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Infrastructures of immobility: enabling international distance education students in Africa to *not* move

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ABSTRACT

There is now a large literature discussing how mobilities are part of contemporary everyday power geometries and is a resource to which people have unequal access. This body of work has, thus, valorised mobility as a desirable good. Why some people choose *immobility* and what has to be mobilised to enable this immobility has received much less attention. This paper draws on interviews with international distance education students in Namibia and Zimbabwe studying at the University of South Africa (UNISA) to explore the spatio-temporal underpinnings to why students choose to remain at home while studying abroad and how this is arranged. It outlines the infrastructures of reach that enable student immobility and how their incomplete nature means that students have to rely on extensive systems of mobilities of other people and objects to ensure that their study progresses without their own educational mobility. In doing so we move away from considering immobility as a result of limited access to mobility. Instead, we set out a new research agenda on why and how the infrastructures of immobilities are important in mobility research.

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1. Introduction

The intensifying movement of people, objects, knowledge and ideas within and across borders is crucial to the making of a globalising world. In response, researchers writing into the ‘mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry 2006) have highlighted the everyday power geometries influencing mobility, with unequal access to this geographical resource. This is particularly so in migration studies which has focused on the infrastructures of mobility (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012; Martin 2005). Alongside this focus on mobility, there has, however, also been increasing recognition of the factors influencing immobility (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). Within this paradigm, stasis is often considered and represented as the normal human condition (Malkki 1992) but in migration studies, as migration has become an overdetermined category in politics, policy and research, the reasons for people’s movements rather than reasons for remaining (Morse and Mudgett 2018) have become the centre of attention.

However, mobility and immobility are relational (Adey 2006). Several studies have revealed how people shift between mobilities and immobilities (Chan 2017; Sheller 2014), with one preceding the other in different combinations. Yet, within migration studies, the immobility of people is often conceptualised as arising from blockages to mobility, while mobility is assumed either as a desired outcome or as a phase that is socially more significant than the immobile stages. Diverging from the presumed desirability of mobility, this paper examines the

infrastructures that enable immobility. More specifically, we consider the effort it takes to stay immobile by identifying the incomplete infrastructures that enable immobility and the intermediaries that have to be mobilised in order for international distance education (IDE) students in Africa to *not* move when other infrastructures fail to connect student to university. These students engage in many different everyday mobilities but do not want to migrate to study. Our definition of immobility is therefore not absolute.

This paper traces the infrastructures of immobility through the case of IDE students in Zimbabwe and Namibia studying at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Research on the internationalisation of higher education primarily centres on international student migration (ISM) (see, e.g. King and Sondhi 2018; Walton-Roberts 2015; Xu 2018), although this is only one form of internationalisation. For instance, new technologies have given IDE new impetus in all continents over the past two decades (see, e.g. Butcher et al. 2011; Sparke 2016).

There are few numbers available on the international dimension of distance education, but in a bordered world with numerous constraints on free movement (Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2014; Williams 2015), cross border services like distance education provide alternatives to mobility. Yet this Internationalisation at a Distance (Mittelmeier et al. *Forthcoming*) has received little attention. In concentrating on IDE students in Africa who are studying at UNISA, we focus on a little-studied group who provide new insights into the infrastructures of immobility.

These infrastructures of immobility require remote students to reach in to UNISA, to access their services from afar, but also for the university to reach out to the students and to transcend the problem that distance poses in education delivery. These infrastructures of immobility are, however, incomplete and have to be complemented by actual mobility of intermediaries. These intermediaries compensate for the students' own immobility when the infrastructures of immobility are incomplete. In doing so, we reverse Adey's (2006) question about the systems of mobilities that are required to make 'mobile life' work. Instead, we focus on the systems of mobilities that are required to enable immobilities. Through developing a new approach to immobilities, this paper helps reconsider the relationship between mobility and immobility.

This paper uses the discursive possibilities and analytical tools of mobility studies to intervene into debates on international education in Africa for two reasons. The literature on international education has been dominated by ISM, although more recent work recognises shorter-term international mobilities too (Riaño, Van Mol, and Raghuram 2018) and has used the term mobilities widely in debates on internationalisation. The mobilities literature recognises the importance of education as a determinant in household mobility decision-making (Forsy 2015). Thus, mobility is seen as important to international education, but it is students who are ultimately seen as mobile. The mobility of educational material that enables students to study abroad, in particular, is often eschewed. This paper highlights some of the mobilities that ensure students do not have to move. Secondly, research on migration from Africa has also adopted the language of mobility. Most of the literature on migration and development, for instance, has focused on migration from Africa, viewing the desire to migrate as political (Lubkemann 2008), economic (Haugen 2012) and cultural (Jónsson 2008), and all immobility as involuntary. They use the term involuntary immobility for those who are unable to leave their country, going as far as to argue that those who do not move are 'displaced in place' (Lubkemann 2008). Our paper sits at the intersection of these two debates around migration and mobility and uses the term immobility to shine light on a little-researched practice. It highlights why some people choose *not* to leave their countries and what enables them to do so. The reasons do not only involve stasis; they could also be due to commitments to work and to family life, themselves imbricated in short-term mobilities. Moreover, not migrating abroad to study involves the mobility of objects and people, in myriad little ways. These mobilities allow the student to voluntarily choose not to migrate.

2. Outlining an approach to infrastructures of immobilities

2.1. Relating mobility and immobility

With few exceptions such as students and skilled migrants, the desire to stabilise mobile populations and reduce migration has been a key political and policy objective globally. Partly in response to the increasing anti-immigrant sentiments, mobility studies has pointed to the all-pervading nature of mobility and to how mobility of objects and goods interweave with those of people. Studies of mobilities now cover a wide range of phenomena: rail commuters in Australia (Symes 2013); labour mobility in Mexico (McEvoy et al. 2012); political strategies in Western Sahara (Wilson 2017) and space tourism (Johnson and Martin 2016). Mobility studies also vary in their ontologies and epistemologies (Adey 2006; Mol and Law 1994).

Mobility is also highlighted in studies of transnational higher education, which are dominated by international student migration. This migration varies significantly depending on distance, frequency, context and individuals' social position. However, migration can be frequent and unpredictable and people's attitudes towards dwelling and onward migration are flexible (King 2012) so that migration is neither 'permanent' nor 'constant'. Consequently, in the literature on international student migration, the distinctions between migration and mobility remain vague at best. Immobility primarily comes into focus when it becomes an issue, when migration or mobility is an aspiration or experience that cannot be fulfilled, often due to the lack of resources (Massey 1994; Waters and Leung 2013). With mobile being normative, what happens when this normative is flipped and the immobile becomes the aim? What are the extensive systems of mobilities that are required to enable relative immobilities?

Immobility has only recently emerged as a subject in its own right (Mata-Codesal 2018). The few studies of immobilities that do exist have focused on involuntary immobility due to restrictive immigration policies (Carling 2002) and as a gendered outcome (Adeel and Yeh 2018). However, not all immobilities are related to government policies or to social inequalities (Bilecen and Van Mol 2017). As Barcus and Werner (2017) suggest, we also need to interrogate immobility decisions, i.e. those in the Global South who choose not to migrate.

Amidst a growing recognition of the agency and social significance of the people who stay (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018; Schewel 2019), it is evident that other people's movements matter in individuals' immobilities. This suggests the relational nature of mobility and immobility and the spatial and infrastructural moorings that differentially enable (im)mobility (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006).

First, mobility and immobility may be *temporally related*, changing over time, across space, and produce different opportunities for mobilities (Standing 1981). Thus, Schapendonk and Steel (2014) reveal how Nigerians and Sudanese migrant trajectories towards Europe shift between different forms of mobilities and immobilities at different points of the journeys. Mobility and immobility can be sequential as one may follow the other, or in some cases, enable or disable the other. Similarly, van Geel and Mazzucato (2017) problematise conventional understandings of clear distinctions between mobility and immobility through an analysis of the mobility patterns of Ghanaians growing up in and between the Netherlands and Ghana (see also Ye 2018 on rural China).

Secondly, mobilities and immobilities can also be viewed through the lens of *distance*. For instance, Chan (2017) highlights how some aspiring international migrants in Indonesia, who attended training centres in other towns, changed their minds about migrating or had been turned away at airports. Their short-distance mobility did not lead to longer-term migration in terms of time and distance.

Thirdly, mobility and immobility may be *mediated* through actors. For instance, the mobility of some enables the immobility of others. In Mata Codesal's (2015) study set in Ecuador, a woman's immobility enables her husband and children to go to the USA, while, on the other hand, a man's migration and remittances enables his daughter to fulfil her desire to stay in Ecuador. In addition to showing a variety of dynamics and choices within families and groups of people who are immobile, she also illustrates that mobility and immobility are relational. Thus, treating mobility and immobility as a binary is

reductionist (van der Velde and van Naerssen 2011). Perceptions of the oppositional nature of mobility and immobility are, therefore, increasingly being challenged (Foster 2017; Ryser et al. 2017).

The question of mobility and immobility takes a particular form in research on higher education. Mobility is highly revered in education (Waters 2017) as knowledge is considered a product of circulation. For Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2015, 688) 'mobility and encounter make knowledge', rather than being an object students take 'home in the equivalent of lifelong shopping bags'. However, increasingly research points to the ways in which this mobility is mediated through distance (Bayne, Gallagher, and Lamb 2014) and online education (Rye 2014), shifting the meaning of university, study and self (Kölbel 2018).

2.2. Infrastructures of mobility and immobility

These studies also point to 'spaces, sociabilities, practices, qualities and politics of physical infrastructures' (Merriman 2016, 85) that shape opportunities for migration (Newman 2003; Xiang and Lindquist 2018). However, people too can be understood as infrastructure (Simone 2004). The role of intermediaries and brokers in enabling and constraining mobility has received particular attention in migration studies (Harvey, Groutsis, and Broek 2018; Deshingkar 2018) as the potential of these infrastructures in containing migration has become the object of policy (Bélanger and Silvey 2019). For instance, intermediaries who form part of the infrastructures of mobility have become the key focus of anti-migration policies which seek to stop migration. These intermediaries often called 'smugglers' (see, e.g. Ambrosini 2017) are cast as the primary problem. Analytically, these infrastructures, including intermediaries, enable us to move beyond migrants as 'solitary mobile subjects' and, rather, to consider the broader social networks and the relational practices that underlie mobility (Manderscheid 2014).

The role of intermediaries and of the broader infrastructures of mobility have been the object of attention with regard to skilled migration (Harvey, Groutsis, and Diane 2018) and international student migration too. Collins (2013) uses the term infrastructure to 'refer to those relatively stable social and institutional connections that support or enable student mobility'. Much of this research has focused on the role of education agents in enabling international student migration by providing information and resources (Findlay and Li 1998; Xiang and Shen 2009), and by facilitating students to deal with state regulations (Lan 2018). Scholars working on international student migration have identified how relationships between institutions and actors enable international migration (Collins 2008), but what are the infrastructures that enable immobility? Just as with mobility infrastructures, there are physical and material aspects to infrastructures of immobility too.

Ploner (2015), drawing on Urry (2007), points out that universities can be seen as moorings because of the physical existence of universities, located as they are within national and political contexts. Yet, other scholars, such as Sheail (2017) focus on the translocal and transtemporal digital connections between university and students which is transforming the idea of the university (see also Ross, Gallagher, and Macleod 2013). Moreover, and given this reach, Bayne, Gallagher, and Lamb (2014, 570–71) suggest that the university 'can no longer be seen as a bounded place'. New technologies are transforming the nature and extent of universities 'in a world in which neither distance nor proximity is what it used to be, and presence itself is not a straightforward given' (Allen 2009, 209). Computers and internet connections, as well as policies, spaces and practices, shape people's opportunities to become mobile for higher education but also to avoid mobilities for higher education. What has to be mobilised in order for students to not move, so that the distance between themselves and the university is nevertheless mediated?

IDE provides an interesting case through which to examine the relationship between mobility and immobility, and particularly, the infrastructures of immobility. The rest of the paper explores the importance and context of IDE and how UNISA seeks to reach out to the students from its campus in South Africa while the students reach in to the university. In doing so, this paper shifts the focus from mobility infrastructures to the infrastructures of immobilities. It also points to how

the incompleteness of institutional infrastructures necessitates the agency of students who mobilise intermediaries in order to sustain their own immobility.

3. International distance education and educational mobility

Over the past decades, international student mobility has grown significantly. In 1975 there were less than one million international students, but by 2017 this had risen to more than five million (UNESCO 2018). In studies of these mobilities, there has been a tendency to focus on international students going to countries in the Global North (see, e.g. Ploner 2015; Barnett et al. 2016). Asian countries like China and India, with their growing wealthy classes, are the largest senders of students (Kim et al. 2018) while the destinations reflect the high status associated with higher education in Europe and the US (Hazelkorn 2015). However, intra-continental flows to regional hubs such as South Korea (Jon, Lee, and Byun 2014) Turkey (Kondakci 2011) and Mexico (Cantwell, Luca, and Lee 2009) are growing. Studies of such mobilities have generated valuable insights into the social implications (Xiang and Shen 2009) and gendered nature of these movements (Sondhi and King 2017), and the significance of culturally constructed expectations of higher education (Mesoudi et al. 2015). However, much less is known about student mobilities in Africa.

Yet, there are large numbers of international student migration from and within Africa (Lee and Sehoole 2015). Population growth in Africa is high and the overall population is estimated to double between 2015 and 2050 (Cleland and Machiyama 2017). Currently, young people aged 15–24 account for some 19 per cent of the population, but this is expected to reach 42 per cent by 2030 (UN 2015). The concomitant rising demand for higher education is currently not being met in many African countries (Mohamedbhai 2014). This is leading to migration within the continent for study, which dwarfs movement to destinations outside Africa (Lee and Sehoole 2015). South Africa is one of the most important destinations for students from the African continent (Dominguez-Whitehead and Sing 2015). But other forms of globalisation of education are also filling local gaps in higher education provision (Gunter and Raghuram 2018). For instance, IDE is growing in Africa and is a phenomenon that has the potential to transform people's lives by enabling students to gain access to university studies across borders without having to be mobile. However, little is known about IDE in Africa. This paper draws on a project that begins to fill this gap.

The 'International Distance Education and African Students' (IDEAS) project focuses on IDE among students at UNISA, the most recognised provider of distance education in the continent. It has an enrolment of around 340,000 students (UNISA 2018c) and plays a key role in higher education in Africa. Most of these students are from South Africa, but approximately 8 per cent are international students (UNISA 2018c). UNISA's distance education model seeks to transcend spatial limitations by providing higher education opportunities on the African continent and internationally (UNISA 2018c). International students' interaction with UNISA primarily takes place online, including enrolment, registration and interaction with tutors, lecturers and other students. UNISA is set up to reach students across distance and enables students' immobilities.

Distance education is an important part of higher education across the world, but, as Luo, Robinson, and Detwiler (2014, 2) point out, 'there is a lack of empirical studies that evaluate the effects of geographic distance on students' distance learning experience'. We address this, in part, by examining what has to be mobilised in order for IDE students at UNISA to sustain their immobility and continue to learn.

4. Methodology

The IDEAS project involves an interdisciplinary team based at The Open University in the UK and UNISA in South Africa. Both institutions are world leaders in open, distance education. UNISA is the primary provider of mass Distance Education for international students in Southern Africa, and the project specifically focuses on UNISA students who live in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Nigeria. The

overall aim of the project was to explore the presence, adaptation, use of social media and learning outcomes of IDE students in South Africa.

The project employed a mixed methods approach that included data analytics of students' learning outcomes, a survey questionnaire with 1295 students studying at UNISA, as well as semi-structured interviews with 165 students. The majority of the survey respondents were female ($n = 710$, 58%), which is in line with demographics across the institution. Due to purposive sampling 369 students were South African (32%) and 772 were international students (i.e. not South African) (68%) from 24 countries across Africa, primarily from Zimbabwe (27%), Namibia (12%), Botswana (4%), Swaziland and Zambia (each 3%). Twenty-four participants were from countries outside Africa.

We recruited 77 women and 88 men for interviews through their survey participation. Thirty lived in South Africa, 85 in Zimbabwe, 40 in Namibia and 10 in Nigeria. IDE students from the case countries were interviewed in English by six postdoctoral researchers. The interviews were conducted via Skype to phone, which increased the accessibility to international participants by facilitating 'access to global research participants' (Deakin and Wakefield 2014, 603). Three interview schedules were developed which had a suite of common questions but due to restrictions of time and internet connectivity, the second half of the schedules adopted three different foci: migration, social media and student adaptation to the academic environment. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded in NVivo through a combination of deductive methods using the key themes in research design and inductive – coding structure based on emergent themes in the data. The infrastructures of immobility emerged as a theme across all three interview schedules and was therefore an emergent code. The in-depth analysis of the data, as well as use of several methods of data collection, facilitated a deep understanding of IDE in Africa and the broader context of UNISA students' learning environment. The analysis in this paper draws on the interviews where students emphasised these infrastructures of learning at a distance.

5. Studying at a distance

5.1. Reaching in to UNISA: choosing immobility

UNISA is a well-known brand across Africa. Many of our interviewees had close relatives, friends or acquaintances who had studied at UNISA in the past. Also, its many famous alumni, such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, have contributed to the spatial stretch of its reputation as a university that provides quality distance education. UNISA has, thus, had a continuous presence in their lives; it had projected its authority over time and space, challenging the notion that it was indeed distant:

I chose distance because I was loving my job and I thought it would be great to get the experience while I worked, because I know these days to get a job without experience is very hard. And with UNISA... I suppose it was one of the few open distance universities that I knew and I'd always heard good reports so I just ran with it. (Mary,¹ Zimbabwean woman).

Obtaining an 'international degree' from UNISA was seen to offer greater potential than degrees from Zimbabwe and Namibia. Mary surmised:

Among people that have got degrees locally and have left the country, many have battled to find solid employment or have had to study further in their new location in order to be able to get the same level of job that they used to have here. Whereas those with South African degrees have had a much easier time getting the same kind of job.

Because South African degrees were more highly valued by employers, it led to promotions, higher salaries or provided the ability to move to another sector, and was an 'easy' choice for many. This value related to South Africa's position as a regional hegemon and the imputed authority of its higher education (Hiralal 2015), and, importantly, because it was still reachable because it had established an infrastructure that did not require students to move to study. Amidst a growing

focus on university rankings across the world (Hazelkorn 2015), South African universities' higher ranking than those in Namibia and Zimbabwe also made UNISA desirable.

Another important reason for choosing IDE at UNISA was the temporal flexibility it offered. Students can choose how many modules they want to take each term (between 1 and 5), based on their work and family responsibilities, but also what they could afford. Unlike in the case of full-time face-to-face international students, study can be calibrated to suit the constraints placed by time and money. Distance from their university was the price they paid for the temporal adjustments required by the multiplicity of tasks that had to be done by these students. For Rebecca, a woman in Zimbabwe, distance education was her only route into higher education. As a full-time government employee, she was not in a position to study full time during working hours: 'I really wanted to attend campus too, but I didn't have time to do all that, I couldn't leave my kid and go for a school, on campus, I couldn't.' Through distance education at UNISA, she was able to work, care for her son in the early evening and study late at night. This was not only true for women but also for men. Thus, Tonderai, a man from Zimbabwe, explained: 'I didn't want to go through the complications of leaving my job, leaving my family behind here in Zimbabwe to go and study in South Africa.'

The choice of distance was a relative one. Other relations – children and work – required proximity, which left the sphere of education to distance. Students chose proximity with their families and work (and the everyday mobilities this involved),² and distance for their study. This is in contrast to ISM, where students are close to their study but geographically distant from their family (Collins 2013). As almost everything can be done online, it is not just international migration that is avoided, but also the everyday embodied mobilities between school and home (Holton and Finn 2018).

For some, even intermittent needs for proximity in education were an insurmountable hurdle:

I live probably 2ks from the University of Zimbabwe but they don't offer this law degree part time, they offer it only fulltime basis. And the other university which I understand does block release is some 260/70 kilometres away from me. It was also going to be inconvenient to me because you would need to do those block releases, I think that they're on weekends, so I would then have to travel to Gweru and then stay there probably for a weekend and then go again every other month or so. But it's the issue of having to drive there, find accommodation and stay there. (Tendai, Zimbabwean woman).

The University of Zimbabwe, which was so close, had been put out of reach because of the time commitments it demanded, while the Zimbabwean distance education model was based on bridging the distance through summer schools, which were in locations too distant and expensive for Tendai. Consequently, for Tendai, UNISA was the only option because it required neither local educational mobility nor international migration. Studying at UNISA was very different from both attending universities locally and ISM and gave her the opportunity to avoid the costs of co-presence – time and money.

However, distance education requires just the right amount of distance or at least the possibility of proximity:

I couldn't really afford fulltime university and also it's closer to Namibia, and that's why I chose UNISA. I did look into other universities from the UK and also the University of Adelaide which also had a lot of distance programmes. I decided to take something that's a bit closer because it's easier to contact people and if you have any issues with books and papers and stuff it's easier to correspond. (Susanne, Namibian woman).

Susanne recognised that there could be times when her personal education-related immobility might need to be mediated. If the infrastructures of educational immobility fractured and disassembled, UNISA was not entirely out of reach, both in terms of physical distance and relatedly, costs. Infrastructures of mobility are entangled in 'uneven political, economic and social systems' (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012, 16). Infrastructures of educational immobility are similarly entangled in multiple systems and become less vulnerable if the physical distance is limited and fewer systems are involved. However, reaching out to UNISA and leading immobile lives was also enabled by UNISA's own strategies, as we will now see.

5.2. UNISA reaching out: enabling immobility

One of UNISA's key aims, according to its *2030 Strategic Plan*, is to position it 'as a leading provider of higher education opportunities through open distance e-learning (ODEL) nationally, on the African continent and internationally' (UNISA 2018a). UNISA's model, its infrastructure of educational immobility, is primarily based upon electronic interaction, but also upon the distribution of printed materials on some modules, few but decreasing local study centres and an extensive network of exam centres in various African countries including Zimbabwe (UNISA 2018b).

The main interface and point of connection between UNISA and students is the online portal my.unisa run on the SAKAI platform. This is where UNISA contacts students to inform them about exam dates and their grades, where students can interact with their lecturers and tutors, and where they can find their study materials (www.myunisa.ac.za). As such, this is the tool UNISA uses to reach out to students.

The interface of the portal is kept simple and straightforward, with limited graphics and pictures so as to enable easy access for their many students who have limited access to internet and have to pay relatively high prices for their data on phones (Mathur, Schlotfeldt, and Chetty 2015). As such, my.unisa becomes an extension of UNISA, or perhaps UNISA is assembled at and through different points including on my.unisa (Bacevic 2018). Either way, the interface 'becomes UNISA' for the students, enabling them to stay immobile.

This infrastructure of immobility enables the university to reach out to students. However, as Muhirwa (2009) has pointed out; 'IDE brings to bear a number of hidden socio-cultural, historical, political, religious, linguistic, and philosophical distances and assumptions between the two communicating entities that are much harder to bridge than the tangible geographical distances'. UNISA's way of reaching out to students was not fully comprehensible to all international students, especially those who were older. For example, Tendai, who was in her late 50s, found UNISA's way of communicating with her at the beginning of her course somewhat overwhelming:

It was a nightmare because only after registration, the next thing happened was emails flooding on my life, email from everywhere! Too much information, you join this group, you join that group, there's a discussion group, there is an announcement group. There are just too many things.

Younger students adapted better to UNISA's use of online communication, but this did not always equate to easy access. While online technologies promise an unprecedented form of reach, students sometimes faced challenges. Rebecca in Zimbabwe, introduced above, explained how she lost all her material when her laptop was stolen. Moreover,

[T]hey put all the materials on the school website, but at times we have got network challenges in our region. It will take me time to go online to check what's there and downloading... If I'm using a laptop, there is a lot of disadvantages to it, it can just be that it doesn't want to work anymore, goes flat, what will I do?

Both the nodes in the network (laptops) and the internet network, with its need for power, were unstable infrastructures; they were always at risk of breaking down, getting lost, and had to be supplemented by older systems and their attendant flows and artefacts – the post, books and hard copies. Brooks and Waters (2017) argue that there is an important relationship between educational mobility and the material dimensions of education, and these became evident when the incompleteness of the material aspects of infrastructure of immobilities became manifest, as we explore below.

5.3. Out of reach

IDE makes it possible for students to be immobile and still access higher education. At the same time, the limitations of UNISA's reach, with academic and administrative issues, in particular, could hinder students from continuing their education. There were cases when UNISA was simply 'out of reach' which had implications for some students' academic progress. For example, Rebecca found

that she was not able to communicate with lecturers and tutors as much as she would like and was therefore disadvantaged compared to the students in South Africa:

I was supposed to be finishing my degree this semester but unfortunately because of some challenges I am one-and-a-half year behind. I think it's a bit difficult when you are in another country, especially in Africa, we're not getting one-on-one tutorials like... we don't get the chance to see the lecturers, attending the classes and what have you. We just have to read because to travel to South Africa to go and attend the school would be a bit expensive for us, so we just have to... based on the modules on the tutorial letters and everything, so at times you don't understand it the way you intend to. So we get to fail, I failed some exams.

Unlike the students in Mali and Burkina Faso who are taught online by French and Canadian instructors who Muhirwa (2009) studied, Zimbabwean and Namibian students were much nearer to their tutors but also knew/felt that the national students had a comparative advantage and obtained better support. International students' expectations of being able to reach the tutors were not always fulfilled, and for many, the distance and cost of travel inhibited the possibility of interaction.

Administrative issues at different stages of their studies posed many challenges for students. Students felt frustrated when the university was impossible to reach:

In 2015, I started my online registration process and submitted all the requirements that UNISA had wanted requested for. I think the last bit that they asked were certified copies of my certificates which I sent by courier. Then came January of 2016 when I was supposed to register online, I went in and the system wouldn't register me and said there is something outstanding. I knew it was these documents that I'd sent by courier – acknowledgement came from the courier that it has been delivered. I tried to communicate with UNISA. I sent emails, I tried to phone, when you call there you hold for more than 30 minutes on an international call on a phone line, I tried to ask my son in South Africa to phone them. Nothing worked. So, in the end I gave up and abandoned it. I just got fed up and said I'm not going to do it. It was only last year that I said, "let me check what has happened", so when I went in end of last year it was just actually a trial to see what is in there and I found that now I could register, and I just registered, and it was accepted. (Tendai, Zimbabwean woman).

While a key reason for studying at UNISA was the possibility of remaining immobile, the limitations to the infrastructure of immobility could impede study progress. Whereas Bayne, Gallagher, and Lamb (2014) portray the social topologies of distance students at the University of Edinburgh as a seamless flow, the international students in Africa experienced a range of interruptions in their interaction with UNISA. There are limitations to the infrastructure but also expectations that students will fix these disconnections themselves. Gonzales, Calarco, and Lynch (2018) point out that although communications and information technology is becoming ubiquitous, a digital divide remains not only because of the disparities in access but also of maintenance so that even those who have technology cannot always rely on it. Students like Tendai then use others in South Africa to reach in to UNISA in response to the incompleteness of the connecting infrastructures. Their strategies varied and went beyond the official channels of communication.

6. Reaching in

When faced with impediments to study trajectories, due to the incompleteness of infrastructures, inequalities in access to educational mobility became evident. In this section, we examine how students developed strategies to reach in to UNISA under these circumstances and how infrastructural deficits are continuously being patched up.

6.1. Reaching in through travel

First, we consider how the access to mobilities was unequal among students, which influenced how they dealt with the distance. For example, a 25-year-old Namibian man who was studying

accounting at UNISA failed several subjects twice. He felt that he was not getting the academic support he needed online and chose to fly to South Africa to go to the campus in Pretoria. By meeting the lecturers in person he got the help he needed, which enabled him to pass the subjects. He was also able to draw on these relations to get more support after he returned to Namibia. He had the resources to reach in to the university through his own mobility, and that unblocked his study progress.

Most of the students were, however, not able to get on a plane and had to find other ways to deal with distance, as the case of Rebecca illustrates:

Interviewer: Ah, so you paid but they didn't get it correct on the statement?

Rebecca: Yes, normally if I pay they will send me a statement in three days, but they did not send me the statement. It's about a month since I paid that 1,300. I have tried calling them but no landline is being picked and I have sent them several emails but they are not responding to me, I don't know what's wrong with them... So I am thinking that for me to progress and for me to see my results now, I just have to pay again the 2,400, but if I find time this year or next year, I'll have to travel to UNISA, South Africa, and make them correct that, because I don't have another option. ... I will have to go by bus because it's the cheapest thing.

For students in Zimbabwe it would take one or two days of travel by bus to reach the campus. Also, the possibility of lengthy border crossings and occasionally unpleasant border guards, the costs of travelling and staying in hotels, and having to leave their family for up to four or five days made it an unattractive, if not impossible, option. These students' predicament, often shaped by material inequalities between white and black people in Southern African countries (Naidoo 2004), influenced how they responded to situations where distance became an impediment. Infrastructures as 'institutionalised relations [...] reflect concentrations of power' (Nyberg 2018, 62) as is evident in mobility studies (Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012). But these concentrations also en/disable immobilities. Unlike the students who possessed the resources to pay for international flights or other convenient forms of transport, many depended on intermediaries to mediate distance. Infrastructures are thus 'vested with certain type of power and control, whereby they could enforce change in behaviour' (Nyberg 2018, 62).

6.2. Reaching in through intermediaries

Even though some students travelled across the border to South Africa, others used intermediaries to resolve issues. Social media was critical in helping students to continue their degrees when UNISA was 'out of reach'. Whereas communication with lecturers and tutors primarily took place through emails, many students used WhatsApp to interact with other students on the same degree course. Through easily accessible group discussions on their phones covering a wide range of topics, including course materials, assignments, jokes, and sharing perspectives on current affairs (Madge et al. *Forthcoming*). In times of need, international students would ask students located in South Africa to help them with the issues that were hard to resolve from abroad:

We joined the WhatsApp group so that the other students who stay closer to the campuses, most of them are in South Africa, when they go for their own queries at the university, you can get them to help you. Just give them the student number and then they communicate to you via WhatsApp. There's also support on Facebook. I know they're trying to do everything online but sometimes it's a delayed process for us because when you send them emails they don't really come back to you. At the end of the day I guess you have to rely on the other students in the group to assist you (Martha, Namibian woman).

This quote illustrates important points about reach. While Muhirwa (2009) found that students in Mali and Burkina Faso responded with 'withdrawal and silent resignation' when they faced poor communication and lack of opportunities to understand their online instructors, our respondents

proactively established relations with students located closer to the campus in South Africa who could serve as their intermediaries.

We see the shortcomings of UNISA's institutional arrangements as part of the normality of the incompleteness of infrastructures (Petroski 1985), especially in the global South. In this way, we differ from other writers in the global North referring to infrastructures in the global South (Graham and Thrift 2007), as we emphasise the fractured and assembled nature of any infrastructure, where completeness is rarely anticipated or delivered. We also illustrate IDE students' own agency, in the form of their responses, and how they addressed the limitations in the technologies of reach and thereby enabled continued access to education. Other students, families and friends were then part of the socio-technical assemblage that is UNISA. Thus, the mediations of individuals seem to be central to educational delivery. The infrastructures of educational immobility, of UNISA as a distance university, are being made and remade through people and technology. They are not static.

However, other national and international infrastructures also influence the ways in which the infrastructure of immobility are patched and reconfigured. Zimbabwe's long-standing economic difficulties, shortage of foreign currency and difficulties in transferring money from there to South Africa (Harding 2018; Fihlani 2018) led Blessing, a woman in Zimbabwe, who did not have the time or money to travel to South Africa, to reach out a Zimbabwean co-student who was in South Africa and who she came to know through the module WhatsApp group. She asked him to pay her registration fees in South Africa in Rands, while she would give money to his family who were living in her city in Zimbabwe. They both saved money by agreeing on a mutually beneficial exchange rate and avoiding the fees and cumbersome process of making international transfers. By proactively approaching an intermediary in South Africa, who acted on her behalf, Blessing overcame the limitations of reach that emerged from the Zimbabwean national context. International students, then, find new ways to supplement the (inadequate) infrastructure of immobility. They form micro-collectives in recognition of the common challenge of infrastructural inadequacies in both South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Despite Blessing's educational immobility with regard to travel to South Africa, a whole range of other mobilities emerged. The money and personal details necessary for the payment, such as her student number, were mobilised and moved. Money became a commodity and the fellow student became its agent (Maurer, Nelms, and Rea 2013). Her fellow student would have to arrange for the payment either by going to a nearby bank, or possibly paying online. In either case, information and money travelled in unexpected ways. Similarly, the arrangement generated new mobilities for Blessing too, obtaining the money, and delivering to her intermediary's family. As such, the use of an intermediary, in this case, did not merely replace Blessing's presence in South Africa but led to other forms of education-related mobility that included both diverse materialities as well as shorter movements within Zimbabwe and South Africa. Although immobility is sown into the infrastructure of IDE, there are simultaneously multiple forms of mobilities (people, objects, information, etc.) that are necessary to enable the specific immobilities of higher education.

Students who had the resources to be internationally mobile did not have to rely on intermediaries to the same extent, whereas those who were immobile had little choice but to find alternative ways to reach in to UNISA. While each national context influences students' opportunities for mobilities in different ways, the use of intermediaries became a way of responding to unequal access to resources and international mobility, but also to make and remake the infrastructure of immobility to suit their needs. The innovative responses point to the agency required to stay immobile but also suggests that human behaviour and social practices constitute and are constituted by the shapes and qualities of infrastructure.

7. Conclusion

This paper contests the idea of mobility as always and inherently desirable (Mata-Codesal 2018; Barcus and Werner 2017) by pointing to how and why IDE students at UNISA in South Africa

choose immobility. It began by showing how distance and proximity are negotiated by students and then outlined the infrastructures of immobilities in the specific case of Namibian and Zimbabwean students, which include technological interfaces and exam centres. UNISA has created facilities that reach out to IDE students, but students have to reach in to UNISA in order to continue their education. Yet the established infrastructure is not always sufficient as a tool for immobility because it is not seamless and continuously needs to be 'fixed'. These processes are central in making and remaking the infrastructure of immobility.

To stay immobile, students need to mobilise intermediaries who can serve as an interface between the immobility of the distance student and the physical university. International students develop transborder digital relationships and mobilise people in order to reach into UNISA. This, however, involves other forms of mobility: of objects, such as forms, student number and money. There is an element of chance with regards to how an IDE student meets an intermediary, via social media or on the my.unisa platform. Both the ease of access and reliability of these intermediaries have a significant impact upon students' ability to be immobile and still gain an international higher education degree. Students' proactive attempts to overcome the shortcomings of reach illustrate that students ameliorated gaps in the formal route of reach by developing relationships with intermediaries through social media, or, in other words, adding new social elements to the existing material and technological dimensions of the infrastructure of immobilities. Just as Adey (2006) found that 'mobile life' requires systems of immobilities to work, we suggest that immobilities also require mobilities to function.

Much like the infrastructures of migration/mobilities, the infrastructures of immobilities are embedded in national regulations, laws and policies as well as particular institutions. By tracing a higher education system that enables immobility, as well as how students use intermediaries to generate their own infrastructure of immobility, this paper sheds light on the circumstances and the efforts that allow people to stay in their own countries and study. In doing so, we point to the agency required to stay immobile, setting the scene for exploring and analysing such infrastructures, not only in relation to higher education in Africa, but across the world and beyond institutional frameworks. This new research focus has potential to help us understand how infrastructures enable people to remain immobile. By demonstrating how infrastructures of immobilities are shaped by institutions, national and international regulations, policies and practices, this paper has turned understandings of the relationship between mobility and immobility on its head and made a case for considering and conceptualising mobilities and immobilities from an angle where staying immobile is the aim.

Notes

1. We have used pseudonyms throughout this paper.
2. These everyday mobilities may have been a significant part of their lives but due to issues of length they are not discussed here. Moreover, in this paper, we were interested in unsettling the narrative of international education as usually involving international migration and of immobility as a problem faced by Africans who desire to migrate. In this paper, we have therefore only focused on education-related mobilities.

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