

Escaping The Acquiescent Immobility Trap: The Role of Virtual Mobility in Supporting Physical Study Abroad Aspirations among Students from Russia

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Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has significantly impacted the outbound student mobility of Russian students. This paper highlights and explains the positive role virtual student mobility can play in shaping and sustaining the international education aspirations of Russian students amidst the entangled geopolitical and financial crises. Drawing upon the Aspirations-Capabilities framework of migration, the notion of mobility capital, and different states of (im)mobility, the study analyses 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with Russian students who participated in various forms of virtual mobility in 2020-2023. The findings reveal that virtual mobility can bolster Russian students' capacity to aspire to international studies despite the mobility-suppressing climate by acting as a 'rite of passage' en route to international education, increasing language confidence, and challenging media portrayals of hostility towards Russian students. The richness of the virtual mobility experience in terms of communication with foreign teachers and students plays a key role in activating this affordance.

Keywords: virtual student mobility, international student mobility, aspirations-capabilities framework, Russian students

Introduction

Since the 2014 events in Crimea and the gradual shift in the political climate in Russia from internationalisation to nationalisation, westbound student mobility has been often viewed as an unwelcomed phenomenon in Russian political and academic discourse. Being framed as the projection of the Global North's soft power leading to brain drain (e.g., Antyukhova 2019; Savelchev, 2023), outgoing student mobility to western countries has been subjected to a suppressive top-down approach, with mass media as a third power willingly or unwillingly playing a subtle yet powerful role in this creeping process. At the institutional level, many initiatives were stopped or put under administrative pressure, often in the form of recommendations or unspoken regulations easily adopted in the context of high self-censorship, a lingering legacy

of the Soviet Union (Kaczmarek, 2020). This can also be linked to “New Public Management Paradigm” as a means “to resurrect quasi-Soviet means of political control” (Chirikov & Fedyakin, 2022, p. 237).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has further impacted the outbound student mobility of Russian students, exacerbating an already troubled practice recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic-related travel restrictions and grappling with worsening currency exchange rates ever since the 2014 events in the Crimea. The media sources promote the messages that Russian students are subjected to discrimination in the West and consistently portray western educational systems as hostile (e.g., Alekseyeva, 2022). Indeed, some countries have stopped either accepting Russian citizens into higher education institutions or granting them student visas, e.g., the Czech Government has banned the issuance of new visas and residence permits (incl. students) to Russian and Belarussian nationals; similar restrictions were adopted in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Many western universities have also withdrawn from temporary student mobility initiatives with Russian higher education institutions. The combined number of international university partners across 4 major universities in Russia has dropped by almost 50%, from 501 to 270 (Krasnikov, 2023). On top of that European universities were accused by top Russian officials of expelling students from Russia for political reasons (“Russian Students expelled from European universities will have the opportunity to continue their education in Russia for free”, 2022). Mass media also spread the news about admittance denials for political reasons based on the case of one British University (Jack, 2022; Matthews, 2022). These specific cases, however, are being extrapolated in the media to the whole Global North as a portrayal of hostility towards students from Russia. This is likely to promote a certain cognitive bias based on overgeneralisation among the Russian student body. At the same time, economic problems in the West are exacerbated in the media, which focuses on the negative outlook and potential future problems while simultaneously portraying Russia as a better place to live financially and from the perspective of ‘traditional values’ and cultural fit (e.g., “The Main Goal of the West is to Worsen the Lives of Millions of people." It's Bad Where There is no "Russian World," according to Kremlin Propaganda”, 2023).

On top of the above attitude-shaping influences, students may also have concerns about the possibility of their reintegration into Russian social and labour systems when they return with a degree from abroad. They may fear being ostracised by the society or limited in their opportunities politically due to being labelled a “person under foreign influence” under the law on foreign agents which came into force in December 2022 (The Federal Law “On Control over the Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence”, 2022). This might create a stronger association between student mobility and subsequent emigration, which many individuals might not be willing to embark upon. Certainly, those with initial emigration intentions who view education as an instrument to facilitate such permanent move are likely to be less affected. For those who hold no permanent emigration intentions, however, the rationale behind pursuing education abroad becomes rather questionable.

In summary, the public perception of international education is being affected by (1) portraying western educational systems as hostile towards students from Russia, both at the application stage and during the study process, (2) increasing the sense of risk of failing to integrate into the labour market in Russia in case of return, and (3) making the move abroad for any reason, including educational, look like a financially and culturally non-wise decision. Combined with unfavourable currency exchange rates and structural constraints such as limited flight options and visa difficulties, these factors contribute to an overall climate that is likely to suppress the international educational mobility aspirations of Russian students.

By definition, virtual mobility (VM) is the mobility which is “achievable not through time spent abroad, but through participation in networks facilitated by technology and involving links to students and institution abroad” (Sweeney, 2014, p.9) and encompasses “all forms of education across borders where students, their respective staff, and institutional provisions are separated by geographical distance and supported by technology” (Mittelmeier et al., 2019). Aghayeva (2022) argues that it includes a broad range of non-traditional formal and informal educational provisions ranging from full online degrees to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and online international teaching and learning groups.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, virtual mobility was on the rise, with many initiatives still continuing as they may fall through the holes of the administrative sieve due to their low level of institutionalized formality. Therefore, as in other troubled contexts such as during the lockdown, virtual student mobility can equip Russian students with international education experience and exposure otherwise unattainable.

Amidst these suppressing forces, virtual mobility, whether formal via bilateral institutional agreements or less formal through lower-level stakeholders collaboration initiatives (when students partake in online international learning independently or when virtual mobility programs are initiated by lecturers, program coordinators, or departments, surpassing administration) can be one of the ways to alter students’ perception about the existing scope of opportunities and raise their aspirations for international student mobility.

Therefore, the present research seeks to answer the following research questions:

R1: Does participation in virtual student mobility increase Russian students' aspirations for subsequent physical student mobility?

R2: If so, how does it affect any future mobility decision-making process under the current mobility-suppressing climate in Russia?

Literature Review

The majority of studies see academic mobility as the result of individual choice which reflects personal characteristics such as socioeconomic background, gender, language proficiency, and personality (Christie, 2007; Dreher & Putvaara, 2005; Findlay et al., 2006; Halsey, 1993; HEFCE, 2004). Reay et al. (2005) concluded that there are different "circuits" within which students make educational decisions, with some looking locally, some within the region, and some looking nationally. Later, Brooks and Waters (2009) have shown that some students look further afield, globally, within an international "circuit."

Since international students are regarded as a distinct and well-defined group of migrants, the allure of foreign study destinations is often described through push-pull theories of migration (Chen, 2007; Raghuram, 2013). There is a body of research that supports the existence of a correlation between study abroad and labour migration intentions (Hawthorne, 2010; Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Robertson, 2011; Rosenzweig, 2008; Tremblay, 2005). According to the human capital investment theoretical framework for migration studies, the choice to migrate is determined by the difference between the discounted expected future benefit and the costs associated with migration (Sjaastad, 1962). According to this school of thought, students are seen as being primarily motivated by economic factors, and their choice to pursue a degree outside of their home country is seen as the product of rational thought in the form of economic gain calculations. In application to the outbound student mobility from Russia, Minaeva (2020) shows that among Russian students who consider degree mobility, 84% plan to stay abroad upon graduation, with 60% willing to emigrate permanently and 24% intending at least to work abroad for some time after graduation. A higher quality of life in the host country (18.2%, n=112), higher salaries (15.8%, n=97), and better career chances (13.5%, n= 3) are the key *economic* reasons for such decisions, according to Minaeva (2020).

However, for students to reap the benefits of the destination country's labour market, a substantial investment is needed first to cover international tuition, living costs during studies, visa expenses, and often years of foreign language training. Several empirical studies have confirmed the socially selective nature of international student mobility (e.g., Salisbury et al., 2009; Wiers-Jenssen, 2011). Studies from many countries have shown that internationally mobile students tend to be of higher socio-economic status (e.g., Brooks & Waters, 2011; Di Pietro & Page, 2008; Gerhards & Hans, 2013; Netz & Finger, 2016) and could even be referred to as 'migratory elite' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). This migration stream is, thus, a positive selection type for which pull factors, as theorized by Lee (1966), are of great power, and those involved in mobility aim to maximize the gain rather than escape adverse circumstances at home. Indeed, those privileged enough to be able to study internationally are less likely to experience negative economic push factors at home due to their on average higher financial status. This means that, firstly, they are not driven by (or solely by) financial prospects and might be "pulled" by other factors as well; hence, taking only economic rationale into consideration does not allow for grasping the full picture. Therefore, it could be argued that "higher quality of life" as the most common rationale for post-study immigration intentions among Russian students, as illustrated by Minaeva (2020), is not necessarily a purely economic factor and requires more nuanced exploration.

Indeed, when financial gain calculations are not that straightforward (especially in the case of students already endowed with considerable financial resources at home), it is important to consider other, perhaps less tangible, factors. Among the many well-researched push factors affecting international student decision-making is fear of political or other forms of oppression (Altbach, 2004; Kirkegaard & Nat-George, 2016), including pressures related to gender or sexuality (Waters & Brooks, 2021), which might be of particular importance in the current context of Russia. At the same time, Perkins and Neumeyer (2014) argue that destinations with greater civil and political stability attract more international students. By comparing the situation at home and abroad, although with their limited knowledge, students might thus make not only financial calculations but quality of life calculations in general as they attempt to expand their capabilities and freedoms (Juran, 2016) beyond purely financial standing. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) refer to such considerations as "social costs" calculations.

In fact, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) present a rather nuanced picture of pull factors. Apart from financial costs, it could be argued that pull factors are largely formed through a subjective perception of a destination country as a desirable place of study/living based on other people's views and accounts embodied by an individual and coupled with a perceived ease of transition and adjustment. Lee (1966) was the first to draw attention to the subjective nature of destination allure,

arguing that there is always "an element of ignorance or even mystery about the area of destination" and "uncertainty concerning the reception of a migrant in a new area" (Lee, 1966, p. 5) since personal contacts or other sources of information are varied and not always available. So once again, though the study destination might have objective pluses and minuses, it is the level of awareness and the subjective perceptions that form its image as a desirable place to study for an individual. De Haas (2021, p.26) describes this influence as being "aware of alternative opportunities and lifestyles".

To conclude, pull factors are not objective but rather represent subjective evaluations of benefits and drawbacks that a particular country or abstract concept of elusive deictic 'elsewhere abroad' (Carling & Schewel, 2018) can offer. In line with Lee's (1966), it is not the pull factors as such but their subjective perception by empirical individuals that leads to the migration decision. These socially and/or individually constructed imaginaries appear to be the departure points for all further thoughts, considerations, and actions. As Riaño and Baghdadi (2007, p. 7) argue, "imaginings about the qualities that specific places in the world may have, as well as the people who live there, and the social, economic, or political opportunities that those places may open up, are significant in the decision of whether or not to migrate and of where to migrate". These imaginings, referred to as imaginative geographies in the context of international student mobility (Beech, 2014), are important in making a place accessible and understandable (Chang & Lim, 2004). They are the inherent part of the equation behind the decision to become internationally mobile as "a function of the combined 'pull' factors and 'push' factors as influenced by intervening obstacles" (Sirowy & Inkeles, 1984, p. 65).

In modern Russia, the mass media consistently shapes a particular view of western countries as economically unstable ("The Main Goal of the West is to Worsen the Lives of Millions of people." It's Bad Where There is no "Russian World," according to Kremlin Propaganda", 2023). This might negatively affect the evaluation of prospects should a student wish to seek employment abroad upon graduation, diminishing the rationale of a higher salary and better career opportunities pursuit, which almost a third of potentially internationally mobile Russian students stated to be of importance in one of the latest research on the topic at the time of this publication (Minaeva, 2020). From the quality of life perspective as a rationale for studying in another country, media messages of students from Russia being discriminated against in the West imply the possibility of higher "social costs" associated with studying abroad and can result in lower mobility numbers from Russia to these countries, a tendency similar to the drop in international student numbers from China to the USA associated with the fears of COVID-19 pandemic accusations (Shen et al., 2023). A significant 33% drop (in comparison to the year 1993) in the inclination of Russian citizens to pursue education abroad was reported by the large-scale study (n=1600) conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center VCIOM (2023), explicitly highlighting the role of the interwoven economic status, urban or rural living, and media consumption (television and the internet) in this decline.

As for the potential returnees to Russia after the study abroad period, it is possible that those of higher economic status might have viewed study abroad as a way to gain a higher social status at home by gaining human capital unattainable for others (Ballatore & Ferede, 2013; Munk, 2009; Waters, 2006). As this rationale has also been negatively targeted in current Russia through certain laws, such as the law on international agents (The Federal Law "On Control over the Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence", 2022), not only might international education no longer provide an advantage, but on the contrary, students might also fear public ostracization. Hence, the decision-making landscape is likely to have changed for many potential returnees who hoped to use an overseas education as a means to achieve a more privileged social and/or professional position at home.

It is important to note that even in the case of favourable push-pull factors calculations, barriers or obstacles can prevent a student from deciding to study internationally. The decision-making landscape is changing in Russia, with a growing divide between those who can and want to pursue international education and those who disregard this option as either a desirable and/or possible pursuit. The financial costs are influenced by currency exchange rates (OECD, 2017) but could be to a certain extent mitigated by the availability of scholarships (Agarwal & Winkler, 1985; Altbach, 2004; McMahon, 1992). As the Russian Ruble keeps plummeting and a number of scholarship schemes are now closed for Russian citizens, studying in the Global North now requires much more financial resources to cover tuition and living expenses. Additionally, immigration restrictions and complex visa procedures can also deter students from choosing a particular country as their study destination, being either viewed as obstacles or limiting the allure of a country in general (ICEF Monitor, 2022). However, the financial resources of those with higher socio-economic status enable them to perceive increased expenses (including those associated with overcoming structural constraints that have been significantly exacerbated due to sanctions) as a matter of 'cost readiness' rather than as an ultimate barrier to participation (Schnusenberget al., 2012). Those with fewer financial resources, on the other hand, have found themselves in a position where physically studying abroad is becoming beyond their capacity.

At the same time, virtual mobility and international online learning offer an alternative route towards obtaining international experience, international credentials, and language skills without facing considerable financial and social costs.

The barriers to participation are minimal in comparison to physical mobility. Therefore, it is interesting to examine the effect that virtual mobility as an alternative option has when physical student mobility is distorted for other than COVID-19 related reasons, keeping in mind that the level of distortion varies for students of different socio-economic background.

Theoretical Framework

One of the ways to explore diversity in individual level of decision-making is through the Aspirations-Capabilities framework of migration introduced by de Haas (2021). Though geared towards general migration decisions, this framework is applicable to international students as well since they can be viewed as ‘elite migrants’ as described above. According to the author, migration theory needs to simultaneously address agency and structure and their constant interplay by adopting the concepts of aspirations and capabilities. De Haas writes that migration aspirations are “affected by culture, education, personal disposition, identification, information and the images to which people are exposed” through creating a particular image of a desirable future. At the same time, accumulation of facets, such as education, can increase one’s capacity to aspire, by “(1) making people aware of alternative opportunities and lifestyles, and by (2) making people believe that migration is ‘within their reach’” (de Haas, 2021, p. 25). In other words, education (educational experiences and experiences of education), amongst other factors, can affect the subjective individual perceptions of both desirability and possibility of migration.

In the same paper, de Haas (2021) synthesizes research on mobility and immobility and presents four categories of (im)mobility: voluntary mobility, voluntary immobility, involuntary immobility, and acquiescent immobility (Table 1).

Table 1

Aspirations–Capabilities-Derived Individual Mobility Types (de Haas, 2021)

		Migration capabilities	
		Low	High
Migration aspirations (intrinsic and/or instrumental)	High	Involuntary immobility ^a (feeling ‘trapped’)	Voluntary mobility (most forms of migration)
	Low	Acquiescent immobility ^b	Voluntary immobility and involuntary mobility (e.g., refugees, ‘soft deportation’) ^c

Note. ^aCarling (2002); ^bSchewel (2015, 2020); ^cBoersema et al. (2014) as cited in de Haas (2021)

The difference among voluntary, involuntary, and acquiescent immobility is hard to capture as the borders between the categories are rather fuzzy and fluid (Schewel, 2020), or at least appear to be so when working with empirical data. People’s immobility can be the product of various circumstances: “an enthusiastic embrace of local opportunities, a commitment to staying in one’s community despite local decline, risk aversion, acceptance of one’s inability to migrate, or perhaps a person has never meaningfully considered leaving and thus never developed a real preference one way or another” (Schewel & Fransen, 2022, p. 4459). In relation to international students’ mobility as a developmental pursuit, the line, though fine, can be drawn between the futures student envision for themselves at a particular point of time within their life course.

Students with higher socio-economic status are more capable of a voluntary choice to either study internationally or stay home from the financial point of view. They are also more likely to have accumulated personal experience or embodied the experience of family and friends as significant others to inform their own views of foreign locales as desirable places to pursue education, thus being less prone to media portrayals. For those less privileged, economic and structural difficulties could be hard to overcome.

Indeed, the "migratory resources" are "unequally distributed within and across communities and societies" and are comprised of "people’s access to economic (material), social (other people), cultural (ideas, knowledge, and skills), and

bodily (good health, physical condition, and habitus) resources” that shape not only ability to move abroad but aspirations as well (de Haas, 2021, p.15). However, in application to international student mobility aspirations, there is another way to view ‘migratory resources’ (excluding the financial component) that have aspiration supporting power – ‘mobility capital’ coined by Murphy-Lejeune (2002). The author viewed mobility capital as a combination of: (1) family and personal history (for example, parental views towards mobility and whether there was a history of migration within the family); (2) previous experience of mobility; (3) the first experience of adaptation; and (4) personality features (such as openness to new experiences, etc.). Weenink (2007) argues for the inclusion of language skills, whereas Carlson (2013) - for the inclusion of general awareness of opportunities in a larger context outside of the country of origin, therefore better aligning mobility capital with migratory resources. What is important is that both migratory resources and mobility capital can be accumulated (e.g., Schäfer, 2022). Migration research in general has demonstrated that mobility experience leads to learning effects, decreasing the informational and psychological costs of further mobility (DaVanzo, 1981; Kley, 2011), especially if that experience was positive. In application to international student mobility, numerous studies conclude that previous experience of educational mobility significantly improves the chances that a person will study abroad again (e.g., Czaika & Toma, 2017; Elken et al., 2023; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; van Mol & Timmermann, 2014; Wiers-Jenssen, 2013). However, in application to Russia, the study by Holicza (2018, 2020) on Russian students (n=302) found that short-term study abroad decreases the desire to live overseas, contrary to expectations. The author shows that Russian students who have not studied abroad are more eager to leave Russia, while those with international experience prefer returning home. Holicza (2018, 2020) attributes this change in attitude post short-term mobility to the realistic insights Russian students gain abroad, including the challenges associated with physical relocation and cultural adaptation, unlike their peers who, influenced by (social) media, hold more idealized imaginaries.

As for virtual mobility formats, Lee et al. (2022) found that those students who have participated in international virtual exchange are twice more likely to take part in subsequent immersive physical study abroad, though the authors acknowledge the possibility of various explanations for such correlation. Not involving overcoming the rifts of geographical relocation and uprootedness (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002), it, nevertheless, can be argued that virtual student mobility has the potential to enhance participants’ mobility capital through the provision of a personal, deep experience as well as a positive experience of adaptation to a new socio-cultural educational space – two powerful facets of personal mobility capital. Most importantly, it allows participants to gain mobility capital in the context of the absence of financial and structural constraints, such as difficulties with obtaining visas and travel arrangements that students from Russia are likely to experience under the current sanction regime. VM experiences have, thus, the potential to alter Russian students’ perceptions of desirability and possibility of pursuing degree studies abroad affecting their current position within a certain mobility type in line with the Aspirations-Capabilities framework of migration (de Haas, 2021).

Methodology

Participants

The study employed qualitative methodology. As part of the research, 18 semi-structured interviews were collected from students from Russia (18-24 y.o.) who took part in any form of virtual mobility (Collaborative Online International Learning projects, MOOCs, semester-long online mobility, synchronous short-term educational programs) between 2020 and 2023. The interviews were conducted between October 2022 and March 2023. This allowed for capturing the accounts of students whose educational journey was affected both by COVID-19 pandemic and the political and economic crises due to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Two of the respondents were excluded for the purpose of this research paper: one on the basis of their current state of student mobility for graduate studies in Hungary, and another - due to their current status as an international student in Russia, originally from Kazakhstan.

The recruitment strategy was that of a combination of convenience and snowball recruitment. Students were approached via International Collaboration and Education offices (ICEO) of Russian universities as gatekeepers, higher education practitioners who might have taken part in the organisation of less-institutionalized forms of VM, and through open call on social media. In total 72 ICEOs were contacted with 10 forwarding the call for participation for potential participants. Additionally, 30 higher education practitioners were approached. These practitioners have previously taken part in the U.S.-Russia University Virtual Partner Program (UniVIP) training which resulted in several collaborative projects in 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years. As the participants were not asked how they learned about the research project, it is difficult to tell with confidence which channel was most effective.

The number of respondents might not seem large. However, the outbound student mobility in Russia has been historically low in terms of the percentage of total student body (0,9-1%) with short-term institutionalized mobility even

less spread (0,3-0,4%) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023; IIE, 2023). As for MOOCs, certainly, the number of students enrolled in MOOCs on foreign platforms is much higher. According to 2021 Coursera report (Coursera, 2021), there were 2.4 million Russian students enrolled, however, half of the students from Russia attend courses exclusively in Russian (Zakharova & Yuditseva, 2019). The experience of MOOC is very much different from other virtual mobility formats due to the lack of direct contact between students and instructors. Nevertheless, those MOOC participants who agreed to participate in this research project did it after a certain self-selection process which indicates that they viewed their experience with MOOCs as international online learning. The inclusion of MOOC participants into the research provides a comparative ground for better understanding of other virtual mobility formats as more immersive international educational experience providers.

Data collection and analysis

The original ethical approval application did not account for conflict-induced constraints on mobility; therefore, the questions about war were not included in the interview guide. Only when the topic was brought up by a respondent could the researcher follow up on it, should it be necessary. Hence, any references to the Russia-Ukraine conflict emerged naturally in the interviews as part of students' reflections on their virtual mobility experience and study abroad aspirations in the current climate created by objective constraints on mobility and aggravated messages of hostility towards Russian students. Moreover, no "why" questions were asked to avoid post-hoc rationalisation of one's feelings and decisions.

Also, to minimize the concern that the interviewees might provide answers they might consider to be those the researcher is hoping to receive, extensive pre-interview bracketing was conducted (Chang, Fung & Chien, 2013; Husserl, 1927). During the bracketing, the researcher made explicit that she does not approach data collection with any pre-conceptions and is only looking to collect authentic views and opinions, whatever they might be, and that irrespective of the nature of responses, they will be valuable assets for understanding the phenomenon of the possible interplay between physical and virtual mobility formats. The interviews were transcribed shortly after they were conducted; any information that might indirectly allow for participant identification (e.g., their higher education institution) was deleted from the transcripts. The transcripts were then sent to research participants for verification and any redactions, if necessary, after which data was fully anonymized through pseudonyms.

Interviews collected were then subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as it allows for the exploration of how individuals make sense of their own lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The limitations of this approach include the possibility of dual bias, both on behalf of the respondent and on behalf of the researcher (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). The first might fail to report accurately past events, whereas the second might misinterpret them, filling the holes with preconceived assumptions based on his/her own experience. As a Russian national and an international student, I cannot be totally bias-free. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to accurately capture the interpretive process, providing theoretically grounded justification for interpretations. For this analysis, as described in the theoretical framework, the guiding theories are the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework, (im)mobility decision typology, and mobility capital (previous experience of mobility and experience of adaptation).

Findings

Despite the diversity in the types of VM experience in terms of length, workload, student-teacher and student-student levels of contact, disciplinary area, participants' nationality, and level of institutionalisation, 75% of the respondents (12 out of 16) commented on the increased sense of aspiration. In this section, firstly, possible reasons for increased aspirations will be covered, and secondly, different types of (im)mobility states resulting from such aspiration-inducing VM experiences of respondents will be explored within the current Russian context using the above-described theoretical framework.

Positive experience of adaptation

Several students spoke about the increase in general desirability to study internationally due to their overall positive experience during their virtual mobility. Half of the respondents were more specific and linked their increase in study abroad aspirations to increased language competence, or rather, language confidence. Although Weenink (2007) argued for the inclusion of language competence into the mobility capital of a person, the quotes below indicate that it is the experience of using one's knowledge of a foreign language for educational purposes that boosts one's aspirations.

After this program, I thought that it might be more interesting for me to go and study somewhere in an English-speaking country [originally the student planned full degree mobility to China]. And I thought

that maybe I have a sufficient level to actually do it. I will understand, and I will be able to learn instead of just sitting and not understanding what's happening in class. ... But the more you engage, the more you participate in such programs [referring to VM], the more you understand that your level is likely sufficient, that you probably have great opportunities, and there's nothing to be afraid of. ~ Larisa

I realized that, as it turns out, I can study in a foreign language and even do it successfully. I didn't end up with all F's; I was even certified with positive grades. I made connections. So, I understood that all those boundaries that existed at the beginning of the semester, they are personally my boundaries – only I can expand or narrow them. That's why I came to this realisation... ~ Marta

Conversely, some students made it explicit that they considered that the effect was minimal (Diana, who took part in a MOOC, and Vladimir, who participated in an online school based on mass synchronous lectures) referring to the lack of direct contact with the instructors which impeded their overcoming of the language barrier.

Well, for now, I can't even say what it will look like at all if I study abroad. I mean, of course, I could try to imagine, but that's certainly involves a certain kind of barrier at a different level. When you're directly in contact with the instructor, in such a verbal communication, you realize that there's still some fear, the fear that suddenly everything gets mixed up in your head and you won't be able to respond properly or something like that. ~ Vladimir

Those students (Diana and Vladimir) not feeling the increased language confidence were also the ones who did not notice any increase in their aspirations because of VM participation. Importantly, they were the only clear cases of non-increase, as the only other person who did not experience the increase in language confidence (Lidia) linked it to the fact that she had previously participated in a year-long exchange program abroad, hence, was already a confident foreign language user. Therefore, it is possible to assume that the improvement in language confidence indicates a positive experience of adaptation and plays an important role in increasing study abroad aspirations.

Virtual mobility as previous experience of mobility

Interestingly, most respondents (9 out of 16) spoke of the increased sense of *possibility* of physically studying abroad after VM participation. They noted starting to see further international educational sojourns as being 'within their reach' (de Haas, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that their capacity to aspire increased through VM experience, which led to the increased sense of aspiration. However, they do not necessarily link it to anything in particular (e.g., language confidence), but rather to the fact that they have acquired international educational experience as such. Although their experience was online, it still contributed to their mobility capital as personal mobility experience (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) and acted as a 'rite of passage' *en route* to international education. Below is one of the most exemplary quotes:

With the overall idea of international exchange, it seemed like the concept of international exchange itself was somewhat unattainable. One's behaviour had to be impeccable, even the evaluation of extracurricular activities. Oh, my Lord! It was almost to the point where your teeth had to be the whitest colour. You know, there's this saying, about how you had to be perfect to get into such a program. I lived with a mindset like that ... until I've participated in this program [referring to VM]. The stars seem closer now. You can somehow reach out for them. And the world has become a tiny bit smaller. ~ Alina

Overall, it is possible to conclude that VM has an affordance to boost mobility capital of a person through provision both experience that is viewed by that person as 'previous mobility experience' and a 'positive experience of adaptation' in line with Murphy-Lejeune (2002) notion of 'mobility capital', as argued earlier. The increase in the mobility capital then forms the ground for subsequent mobility aspirations under the Aspirations-Capabilities Framework (de Haas, 2021) as it changes the perception of opportunity structure and informs VM participants that they might thrive within a foreign education system studying in a foreign language. VM allows them to realise that they can study abroad and can do it successfully.

Involuntary immobile or trapped in acquiescent immobility

Certainly, an increase in aspirations does not necessarily lead to a firm decision to pursue international education. According to the Aspirations-Capabilities framework, there could be two explanations for why remain in their original place of residency: “(1) that a person lacks the capability to move or (2) that staying is a voluntary (or acquiescent) preference” (Schewel, 2020, p.338). The key difference between involuntary and voluntary/acquiescent immobility could lie in the perception of barriers to participation. Russian students forced into the state of immobility by external, geopolitical conflict-induced factors acknowledge the limiting effect these factors have on their opportunities. They speak of ‘certain events’ and ‘challenging current situation’ as they resort to self-censorship and avoid explicit references to Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Well, actually, I did have plans to continue my education abroad. I wanted to relocate to another country, but we faced a different situation that also prevented me from doing that. At this point, I believe that it's not forever. Certainly, there will be opportunities in future as well. I sincerely hope so. Unexpected complications arose... Well, this time it didn't work out, again due to certain events, perhaps. It didn't fall into place. But I'm not losing faith in the future... Yet planning something in our times, well, we know that it's very challenging, extremely challenging. ~ Alexandra

I have thoughts of moving. However, in the current situation, it's very challenging. Right now, leaving Russia to go somewhere is difficult, but I've been having these thoughts for a while. I mean, it's really problematic. Bank cards don't work, nothing works. So, that's why I enrolled in these courses [refers to VM], to gain skills, to somehow improve my language. Because I understand that all of this will be useful to me in the future. ~ Karina

The narratives behind acquiescent immobility are much more subtle and revolve around dodging study abroad options and not “meaningfully considering alternatives to staying” (Schewel, 2020, p. 339). Acquiescently immobile individuals are likely to view study abroad as something impossible to be realized, something like a ‘fairytale’, beyond their reach in de Haas’s terms (de Haas, 2021) as in the below quote from Vladimir’s interview:

Well, we were actually offered a chance to go and study in Spain, but we looked at it as, you know, kind of like a fairytale, more or less. ~ Vladimir

Even though further in the interview Vladimir says that he would like to go abroad during his studies towards a PhD, he nevertheless does not exhibit any readiness to engage in any goal-oriented behaviour stating that “If I am offered to go, then I am always in favour of such things”. This indicates that although he acknowledges such a possibility in general, hypothetically, he does not meaningfully consider it as being applicable to him.

Voluntary immobile: staying or not going

The key difference between acquiescent and voluntary immobility is the level of meaningful engagement with the idea of studying internationally. However, it is important to distinguish between two versions of voluntary immobility: choosing not to migrate and choosing to stay (de Haas, 2021; Schewel & Franssen, 2022). The former is linked to risk aversion, barriers, and negative imaginaries of other places; the latter represents the embrace of local opportunities, commitment to the home locale, and vision of the future at home. Though all these rationales were argued to be possible by Schewel and Franssen (2022), the difference between the two anchoring points allows to differentiate between those students whose choice is less affected by negative media portrayals and those who have fallen victim to them.

The two most exemplary quotes from those who choose ‘to stay’ are below, with the first quote being an example of embracing local opportunities within Russia, and the second – of a commitment to improve the situation at home:

Well, I still often analyze why I only focused on the language barrier. Why don't I want to go abroad? And I've come to the conclusion that it might not be just about that one reason. Maybe it's because I still like it here, and I haven't exhausted all the resources and opportunities here. I'm quite an ambitious person... But overall, I believe that while I'm living in my city and my country, I still have untapped possibilities. ~ Diana

Well, I think as of now ... Well, how to say it? I just don't like the idea of permanently leaving Russia, thinking that everything about Russia is terrible and one must leave. I don't like that mindset. I understand that there are problems. I can clearly see that within education. Those issues are more apparent to me. Perhaps

I have a need to fix something here. I understand that it's not very realistic, but it's as if... I don't know, I was born in this country and I should try to make it better. I don't think it's impossible. Maybe on a local level at least. ~ Pelageya

Those who choose 'not to go' are more likely to talk extensively about the barriers to participation, such as financial difficulties, concerns about structural barriers in terms of gaining admission and securing a visa, as well as concerns about facing discrimination and negativity during the potential study process while in another country, in line with the hostility narratives promoted in the media. David is an example of it. He does not talk about the benefits of staying but rather justifies his choice not to pursue study abroad opportunities despite his initial intentions to do so which even manifested in action (taking a language exam). He questions the 'appropriateness of such an action [study abroad] in the current realities' speaking of structural difficulties, fears of ostracization upon return to Russia as well as concerns about the potential lack of acceptance while abroad:

So, at the moment, I'm preparing for my master's degree. I've taken the international IELTS exam with the intention of using it for admission to a foreign university. But for instance, right now when the application deadlines are approaching and many will close in March, I haven't done it yet because I have doubts about the appropriateness of such an action in the current realities ... Due to political reasons, there are discrepancies in views, values, and attitudes, probably towards national identity and possibly some practical difficulties. Although personally, well, if I were to express my feelings, I would probably say that what might be frightening is the recent changes in the situation due to the very latest events. ... So, in the immediate perspective, it's more about the processes that concerns me. The difficulties, the logistical problems and technical issues related to finances, payment for all of this, the restrictions related to sanctions. In the long-term perspective, there are indeed further concerns. Questions arise about acceptance from others, not only within the national environment, but within a different national environment. ~ David

In two minds: no decision reached

The acquiescent immobility should also be separated from the cases when the decision has not been reached *yet*. The basis for this distinction could be again the depth of engagement with the idea of pursuing education abroad. Those who consider mobility are at the evaluation stage of the financial and social costs associated with this venture as illustrated by the following interviews excerpts:

Yes, as always, it varies. Some people say that given today's circumstances, everyone talks about how it's not the right time to go anywhere, you should stay at home. Well, sure. And then some say that it's a very good step, that there are great prospects, great opportunities. Others ask, what's wrong with where you are? Why is it bad here? Everyone's saying different things... ~ Uliana

And for now, I don't know where to go. There are so many considerations. It's still vague... So, for now, I'm waiting until I finish at least this year, decide what and where I'm studying, and I have one more year left. I'm hoping that something will become clearer. Firstly, there's also the added factor of not wanting to change anything due to the situation. Yes, I know that universities admit students, but again, not every university and not every country is welcoming. So, I wouldn't want to experience additional stress due to this. Maybe it's necessary to wait a bit. There are many factors here, both financial and the global situation. ~ Marta

Personal virtual mobility experience role in combatting negative portrayals

What is important is that all the participants, regardless of their current (im)mobility decision, value opportunities to gain international experience, develop their disciplinary knowledge, and improve their language skills through further future possible virtual mobility. Just as COVID-19 normalized online studies, so have students' previous virtual mobility experiences normalized for its participants this virtual mode of learning and collaboration within an 'international circuit' (Brooks & Waters, 2009). This is important as it might allow for keeping these students open to the world despite the mobility-suppressing climate in Russia, which again will provide them with personal experience of international engagement, empowering them to combat the narratives of 'hostile elsewhere' (especially in the West) in Russian media, just like in the following cases:

[Speaking about receipt of the scholarship for VM participation] Especially now considering the current event... as if they shouldn't have given [a scholarship], but they nevertheless somehow still did ...

~ Pelageya*

I'm not worried about how I'll be treated, because in general, everywhere people treat me well It's not like they look at me through the lens of what's happening in Russia. I never felt that when we were talking to the person responsible for the program... ~ Pelageya*

Perhaps, it was a bit surprising for me, or even more so, that there was absolutely no negativity directed towards me, like, being from Russia, there were no conflicts at that moment. I've heard somewhere that in that country Russians are not liked or something like that. At first, I was a bit cautious, not that I was afraid, I didn't hide the fact that I was from Russia or anything. I was just curious to see if there would be any evidence of what I had heard. But even with the students, we all got along very well. ~ Marta*

*Pelageya's VM happened in spring-summer after the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine militarised conflict

*Marta's mobility took place prior to the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine militarised conflict

To recapitulate, among the VM participants interviewed as part of this study, only one person (Vladimir) can be placed within the acquiescent immobility category. His placement within this category can be attributed to the low richness of his VM experience since he took part in an online international school based on mass lectures as opposed to more immersive forms of VM in terms of communication with a course instructor and peers, as well as his initial low aspiration level to become physically mobile, judging by curiosity being the reason for his VM participation. Additionally, one person (David) resorted to risk-aversion behaviour abandoning study abroad plans partially due to perceived barriers to participation and partially due to concerns about integration either while abroad or at home upon return. Yet again, the same pattern can be observed in terms of the reason for VM participation (curiosity) and the low level of engagement with other people during the MOOC in which David took part. Nevertheless, the majority of VM participants interviewed as part of this research project reported an increased sense of aspiration for potential further physical study abroad.

Discussion

Although international student mobility is often framed as an elitist pursuit, most students from Russia, even prior to the financial and political upheaval, could not routinely afford international educational sojourns. They might have hoped to receive a scholarship or planned to invest a considerable proportion of their personal/familial assets into funding their education abroad. For them, the opportunity structure has changed considerably after the start of the Russia-Ukraine military conflict in February 2022, and they now might experience involuntary immobility with the potential to drift towards acquiescent immobility, as time passes.

Examples of the state of involuntary immobility include situations where students are no longer able to afford to study abroad, are unable to transfer money abroad or pay their tuition due to sanctions against Russian banks, or experience visa denial as a result of their inability to show proof of the necessary maintenance funds (sufficient and accessible while abroad) as part of the visa application process or structural constraints when visas are no longer issued for Russian nationals, nevertheless still expressing the desire to study internationally. It is important to remember that these students' aspirations were formed when study abroad opportunities were viewed as 'within their reach' (de Haas, 2021). These students might still retain high aspirations for some time, but the potency of aspiration is likely to decrease as they progress through their life course (Wilson, 2010). Once their aspiration level decreases considerably, these students are likely to become acquiescently immobile, neither able nor wanting to study abroad.

The discrimination narratives in the media as well as journalistic pieces on the poor financial and cultural situation in western countries have the potential to accelerate the erosion of study abroad aspirations among these students, targeting both economic and better life rationales for studying in the West. The students are thus likely to become complacent about the opportunity structure and be deprived of the freedom to rationally choose their educational path on a global scale, overlooking the opportunities even if they emerge. This would illustrate their transition into the state of acquiescent immobility when their decision to stay is not really a decision, but the product of not meaningfully considering the alternatives thus not really developing a preference (Schewel & Fransen, 2022). As Schewel (2020, p. 334) explains, the category of acquiescent "non-resistant to constraints" immobility "challenges prevalent neoclassical and push-pull perspectives that assume the aspiration to migrate should be greatest among those who have the most to gain (often in

economic terms) from migration" and could also explain why some linguistically and academically capable students do not pursue study abroad opportunities even when presented with them. What participation in VM does, is keeping these students open to consideration of studying internationally for a more prolonged period of time through shaping an attitude that this route is realistically, not hypothetically, possible for them personally. Whatever the decision they then reach is secondary to this discussion, as long as they give study abroad option due consideration and thus, actually, exercise the choice. The latter is of core importance as expanding the range of possible ways of life from which a person can choose ought to be viewed as an end rather than a way to achieve a particular objective (Sen, 1999) such as, for instance, an increase in international student mobility numbers.

VM participation is of particular importance for Russian students of lower socio-economic status whose potential to gain similar experience through physical travel has been significantly limited by plummeting currency exchange rates, cancelled scholarship schemes, and limited collaboration options between higher education institutions in Russia and in the Global North. The findings illustrate that virtual mobility has the affordance to empower Russian students to escape the acquiescent immobility trap to which the notion of 'freedom to choose' is ontologically inapplicable. Participation in virtual mobility does so by supporting their study abroad aspirations despite multiple entangled crises though increasing their capacity to aspire via accumulation of mobility capital as a migratory resource.

Limitations

The potential limitations of this study are the relatively small sample size and self-selection bias of respondents during recruitment. However, qualitative studies using empirical data tend to reach saturation within a narrow range of interviews (9–17) as shown by the systematic review conducted by Hennink and Kaiser (2022). Also, as this research focuses solely on the level of affordances, the observed changes in aspirations, perceptions, and attitudes provide a sufficient basis for drawing theoretical conclusions, which is the aim of this study, thereby mitigating concerns about generalizability. The internal validity is achieved through triangulation between theoretically devised mechanism of the influence and its manifestation in empirical data.

Another potential limitation is that people tend to like more those things that can move them toward their goals (Ferguson & Wojnowicz, 2011). Yet, the students were not asked for evaluations, and their understanding of study abroad as a possible option after VM participation cannot be explained by their initial predisposition towards more liking of the process. The boost in the foreign language confidence can be attributed to it only partially.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study indicates that the acquisition of mobility capital through VM contributes to heightened aspirations for physical student mobility in line with the Aspirations-Capabilities framework. It provides evidence that personal experience of mobility, though virtual, has an affordance to support students' capacity to aspire for international studies, even if caught in the entangled crises as in the case of students from Russia amidst ongoing at the time of study Russia-Ukraine conflict. It can also make students less prone to media portrayals of hostility towards them within other higher education systems. Nevertheless, the richness of virtual mobility experience in terms of communication with teachers and fellow students from abroad plays a key role in activating this affordance. Therefore, more of synchronous virtual mobility initiatives are needed to help young adults in Russia stay open to the world and foster their sense of global belonging by penetrating holes in the again-falling "iron curtain".

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