were closed down. The restrictions and closures of cafes, restaurants, bars, cinemas and hobbies reduced opportunities to meet friends and relatives. Remote working and online studying

also reduced social encounters. It is no wonder, then, that in the open-ended answers in the Covid data, many young people living alone said they felt as if they were "trapped" in their own home.

Changes in satisfaction by principal activity

The transition from school or study to work is another key marker of attaining adulthood. This transition has become more complex and often involves precarious work and underemployment (Lorentzen et al. 2019). This transition is often marked by uncertainty about the availability of jobs and job insecurity (Haikkola and Myllyniemi 2020). It is no surprise, then, that the transition of young people to the labour market and their integration into society are both said to have become more difficult (Lange et al. 2013).

Looking at the satisfaction of students (70-71% of respondents) and young people at work (23-24% of respondents) before the Covid-19 pandemic, the satisfaction levels were quite similar in all dimensions. Unemployed young people (5-7% of respondents) differed from both groups in that their life satisfaction was clearly lower (7.94 compared to 8.58 for students and 8.65 for those at work). During the pandemic, students' and employed young people's satisfaction dropped in all three dimensions. Students' life satisfaction dropped from 8.58 to 8.3, whereas that of employed young people dropped from 8.65 to 8.31. Leisure-time satisfaction declined from 8.28 to 7.64 among students and from 8.01 to 7.61 among employed young people. Satisfaction with social relations declined from 8.58 to 8.28 among students and from 8.5 to 8.21 among employed young people.

However, only the change in unemployed young people's leisure-time satisfaction was statistically significant. Their leisure-time satisfaction declined from 8.13 to 7.19. In other words, except in their leisure time, unemployed young people might not have experienced the Covid-19 restrictions as severely as students and employed young people.

The results can be interpreted in both positive and negative ways. The results are positive in that the transition of unemployed young people from school or study to work had already been disrupted by not getting a job, and a further decline in satisfaction could have led to persisting unemployment and lingering dissatisfaction. On the other hand, young people at work were already in a vulnerable position and even a slight decline in their satisfaction is a worrying sign. The same applies to young people in the final stages of their studies.

A study conducted at the University of Turku (Herkama and Repo 2020) provides more detailed information on how Covid-19 and social restrictions affected students who graduated in the spring of 2020. High school graduates reported difficulties in applying for postgraduate studies and problems with finances. Some young people who had their final year in upper secondary vocational education did not graduate as planned. Some graduates did not get their first job. Herkama and Repo (2020) believe that these difficulties have a wide-ranging impact on the psychosocial well-being of young people who are in the middle of their transition from study to work.

Association of job loss and satisfaction

Promoting the integration of people into working life is one of the cornerstones of securing young people's ability to work (Korkeamäki et al. 2015). It is obvious that the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted this transition. According to Statistics Finland (Sutela 2021), at the end of 2020 there were 7 000 more young men and 3 000 more young women unemployed than a year earlier. The Covid-19 pandemic affected many young people who had just entered the labour force, in the form of redundancies or job losses. Many delayed completing their education because the labour market situation was so bad.

Approximately 19% of the respondents had experienced job loss, reduction of working hours or lay-off during the Covid-19 pandemic. These young people had lower satisfaction in all three dimensions compared to those who had not experienced job-related difficulties. Life and leisure-time satisfaction of these young people was 0.49 of a school grade lower, whereas satisfaction with social relationships was 0.53 lower.

Sutela (2021) has analysed the employment of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic in more detail. She found that the Covid-19 crisis has affected young men and women differently: "Men are more often unemployed, women are studying." A similar gender difference is also seen in the proportion of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET). The number of young men in that situation increased by several thousand in 2020, with little change in the number of NEET young women (Sutela 2021).

The interruption of leisure-time activity and satisfaction

The fourth area of young people's life that we look at in this chapter is interruptions in leisure activities and hobbies. Leisure activities and hobbies have traditionally played an important role in the lives of young Finns. Since the early years of independence, leisure activities and hobbies have been an important tool in civic education and the socialisation of young people (Hoikkala and Suurpää 2005). Their importance in the well-being and civic education of young people is still emphasised in contemporary youth policy, and leisure activities are in many ways linked to the transitions of youth. The current (2019-) and previous (2015-19) Finnish governments have also identified the promotion of young people's leisure activities and hobbies as a tool for preventing social exclusion (see Salasuo 2021).

Approximately 59% of respondents experienced the interruption of leisure-time activity. Their leisure-time satisfaction was 0.32 of a school grade lower than those who had not experienced the interruption of leisure-time activity. In contrast to that, their life satisfaction or satisfaction with social relations did not differ statistically significantly from the "has not experienced" group. As we argued in our previous analysis (Salasuo and Lahtinen 2021), the effect of interruptions in leisure activities and hobbies, at least in terms of satisfaction, remained relatively small. In summary it can be said that the interruption of hobbies annoyed young people, but only a small proportion of them said that the effects were very negative.

In 2021, there was a lot of discussion in the media about the interruption of young people's hobbies and leisure activities. In fact, in early 2021, the subject became politicised when the capital Helsinki justified the easing of Covid-19 restrictions by the need for young people to get back into hobbies and leisure activities (ibid). The Mayor of Helsinki was worried that young people might not return to hobbies after they had been subject to restrictions for so long. In the public debate, politicians expressed their concern that such a transition in youth leisure activities and hobbies – young people dropping out – would affect their well-being and lead to social exclusion (e.g. Vapaavuori 2021).

Conclusions

Covid-19 and social restrictions have clearly affected the subjective satisfaction experienced by young Finns. According to our analysis, changes in satisfaction are particularly evident in the experiences of young people living in the middle of important transitions in youth. Youth satisfaction did not collapse in any particular area of life but declined steadily in all areas surveyed. If the decline in satisfaction is interpreted as a signal of the disruption or distraction of youth transitions, some worrying results emerge from our data.

We were especially interested in comparing the changes in life and leisure-time satisfaction as well as satisfaction with social relations before and after the Covid-19 pandemic; we discovered that there were greater changes in some dimensions than in others. The analysis showed that in all three dimensions of satisfaction the levels declined, but the decline in leisure-time satisfaction was the largest.

We were also interested in the satisfaction levels of different groups of young people. Boys were slightly more satisfied with their life in general and their leisure time than girls. In all three dimensions the decline in satisfaction was greater among those who lived alone than among young people living with parents or with other people.

Moving away from parents is considered by young Finns to be the single most important marker of adulthood. According to our results, the satisfaction with social relations fell much more for young people living alone than for those living with roommates or with parents. Young people living alone also most often report experiencing loneliness. These results can be interpreted as a signal of a disruption in young people's efforts to become independent during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, students' and employed young people's satisfaction dropped for all three dimensions. Somewhat surprisingly, the results show that there were no major changes in the life satisfaction and satisfaction with social relations of unemployed young people. However, their leisure-time satisfaction dropped during the Covid-19 pandemic. In other words, except for their leisure time, unemployed young people might not have experienced Covid-19 restrictions as severely as students and employed young people.

The young people who had experienced job loss, reduction of working hours or lay-off during the pandemic had lower satisfaction in all three dimensions compared to those who had not experienced job-related difficulties. Many young people

postponed their graduation, and job insecurity increased among employed young people. The results of this study, along with other studies, strongly suggest that the transition from school to study or from study to work was severely disrupted for many young people.

The leisure-time satisfaction of those young people who had experienced the interruption of leisure-time activity was lower than those who had not. In contrast, their life satisfaction or satisfaction with social relations did not differ from the "has not experienced" group. Concerns have been raised in the Finnish political and media debate about whether young people will return to their hobbies and other leisure activities. According to our results, interruptions to and restrictions on leisure activities and hobbies affected about 60% of young people aged 15-24. Young people did not experience the interruptions strongly, but it is still too early to assess whether the interruptions had longer-term consequences. It is possible that some young people will not return to their hobbies or other leisure activities and will remain completely outside civic education in the future.

These results help locate the groups most affected by the pandemic and focus youth policy on specific problem areas. Firstly, experiences of the restrictions are gendered. This must be properly considered in policy action. Secondly, moving away from their parents' home, the most important marker of adulthood among young Finns, may need special support. Thirdly, many people prolonged their studies because of the pandemic, which may cause congestion in the transition to work. The Covid-19 pandemic has also weakened job opportunities for many young people, which has had consequences for their well-being. In the post-pandemic world, special flexibility will be needed to enable young people to enter the labour market and feel that they belong in society.

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Chapter 15

Transitioning through higher education: how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the learning pathways of university students

Veronika Gyurovicsova and Howard Williamson

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic was announced in 2020 and, within two years, led to the infection of over 525 million people worldwide, resulting in over 6.2 million deaths (WHO 2022). In the United Kingdom, the initial lockdown in March 2020, the two further lockdowns and the general sense of unease had diverse effects on both students and educators in higher education. Over 53% of undergraduates reported that the pandemic had been detrimental to their academic performance (ONS 2021). Over 80% of registered pupils across the world had their education disrupted at least once, with 151 nations enacting country-wide educational cancellations (UNESCO 2022).

The lockdowns and the ongoing state of anxiety that enveloped many students had a wide range of consequences. First and foremost, students reported experiencing significant academic hurdles when transitioning to online study. Staff were often unable, certainly at the start, to provide effective instruction and assistance. Because of the low level of interest that sometimes resulted without suitable tutor supervision, various online alternatives to in-class discussion, such as breakout rooms, were subject to considerable criticism (Moniz 2017). Second, many individuals encountered physical and socio-material issues related to living places, as well as loneliness, and some were vulnerable to the "digital divide". According to a Nominet survey, half of British parents and guardians were apprehensive that a lack of equipment in the home would have an impact on their children's education, and just one in four parents (26%) were able to provide their children with consistent internet access for home learning (Ashworth 2021).

Furthermore, several research studies pointed to the wider societal difficulties that arose as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the attempt to maintain social distancing and self-isolation. Cutting social links led to uncomfortable feelings of loneliness, worry and despair, as well as more profound mental disorders, health consequences, and other issues that affected both individuals and society (Singh and Singh 2020). Finally, as Defeyter et al. (2021) pointed out, higher education students encountered a variety of financial challenges, including insufficient income

for food and accommodation. As a result, the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly had a direct, and often negative, impact on students in higher education, jeopardising their studies and disrupting their anticipated transitions to "qualified" futures. Though there are now some emerging studies of youth transitions among more qualified cohorts of young people, concerns about "fragmented", "obstructed" and "interrupted" transitions have largely been related, in the past, to more vulnerable, marginalised and unqualified youth. Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was becoming clear that the received wisdom around prolonged, multiple and reversible transitions (cf. Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Williamson and Côté 2022) was applicable to growing numbers of young people. The question was to what extent the pandemic would dramatically worsen prospects for those in higher education through significant alterations to their conventional and established learning pathways.

This chapter considers that question. First, it reflects briefly on some of the relevant literature and discusses the methods of data collection. The outcomes of what is clearly a modest study are then reported. Though based on data from just one university in one location, there is no particular reason why its findings cannot illuminate the issues experienced by higher education students elsewhere in the UK and more generally across Europe. After all, the Covid-19 pandemic compelled all universities to re-appraise their approaches to learning and teaching in similar "hybrid" ways. Finally, by way of conclusion, the chapter critically reflects on and evaluates the study findings, providing some indication of possible policy implications.

A limited literature

Relatively little research has been done on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students in schools and universities. The UK Office of National Statistics (ONS 2021) reported in November 2021 that over half of university students (53%) said their academic performance had been substantially impaired by the outbreak of the pandemic.

Carr (2000) has suggested that students' opinions of online learning were negative as a result of previous interactions, leading to high dropout rates and low student participation (Maltby and Whittle 2000). Moreover, there are indications that the introduction of online learning programmes has been less than a success due to a lack of preparation on the part of organisations and their target constituency (Aydin and Tasci 2005). According to Watermeyer et al. (2021), only half of the 1 148 academic staff who were polled felt equipped to offer online instruction. Furthermore, teachers considered that online education had produced a cohort of students with distinct needs, with some learners voicing displeasure with the teaching context (Knight et al. 2021). In endeavouring to offer support to students who were self-isolating, staff often struggled to keep up with their expanded responsibilities (ibid). Staff were often unable, or at least felt unable, to provide effective instruction and assistance to their students.

Research prior to the Covid-19 pandemic has suggested, on the other hand, that text-based internet communication sometimes helped students to overcome their fears and unease about in-person discussions. Some students felt more comfortable

with using the chat function. Students also responded better in situations where they had more time to reflect on and revise their thinking about a subject (Zounek and Sudicky 2013). This not only helped students who might not normally have spoken up in lecture and seminar discussions, but also benefited other students by enabling a wider range of information and perspectives to be shared.

When the Covid-19 pandemic compelled a change to learning environments for learning and teaching, it was anticipated that there would be a resultant impact on pedagogical practices. However, earlier research by Mulcahy et al. (2015) found no link between learning settings and pedagogical advancement. In theory, therefore, switching from a lecture room to another location, such as a bedroom or an office, might not have produced much difference at all in approaches to learning and teaching, even though such a switch was clearly imperative if students' engagement, motivation and performance were to be sustained.

Regardless of student-teacher interactions, students were still likely to be restricted in their learning journeys during the Covid-19 pandemic by practical obstacles, such as: living in multiple-occupancy accommodation where a house is rented to individuals from different households and they share facilities such as a bathroom and kitchen; employment or care duties and responsibilities; a lack of suitable study space; poor or no Wi-Fi; and a lack of appropriate IT equipment (Reay et al. 2001). Griffiths et al. (2021) discovered that participants living in limited space rearranged and changed their living environments in efforts to respond to their online learning demands. These findings confirm Gourlay's (2021) argument that "virtual" learning does not mean independence from the physical limitations and constraints of on-campus education; rather, blended learning often adds additional challenges. It may be argued that, in lower socio-economic locations, discrepancies are more obvious because students lose the levelling impact of campus learning, in which everyone has equal access to the necessary learning facilities and resources (Griffiths et al. 2021).

There is a substantial level of digital inequality in contemporary societies. It is impractical to expect students, and arguably even some staff, to have access to the internet and smart equipment with which to interface with the outside world (Rashid and Yadav 2020). This is perhaps not so much the case in the United Kingdom: according to Ofcom (2021), only 2% of UK residences are unable to obtain "good" internet speeds, and these are mostly in rural locations. As a result, it might be claimed that internet access in the UK should not be a concern. Nonetheless, not all houses are capable of receiving "good" internet and not all households can afford it.

Furthermore, the enforced isolation of learners during the Covid-19 pandemic undermined the social dimensions of the student experience. Interpersonal and community relationships were jeopardised by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic; online learning was accompanied by often profound social isolation. Opportunities to meet other students, and indeed engagement with university "communities" (clubs, sports, events) are an invaluable dimension of student life because they support the formation of social bonds and networks with people with whom they might not otherwise interact. As a result, students establish access to a range of social capital, such as information, social support, beliefs and objectives, and other "capability" resources, through social networks (Schulz et al. 2017).

Moreover, students' own peer group networks have a considerable impact on academic success (Brouwer et al. 2016) and affect academic achievement in a variety of ways. For example, an inability to fully discuss course subjects with classmates can have negative consequences (Kraft 1991). This relates to Moniz's (2017) finding, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, showing that students expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of dialogue in breakout rooms.

A survey of over 1 200 higher education respondents by Defeyter et al. (2020) found that 22% of students rely on employment income to see them through their education. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many students were forced to return to their parents' home owing to financial difficulties, yet they were often still compelled to pay rent for housing they no longer occupied (BBC 2021). More than £930 million was spent on abandoned rooms in just one academic semester, according to Save the Student (Brown 2021), which interviewed almost 1 300 students. Additionally, the tuition fees that are levied in the UK were a controversial matter of debate, with students expressing dissatisfaction at having to pay full fees for what they considered to be a partial learning offer. Many students thought that the government had failed them by providing inadequate direction and allowing institutions to abuse them financially (Defeyter et al. 2021).

Methodology

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies – mixed methods – in social science has gradually become more common (Bryman 2012). Each has its merits and limitations (McEvoy and Richards 2006). Researchers can leverage the benefits of one study methodology to compensate for or enhance the efficacy of another by using a mixed methods strategy. According to Greene et al. (1989), researchers adopt mixed approaches for five reasons: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation and expansion. As a result, using a combination of methodologies should produce more trustworthy and plausible findings.

Online surveys ensure that data is collected in a very short amount of time and are both efficient and economical (Lefever et al. 2006). The use of Google Forms in this study allowed for the collection of a range of opinions and ideas on the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects. A snowball sampling approach was adopted. The digital version of the questionnaire enabled individuals to submit and analyse it at their leisure, culminating in more accurate and high-quality data (Sue and Ritter 2012). To obtain rich data, both closed-ended and open-ended questions were included.

Semi-structured interviews are a mix of the formal and informal, in which the interviewer prepares the subjects ahead of time but employs open-ended questions to allow the respondent to elucidate and clarify specific issues. This approach is appropriate for researchers who have a broad understanding of their subject and want to learn more about it. They do not employ a predetermined framework, which may limit the depth and breadth of replies (Bryman 2012). Overall, the online survey covers 53 cases of students from one university.

Four individuals were selected for interview out of the questionnaire sample. Those willing to be interviewed had provided contact information on their questionnaires.

A semi-structured topic guide ensured that the key issues emerging from questionnaire responses were explored in more depth during the interviews. The interviews were conducted through MS Teams, recorded and then saved on an encrypted USB.

Findings

The survey questionnaire responses

Perhaps surprisingly, most respondents to the questionnaire were reasonably happy with online learning. More believed teaching was of excellent quality than were critical of it, though the majority expressed neutrality. Despite this, virtually all students found studying from home challenging, with just a small minority having no problems. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents found online learning difficult, and they had struggled to adjust to it. There were difficulties transitioning to online learning, and it was more difficult to focus at home than in a classroom. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, 12 (just under a quarter) of the respondents had taken online courses. Yet, despite having previously learned in this manner, though perhaps precisely because of this experience (and therefore knowledge of how it can be done well), they were the least satisfied with online learning at university and its quality.

During the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns, more than half of the respondents said they had been able to acquire extra help from the university and their lecturers/professors. They had been able to reach out to lecturers and had received replies in a timely manner. This demonstrates that, despite each student's unique demands, the university and its staff were mainly still able to assist students appropriately throughout difficult times. Furthermore, it is possible that this reflects back on respondents' satisfaction with online learning. Students who said "yes/ strongly agree" to questions about "appropriate help received in a timely manner" also replied "agree" to questions about online learning satisfaction, whereas those who disagreed about receiving appropriate support were also usually dissatisfied with their online learning.

Virtually all participants answered that they had all the technology and materials they needed for learning at home, and more than four fifths stated that they had their own devices, with no need to share it with other members of the family. Furthermore, two thirds (36) of the respondents stated that they had their own personal workspace at home. However, only just half of those surveyed believed that their internet connection was adequate.

The results suggest that those who lacked the requisite environment and equipment had a more unfavourable attitude towards online learning in general. This should not be surprising. What is more surprising is that many of those who had all the necessary technical resources were still dissatisfied with online distance learning, suggesting that there are issues other than the lack of equipment that affect their perspective. Conversely, when asked if they were pleased with online learning, all individuals who did not have their own private learning environment said either

"agree" or "highly agree". Despite this, these respondents stated that it was difficult for them to focus when they were at home, indicating that their wider surroundings may also influence their learning trajectory and achievement, however positive they may have been about the learning offer they received.

A robust internet connection is essential for online learning since, without it, students are not likely to be able to engage wholeheartedly and realise their full learning potential. Most of those who were least satisfied with their online learning offer did not have a decent internet connection. While there may be additional reasons for their dissatisfaction, it seems reasonable to conclude that a student's perspective on online learning is strongly influenced by the quality of their internet connection.

When it came to the level of interpersonal contact during the Covid-19 pandemic, with its enforced physical isolation and imposed online learning, there was a mixed response. Fewer than half (22) of the respondents had interactions with people, fewer than a third (16) did not, and just over a quarter (14) had a neutral experience. The "neutral" replies were almost certainly those students who did have online contact with others but who were dissatisfied with that engagement, such as having the option to work with others in breakout rooms but where no one was speaking. This view is supported by the fact that 25 participants were unhappy with the number and nature of social encounters they had, compared to just 16 people who were satisfied with them.

Several students described how they had collaborated with others during their course: They mentioned "Breakout rooms", "Projects in groups", "Teams or Zoom", and "Through video conferencing/Facebook video". These can be perceived as useful online alternatives to the in-person university tutorials, seminars and project work that had previously characterised significant elements of learning and teaching practice, and some respondents stated that they were satisfied with these equivalent social interactions online, reinforcing the more general finding that many respondents were satisfied with their online education. Others, on the other hand, were more critical: "Teams calls, breakout rooms, etc., but no one ever talks, so it's not very productive."

Because social contacts are so important in student life, it should be no surprise that many students were dissatisfied with not only the quality but also the quantity of social relationships. Surprisingly perhaps, fewer than half of those surveyed said they utilised communication resources such as Zoom or Teams to build or maintain their social contacts when face-to-face encounters were strictly forbidden during Covid-19 lockdowns. Many students mentioned utilising these platforms in class to collaborate with others, sometimes engaging in more personal communication in the "chat" but generally communicating only for educational rather than social purposes.

Finally, it was quite difficult to determine how economic issues had affected students during the Covid-19 pandemic. The reaction to whether or not there had been a financial impact was divided. Only eight respondents to the survey were financially reliant on a job, and when asked how the Covid-19 pandemic had affected them, several said it had had no impact: "Because I work in education, I had to work during the lockdown"; "It had no effect on it"; "During lockdown, I got a job, and we haven't had [another lockdown] since".

When it came to university tuition costs, three quarters of respondents stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the amount they were required to pay, while just three people agreed. This appears to be contradictory to the satisfaction expressed by respondents about the online learning they experienced. Yet, students could be satisfied but still feeling that they had overpaid for the service they had received.

The interviews

Despite the fact that responses to the questionnaire varied considerably, there were many recurring themes on which students elaborated during the interviews. Three of the four interview participants commented on how smoothly the institution had transitioned to online learning procedures. Likewise, all four participants emphasised how useful it had been to have recorded lectures and to be able to watch them afterwards: "I had to miss a lot of courses owing to childcare but being able to watch them again meant that I could still understand what was going on."

Accessibility to a private area where they lived, and boundaries between academic life and personal affairs were two challenges that were prominent among the students' concerns. Just two of the participants had a clearly defined office/study space, which they could "attend" and then retreat from when "working time" was over. Those individuals who did not have access to a separate study space spoke of their days blending together and a lack of separation between their personal and academic life. One of the participants didn't have a workstation and had to study from her bedroom, where she also spent most of her free time, which she had found exceedingly difficult.

In terms of university support, and assistance from academic staff, all participants remarked on how efficiently the institution had converted its facilities to function even under lockdown.

> I was apprehensive about the library being closed since I prefer to mostly use books for my assignments, but [the university] put up a system where you could purchase books for pick-up or delivery, so I found it really beneficial.

Few participants mentioned that academic staff struggled with electronics and the move to online learning, which might have made things more difficult for them. However, one interviewee was dissatisfied with the assistance provided by lecturers, citing as examples poor communication, a lack of helpfulness and a lengthy time to respond to urgent emails.

When asked what made learning from home easier or harder, the most immediate answer was internet access, which was recognised as affecting not just students but also lecturers, hampering the learning and teaching process. Three of the four respondents reported that they experienced difficulty with internet access at least occasionally during lectures, and participants expressed concerns about one particular lecturer routinely not having sufficient internet connectivity: "One of my lecturers kept having internet issues and we had a lot of lessons cut short."

Other concerns voiced were a noisy environment, which impeded communication and concentration. Because practically everyone was at home during lockdowns, nearly every participant mentioned that this was a problem for them. The ability to rewatch lectures and avoid having to travel to university, on the other hand, benefited all students.

Throughout lockdowns, all respondents, particularly those who had had to remain on campus, commented adversely about their social experiences at university. All respondents remarked on how much they missed being "a student". They had been unable to join clubs, go out and socialise and just "hang out". Those who had been trapped on campus were doubly affected. They were closest to where the student experience should have been happening and they were also the most isolated. They were bored, with nothing to do, and lonely because they had no family or friends around them.

Those who had returned home or lived with flatmates did not feel as lonely, since they could at least participate in some activities with other people. They were, however, disappointed with social interactions in "class", particularly in group activities online, where many people did not participate at all.

Finally, two interviewees indicated that they saved money during the lockdown, since they continued to work and had nothing to spend their money on because nothing was open. One was also furloughed (so still receiving a significant proportion of their income, despite not working), which they said assisted with rent and food expenses. Three of the four participants said they knew someone who had returned home but who was still paying rent for housing on or near campus. All of those interviewed believed that their tuition costs were excessive and that they should be reduced since they were not getting the complete university experience.

Discussion

It has been suggested that students would not prefer online learning since they are accustomed to in-person instruction (Carr 2000). On the contrary, the findings of the survey demonstrate that the majority of students are satisfied with online learning and the quality of learning offered online. A small sample of interviewees indeed claimed that they liked the flexibility of online learning. Satisfaction with online learning is strongly influenced, however, by the type of teacher, the materials used and the learning environment, since students then have more time to reflect properly on their learning and to absorb its content (Zounek and Sudicky 2013). Participants in this study said they liked online learning since the lessons were recorded and they could watch them whenever they wanted – even though this does not necessarily mean that they did!

A central concern that caused considerable discontent amongst students was the lack of engagement by other students. This is consistent with the pre-Covid findings of Moniz (2017), who concluded that in breakout rooms without instructor supervision and facilitation, participation is lower than during in-person talks. This, on the other hand, contradicts research that shows that removing anxiety about speaking among some students, and giving them the opportunity to post-edit comments,

enhances student involvement, particularly among quieter and less confident students (Zounek and Sudicky 2013).

Surprisingly, there was no link between satisfaction with online learning and issues focusing or transitioning to online learning. This is consistent with the pre-Covid research conducted by Mulcahy et al. (2015), who found no link between learning settings and pedagogic advancement. As a result, switching to online learning should, at least theoretically, have no impact on student satisfaction with regards to learning per se, as is corroborated by the findings from this study.

According to the literature, organisations are frequently unprepared and therefore likely to fail when facing extraordinary times (Aydin and Tasci 2005). Only half of academic employees surveyed by Watermeyer et al. (2021) felt prepared to offer online learning. However, this study reveals that over half of the student respondents said they could obtain extra support from the institution when they needed it and that they could reach out to their lecturers in a timely way. Furthermore, respondents were complimentary about how swiftly and effectively the university itself had reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic and its lockdowns. From student perspectives, both the institution and its staff worked hard to maintain the students' learning pathway as best they could.

There was, however, a clear link asserted between the commitment of lecturers and student satisfaction with online learning. Those who struggled to contact their lecturer or experienced problems with their online instruction were far less satisfied. Students also noted that some university staff seemed to struggle, at least at first, with technology and did not know how to make full use of the virtual learning environment (notably through Blackboard). One interviewee was very clear that their discontent with online learning was significantly attributable to inadequate contact with lecturers and a lack of assistance during lockdown. This supports the findings of Knight et al. (2021), who discovered that, during lockdown, lecturers often struggled to help their students due to their own increased workload. This then had a knock-on effect on students whose educational attainment was impacted negatively. This was, however, a criticism levelled by only a small proportion of respondents in this study.

Physical surroundings changed the learning experience for many students, however much they appreciated the institutional efforts to provide meaningful online learning. Four fifths (43 of 53) of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they had trouble concentrating because of the nature of their learning environment. The contextual response to the Covid-19 pandemic transformed the circumstances and atmosphere in which students were compelled to learn, resulting for many in a merging and blending of their learning and teaching experience with their everyday life.

Griffiths et al. (2021) discovered that, when students had limited space, they refurbished and rearranged their living areas to make room for online study. This may have been possible for some young people, but it was not possible for one third of respondents to this study. They had to make do with whatever space was available, sharing it with others or in some cases, as noted, working from their bedrooms.

For these reasons, the physical environment for learning (space, quiet, focus) appears to be a significant barrier for higher education students, as those without their own place to learn responded more adversely throughout the survey. This supports the findings of Reay et al. (2001), who describe how a lack of adequate study space inhibits students' capacity to engage and achieve.

Only half of those surveyed had a reliable internet connection. From both their own and one lecturer's internet, it was clear that this presented a significant difficulty for them. From the interviews, it may be assumed that people who expressed a neutral position when asked about internet connectivity had an unpredictable connection.

However, one respondent stated that they had missed "a lot of classes" owing to a bad internet connection and, as noted, concern was expressed particularly about one lecturer's lack of online access. This study contradicts Ofcom's (2021) assertion that very few households in the UK now have any problems with internet access, and it supports Rashid and Yadav's (2020) conviction that, owing to digital inequality, we cannot assume that all students and even their teachers inevitably have reliable access to the internet and devices outside university.

Only 30% of the survey respondents were happy about their social relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrating the importance attached to the need for social contact for both academic and more personal reasons. According to Kraft (1991), not being able to debate course subjects with peers can have negative implications. Just two fifths of the survey respondents said they had opportunities to communicate with their peers, while a quarter said they had "neutral" opportunities, implying that they may have had opportunities but were dissatisfied with them, despite a variety of online platforms being at least theoretically available.

While not everyone had access to these platforms, those who did responded positively when asked how satisfied they were with their connections. After all, the evidence is that social capital (networks), expertise, ideas and support all accrue beneficially from such interaction (Schulz et al. 2017). Respondents to this study did remark, however, that even while they may have had the opportunity to collaborate with others, their peers did not always reciprocate: "No one ever talks, so it's not very productive". This is consistent with the research by Moniz (2017), who discovered low involvement in discussion groups when there was a lack of tutor supervision.

All the interviewees talked with considerable emotion about missing out on the student experience, not being able to go out and routinely being bored. Despite this, fewer than half of the respondents to the survey utilised platforms like Zoom or Teams for social reasons; the majority used them exclusively for educational purposes. Perhaps they maintained their social contacts through other social media, in some attempt to maintain the separation of their academic and more personal lives.

According to Defeyter et al. (2020), 22% of the 1 200 students polled were reliant on a job to pay for tuition and other expenses. In this study, however, only eight of the survey respondents were reliant on a job to pursue their studies and the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to have made little difference to them, despite a BBC (2021) report noting that even students who had had to move back home often still had to pay for university housing, exacerbating their financial pressures and anxieties.

Brown (2021), in collaboration with Save the Student, estimates that more than £930 million was spent on vacant rooms during the 2021 lockdown. Though none of the respondents to this study had directly experienced this, three of the four interviewees claimed to know someone who had gone back home but was still making payments for university housing.

Three quarters of the survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the amount they were required to pay in tuition fees (in the UK these are loans that have to be repaid once students are working and reach a certain threshold of earnings). This was also the consensus among all four interviewees, who felt that they had overpaid for the experience of online learning. In the interviews, all the participants agreed that the government should provide at least a partial refund to students in higher education, on the basis that "We didn't have a true university education" and that "Online learning isn't the same".

Conclusion

It is almost certainly premature to draw firm conclusions regarding the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' transitions to autonomy and adulthood. So much will depend on the buoyancy of labour markets, the attitudes of employers towards those who studied through the Covid-19 period, the attitudes and determination of the students themselves, and many other extraneous factors.

This chapter has reported on a small-scale study of students' experiences of learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, in one university in one particular country (the UK), with its own distinctions regarding, for example, its higher education curriculum and the costs incurred for taking part in it. This is very different in other countries in Europe. Yet the experience of online learning, the physical conditions in which this occurred and the digital inequalities that prevail (notably internet access and connectivity) are likely to resonate in other places. And the messages from this study are complex, sometimes contradictory, though perhaps rather more positive than might have been expected.

Despite their reservations, criticisms and concerns, most students appear to have adapted to their very different learning journey through higher education. They have appreciated the efforts of the institution and its staff to establish alternative, online learning and engaged with the online learning offer. This has, few doubt, meant a poorer student experience and diminished learning experience, enforced by the pandemic. As previous (pre-Covid-19 pandemic) research has suggested, students still favour in-person rather than online engagement. Respondents in this study, though denied the wider social experience and sometimes hampered in their learning on account of restricted and unsuitable physical environments, were generally quite stoical about the circumstances they faced, making the best of the situations they encountered, and expressing far fewer concerns and complaints than might have been anticipated.

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Chapter 16

Mental health and assessments: school students' perspectives and the implications for youth transitions

Gilda Isernia

Introduction

Rates of poor mental health among secondary school students and teenagers have been rising steadily in recent decades (Bor et al. 2014). The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the impact of existing stressors and contributed to the emergence of new ones. The psychological impact of the pandemic on all sections of the population also gave additional visibility in the public debate to the topic of mental health and well-being. As a consequence, we are seeing a renewed interest from governments and institutions in tackling the issue of poor well-being in broad societal terms (UNICEF 2021a).

Research shows that poor mental health in secondary school students is linked to undesirable short- and long-term outcomes, such as poor school performance, early school leaving and, in adult life, unemployment, financial uncertainty and higher chances of physical and mental illness (Pascoe et al. 2019). Therefore, it is a priority for educational providers and policy makers to develop frameworks for tackling the issue of poor mental health among adolescents and young people. This case study examines findings relating to mental health and assessments during the pandemic, gathered in the scope of a wider study involving over 1 000 students (Isernia 2021). It will make the case for existing and future policy frameworks to integrate innovative assessment methodologies as a way to tackle poor mental health and early school leaving in schools.

Background context and literature

Poor mental health among adolescents and young people is associated with a wide range of short- and long-term negative outcomes. Symptoms of anxiety and depression, such as concentration difficulties and lack of motivation, can affect students' ability to learn and complete school-related tasks (Kessler 2012; McArdle et al. 2014). High self-reported levels of stress and burnout are also linked to poorer academic performance (Humensky et al. 2010). Poor academic performance discourages – and in some cases, directly prevents – students' pursuit of higher education. The lack of qualifications and skills resulting from early school leaving have been linked to higher rates of unemployment and welfare dependence, as well as greater incidence of mental and physical illness in adult ages (Lamb and Huo 2017; Turrell et al. 2006).

Reducing early school leaving to less than 9% across EU member states by 2030 is one of the EU's priorities in the field of education. According to the *Education and Training Monitor 2020*, 19 out of 27 EU countries successfully brought the percentage of early leavers from education and training down from 10% as per EU target for the year 2020 (EU DG EC 2020). The educational disruption caused by Covid-19, however, is reversing this achievement. The pandemic and the collateral school closures, impacting over 17 million students in the EU (UNICEF 2021b), had significant effects on students' well-being (Moxon et al. 2021).

Most EU countries closed schools continuously for an average of 10 weeks during the first lockdown, with additional school-to-school and regional variation throughout the second wave. The length of school closures varied in many countries, for example in Belgium (Azevedo et al. 2021), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Reuters 2022), Italy (Giorno 2020), the Netherlands (Engzell et al. 2021) and the UK (Major et al. 2021). Although most in-person school activities were moved online at the discretion of individual schools (UNESCO 2021), the lack of preparedness and equal access to the digital classroom negatively impacted and still impacts the quality and accessibility of education (EU DG EC 2021).

A wealth of research has resulted in frameworks produced by organisations and institutions with the aim of improving the mental health and well-being of young people. After careful review of a sample of research and policy reports (OECD 2015; WHO 2015; national action plans for mental health and well-being of Belgium, Cyprus, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and Portugal; and state-sponsored research on the mental health of children and adolescents by Norway and the US), we propose the following categorisation of interventions: first, awareness raising, or building knowledge among educators and students on the importance of well-being, and building capacity to identify signs of poor mental health; second, symptoms management, or the attempt to reduce externalising behaviours and increase students' ability to manage poor mental health; and, third, the direct provision of services such as free and accessible counselling and therapy.

While there is a wide consensus within the literature on the positive role that schools can play in improving the mental health of students (Reimers and Schleicher 2021), the interventions listed above only partly address the root causes of disengagement

and poor mental health, failing to consider the structural elements of school systems that directly impact students' well-being and performance.

Methodology

The findings reported below are part of a wider qualitative study by the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions (OBESSU) involving over 1 000 students and teachers. The study, designed during the pandemic, incorporates lessons learned from past school closures and health crisis-management interventions. The three stages of data collection (desk research, focus groups, survey) took place between December 2020 and May 2021. Through desk research three streams of inquiry were identified: quality and accessibility of education during school closures; impact on students' daily life and that of those around them; the policy responses put in place and their perceived efficacy. Participants for the survey were recruited through dissemination of an open link amongst OBESSU member organisations, available in several languages (English, Italian, French and Spanish).

Survey questions were developed following analysis of semi-structured focus group discussions with 31 students and teachers in January 2020. The survey, launched in April 2020, obtained 1 021 responses from students aged 12-21. Around three quarters of the respondents were aged 15-18, with a strong majority identifying as female (70%). The top five countries represented were Italy, Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Lithuania and Belgium, accounting for 88% of the total respondents. Other respondents came from Albania, Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Moldova, Northern Ireland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey. Most respondents reported being based in rural areas as opposed to urban areas (60% and 40% respectively), while around 14% of them were from a migrant background, though the proportion varied considerably across countries.

Findings

The findings of the OBESSU research suggest a connection between poor well-being of students and their assessment. Assessment is commonly understood as a "process of appraising knowledge, know-how, learning outcomes, skills and/or competencies of an individual against predefined criteria" (EU CEDEFOP 2011: 13). Assessment can take various forms and serve different purposes. End-of-year assessments in secondary schools of Europe tend to have three core characteristics. First, they are high stakes, for their results have important implications for takers, often leading to the awarding of a diploma or learning certificate, for example, which in turn affects the ability to access higher education and job opportunities. Second, they are summative in method: used at the end of an educational process, assessment evaluates whether takers have absorbed a sufficient level of knowledge. This level is usually pre-defined or agreed upon by test providers. Third, assessments are also rigorous: their physical settings, contents and standards of measurement do not vary based on learners' individual or external circumstances.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with its impact on students' learning, the high-stakes, summative and rigorous nature of assessments posed additional challenges for students preparing for end-of-year exams. Students in our study reported an increase in their workload, with over half of the total sample defining the amount of homework as "excessive".

Over 70% of the students in our survey described the homework in absolute negative terms as either boring or repetitive. Three reasons cited for the increase in workload were the need to counterbalance learning losses due to school closures; the belief that students have more time to dedicate to homework due to the restrictions on social and daily activities; and teachers' increased sense of responsibility around preparing students for end-of-year assessment in a climate of uncertainty. The latter reason supports previous research (Volante 2004; Earl et al. 2003) relating the content and modalities of day-to-day classroom activities to assessment methodologies. In the words of a student from Ireland.

> The teaching is focused on making sure that students pass. So teachers don't engage the students, they focus on the grades, on teaching with the book. Students want to learn, but right now it's about exams and passing, not learning.

The increase in workload has to be seen in the wider context of remote learning. Students had diminished opportunities for teachers' support: within our survey, lack of explanation and follow-up was the most common challenge in learning STEM subjects online and the second most common challenge for practical subjects. Students also struggled with spending long hours in front of a screen. Around 96% of the respondents reported experiencing adverse effects connected to screen time, such as eye soreness (75%), fatigue (75%), lack of concentration (70%) and posture problems (60%). The majority of our sample reportedly spent six to seven hours a day following classes online. Yet, based on the relationship between hours spent in online classes and students' satisfaction in our survey, four hours per day seems to be the most appropriate length of time for online classes, according to respondents.

Teaching-to-test methodologies, lack of support, increased workload and the effects of prolonged screen time have negative repercussions on students' well-being. Over 70% of the survey sample reported feeling stressed about "problems at school". While this is not explicitly related to assessment, students established a connection between assessment and well-being in their open answers.

> Most of the time I am upset about exams and my future.
>
> I sleep very little at night and destroy myself to study … I really hope I will pass this year.
>
> I'm not feeling well! I'm stressed about the exams at the end of the school … I will completely fail the exam. Thank you, Covid-19, for destroying our lives.

Students were also more likely to be pessimistic about their future than about other items like their self-esteem or the ability to solve problems, and 78% of the students felt unprepared for upcoming school-leaving assessments.

Discussion and conclusion

Recommendations to improve students' well-being in schools generally focus on building services, knowledge and capacity related to mental health among students and educators. In such recommendations, issues of mental health are identified as external to the school system and requiring additional solutions. Yet the findings above suggest that, in the context of extensive school closures and emergency online learning, assessment was particularly stressful for students, contributing to their declining mental health and well-being.

Pandemic-academic stress is defined by students as consisting mainly of heavy workload, constant testing, passive learning approaches, prolonged screen time, uncertainty over end-of-year assessment methodologies and lack of support from teachers. Tackling these issues emerges, therefore, as a critical means of addressing students' declining rates of well-being, fostering students' engagement and preventing early school leaving. In this configuration, reforming assessment methodologies can have a "ripple effect", contributing to the transformation of school systems as a whole. Effective reform will require two main actions: a redefinition of the key competences and skills that education systems seek to foster; and a strategy to incorporate students' engagement as a core objective of teaching and learning methodologies.

With regard to the first action, the European Skills Agenda stresses the importance of equipping students with the right skills for jobs. This postulates that the future labour force is in need of adaptation, as opposed to the labour market being in need of transformation. Research by the International Labour Organization and the World Health Organization paints a different picture. According to their joint report, over 2 million workers die each year of work-related diseases or injuries, the top risk factor being long working hours (WHO and ILO 2021). Cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death globally, is 50% more likely to occur among those reporting work-related stress (ILO 2016).

A stress problem already exists in our societies: teaching students to manage their stress is a way to reproduce, and not mitigate, the health risks and challenges of modern workplaces. Much more transformative and effective would be changing the systems in which they learn. Student unions and youth organisations have campaigned for decades to this end; examining their advocacy efforts and involving them in the process of reform can be a starting point to transform assessment methodologies for the better.

This involvement in reform also furthers the aim of the second action outlined above, which is building a strategy to incorporate students' engagement as a core objective of teaching and learning methodologies.

According to a study in Australia, the ability to exercise choice is fundamental to foster student engagement (NSW Department of Education and Communities 2015). Currently, students do not have choices when it comes to assessments. There is a significant gap in our data set between the way students are currently assessed and the way they would want to be assessed. The latter varies considerably in two ways: one related strictly to content of the exam and marking, the other focusing on the important skills and competences not captured by exams. For some, current exam

methodologies are acceptable but not suitable for online learning. For others, they should be replaced by different methods, such as discursive or formative evaluation, or open book exams. There exists, however, a broad consensus that assessment methodologies should take into account more than just marks, broadening evaluation to include effort, extracurricular activities, personal path and family situation, as well as external circumstances.

This case study has sought to illustrate the connection between assessment, well-being and early school leaving during Covid-19 by reporting selected findings of the OBESSU report on the impact and challenges of Covid-19 on education systems in Europe (Isernia 2021). It has challenged mainstream narratives in support of limited mental health interventions in schools, arguing for a holistic approach that can transform, rather than only add to, the current systems. The implications for youth transitions would be several and positive. Reforming assessment has the potential to foster inclusion of learners with different strengths and abilities; reduce the stress students feel in relation to their school performance and workload; transform the way students learn and what they learn; and, overall, provide them with a more positive experience of education. All of these are crucial aspects of retention of young people across transitions, whether in education, training or employment.

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Chapter 17

Adapting services and support for young people negotiating the transition from care to adulthood in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic

Emily Munro, Seana Friel, Claire Baker and Fiona Newlands

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has bought into sharp focus how difficult it can be to cope with multiple and abrupt changes in one's life simultaneously. These recent experiences provide some insight into the "accelerated and compressed" transitions that many young people experience when leaving foster and residential care. Care leavers typically have to navigate a number of changes in their lives around the same time (setting up home, managing day-to-day living and their finances, and maintaining education, employment or training) at a much younger age than other young people in the community and without the levels of practical, emotional and financial support that families typically offer their children (Stein and Munro 2008). The challenges that young people face during this stage in their life course may also be compounded by pre-care and in-care adversities, placing them at high risk of social exclusion and poor outcomes into adulthood (ibid; Gypen et al. 2017).

The Covid-19 pandemic has served to intensify the pressures facing young people as they negotiate the transition to adulthood. A survey conducted by the International Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood from Care (INTRAC), exploring the impact of the pandemic on care leavers' transition pathways and the supports available to them, found wide variations in the visibility of care leavers and service responses within and between countries (Rafaeli and Munro 2020). Responses from 19 countries showed that the most common measure was to "pause transitions" by postponing young people's exit from care placement. Increased contact and support from workers were also identified as developments in a number of countries, including (but not limited to) England, Scotland, Spain, France, Germany and Romania.

In England, central government called upon local authorities to ensure that young people were not expected to leave care or "staying put" arrangements (remaining with former foster carers when aged 18-21 during lockdown. They also recommended that local authorities put additional support in place, including provision of discretionary payments to cover food, utilities and rent where needed. This chapter explores

how localities in England have responded to these calls and considers the strengths and limitations of adapting service responses to try to scaffold and support young people in precarious times.

Methodology

The chapter draws on data from a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19). The study aims to improve understanding of the impact that Covid-19 has had on the timing of young people's transitions from care, where those young people go ("transition pathways"), what services and support they receive and how they fare. The first phase of the research, presented here, involved 26 semi-structured interviews and one focus group with leaving care managers from 16 local authorities across England. Further details and outputs from the study are available (Newlands et al. 2021; Munro et al. 2021).

Findings

Beyond "leaving care": disrupting age-related transitions and promoting continuing care and more relational practices

Messages from research highlight that care leavers typically have little choice or control about when they will "leave care". It is common for young people to experience age-related transitions which take little account of individuals' wishes, feelings, needs or circumstances (Munro et al. 2012; Höjer and Sjöblom 2014). Young people often experience the preparation and planning for this major life change as a bureaucratic exercise (Munro et al. 2012). Forward planning can also be anathema to young people who have experienced multiple changes and upheavals in their lives (Hung and Appleton 2016; Barratt et al. 2020). Moreover, young people have highlighted that there can be a mismatch between the help and support that they are offered (time-limited financial and practical assistance) and what they want and need (emotional support from people that they know and trust) (Munro et al. 2016; Baker 2017; Atkinson and Hyde 2019).

Qualitative accounts from managers in our study suggest that the pandemic has served as a catalyst for some positive adjustments to social work practices in two ways (see also Baginsky and Manthorpe 2020; Featherstone 2020; Ferguson et al. 2020). Firstly, permission to postpone transitions from care placements during lockdown has served to disrupt the traditional pattern of age-related transitions. Secondly, professional accounts suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic created conditions that promoted more frequent, personalised, flexible and relational support. Their accounts suggest that the ethic of care which "focuses on attentiveness, trust, responsiveness to need … and cultivating relations" (Held 2006: 15), came to the fore as professionals sought to support young people during the pandemic.

All the managers reported that they had maintained care placements for some young people who had been due to move into independent or semi-independent accommodation during lockdown. The shift away from age-related transitions and permission to extend placements was welcomed by professionals. They reflected that the ongoing provision of support and more gradual transitions were consistent with how parents provide continuing care for their children into adulthood. Some managers offered examples of how disruption of the practice of "kicking people out of care" on or before they reached a given age, or permitting them to return to former carers, had benefited the young people concerned.

> To reduce isolation, for those who are at university and isolated in [university accommodation], we were paying for their halls of residence. But then, because they've still got a relationship with previous foster carers, we've temporarily started paying the foster carers for the student to go back and stay with them temporarily, until things open up. Yes, we've made those sorts of adaptations where necessary.

Although professionals welcomed the shift away from age-related transitions, there was also recognition that some young people were keen to move on; professionals highlighted the importance of taking a person-centred approach and making decisions based on individual need and preference.

Accounts from leaving-care managers demonstrated their commitment to adapting to hybrid models of practice (virtual and in person) to support young people during the lockdown. This was deemed important to demonstrate care, to minimise isolation and to try to prevent the deterioration in young people's health and well-being. Local authorities increased the frequency of their contact with young people, and managers reflected that during the crisis more personalised, flexible and relational support had flourished. They also emphasised that the type and frequency of contact was flexed and tailored to account for young people's different preferences and individual circumstances, rather than being driven by compliance with policies governing the frequency of direct visits.

Local authorities were often creative in the design and delivery of online support offers, including drop-ins, quizzes, cooking sessions, exercise classes, candle-making and song writing to combat isolation and boredom. For example, one manager explained that:

> [The social work assistant], he's a musician, he's made songs with the young people. Another [social work assistant] is very much into mindfulness type stuff, and she sends out [mindfulness] worksheets.

These developments were viewed as positive by-products of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the majority of those who were interviewed were keen to maintain these practices beyond the immediate crisis.

> We want to continue to be creative in the way that we communicate with our care leavers, and base how we communicate with them on their needs and their wishes, rather than we must come and see you face to face every eight or 12 weeks.

While the findings signal positive adaptations to service delivery, it is important to recognise that the role and contribution that these have made to scaffolding and

supporting young people leaving care has varied. Data from our study also served to highlight how the pandemic has exacerbated precarity in the lives of young people with the most complex needs.

Gaps in provision and precarious pathways

Care-experienced young people come from different family backgrounds, have a diverse range of experiences prior to entry to care and varied in-care experiences. All these factors set the context for their experience of leaving care (Baker 2017). Past experience may lead to survivalist self-reliance among some young people negotiating the transition from care and they may be reluctant to seek and access support even when they are entitled to do so (Samuels and Pryce 2008). What is offered may also be shaped by historic decisions about the type of in-care placement young people were provided with (kinship, foster, residential) and/or the availability of and eligibility criteria governing access to housing and other provisions.

As the discussion above illustrates, some young people benefited from changes in service responses during the lockdown. However, the consequences for individual young people have varied. Leaving-care managers highlighted the heightened difficulties they had encountered in supporting some of the most vulnerable young people in their cohorts during the pandemic.

Every local authority expressed concerns about housing, with the Covid-19 situation exacerbating pre-existing problems surrounding the availability of suitable and affordable housing stock, including supported accommodation options to meet the needs of those requiring additional support. Lack of movement within the housing sector was a source of frustration for some young people, who wanted and had expected to be moving on faster than was feasible in the context of Covid-19 and experienced a period of being in limbo. An initiative to prevent rough sleeping was found to have had unintended consequences, because it precipitated a shortage in supply of emergency accommodation to meet the needs of care-experienced young people. Four local authorities reported that they had resorted to the use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation outside the authority. As one manager explained:

> If a young person breached Covid-19 rules in their temporary accommodation, they were being evicted from their temporary accommodation for breaking the rules and then that duty to house [them] was being discharged … We did see an increase in young people not being able to stay in temporary accommodation and greater use of hotel accommodation, greater use of hotels out of the local authority.

As this quotation illustrates, changes in response to the Covid-19 pandemic have meant that highly vulnerable young people were sometimes being placed in unsuitable accommodation at a distance from formal and informal support in their local areas. Qualitative data from our study also suggest there has been a widening gap in the care and support for young people with mental health needs.

Studies pre-dating the pandemic identified challenges surrounding the transition from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to Adult Mental Health Services with poor transitional planning, high thresholds and differences in service cultures

creating barriers to access and causing disengagement from services (Campbell et al. 2012; Lindgren et al. 2014; Singh et al. 2010). Mental health problems, which are already high among children in out-of-home care, may also increase as young people negotiate the transition to independent or semi-independent settings. Again, the pandemic has placed additional pressures on already stretched services. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Care Quality Commission (2021) has acknowledged that services have struggled to meet the increased demand for mental health services and that it has proved difficult to provide access to help when young people need it.

Every local authority identified mental health support as a pressing issue. Restricted services and alternative models of delivery may inhibit access and engagement among young people in or leaving out-of-home care. Managers identified additional challenges during the pandemic, including high demand and elevated need, coinciding with a period of reduced access to health professionals.

> Covid has had a massive impact on the emotional wellbeing of care leavers … not only are our young people having to deal with their previous lived experience, but to a certain extent it has been compounded by all the new ways of doing things around lockdown, not allowed to go out, not allowed to meet up with friends … We've definitely seen a marked increase with young people that have struggled with self-harming, suicidal ideation and complex mental health issues.

Managers suggested that young people had had mixed experiences of using digital technology for virtual health appointments. While this adaptation was perceived to have facilitated some young people's access to support, for others the model of delivery was experienced as an additional barrier to engagement. It was noted that young people leaving care have often had to discuss their care histories and experiences with multiple professionals, and that past experiences and lack of consistency in relationships can mean that it takes time to build trust and rapport. In this context, virtual consultations with unfamiliar health professionals did not necessarily create conditions that were conducive to obtaining the help they needed, as the following quotation illustrates:

> If we do manage to get mental health services involved, a phone conversation to talk about your mental health isn't often what young people want … Even if we have managed to get them into services, they quickly disengage … because it feels very impersonal, and if they've not met that person, why would they start sharing how they're feeling?

An additional concern was that high thresholds for services and long waiting lists meant that young people's mental health deteriorated as specialist input was unavailable when they needed it. Furthermore, a small number of leaving-care managers drew attention to a rise in complex mental health needs within their areas, including an increase in self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. It was also apparent from the data that, had it not been for proactive and persistent intervention from leaving-care workers, some young people might not have received the support they urgently needed.

> We had another young person who hit mental health crisis and just trying to get him the help he needed was absolutely horrendous. He found himself homeless on the streets and it just felt like every door we knocked at was a knock back. Eventually,

> we managed to get him an assessment under the Care Act for his mental health and unfortunately, he's now sectioned and we're trying to work on discharge plans for … It's been a long road and it took a lot of effort on our part to keep taking him back to the outreach services so that actually he would get a service.

It was also acknowledged that difficulties accessing appropriate and timely mental health support were only likely to get more challenging, given the profound impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had upon the psychological health and well-being of the nation.

Discussion and conclusion

The Guidelines for the alternative care of children (UN 2010) recognise that countries should provide after-care support for those without parental care. The importance of providing this is clear, given international evidence that care leavers' education, employment, income, housing and mental health outcomes are poor compared to their peers in the general population (Gypen et al. 2017). However, a recent multinational comparison of care-leaving policy and legislation in 36 countries found that in practice most countries provide little after-care beyond 18, even when legislation is in place (Strahl et al. 2021).

In England, where the legal and policy framework governing care leaving are well developed, findings from our study suggest that the pandemic may have facilitated some subtle and beneficial shifts in practice. Measures during the pandemic may have helped to disrupt the tradition of age-related transitions and supported more flexible and relational practice with continuing care. Notwithstanding these developments, the Covid-19 crisis has also served to exacerbate gaps in service provision in respect of housing and mental health. These concerns have wider applicability in light of the fact that Strahl and colleagues (2021) found housing and poverty to be a main challenge for care leavers in 31 countries. Mental health was also observed as a challenge in 27 countries. In the context of Covid-19, INTRAC members also identified homelessness, housing instability and access to mental health services for care leavers as policy priorities to address.

Although some young people in England benefited from remaining in their current placements for longer, or returning to former foster carers, others experienced precarious housing pathways due to shortage in the supply of suitable accommodation to meet their needs. Some vulnerable young people were placed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation outside their own local authority area and at a distance from services and support, at a point in their lives of instability and change. Local authorities have a duty to take steps to secure sufficient accommodation within their area to meet the needs of children in out-of-home care ("sufficiency duty"). It is important that steps are taken to ensure that care-experienced young people have access to safe, affordable housing in their local area. Failure to provide this is also likely to have a detrimental impact on other aspects of young people's lives, including their emotional health and well-being.

Gaps in the availability of, and access to, effective mental health services for care leavers pre-date the Covid-19 pandemic (Butterworth et al. 2017). Every local authority

signalled the need for improved access to mental health services for this cohort of young people. This message is further supported by data from a survey that found that during lockdown 70% of care leavers reported a deterioration in their mental health; 45% screened positive for possible clinical depression and 43% for possible clinical anxiety (NIHR 2020). Models of service delivery should also recognise the importance of trust and relational continuity to facilitate access and engagement. In parallel, advice, guidance and support should be provided to the children's social care workforce and foster carers so they can help promote young people's emotional health and well-being.

Going forward it will be important to continue to explore young people's and professionals' perspectives on services and support during and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is also a need to monitor whether the pandemic has perpetuated the inverse care law ("greatest need, least support") (Hart 1971) and to implement measures to disrupt intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

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Part V

Navigating transitions

Chapter 18

Navigating transitions in post-pandemic Europe: key messages from the Youth Partnership Symposium 2022

Maria-Carmen Pantea

Introduction

The symposium "Navigating transitions: adapting policy to young people's changing realities" (21-23 June 2022) was the main event of the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership in the framework of the European Year of Youth. It took place in Tirana (Albania), the European Youth Capital 2022. The symposium was the first event of such a scale organised by the Partnership after two years of lockdowns and restrictions. The event brought together 105 participants from 35 countries to reflect on "what paradigm shift is needed in youth research, youth policy and youth work to support young people's aspirations" (Youth Partnership 2022). The rationale of the symposium was to explore whether and (if so) how youth transitions are being reconfigured in post-pandemic Europe and how the youth sector can best respond to these transformations.

This chapter is based on the proposals from participants and contributors, on the detailed notes taken during the symposium, on the eight workshop summaries provided by the rapporteurs (Aleksandra Djurovic, Alonso Escamilla, Andreas Heinen, Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll, László Milutinovits, Marie-Claire McAleer, Mila Lukić and Neringa Tumenaite), on the feedback from participants and from the Youth Partnership secretariat. A more developed report is also available. The chapter does not claim to fully represent the views expressed during the symposium. Omissions are inherent. Nonetheless, we hope it channels the main messages and informs important conversations on how young people can be better supported through today's changing realities.

Context

The event took place after two years of lockdown measures and epidemiological restrictions and as the Russian war in Ukraine was entering its fifth month. The year 2022 was one of increased disillusion and anxiety over the possible reversal of

democratic progress and the emergence of illiberal tendencies. At the time of the symposium, warning signs of recession were entering public concern. The overall context was shaped by high expectations towards policy makers and towards young people themselves.

The theoretical context was marked by a timely interest in revisiting the meanings of youth transitions. Traditionally interpreted as phases of preparation for adulthood and the passage to independence, youth transitions have become – both before and during the current crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic – loaded with new theoretical questions. What strategies have young people developed to deal with new circumstances, in particular the new uncertainties about the labour market, education and learning mobility? Are the conventional markers of adulthood (finishing school, stable employment, independent residence, marriage and parenthood) still reliable, given the structural constraints shaping young people's lives? Can transitions be reimagined in ways that acknowledge "in-betweenness" and/or "liminality" as their key features (Pitti 2022a, 2022b)? As we witness the failure of conventional ways of moving from youth to adulthood, is the current youth policy-making process still pertinent? What structural, and perhaps procedural, changes are needed?

In 2022, the EU celebrated the 35th anniversary of the Erasmus programme (and its youth programmes will celebrate in 2023), while the Council of Europe's youth department had its 50th anniversary, an ideal time for restating the unique value of youth mobility and youth participation, and for looking into the relationship between young people and policy making. The symposium built upon the findings of the surveys, research and campaigns of the two partner institutions, notably the EU's Flash Eurobarometer Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth and the Council of Europe's Democracy Here | Democracy Now campaign.

The symposium was based on the relevant strands of the Youth Partnership's earlier work and integrated its more recent knowledge base with the impact of the pandemic. As stated by the manager of the Youth Partnership, Clotilde Talleu, the event was part of its commitment to ensuring synergies and facilitating dialogue with young people, youth workers and policy makers. The event balanced quality plenary contributions with eight parallel workshops, participant-led sessions, plenary exchanges with policy makers and interactive discussions.

Content and issues raised

Overall impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and their transitions

Many changes in youth transitions represent continuations of earlier trends, such as higher unemployment and underemployment (working fewer hours than preferred, in jobs associated with inadequate education/training or payment), economic instability, in-work poverty and devaluation of educational achievements (Chisholm and Hurrelmann 1995; Roberts 2018). Although the Covid-19 pandemic has already

had strong (and well-discussed) implications for the lives of young people, its impact may still unfold with long-term effects that may not yet be visible.

Symposium participants called for increased awareness of the diversity of young people in terms of geography, location, gender, class, education, employment status and personal circumstances. Two key presenters (Ilaria Pitti and Howard Williamson) highlighted the risk of reproducing learned narratives that either celebrate young people's resilience or treat them as victims during the pandemic. On seeing them as victims, see the concepts of the "Covid-19/lockdown generation" (ILO 2021) and the "lost", "threatened", "betrayed" and "condemned" generation (Pitti 2022a).

One of the specificities of youth – as a period of the life cycle – is intense sociability and the importance of relationships outside the family circle, which are crucial levers for young people's identity building. The Covid-19 pandemic imposed severe limitations on young people's sociability, an aspect insufficiently acknowledged and documented. The strong focus on learning loss during school closures arguably concealed and underestimated the social implications of the pandemic.

A cross-cutting finding was that young people faced protracted transitions, often under the spectre of precarious circumstances, without the conditions in which to experiment safely and perhaps fail. The Covid-19 pandemic fractured young people's emancipatory routes, including the possibility to experience independent living. The expanded horizons of opportunities brought about, in recent decades, by education and mobility were replaced by the more restricted routes available within the confines of close family and local community. This process led to the perpetuation (even the strengthening) of traditional inequalities, notably in relation to social class. It illustrates powerfully how youth transition models need to move from what is often a white, middle-class young male typology towards a more inclusive approach (Williamson and Côté 2022: 68-93).

Statistics presented during the symposium showed that as many as 2 million young Europeans (aged 15-29) lost their jobs in 2020 (Eurostat 2021). Young people were easily displaced, not least because they were over-represented in service-oriented and similarly precarious segments of the labour market. They were also less well protected by job and income support and other welfare schemes, especially when working part-time. There were, however, differences within the youth population. Young people from socially vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, young people in non-standard employment and young women were up to twice as likely to become unemployed during this period (Moxon et al. 2021).

A consensus was built during the symposium around the idea that policy responses to young people"s situations during Covid-19 were delayed, given competing health priorities for other groups. A third of young people in Europe felt left out by the state during the pandemic (FRA 2022). The implications discussed were multiple and diverse: from delayed transitions to independent living, home ownership and family formation, to silent anger, increased levels of stress and, ultimately, poor health outcomes. Uncertainty over the future and a poor sense of belonging were also associated with weak civic engagement and low political trust.

Discussions highlighted the fact that young women were more affected than older women and young men during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans. Their transitions were more difficult because of increased caring responsibilities, their over-representation in sectors at the forefront of the response to the pandemic, or which were the hardest hit by it, and the regulations and restrictions that followed. The lockdown measures strengthened gender norms in more traditional communities: the emancipatory routes outside families were fractured, and cohabitation with the elderly often reinforced patriarchal norms. Youth workers at the symposium spoke with concern about the economic strains placed on girls and young women, including Roma and Travellers, and called, among many other issues, for freely accessible tampons and pads in youth centres and schools to address period poverty.

Participants highlighted the risk of overlooking the increased vulnerabilities experienced by specific groups, such as young people fleeing war, those with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) youth, Roma and Travellers, young people leaving care and those living in rural areas. The particularities of transitions to adulthood for young people with disabilities were discussed at length. Participants called for more consolidated policy responses that are rights-based and tailored to the specific situations of these groups. The main message was that now, when the young population by and large experiences increased vulnerability, the risk of overlooking the "hard to reach" is higher than ever, unless policies have a built-in awareness of the multiple disadvantages they face and unless proactive interventions are in place.

Overall impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth organisations

Consensus emerged that youth workers had displayed a high commitment to young people; they were creative and innovative in their approaches throughout the pandemic. State and public-sector communication with young people during the Covid-19 pandemic tended to be normative and one-dimensional. However, although youth NGOs sought more interactive approaches in supporting young people, shortcomings in opening up dialogue online were sometimes evident.

Even if the NGO sector was proactive and creative in engaging with young people, its over-dependence on temporary or irregular funding hampered its capacity to deliver. The employment regime of youth workers emerged as an important topic, with pertinent dilemmas on their volunteering and employment status. Post-pandemic, there was a strong sense of exhaustion among youth workers. The labour market implications for youth work are increasingly counter-productive, with a considerable brain drain from the NGO sector being reported, due to closure or postponement of projects and the reallocation of funds. Digital fatigue and poor social interaction have been additional risk factors to this process. Migration away from Eastern Partnership countries, from the Western Balkans and several EU countries poses continuity challenges for youth organisations (and indeed aspirations among public authorities to strengthen their commitment to the European Youth Work Agenda).

The pandemic led to a stronger sense of connection to the locality among young people, an increased relevance of community engagement and, potentially, an "immobility turn" (Cairns et al. 2021). A tentative implication was that organisations may experience a lower propensity for in-person mobility among young people, be it temporary or long term. For the time being, the finding was analysed more in relation to students' mobilities (Cairns et al. 2021, 2022). Participants shared their concern that the recovery agendas tend to downplay the role of non-formal education and learning and youth work, which alongside formal education make important contributions to young people's social lives. In addition, the priorities of recovery plans were considered insufficiently tailored to the advocacy and watchdog mission of many youth organisations. Organisational survival was sometimes at stake, while mission drift made many organisations change their priorities towards service provision or other state-driven agendas. It was noted that once such moves within the sector are made, it is hard to re-establish the previous activist agendas when a new ethos has taken hold.

As the war in Ukraine continues, more youth organisations without previous experience in assisting refugees are trying to provide a response. They are learning "on the go" how to provide humanitarian aid in ways that are both effective and meaningful. Youth workers from Ukraine's neighbouring regions called for increased support for the grassroots organisations entering humanitarian assistance and work with displaced young people. The creative responsiveness of youth work during the Covid-19 pandemic now needs to be harnessed in order to respond creatively to other emergent crises.

Shrinking civic space

The symposium included a presentation on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth participation and democratic spaces, based on a publication by Tomaž Deželan and Laden Yurttagüler (2020) and a survey conducted by the Youth Partnership in 2021 (Deželan 2022). The study noted a tendency towards persistent silencing of voices of civil society under the camouflage of alleged "urgency" to react to crises including, but not limited to, the pandemic. Discussions highlighted the dangers of the learned narratives on the priorities of the youth sector and young people in ways that reproduce, at different levels, the official, normative agendas where Covid-19-related topics rank high. Conversely, other issues young people are concerned with, such as corruption, nepotism, clientelism, marketisation of public spaces and gentrification, receive a low profile and are insufficiently addressed.

Who defines a social problem and the priorities of the youth sector for the future? Who speaks on behalf of whom, and based on whose values and priorities? The symposium highlighted a crisis of representation and the need to re-conceptualise transitions, the social problems and the solutions. It was argued that youth organisations are becoming good at adjusting to donors' agendas and priorities, without ensuring that young people are also included in the definition of the problem. The structures of youth participation, when available, still tend to be selective, elitist and dissuasive for those with fewer opportunities. Often, solution-driven interventions are proposed (e.g. a new smartphone application, employability services of various

kinds) without proper engagement with young people themselves – especially those at the sharp end of experiencing the issue at stake – on how they articulate a problem and its causes, and what they consider to be appropriate "ways out". The importance of physical spaces that are public, accessible and youth-friendly was repeatedly stated.

Artificial intelligence, digital youth work and young people's transitions

The implications of a high reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) in youth work were considered in relation to the principles of diversity, inclusion, empowerment and accountability. Participants expressed concerns related to the way algorithmic stereotyping reinforces pre-existing biases and shapes societal norms in ways that are political and power-based. Several unsolved tensions were discussed in the context of social media as a positive and purposeful tool for youth participation. Social media also constitued a tool for social disengagement: there were often difficulties in ensuring "meaningful" communication online; there are privacy concerns; and there are issues relating to the digital divide and the carbon footprint. It was argued that increased dependence on digital tools as substitutes for physical interaction poses dangers for our democracies; it reduces the necessary diversity of our social worlds and reinforces disconnectedness. Instances of misuse of AI (in elections and referendums), online propaganda and fake news phenomena were also touched upon.

Consensus materialised around the idea that the future of youth work is inherently hybrid. Yet participants spoke at length about concerns related to "tech-solutionism" (the belief that the solution to all problems lies in technology). One such example is the growing number of mental health support applications, which may help in the short run, but may be far from a sustainable way to deliver specialist psychological services and more generalist youth work, for instance.

Participants called for a stronger involvement of the youth sector in the process of regulating the technology industry. They demanded policies likely to hold "big tech" companies accountable, to make clear their legal responsibilities and to increase transparency and ethics.

Young people and conflicts

Young people in Europe have different relationships with wars and conflicts. They are, *inter alia*, victims, fighters, survivors, internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees, concerned observers, peace activists and humanitarian aid volunteers. War has become a generational experience for young people in Ukraine. Those from the Eastern Partnership and other neighbouring countries feel its threat or its likely long-lasting consequences. Young people from the countries bordering Ukraine are often the first to provide humanitarian support for those displaced. But war is also an intergenerational issue, with inherited (sometimes unconscious) traumas and coping strategies. When living in regions with frozen conflicts, young people need to get a better understanding of how to manage situations when facing nationalistic or

aggressive behaviours. During the symposium, Svitlana Ivanova (Ukraine) shared her personal testimony about her experience during the war, including young people's difficulties when facing everyday dangers, threats and stress.

The symposium discussed many of the negative implications of war in young people's lives: the conscription of young men to war and the voluntary enrolment of young women, with consequent dangers: the limited access to rights for girls and their exposure to war rape; the high incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder; the increased number of suicides; and grief. The radicalisation of survivors, inherited trauma, censorship and misinformation in the lives of young people, hate speech and the demonisation of the enemy were also discussed. The distorted transitions in war contexts were analysed in relation to education loss, the sense of uncertainty and weakened capacity to plan. At a broader level, participants emphasised the importance of resisting the normalisation of war due to fading public interest in prolonged conflicts.

Several European initiatives that promote the spirit of reconciliation and co-operation between young people living in countries with recent histories of conflict were highly commended. The Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) and EU4Youth were discussed, highlighting their support for intercultural dialogue, and the promotion of tolerance, understanding, peace and reconciliation. These initiatives were valued for giving young people opportunities to overcome physical and cultural borders. They cherish a regional identity, while fostering a broader sense of belonging to Europe, in accordance with the EU enlargement agenda.

Ways forward and proposals for a renewed approach

The section below presents the key points for further action that emerged during the symposium. As participants were not always specific with regard to the target audience for the proposals, these are organised more around topics and less according to the domains of action (policy, practice, research) or the levels of policy making (European, national, local). Thus, the ways forward should be read as tentative attempts to make sense of the recent transformations and to map a changing landscape.

Revise the grand narratives from the bottom up

The symposium highlighted the prominence of two main narratives: one that – invariably – victimises young people, and another that celebrates their resilience. Both seemed reductive, likely to (re)produce biased generational labels, without the capacity to mobilise adequate policy responses. Participants called for increased awareness of the diversity of young people in terms of geography, location, gender, class, education, employment status and personal circumstances. A more inclusive theoretical model for youth transitions was considered critical.

Participants also called for stronger youth ownership over the definition of problems and solutions, in ways that replace learned narratives or organisations' drift towards the funding priorities of the moment. To many, the conventional services provided by the state appeared "adultocratic", obsolete and insufficiently tailored to the

actual needs and profile of young people themselves. Youth work was called on to advocate for youth-informed and rights-based provision of services. A more general sense of frustration permeated the symposium messages, related to the postponed transitions and silent anger for not being listened to or understood as a generation. More qualitative research is needed to gain a bottom-up understanding of the (unanticipated) meanings that young people attribute to the changes around them.

Make other sectors aware that they do youth policy

Participants called for the definition of youth policy to be revisited, considering that other policy fields, not traditionally associated with young people, do have implications for their lives. Young people want a say in climate policies, in local urban planning, in refugee and asylum policies, in the regulation of AI and digital governance, and in policies on agriculture and energy. Environmental policies ranked high. One concern, for instance, was related to the double standards in the use of pesticides in Europe. Participants demanded a stronger stance from the youth sector in relation to policies for mitigating climate change (e.g. reducing greenhouse gas emissions also by making nationally determined contributions legally binding under the Paris Agreement). They also asked for stronger engagement of the youth sector in demanding a regulatory regime for the tech industry (to include higher social accountability, ethical obligations, privacy laws, more transparency, lower carbon footprints and fair taxation). Overall, making other sectors aware that they, too, "do" youth policy emerged as a powerful message.

Safeguard civic spaces

The symposium challenged the "centrality that economy has in defining who is recognised as an adult and who is not" (Pitti 2022b: 11) and proposed alternative views on adulthood. Civic participation emerged as an important part of the transition to adulthood that called for stronger policy attention. Thus, whereas previous crises were mainly about "fixing economic problems", interventions now need to go beyond employment and education alone. To many, the pandemic brought to the fore the high value of physical spaces for participation. Participants noted with concern the limitations posed by gentrification and the marketisation of public spaces. To enable democratic participation, physical spaces need to be free of commercial interests, open, inclusive and youth-friendly. Young people called on local authorities to maintain public spaces for citizenship, not for consumption, and to de-commercialise the urban commons. Ultimately, they argued for a robust commitment to transparency and political integrity from decision makers. They expected the European institutions to increase awareness of the need to safeguard the grassroots activist organisations navigating increasingly illiberal environments.

Mind the trade-offs of service provision

There are trade-offs involved when youth organisations shift to service provision in the post-pandemic world. The focus on Covid-19-related topics and services within

the youth sector risks silencing activism in a move that preserves the current state of affairs and the fear of retribution. Participants called for critical reflection on mission drift in the youth field, with long-term implications for the identity of the youth sector and for our democracies. The costs of the shift in focus are particularly high in Eastern Partnership countries, the Western Balkans region and European countries that are experiencing growing illiberal trends, where reliance on funders' agendas is key for the survival of small organisations.

Enlarge the scope of recovery agendas

Participants noted with concern the narrow understanding of the social losses incurred by young people during the Covid-19 pandemic, an area that youth work is able to address, and which clearly falls within its mission. They suggested that the priorities of pandemic recovery agendas do not adequately reflect youth work and are insufficiently tailored to the advocacy and watchdog mission of many youth organisations. According to several participants, many small, grassroots NGOs saw themselves in the situation of trading previous advocacy and watchdog roles for service-provision activities (a funding area in recovery plans).

Participants called on member states to include a new chapter on crisis management in their future policy planning, in anticipation of future predicaments. They proclaimed that "youth work is good in crises" because it can adapt faster than other sectors and institutions, as was the case during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, they argued for future policy making to incorporate youth work as a default response in their future crisis responses. This also requires the youth sector to make its contribution clearer and better known.

Reach the "hard to reach" and address the crisis of representation

Participants called for a stronger commitment to social inclusion, for innovative, proactive tools that are able to get to, engage and maintain in activities those young people who are considered "hard to reach". They expressed concerns related to privilege, representation, creaming and tokenism in youth work and youth policy making. Questions on the moral legitimacy of privileged young people speaking on behalf of those on the margins were raised recurrently. Innovative services and youth work interventions that are culturally competent and able to reach young people in very difficult situations were considered to be needed.

Young people in the symposium asked to strengthen the outreach and inclusion of the Erasmus+ programme to particular groups, such as young people with disabilities, young people leaving care, young people from conflict and war areas, LGBTQ+ young people, young Roma and Travellers, young people facing homelessness and those living in rural areas or small towns. This was considered particularly relevant in the context of diluted notions of disadvantage and the heightened vulnerability of the youth population more generally after two years of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Bring gender closer to the centre of youth policy

The symposium made a case in favour of bringing gender and intersectionality closer to the centre of youth policy agendas. Participants argued that the pandemic restriction measures reinforced the patriarchal norms in Europe's more traditional communities. It fractured the emancipatory routes for girls and young people from sexual minorities, who had often remained trapped in conservative communities or in controlling families. There was a call for increased awareness of early marriage in the context of rising school dropout rates during the pandemic, especially in rural areas in Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans region. One workshop opened up a discussion on period poverty and the ways youth work could advocate for free and accessible period products.

Consider good mental health and well-being as outcomes in themselves

Participants emphasised the need for young people's mental well-being to be embedded in diverse settings and services, including (but not limited to) youth work, employment, education and training. The concern for mental health emerged as part of an "alternative idea of adulthood" (Pitti 2022b: 11) shaping young people's new transitions. Advocating for new bridges between the world of employment and mental health was needed. Young people also called for increasing the capacity of youth workers to engage in non-clinical interventions aimed at mental well-being outcomes. They argued that preventive, non-clinical psychological interventions can be carried out by youth workers, provided they receive proper information and training.

Address youth poverty through stronger social protection

While transitions are becoming increasingly difficult for the general youth population, some groups are particularly hard-hit. There was clear support for stronger social protection and more adequate income schemes for young people not in employment, education or training, or those already suffering multiple disadvantages. Poverty-alleviation measures were deemed necessary since precarious employment no longer leads individuals out of deprivation. Thoughtful consideration of universal basic income for all young people to have a good starting point in life was proposed. Participants called on youth organisations to be proactive in reaching and engaging young people living in poverty, in order to redress elitism in youth work.

Advocate for jobs of quality

One in six young people lost their job due to the pandemic (ETUC 2021). Prompted by the inputs of Howard Williamson (2022), María Rodríguez Alcázar (European Youth Forum) (2022) and Shunta Takino (OECD) (2022), the symposium called for recalibrating the discourse on job creation with a more nuanced analysis of the

quality of jobs that are available. One message was that, when the focus is placed on the supply side (skills and "equipping" young people for the "world of work"), the demand side of employment tends to be ignored (that is, the quality of jobs available). Employment guarantees and support schemes were also questioned for being directed at employers who perpetuated market criteria ("back of the queue" young people were less likely to be selected for jobs, training programmes or apprenticeships). Participants called for a stronger social commitment to be embedded in activation measures in ways that reduce their misuse. They argued for a renewed focus on social connection and meaningful relationships, as an alternative to checklists and tick-box indicators in youth work.

Beware of "tech-solutionism"

"Tech-solutionism" is the belief that technology can provide a solution to any or most (social) problems. While the pandemic caused youth work to rapidly discover the unanticipated potential of the online world, an overreliance on technology may not be sustainable and may induce a false sense of confidence. Participants cautioned against new digital applications being proposed in youth work regardless of the problem or of alternative solutions that may also be available. Youth workers and policy makers need to ensure that the creation of a new application, digital platform or online service is not a solution-driven choice.

Engage with young people's relationship with wars and conflicts

The symposium demonstrated that young people have complex relationships with war and that there is a strong expectation of youth work engaging with its implications in young people's transitions. There are not many environments where discussions of its implications can be done in ways that are open, safe and transformative. The Youth Partnership has publications on the role of youth work in supporting refugees, including a Youth Knowledge book (Pisani et al. 2018), a T-Kit on conflict transformation (Ohana and Lyamouri-Bajja 2012) and a handbook for working with young refugees (Henriques and Lyamouri-Bajja 2018). Despite the important ways in which war and peace shape young people's life orientations in today's Europe, this is still an area requiring more consolidated engagement from the youth work community.

Addressing young people's (silent) anger and traumas related to conflicts and wars is not easy: it requires knowledge and sensitivity to local and historical dynamics, political awareness and exceptional social skills. Youth work may play a role in helping young people reflect on and discuss the different positions of those involved, including themselves. It can help young people consider and make sense of fundamental questions, such as: what historical, political, geographic, biographical elements make someone believe and act in certain ways? How do people mobilise different value sets, informed by different historical experiences? How are different hierarchies of values produced in time? How are conceptions of peace often subverted for political gain and how can young people make sense of these processes? Addressing these questions would strengthen young people's democratic agency and, hopefully, move towards post-traumatic growth.

Support young people from Ukraine and young activists in Russia and Belarus

A cross-cutting theme in the symposium referred to the need to support young people in Ukraine. As the draft manuscript of this book was being submitted for copy-editing in November 2022, the country's Youth Council under the President of Ukraine had just published its current youth strategy: The implementation of Ukraine's youth policy in the war and post-war reconstruction conditions. Participants considered it important to maintain solidarity with youth organisations facing very difficult circumstances there. Inclusion of participants and organisations from Ukraine in future projects was considered key. As many anti-war activists risking their lives in the Russian Federation and Belarus are young people, participants called for increased awareness of their courageous actions and stronger solidarity with them. Participants anticipated the dangers of normalising war and conflict and called for the youth sector to play a role in enhancing young people's political agency by supporting youth work and youth NGO initiatives in those areas.

Develop the knowledge base and evaluate what is being done

It was noted that there is insufficient information and analysis on the impact of many policy interventions, programmes and initiatives for young people. Proper evaluation was considered key for gaining an understanding of what works, what does not work and what is promising. The value of replicating interventions from the T-Kits produced by the Youth Partnership was highlighted. This would further increase the quality of interventions and add to the knowledge base on activities. Participants learned of the Youth Partnership e-library of youth sector evaluation, a project aiming to build capacity in the youth sector for better evaluation and learning for youth (work) policy and practice.

New relationships with mobility?

A finding shared during the symposium was that young people's propensity for learning mobility seems to have decreased. While one cannot yet speak about a documented trend, it is important to watch this closely. Potential reasons may be the discovery of the local and the capacity to have meaningful change at home, a post-pandemic unease with travel and legitimate concerns related to the carbon footprint (recommendations for more sustainable approaches to mobility ranked high). It may also be that the face of youth work becomes more local. The rationale behind this, and behind adapted practices that reach similar goals to the ones attained through physical mobility, may call for further research. The best ways of using online and offline tools need to be explored to draw the benefits of both, while increasing environmental sustainability.

Remain open to unanticipated effects of the Covid-19 pandemic

Although there was a legitimate expectation that the symposium would identify and address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, participants considered the symposium to be a starting point for the learning process, with many unknown factors related to long-term impact. To avoid the "dangers of forecasting" (Williamson 2022), it may be worthwhile remaining tuned to possible long-term effects that are not yet evident or still to unfold.

Conclusion

The Youth Partnership Symposium 2022 explored whether and (if so) how youth transitions are reconfigured in post-pandemic Europe and how the youth sector can best respond to the new transformations. Discussions questioned the understanding of transitions in relation to the conventional markers of adulthood (finishing school, stable employment, housing, marriage and parenthood), as the enabling circumstances for these processes are no longer tenable. Participants called for stronger youth ownership over the definition of problems and potential solutions, in ways that replace learned narratives on what youth problems are or organisations' drift towards the funding priorities of the moment.

A cross-cutting concern was related to the absence or inadequacy of reflection on non-formal learning and youth work in EU member states' post-pandemic recovery agendas. Participants noted with concern the narrow understanding of the social losses incurred by young people during the pandemic. Also, the priorities of the recovery agendas were considered insufficiently tailored to the advocacy and watchdog mission of many youth organisations (especially small, grassroots NGOs), who saw themselves in the situation of trading previous advocacy and watchdog roles for Covid-related topics and service provision. Participants warned of the trade-offs involved in such shifts and called for critical reflection on mission drift, with the long-term implications for the identity of the youth sector and for democracy.

A cross-cutting theme was that civic spaces are threatened by illiberal trends. Young people claimed physical spaces for participation and stronger support for struggling activist organisations, including those from the Russian Federation and Belarus. They demanded more nuanced conversations on the employment regime of youth workers, in view of the brain drain and increased precarity of so many jobs within the sector.

Discussions reflected concerns related to privilege, representation, creaming and tokenism in youth work and youth policy making. The need was expressed for proactive interventions that are culturally competent in engaging several under-represented groups. In relation to employment, the symposium made a case for recalibrating the discourse on job creation, with a more nuanced analysis of the quality of jobs that are made available and of the actual inclusiveness of the support measures offered. Social protection measures were often criticised for being obsolete, autocratic and unable to bring young people out of poverty.

As a flagship event of the Youth Partnership, the symposium gave young people the space to express their aspirations and formulate their proposals. The variety of pertinent issues opened up during the discussions suggest high expectations from young people and youth organisations towards the policy community, understood in a broad sense. Ultimately, the proposals moved towards redefining youth policy in ways that engage other policy fields not traditionally associated with youth, such as climate, AI, urbanisation, transport, energy, agriculture and the rule of law. The event paved the way towards making "other sectors aware they also do youth policy", an ongoing policy project. To those taking part in the symposium, the policy space for "navigating transitions" is inevitably broader and needs to be acknowledged as such.

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Chapter 19

Transitions on hold? Youth transitions of vulnerability and insecurity in the Covid-19 pandemic: implications for youth policy

Ewa Krzaklewska, Howard Williamson, Amy Stapleton and Frank Tillmann

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in February 2020. Initially, young people were presumed to be relatively immune from the worst physiological effects of the Covid-19 virus, though it quickly became apparent that they were often disproportionately harmed in social, psychological and developmental terms. Potentially this generational experience will shape both their youth years and their futures. Indeed Covid-19, instead of being an episode, or a pause, over time has become a new condition for younger generations, affecting an increasing proportion of young people. What at first seemed to be a new type of crisis, one that needed to be faced globally, after some months became a new but relatively stable context that gave rise to ways of functioning and being to which individuals and institutions needed to adapt. Indeed, many countries had applied some very harsh measures to deal with the spread of the virus and protect the most vulnerable populations, without reflecting on the potential long-term consequences of their lockdowns, curfews and social distancing. These often damaging consequences soon came to be observed (Briggs et al. 2021).

This Youth Knowledge book has sought to document the efforts by researchers and practitioners to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected, and often afflicted, the lives of young people, particularly in their transitions to autonomy and to adulthood. The EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership soon recognised an urgent need to gather knowledge, and debate the impact, of the Covid-19 pandemic on the "social condition" of young people and on the youth sector.

The symposium on the topic, entitled "Navigating transitions: adapting policy to young people's changing realities", which was held in Tirana, Albania on 21-23 June 2022 (Youth Partnership 2022), reflected on the findings of the research reported in this book and of other studies published on the Covid-19 Youth Knowledge Hub of the Youth Partnership. This volume covers some of the recurrent or dominant themes and learning that have surfaced for young people and the youth sector, reflecting on their meaning for youth policy reconstruction in the light of potential

long-term consequences. The ideas projected within the book clearly resonate with the reflections of the wider youth sector (Pantea, Chapter 18 in this volume) and we will bring them forward in these conclusions as well.

Through an open call for papers, this book has allowed for a diversity of contributions on "youth transitions in Covid times" with regard to themes, formats and knowledge sources. In recognition of the deep social change that was happening and the potential transformation of ideas and practices, the editorial team was determined not to impose a structure or too rigid directions for reflections around youth transitions. We were not necessarily seeking academic texts and indeed sought a mosaic of commentary on the theme, including case studies from the perspectives of not only young people but also youth organisations and those who work with young people. We received a range of submissions and selected those that offered a mix of perspectives and analysis, traversing categories of young people, addressing various contexts of their lives, invoking diverse methodologies, providing different forms of commentary and of course deriving from many parts of Europe. Under pressure to capture the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, case studies of projects, organisations and cities necessarily became the most common approach, with some studies that were part of larger projects (and therefore better resourced) capturing the effects of the pandemic, even if they were not primarily designed to do so.

The contributors were asked to put forward policy-relevant reflections in their conclusions, as the book aims to make a useful contribution to post-pandemic policy orientation in the youth field. Though the volume contains contributions relating to many and diverse areas of young people's lives, there are powerful common themes and messages that shine through, some with an air of sad predictability that might have been forecast before the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, but others with a level of surprise and even hope. Both aspects of our conclusions merit further reflection and debate, as well as open-minded policy attention. This is not the first nor the last significant societal challenge that demands policy adaptation and so the learning from these contributions could be considered for the bigger purpose of developing lasting, crisis-resilient and supportive youth policies.

As time has passed, the feeling of vulnerability and unpredictability resulting from the more recent political and economic situation in Europe – the Russian invasion of Ukraine, inflation and the resulting economic difficulties, renewed attention to the climate emergency, and the energy and cost of living crisis – has actually made the Covid-19 pandemic seem to lose, in some contexts, its relevance and gravity, putting it into the space of "social forgetting". Even as we write this chapter, the two-year health crisis that was "Covid times" is already slowly becoming a memory to which we do not want to return. Nor do those who lived through it as young people.

Nevertheless, there were both lingering and more persistent interruptions to young people's lives that put their transitions on hold and continue to have an impact on their pathways to autonomy and independence. This book collects some learning and policy-relevant messages from the research, experience and documentation that took place across Europe. Some young people actively refused to let the Covid-19 pandemic leave a visible mark or scar on their life, as they denied its impact or significance in order to retain agency and control – that sense of autonomy that

was withheld or confiscated during the most difficult and restrictive period at the start of the pandemic. One example would be the Erasmus+ students who did not abandon travelling abroad, even when substantial Covid-19 restrictions were in force (Krzaklewska et al. 2021). And there is still a need to reflect on the wider issues and processes that Covid-19 opened up, for young people, youth policy and youth research.

Transitions of vulnerability and insecurity

We know both intuitively and empirically that the Covid-19 pandemic affected young people – indeed, all people – in very different ways across a range of issues, such as access to outdoor space, the quality of devices available to them, the reliability of internet connectivity, the atmosphere and relationships in their living conditions, and many other things. The contributions to this book provide evidence of this impact but nuance it in relation to, for example, the social groups affected, national settings and resources available. Things were very rarely black and white; there were many shades in between.

First, the chapters in this book draw attention to the fact that Covid-19 often simply amplified the disadvantages and inequalities already faced by particular groups of young people. Indeed, the pandemic illuminated and threw into relief the multiple dimensions of the "youth divide". Inequality and exclusion were generally exacerbated as those young people with the greatest disadvantages found them compounded across the policy spectrum of health, economy and "family" life. For minority groups (for example, Roma youth, or young people in the public care), the policy achievements of recent years, particularly in education, may have been thrown into reverse (see Chapters 4, 5 and 17 in this volume). New measures would need to be established to support groups such as young migrants (see Chapter 10). There has been influential research on the lifetime "scarring effects" that can flow from the exclusion of young people early in their lives (Bell and Blanchflower 2011), and these studies point to the "many alarming signals" that the pandemic has worsened these prospects. So-called "youth guarantees" may need to be radically rethought if social inclusion is to remain a paramount objective of youth policy in post-pandemic times. Symposium participants also highlighted the increased vulnerabilities experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) youth, by young people living in rural areas and by homeless youth, stressing the gendered impact of the pandemic.

Second, the evidence points to robust concern about the disruption of transitional pathways to adult autonomy during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was clear that few young people anticipated that their changed world would last for so long and might well persist. The significance of the anticipated length versus the actual duration of the Covid-19 pandemic should not be underestimated. We are now talking about two years of young people's lives having been "stolen" or "lost", almost certainly changing the nature of their prospective and desired transitions quite dramatically. The material in this book testifies to delays in "residential emancipation" (transitions from dependent to independent living) and invokes the idea of lives "on hold" as learning and employment pathways (transitions from school to work) have been interrupted and disrupted.

There is rather less focus on the transition from family of origin to family of destination, but this is almost implicit in these texts – young people were already struggling to make these decisions given the wider transition concerns about the security of employment and the costs of housing. The Covid-19 pandemic has simply thrown this issue – the third in the classic trilogy of youth transitions (cf. Furlong and Cartmel 1997) – into even greater relief. These findings resonated with debates in the symposium, with participants stressing that the pandemic fractured young people's emancipatory routes to independent living and put them more often in positions of precarity with regards to labour market.

Third, various contributions highlighted the significance of the spatial and relational context in which young people found themselves during what was, according to many people, an unexpectedly prolonged period of regulation and restriction. Not only were those spatial and relational contexts objectively very diverse, depending on the social, economic, cultural and even digital capital of the young people concerned, but they were also subjectively perceived and used by those young people in very different ways. Combinations of circumstance were sometimes experienced and acted on in similar ways, just as apparently similar situations affected young people in different – both positive and negative – ways. On a wider canvas, there seemed to be persistence of the long-used typology of young people as variously valued, vulnerable or villains, from concerns about the receding support available to them, commitments to "building back better" at the earliest opportunity (particularly through education and compensating for learning loss) to depictions of young people as a public health enemy, as the most likely super-spreaders of the Covid-19 virus (through their assumed and actual resistance to restrictions). The symposium stressed the importance of the voice of young people in the pandemic, noting the "persistent silencing of voices of civil society under the camouflage of alleged 'urgency' to react to crises" and a crisis of youth representation, in particular in relation to vulnerable groups.

What shines through is the need to avoid any sweeping generalisations. Living at home may have been a relatively safe haven for some young people but it was a trap for others. As the contributions to the book emphasise, young people had both safe and unsafe stations and situations in which they had to live through the Covid-19 pandemic. Some succumbed to deteriorating mental health and depression, while others revealed and displayed unexpected resilience, adaptability and creativity in very challenging times. Vulnerability, risk and isolation may have been the prominent assumptions made about the impact of the crisis on young people, but they were by no means the only story.

Reflections in the book and from the symposium point to what is described as a shift from transitions to autonomy and responsibility to transitions of vulnerability and insecurity, as young people have had to navigate a health crisis as well as the existing economic crisis, political instability and a burgeoning climate emergency – all protracted processes which enveloped the changes brought by Covid-19. The existential threat is very present.

What, therefore, has happened to young people? How have they responded? As noted, for many different reasons, they have varied in their capacity to cope, both

on account of spatial restrictions and other material and environmental constraints, and because of personal resilience and resources. These circumstances have sometimes been assisted and ameliorated by policy measures (such as the provision of laptops), and by institutional and professional support, but too often it has been a case of individualised coping: young people have been left to "get on with it" as best they could. Professional support, facing its own administrative and procedural challenges – in youth work, formal education and other services – has sometimes done its best in the circumstances but often fallen short of what has been needed, leaving young people abandoned and excluded. In that respect, the retreat of institutional support in young people's lives, hitherto sometimes rather invisible, overlooked and unacknowledged, has compounded the precarity and risk that was facing an increasing proportion of young people prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Reflections from both professionals and young people as beneficiaries of those services provide valuable messages for policy makers to reflect on, especially in terms of where it worked and where it did not.

The papers in this volume testify to this in myriad ways. There has been a diminished capacity for young people to acquire "adult markers" (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of this volume) and the "dream of mobility", with its exposed precarity, has been closed down (Chapter 6). The Covid-19 pandemic has produced profound loneliness and a sense of entrapment for many young people (Chapter 14). It has fomented unhappiness and stress, and a context of social dislocation – when set against what might have otherwise been anticipated – that has led to a range of psychosocial disorders, headlined in the rising mental health issues affecting young people (Mastrotheodoros 2020; Mastrotheodoros and Ranta 2022). The restrictions that prevailed during the pandemic enforced withdrawal from social life but have arguably cemented a deeper vein of withdrawal and a loss of sociability, suggesting longer-term changes in young people's identity and confidence in forging physical connections with each other. There have been many reports of young people now feeling "unprepared" to face the future. The symposium conclusions highlight all the issues mentioned above, stressing as well increased youth poverty and labour market precarity.

Yet even in the face of this torrent of negativity about the effects the Covid-19 pandemic context on young people, there is still a more positive and celebratory side to the story. We learn that some young people have rearranged and redefined their life course through innovation and versatility. New forms of individualisation and community have emerged. Constructive responses to the circumstances imposed by the pandemic have been enabled by the technology that everyone was compelled to use by the restrictions enforced through the pandemic. Young people have often been at the forefront of making the best use of the technological resources at hand. They have, almost without doubt, been most skilled at navigating its potential and adapting to its promise. After all, many young people were already accustomed not only to digital leisure and communication but also to doing such activities from "home" before the pandemic. The contributions to this book suggest that this served as an important resource in facing the pandemic, allowing contact and connection through culture and gaming despite being trapped at home (Chapter 8) or through participation in activities of youth work or youth organisations online (Chapter 13).

It is also suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic contributed to recovery of a relationship with home – both with the family and with the local community (Chapter 7). Even all the proclaimed merits and benefits of physical mobility are now called into question. Not only does it put individuals at greater health risk (both self and others) but many things that previously required physical contact and encounters can now, with the rapid improvements in online communication (themselves accelerated by the circumstances of the pandemic), be addressed, activated and achieved "at home" or from the office. Indeed, the feasibility and sustainability of mobility is debated (Cairns et al. 2021), though there also seems to be little sign of any blanket withdrawal from physical encounters and exchanges, with some mobile students actually wanting to make up for opportunities lost during the pandemic (Krzaklewska et al. 2021).

Adequacy of theoretical frames of youth transition in times of crisis

One of the important points to reflect on for us, as researchers, is the adequacy of theoretical frames that youth research utilises for describing social reality and diagnosing the situation of young people, here in particular the concept of youth transition. As the book takes transitions as a key concept, it could be argued that this decision might have limited the proposed contributions by linking it to normatively prescribed trajectories relating to labour market, housing and family transitions, in ways that might "limit adults' and institutions' capacity to recognise and support new configurations of adulthood elaborated by young generations" (Pitti 2022: 9). On the other hand, the disruptions of transitions, monitored through statistics and quantitative indicators, had been consistently used as indicators of social change (e.g. with the Board of Youth Indicators within Eurostat as an institutionalised version). Taking the example of the economic crisis in 2008, labour market indicators were a very powerful tool for highlighting the difficult situation of young people in many European countries.

We believe, though, that the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the need for an integrated approach to youth research and youth policy. As we noted in the introduction, youth studies and youth research diverged some years ago into two bodies of work. The first was concerned with youth transitions (initially to the labour market, latterly also to independent living, to family formation and to alternative, sometimes illegal lifestyles), focusing on more "objective" (sometimes thought of as "realist") pathways to autonomy. The second body of work was concerned with youth culture, focusing more on peer relations, leisure activities, lifestyles and identity formation, a more "subjective" (sometimes referred to as "nominalist") frame of reference to questions of dependency versus autonomy (France et al. 2020; Williamson and Côté 2022).

The dichotomy is noted in this book, though it was, arguably, always a false one, as both perspectives are necessary to get a complete picture of the lived experiences of the younger generation. In fact, the Covid-19 pandemic experience sharply illustrated the impossibility of separating those two lines of inquiry, as growing evidence and argument reveal how they are interconnected. We certainly see from some of the contributions in this book the convergence of these two traditions in youth research during the pandemic. Even though this book is focused on the transition

and journey to adulthood and to a more independent status, we have not been oblivious of the fact that in the here and now the Covid-19 pandemic has also led to changes and transformations in the cultural behaviour and preferences of young people in modern Europe. The restrictions imposed had an impact most of all on the ways young people could be together, to socialise and develop youth culture that resonates with the aspirations and values of young generations – the aspect strongly underlined during the symposium. These changing lifestyles shape and create paths to autonomy (as broadly understood); they allow young generations to understand and express their values, needs and aspirations; and they set parameters for the opportunities and pathways to economic, civic and personal independence.

The period of youth is also often depicted as a period for experimentation and exploration, a time of liminality that allows for testing one's skills and capabilities somehow before the most critical transitions take place (Arnett 2004). Such notions are linked to consumeristic attitudes and lifestyles, concerned mostly with leisure time assigned culturally to the period of youth, even if accessible to only some segments of young populations (Bynner 2005). Indeed, the pandemic had in a sense equalised the lack of access to youthfulness or playfulness, as in most cases these would require elements of sociality that were forbidden on account of lockdowns or the need for social distancing. The moratorium previously associated with privilege to put transitions on hold became related to lack of access or lack of opportunities and became "waithood" for all, a situation where external conditions limit one's aspirations and agency (Honwana 2012; see also Chapter 7 of this volume). Interestingly, the cultural imperative of time-taking in youth is not absent from policies, and it is important to see it in the light of different normative expectations of young people and the resources they have. The symposium confirmed the need to create safe institutional solutions for exploration and experimentation during youth with policy safety nets when things go wrong.

Here, Norway's *folkehøgskole* is an exemplary model. It gives all young people the right to spend up to one year travelling on exchange, doing volunteering, finding a job or entering military service. They get financial support for that time – regardless of their parents' income – and have to pay back only half of this loan when they earn their own wage (Utdanning.no 2022).

Finally, the reflections on transitions reveal the need to include civic participation as an important element of young people's biographies. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerable position of young people as citizens, and increased disciplining of young people by the state has been observed (e.g. in Greece). Even though participation per se is not often an explicit focus of transitions, this is one of the areas that youth civil society highlight as most affected during the pandemic and, as young people themselves claim, rebuilding faith in youth participation is an essential component in any Covid recovery plan (European Youth Forum 2020). This message came through very strongly in the symposium, where the findings of research were debated, including the position of young people as citizens and shrinking public spaces that are accessible and youth-friendly. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed various measures of regulation and control of young people that included their associative activities and attempts to make their voice heard, such as through protests, which were stopped on the basis that they were exacerbating the

spread of coronavirus (see Chapter 9). The message that came from the symposium was to include civic participation as an integrated part of youth transitions, since the acquisition of agency and resources to make your voice heard as a citizen is an important threshold in young people's biographies.

Policy implications

Youth has not been a priority policy field during the Covid-19 pandemic, even if this group has been disproportionally affected in relation to their transitional outcomes and well-being. What is needed is the investment that will provide long-term compensation for the disruption of youth transitions, hindered learning and sociality, the deterioration in mental health and the onset of loneliness and exclusion. Thus, the efforts of policy makers need to stress the imperative to rebuild offers and support systems for multiple youth futures, especially in the context of other emergent social, political and economic crises. Youth policy has to take responsibility for developing approaches for Covid-19 pandemic after-care for young adults, to prepare them for further societal challenges and transformations.

What the pandemic has shown, and what we have discussed above, is that there is a need for more holistic approaches in policy development and implementation with, at the heart, a human-centred view of transitions that considers wider questions of well-being, mental health and social development. This needs to be done with the involvement of young people in decision making, even in the context of new situations of emergency. An excellent example from November 2022 (as the manuscript for this book was being concluded) is a report by Ukraine's Youth Council Expert Group (UYCEG 2022).

This book emphasises the importance of maintaining youth services (Potočnik and Ivanian 2022). Central to that is the kind of relationships and support that adults have provided for young people, particularly more vulnerable young people who have often experienced quite a dramatic decline in both material and affective support (see Chapter 3 and Chapter 17). Many of those adults or youth workers have worked extraordinarily hard within lockdown regulations that restricted physical encounters and face-to-face communication. Some may, indeed, have gone beyond and ignored the legal and bureaucratic parameters imposed on some professionals, referred to as "professional rule-breaking", purportedly in the interests of the young people with whom they worked. At other times, we have seen a retreat or withdrawal of professional intervention in those young people's lives, whether by teachers, social workers, counsellors or mentors, often producing a sense of isolation and abandonment.

Just as some young people have adapted in impressive ways to their changed circumstances during the Covid-19 pandemic, so policy and professional activity have revealed a capacity to establish new forms of engagement and to be more flexible in the adaptation of past practice. The symposium also underlined the resilience of the youth sector and the commitment of youth workers to producing innovative solutions, even when they had limited resources (Chapter 12). There has been some evidence of more personalised and flexible services being made available to young people, with a wider set of options accessible to them. Indeed, the pandemic has,

in some quarters, heralded some refreshing changes in policy and practice. The descriptions of young people's situations indicate that they are challenged by growing uncertainty. Especially in times of crises, it is essential for young people that they can rely on a safe harbour – in the sense of having a set of confirmed options in their educational pathways or transitions from education to work. For example, at national level Austria and Germany are developing guaranteed vocational apprenticeships for interested young people (FMDEA 2020; SPD/Grüne/FDP 2021).

Inequality needs an intersectional perspective, considering that the pandemic had gendered consequences in education, the labour market and care work. That perspective is also needed for other dimensions of inequality, such as age, disability, rural versus urban areas, migrant status, ethnicity, sexual identity. Outreach youth work needs significant strengthening to guarantee access to support and services for the most excluded and marginalised groups of young people, whose trust in institutions and professional interventions may have been tested to the limits (Chapter 4).

This book underlines clearly the meaning of formal education for young people. In recent years there had been decoupling of youth policy from educational policy, with European youth policy – and indeed usually youth policy at national and municipal levels – being largely concerned with what happens beyond education. This is not to say that youth policy is not concerned with education, but rather to suggest that more reflections are needed on how education – as an institution, as a practice and as a social space – has further impacts on transition pathways and the well-being of young people. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the consequences of school lockdowns in universities and schools for young people's mental health and well-being (Chapter 15 and Chapter 16), with online education being on the one hand easily digested by young generations, yet on the other hand having unforeseen consequences, not just in relation to mental health and well-being but on a constellation of other issues, from violence in the home to the provision of youth services that no longer had schools as an entry point for contact.

It is also important to note that, while those involved in youth policy and practice have registered considerable concern about the ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed or obstructed transitions, there appears to be less attention given either to the cultural creativity of some young people (possibly a foundation for further support for leisure-time activities) or the implications of the cultural starvation imposed on young people as a result of being unable to go out and participate in sporting, musical or other cultural events. Notwithstanding the testimony that some young people have found their own strategies – from the comfort (or otherwise) of their own homes – for cultural innovation and communication during the pandemic, that may be an issue worthy of further investigation and debate. As highlighted by research, the disconnection from hobby and leisure time, and the pressure to perform in formal education tests and assessments, exacerbated the mental health problems of young adults (in particular, in the age bracket 15-20).

Youth policy should also address questions of lost social capital and the need to rebuild bonds and connections between young people but also across generations. New investment in programmes such as mobility periods abroad, volunteering projects and youth camps should be generated, allowing the reinstatement of youth

space. Stable structural funding for youth organisations and centres has proved again to be an important issue for youth policy at national and European level, as many youth organisations struggled during the pandemic to sustain their work, and the precarious employment of youth workers risked losing professionals at a time of crisis. Furthermore, as the findings in this book indicate, in order to support the networking of young people through informal virtual spaces, policy should consider urgently establishing a non-commercial virtual environment for youth work as an infrastructure to reach young people online. This would need to be anchored through an upgrading of digital forms of practising youth work, and an appropriate network for youth workers themselves. In general, against the background of experience from the Covid-19 pandemic and the role that youth work played within it, the European Youth Work Agenda should be updated through a participatory process across the community of practice to ensure that youth work remains attuned to the changing nature of young people's realities.

A last word

It is clear that many of the lessons about the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people and their transitions to adulthood and autonomy are still to be drawn, and this will be the case for some time to come. Is it possible to talk about returning to "normal" or will a "new normal" be something quite different from what prevailed before 2020? Other factors compound the impact of the pandemic, not least the changing geopolitical environment and its effect on the economy and employment and on the climate emergency. Digital and green, social and economic transformations were already under way before the pandemic, and they will now need to be accelerated even more. These wider circumstances will also play their part in influencing how youth transitions are supported or obstructed in the future, and will affect how young people shape their aspirations, mobilise their resources and consider their approaches to connection and communication. Since youth policy focuses essentially on supporting transitions to adulthood, but also on empowering young people, all these findings require transformative debates, especially when considering the imminent mid-term reviews of the two European youth strategies, namely the European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and the Council of Europe Youth Sector Strategy 2030, that will shortly follow the publication of this book.

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown into relief some key issues in contemporary youth transitions in Europe. Young people and those working with them have sometimes reacted to their situation under Covid-19 in somewhat unexpected ways. These reactions – from young people's cultural creativity to more flexible policy and service responses – need to be harvested with care to consider their application and applicability to post-Covid times, and to recurring or alternating crisis periods in general, as we have learned in recent decades. There is a need to avoid over-celebration of positive and purposeful activity during the pandemic, just as there is a need not to draw completely downbeat and pessimistic conclusions.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that, despite the promise of adaptation and flexibility (some glimmers and glimpses of hope), the Covid-19 pandemic has largely exposed and worsened traditional dimensions of inequality and exacerbated

the youth divide. For the most part, despite some changes primarily at the margins, it is the continuities of pre-pandemic circumstances – disparities in access to resources, economic opportunity, technology and connectivity, living space, family and professional support, and more, including susceptibility to the virus itself – that have loomed large. For many young people, there has been a loss of learning and employment trajectories, a diminution of human connection and the shrinking of opportunities to develop social capital. All of this has been subject to disruption, interruption and upheaval, producing the experience of abandonment, a sense of alienation and sometimes profound feelings of apathy.

For some, the future may be a question of "health versus wealth" (Chapter 6) or neither. Political jargon speaks recurrently of the need to "build back better" but, if young people's lives are to be put back on track in meaningful and relevant ways, there is an urgent imperative to forge forward faster, and more fairly. This will sharpen classic youth policy challenges across the key domains of education, training, employment, health, housing and justice, testing the "reach" of policy and its capacity to engage with young people's voice and needs through appropriate information, participation and service delivery – where it matters, when it counts.

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In early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck Europe with a vengeance. All sections of the population were rapidly affected by the efforts made to limit the deadly impact of the coronavirus: lockdowns and other restrictions on personal movement, the closure of public spaces and limits to association.

Young people were perhaps the least at risk in terms of illness and mortality. In other respects, they were disproportionately affected, on account of the closure of educational institutions, the collapse of recruitment to the labour market and the range of challenges surrounding the places and spaces where they lived, whether "at home" or elsewhere.

Covid-19 regulations lasted for well over two years and their consequences linger on or persist. The experience of the pandemic affected young people in many ways. This book provides a range of accounts of those experiences, among different sectors of the youth population, in different parts of Europe and among those who sought to provide young people with support. It draws perspectives from pre-existing research projects that were sustained through the pandemic, spontaneous research inquiries and reflective case studies from practitioners in the field.

This volume of the Youth Knowledge Book series presents a contemporaneous account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic period on young people. It broadly confirms the resulting exacerbation of the inequalities affecting young people in different and cross-sectional ways, as their lives and aspirations were disrupted and put on hold. But it is by no means completely bad news. Young people also displayed creativity, resilience and sometimes resistance during the pandemic, as did some professionals responsible for supporting them. From this diversity of understanding about responses to one crisis, there are important lessons and ideas for youth policy and how it may respond better to similar crises in the future.

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ISBN 978-92-871-9341-4 (PDF)
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