

Being ‘at’ university: the social topologies of distance students

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Abstract This paper considers how online, distance students enact the space of ‘the university’, in the context of the rise of distance education within a traditional, ‘elite’ institution. Aiming to provide insight into how students translate into distance the space of a university which has traditionally had its basis in conventional on-campus education, it locates itself within the ‘new mobilities’ paradigm (Urry in *Mobilities*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007), drawing on four different kinds of social space delineated by Mol and Law (Soc Stud Sci 24(4):641–741, 1994) and Law and Mol (Environ Plan D 19:609–621, 2001) in order to analyse narrative and visual data generated with distance students at the University of Edinburgh. The paper shows that the material campus continues to be symbolically and materially significant for a group of students who may never physically attend that campus. Distance students, we find, need their own version of the ‘spatial certainties’ of bounded, campus space. Yet, in exploring the ‘new proximities’ of online distance education, we also argue that to define institutional and academic authenticity solely in terms of this bounded, ‘regional’ space is inadequate in the face of the other topologies which also come into play throughout distance students’ accounts of what it means to be ‘at’ university.

Keywords Distance education · Mobilities · Space · Online education · University

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Introduction

Lilia Banton: [to be at Edinburgh university] means to be online but also mentally, intellectually and even emotionally engaged with the course. it's not about where you live and breathe, but what you're reading about, studying, researching, creating. i think for me being at Edinburgh is being intellectually stimulated, thrown into uncertainty, sort of crisis, living with it, embracing it. i don't think i would do it while 'in' edinburgh cos the sheer physicality of the place could overpower me.

This paper is about being a distance learner in higher education, and how we might theorise and better understand what it means to be a student at a university who is not—and may never be—in that university in the material sense of being present 'on-campus'. Distance education, at least in the context of the conventional, campus-based university, requires us to think newly about institutional space, and the various ways in which students and teachers are mobilised within it. In engaging with distance education, we move beyond the 'spatial securities' (Mol and Law 1994: 642) of the on-campus, toward an understanding of the institution as characterised by 'flux and flows rather than simple bounded space' (Fenwick et al. 2011: 153).

In this paper we report on research with distance students at the University of Edinburgh, an institution which is currently engaged in a programme of significant expansion of distance provision. Over the period of a year we generated interview and visual data with 28 students enrolled on a postgraduate distance programme in education.¹ These students were located across twelve countries, and were at various stages of a programme which is conducted entirely online, with no requirement for students ever to attend on-campus. This is a class that never meets face to face, a cohort that by definition must work within the uncertain boundaries of a highly technologised educational space which has a complex, shifting relation to its material, institutional 'base'.

In working with the data generated during this project, we take a view informed by the 'mobility turn' within social science (Hannam et al. 2006), also drawing on Mol and Law's delineation of four kinds of social space—regional, networked, fluid (Mol and Law 1994) and fire (Law and Mol 2001). Spatial and mobility perspectives, informed in part by the influence of geography on the field of education, are growing in currency in educational research (Edwards and Usher 2007; Taylor 2009), though their presence in the published literature is still relatively low-profile (useful overviews are provided by Fenwick et al. 2011; Leander et al. 2010). There is surprisingly little work which takes a critical 'mobilities' perspective on online distance education, or indeed on mobile learning itself (exceptions are Enriquez 2011, 2012).

The term 'distance education' is itself a negative definition—'distance' education is what is *not* on-campus; it is discursively determined and at the same time de-privileged via an explicitly spatial orientation which constitutes it as other to the 'norm' of the on-campus (see also Marsden 1996). It constructs an apparently clear relation between absence and presence which is in need of some critique. Thinking about distance education from a mobilities perspective requires us to begin to interrogate 'sedentary' assumptions which privilege simple proximity (Sheller and Urry 2006) in favour of a more nuanced way of understanding the many, complex 'mobilities and moorings' (Hannam et al. 2006: 2) of distance students. The university, we suggest, can no longer be seen as a bounded, stable

¹ The MSc in Digital Education, based in the School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. <http://online.education.ed.ac.uk/>.

place—a static ‘container’ within which education takes place. Instead it is re-cast as a complex ‘enactment’ (Edwards et al. 2011: 22) by which ‘hosts, guests, buildings, objects, and machines are contingently brought together to produce certain performances in certain places at certain times’ (Sheller and Urry 2006: 214).

We begin therefore by providing a brief overview of ‘the mobilities turn’ in social science, making reference to the conceptualisation of space described by Mol and Law (1994) and Law and Mol (2001). We then draw on Mol and Law’s topologies in discussing interview data which maps distance education as a complex intersection and interaction of multiple spatialities and enactments of ‘the university’. We work toward a position which sees distance education not simply as the spatial poor relative of the on-campus, but as being concerned with what Mol and Law call ‘topological multiplicity’; a mode in which institutional formation and personal identity, location and diaspora, mobility and stasis are continually and creatively re-thought, re-formed and re-shaped.

The ‘new mobilities paradigm’

Urry (2007) describes the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ as ‘transformative of social science’. He defines it as a conceptual and post-disciplinary shift which ‘enables the “social world” to be theorized as a wide array of...practices, infrastructures and ideologies that all involve, entail or curtail various kinds of movement of people, or ideas, or information or objects’ (6). The mobility ‘turn’, it is claimed, ‘puts into question the fundamental “territorial” and “sedentary” precepts of twentieth-century social science’ (Hannam et al. 2006: 2).

Such a turn, informed by an ‘interplay’ between post-structuralism, actor-network theory and complexity theory (Edwards et al. 2011), provides a useful context for considering the new understandings of space, mobility and stasis which we see in highly technologised, distance education programmes. For the mobilities paradigm has a central concern with distance, and the ways in which distance is articulated, negotiated and traversed within, and beyond, education (Urry 2007: 54).

A central concern of the mobilities approach is the questioning of ‘sedentary’ assumptions which ‘treat as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treat as abnormal distance, change, and placelessness’ (Sheller and Urry 2006: 208). This is a sedentarism which ‘locates bounded and authentic places or regions or nations as the fundamental basis of human identity and experience’ and takes ‘territorial nationalism’ as its guiding principle (209). The mobilities turn takes us away from such a focus on bounded regions and terrains (the nation, the city, the campus), toward a consideration of the new kinds of ‘mobilities and moorings’ (Hannam et al. 2006: 2) experienced in contemporary political, economic and social space.

It is important to point out here that the mobilities approach, while problematising sedentarism and the assumption that the ‘local is the realm of the authentic’ (Fenwick et al. 2011: 138), does not simplistically privilege new modes of deterritorialisation, nomadism or ‘liquidity’ in opposition to it. Rather, it equally works against ‘grand narratives of mobility or fluidity’ (Hannam et al. 2006: 5), focusing instead on articulating how patterns of movement and stasis are shifting and changing in relation to each other. Mobility itself depends on the fixity and materiality of its infrastructures (economic, material and technological). As Sheller and Urry (2006) are careful to point out, ‘there is no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility’ (210).

Mobility and space

Mobility is by definition concerned with space, and the movement—or lack of movement—across and within territories and domains. The ‘mobilities turn’ is preceded by a ‘spatial turn’ (Fenwick et al. 2011: 129) in the social sciences, which draws into question the assumption that space functions as a ‘static container’ (Fenwick et al. 2011: 129) within which individuals act. Rather—and here the alignment of the mobilities paradigm with actor-network theory and post-actor-network theory is clear (for example, Law 2002)—space is seen as a dynamic entity which is produced by the social and material interactions which take place ‘within’ it. As Fenwick et al. (2011) make clear, for forms of education which have to do with media, technology, distance and the online, ‘the ordering of space–time has become a critical influence’. The distancing of education makes possible new spatial practices, new patterns of movement and ‘new proximities’ (129).

In order to begin to make sense of the mobilities and spatial orientations described by distance learners in our study, we have found it useful to draw on Mol and Law’s (1994) influential delineation of three kinds of social space: regional space, defined by stable boundaries; network space, defined by stable relations between elements; and fluid space, defined by shifting and volatile boundaries and network relations. A fourth and less familiar ‘spatial formation’ is identified in a later paper—that of ‘fire space’ (Law and Mol 2001) in which a space defined by the complex intersections of presence and absence is described.

Again it is important to point out that these social topologies are not exclusive of each other, but exist alongside each other in ‘intricate relations’ (Mol and Law 1994: 662). The spatial forms are both ‘other to each other’ and at the same time connected and interdependent (Law and Singleton 2005: 348). Much as the mobilities approach does not offer a simplistic privileging of the mobile over the static, so the spatial forms described here are not seen as having qualitative advantages over each other—what is interesting is the way in which they touch, intersect and appropriate each other (Mol and Law 1994: 663).

In discussions of online education and the nature of the digital, there has been an historic tendency to see the apparent ‘fluidity’ of such spaces as inherently liberatory, as providing an educational topology which is somehow freer, more democratic, more ‘open’ simply by virtue of the otherness of ‘cyberspace’ (Bayne 2004; Edwards et al. 2011). Such discourses continue, influenced now by the promises of democratisation and accessibility-to-all of the ‘open education’ movement (Brown and Adler 2008; Caswell et al. 2008). However, as Edwards et al. (2011) point out, ‘mobility through cyberspaces is neither inherently emancipatory nor positive and relies upon its own immobilities and moorings’ (226). It is important to maintain a critical perspective on the mobilities and spatial orientations of online education, not simply to position the regional and the bounded as ‘problematic and parochial’ (225) in the face of the more obviously networked and fluid spaces of the internet. To use the terms of fluidity and mobility carelessly is to risk them becoming ideological rather than analytic categories (Edwards et al. 2011: 225).

Thus our aim here, in analysing the spatial orientations of distance students, is not simply to reveal or ‘out’ a continuing tendency toward sedentarist views and dependence on notions of regional space in the academy, though that is one aspect of the analysis. More, though, it is to show how notions of space interact in sophisticated and generative ways which have implications for how we think about distance education in the context of the ‘traditional’ university. Distance students, we find, need their own version of the ‘certainties’ of bounded, campus space, while at the same time relishing their immersion in the networked, fluid and fire spaces of the online mode.

The nature of the research: context and methods

The research we report on here took place at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK, between 2011 and 2012.² The growth of distance education internationally (for recent reports on growth trends see, for example, ICDE 2009; Allen and Seaman 2011; Hanover Research 2011) is also evident in the UK (White et al. 2010), being accompanied by encouragement from government to expand the provision further in order to build capacity to ‘compete’ within a global distance education ‘market’ (see Brindley 2011). The University of Edinburgh is contributing to this trend, currently investing significantly both in accredited online, distance education at postgraduate level, and in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

As distance education continues to grow, we aim to make here a contribution to a better understanding of the significance of the institutional space of the ‘traditional’ university to distance learners. We wish to better understand the new ‘proximities’ of online distance education and, in particular, we aim to provide some insight into how students translate into distance the institutional space of prestigious universities which have traditionally had their basis in conventional on-campus education. We are interested in how these students relate themselves to the material campus, and the multiple ways in which they articulate and enact institutional space.

Our focus here is an accredited postgraduate programme at the University of Edinburgh—the MSc in Digital Education in the School of Education—which has been offered entirely online since 2006. This is a programme with high levels of recruitment and student satisfaction, and a global spread reaching across 40 countries. We generated qualitative data with 28 individuals who are current students on the programme, or very recent graduates.

Interviewees were recruited to the study via an invitation sent to 150 current and recent participants, with an opportunistic emphasis on eliciting data across all years of study, and a reasonable global spread: students participated in the research from Australia, Croatia, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Spain, Tanzania, UK, and the USA. In a reflection of the general demographic profile of the MSc programme, interviewees were mature and all currently working in education or education-related fields—the majority (70 %) were in the age range 35–54, and all were currently or recently teachers, developers, researchers or administrators in education across the school, further education, higher education and corporate sectors.

We used a series of online interviews to explore with students their perspectives on institution, distance, and the nature of off-campus study. Our chosen interview method was online, synchronous, text chat within Skype, conducted one-to-one between the project Research Associates (RAs) and the interview participants. This method was pragmatic in that it enabled us to access a widely-dispersed group of participants, and to offer flexibility and responsiveness to interviewees in the timing and conduct of the interviews.

Both RAs were closely associated with the MSc in Distance Education programme from which our participants were drawn: one was a recent graduate, and the other was himself a current student. This closeness of association between the RAs and the interview participants had the primary advantage of off-setting some of the commonly-reported disadvantages of the online, synchronous interview method: its technical and

² For more about the ‘New geographies of learning’ project and its methods, see the web site at: <http://edinspace.weebly.com>.

literacy barriers (James and Busher 2012); issues to do with the ambiguity of identity online (Hooley et al. 2012); and problems with establishing trust in the context of the online interview (Hine 2004). Both RAs and the interviewees had used synchronous text chat many times before, during their time on the MSc programme: the rapid and highly mediated nature of this interview method was therefore not strange to them, and they were all in good possession of the specific literacy skills needed to write and respond well in this mode. Because the RAs and interviewees were already at least partially known to each other, after having studied together over some years, there was an existing relation of trust between them: this did not have to be negotiated newly for the purposes of the research.

The interviews sought talk which related specifically to students' construction of the spatiality of the distance mode, and their conception of the institutional 'presence' of the university. Interviews started by eliciting 'arrival stories' from participants, asking them to describe their moment of arrival 'at' the university, using the notion of 'arrival' in this context deliberately to problematise the association of study with a fixed academic geography. Narratives were sought relating to these themes of arrival, departure and the experience of being 'at' Edinburgh while not 'in' Edinburgh. Participants were asked to describe their study spaces, and the geographic locations from which they engaged with their studies.

The interview transcripts were copied and pasted from Skype, anonymised and uploaded into the cloud-based computer-assisted data analysis environment Dedoose.³ This was chosen because it is a flexible and robust qualitative data analysis application which is designed for collaborative coding. All interviews were subjected to close reading and annotation by the project leader, co-investigator and one of the RAs for key themes and structural characteristics of the interview talk. Dominant themes were identified from these notes by the project leader, from which coding categories were determined and refined during discussion among the research team. Interview transcripts were then divided up and coded according to these categories by the project leader, co-investigator and RAs. All transcripts were then re-checked and re-coded for consistency by the project leader. Mobility, community, homing and the nature of campus and institution all emerged as dominant themes.

In response to the data emerging from the interview phase of the research, and in line with our wish to take account of visual and multimodal research methods, we also asked students to submit digital 'postcards' which represented their study environments. The postcards are visual (taking the form of an image of the student's study space), textual and auditory [in that they embed short clips of the soundscape of each study environment, in an attempt to work against the tendency among internet scholars to privilege image over sound (Sterne 2006)]. Analysis of the postcards has been primarily constituted around the creative, interpretive act of mapping: the project RAs worked across Googlemaps (Fig. 1) and then Thinglink (Fig. 2) to reach an understanding of how such spatial 'portraits' might be represented and worked-with visually. The resulting mappings overlay and penetrate national regional space with domestic visual and auditory space, in a way which attempts to capture something of the topological multiplicity of distance education, and the themes of the research.

We now move on to discuss our data, drawing primarily, for the purposes of this paper, on the interviews. In doing so, we emphasise one particular aspect of the spatial orienta-

³ <http://www.dedoose.com/>.

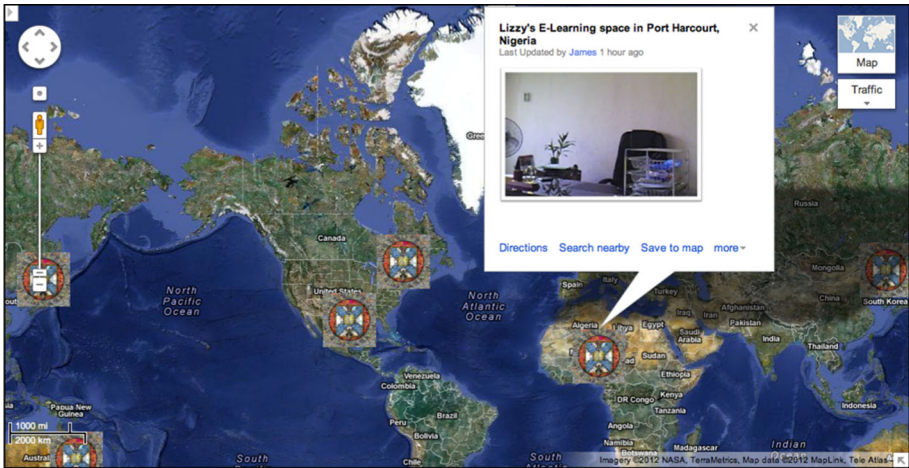


Fig. 1 Part of the mapping of student spaces using Googlemaps (viewable at <http://tinyurl.com/bn6bnal>)

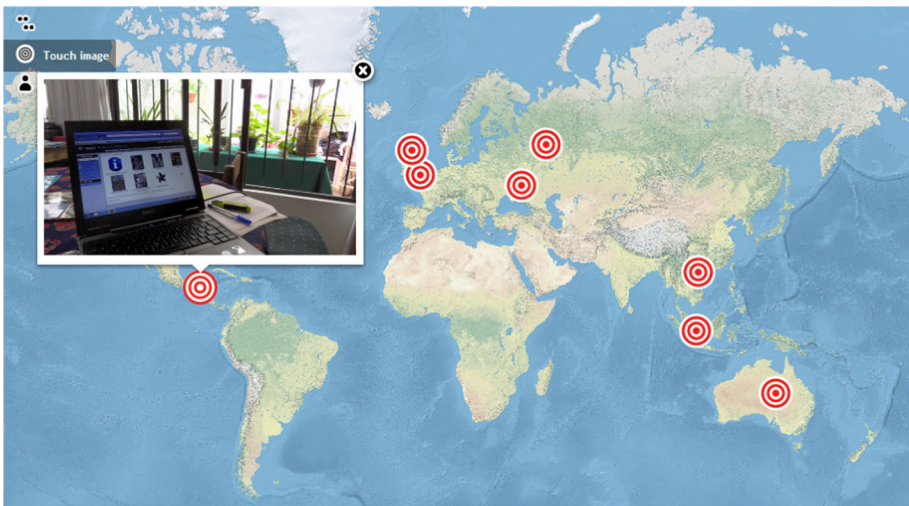


Fig. 2 Mapping the spaces using Thinglink (<http://tinyurl.com/ls2txb5>)

tions of distance students: we ask, when education is explicitly located outside the ‘container’ of the campus, how does that shift the ways in which ‘university’ space is enacted? Thus, with Fenwick et al. (2011), we attempt to ‘frame education as spatial practices rather than as taking place *in* space or *in* particular contexts’ (148).

Weaving Mol and Law’s (1994) and Law and Mol (2001) theorisation of regional, networked, fluid and fire spaces through our analysis, we organise our data according to three broad themes: homing and the sentimental campus; the metaphysics of presence, or ‘campus envy’; and the imagined campus.

Homing and the sentimental campus

Christian Meinecke: my mum and dad both used to live in Penicuik [near Edinburgh], so there was a slightly nostalgic part of me which thought Edinburgh study would be quite cool... we used to park in Nicholson street, near the round Edinburgh uni building when we went Christmas shopping, when visiting grandparents...I was also given an Edinburgh scarf in my early teens...seems funny that I have now 'earned' the right to wear it.

We have already touched on the critique of 'sedentarism' within the mobilities paradigm, and the necessity of tempering this critique with an understanding that fluidity and flux do not simply replace the focus on bounded space with an alternative metanarrative, though they may function to nuance it. If social science has had a sedentarist tendency (Sheller and Urry 2006) the practices of the 'traditional', 'elite' university have shared it. The privileging of the bounded space of the campus is played out in multiple ways: the 'othering' of online education via the discourses of 'distance' already referred to; the material practices of many of its teaching methods; the continuing dominance of notions of the 'classroom-as-container' (Leander et al. 2010) in educational research. We might add to these the reliance in institutional promotional materials on alluring images of university estates and buildings, anchoring institutional authenticity and access to high levels of organisational and academic capital to the image of the institutional estate, and in the process fetishizing the campus and the enclosed, bricks and mortar spaces of the university. It is partly through this fetishization of the campus that the university has been able to constitute its 'insiders' and its 'outsiders', in a dependence on the supremacy of a 'regional' space (Mol and Law 1994) which is bounded and constitutive of its authenticity.

One might expect online, distance students to be critical of such instances of institutional sedentarism, and to an extent they were. Yet the picture was more complex than this. If there were many examples of distance students caring little for the material spaces of the campus, there were many others in which a strong symbolic and sentimental connection with the city and campuses of the University of Edinburgh was expressed. Heritage, diaspora and 'home' were very real factors influencing the choices of distance students located often at very great distances from the built university. For example:

Phillip Walley⁴: I also inherited a packet of family history materials that tracks my heritage back to Scotland.

...

Family records show the first departure from Scotland was around 1627. He was a former resident of Inverness-shire (purportedly in the vicinity of Badenoch) who migrated to what would become Massachusetts. ... The second departure would come in 1828 when the couple decided to move their surviving Scottish-born children to the States—settling first in Massachusetts, then Maine and finally in Illinois. So, in terms of heritage, my attending the University of Edinburgh in an online programme is very much my own virtual "Homecoming Scotland".

⁴ In presenting the data names have been changed and deletions of certain material (date and time-markers, and interjections from the interviewer, for the most part) are indicated through ellipses. Occasionally clarification is inserted by the authors in square brackets. Data is otherwise left unedited from the original Skype text chat transcripts.

Rosaline Bohanek: My father is a Scots man and I have relatives living there [Edinburgh]. I've always loved the city and would love to have gone to the physical university. Also, the course had a brilliant reputation ... but initially the sentimental connection gave me a 'visualisation' point. ... I disappointed myself a bit in my under-grad course—I didn't go to the university I wanted (in Scotland) because I under-achieved at A Level and I didn't achieve that well at first degree. Coming to Edinburgh seemed to be putting that right—a Scottish university, at which I was going to achieve to my expectations. Also to make my Dad proud.

As Sheller and Urry (2006) have written, if studies of migration and diaspora have 'offered trenchant critiques' of the static categories of 'nation, place, and state', they have also brought to the fore 'acts of "homing" and "regrounding" which point toward the complex interrelation between travel and dwelling, home and not-home' (211). If the city and campus of the 'traditional' university function for many undergraduates as a space 'away' from home (Holdsworth 2009), for many of the distance postgraduates in our study it worked, paradoxically, as a means for a conceptual homeward return. In some senses, perhaps, it allowed them to 'take account of a homing desire' which is to be differentiated from the 'desire for a "homeland"' (Brah 1996: 180). 'Home' and its meanings, for these students, need to be rethought in terms both of their symbolic value and their complexity (Fenwick et al. 2011: 146).

The metaphysics of presence, or 'campus envy'

In the extracts above the regional space of the campus is foregrounded in distance students' accounts of the sentimental, 'homing' impulses associated with their presence 'in' the university, despite their geographical location often many thousands of miles away. Yet this play of presence and absence might also be read differently, in terms of what Law and Mol (2001) call 'fire' space. Within a topology of fire the presence of a 'thing', an object—its 'constancy'—depends on 'simultaneous absence or alterity', it 'evokes a specific version of the relation between presence and absence: a link between a single present centre and multiple absent Others' (616). In the context of this study, we might see the distance programme as depending for its form, its 'constancy', on the flickering patterns enacted between the 'presence' of the university and its multiple, 'absent' students (or indeed, conversely, between its multiply present students and their absent campus).

Thus distance education can be seen as both playing out and working against the 'metaphysics of presence' that Urry (2007) identifies as dominating social science generally, a privileging of presence which focuses on 'geographically propinquitous communities' and 'more or less face-to-face social interactions' (47). This concern with presence/absence is something that, according to Law and Singleton (2005) conventional actor-network theory approaches do '*not* see in their talk of networks and relations' [emphasis in original] (342). To talk of a 'topology of fire' opens up the possibility of discussing space not as networked and visible, but as constituting a lambent interdependency of the 'here' and 'not here'.

In our data, we found this to be expressed via a privileging of presence which we playfully called 'campus envy': a tendency for students to view the campus not so much as a sentimental 'home' (as in the extracts above) but rather as a kind of touchstone—a *logos*—which functioned as a guarantor of the authenticity of academic experience which was not always easy to articulate:

Max Cray: I can always remember ‘geolocating’ people so, for some reason, I would always remember where people were from on a given course, so the place that others were coming from seemed very important to me actually, thinking back, I assumed, for whatever reason that those actually *in* Edinburgh were somehow advantaged. I never really thought it through, just an unconscious perception maybe, but I seem to remember being a little jealous of those actually in the city as if proximity would somehow give them an advantage! ...[I] suspected that more of a ‘university life’ could be had if one was actually in Edinburgh... but this was a minor thing compared to my enjoyment with study which far outweighed any ‘Edinburgh envy’.

Penelope Carrera: I couldn’t wait to start. I filled out the forms and remember posting [them], thinking of how I hoped the box was safe and it didn’t go astray. I was so excited, it was irrational. some of the papers were not relevant e.g., car parking, freshers week etc. but I didn’t throw them out, they made me feel like a ‘proper’ student, even though I knew I couldn’t attend.

This sense of the possibility of campus presence was perhaps most evident in the ways in which students spoke about graduation and the importance of making the journey to Edinburgh to attend the ceremony, despite there also being a popular and well-established ‘virtual’ event offered to all students⁵:

Lenore Pergande: But I am planning to come for my graduation... It is like a gift, I get myself to Edinburgh as a graduation gift and to see my ‘alma mater’. A way to close this experience in RL [real life] after a long journey in VL [virtual life]. And a way to gain a different identity in this course experience.

Interviewer: So, how do you feel now as you approach what could be seen as a departure from the course?

Matthew Gillon: Good question... Will I be disappointed? Will it change my engagement with the programme? And yet, the very fact of graduation changes my relationship with the programme, so perhaps I need the ritual of the “real” graduation to mark the end—my end—to the programme.

The campus here becomes talismanic, the ‘single present centre’ around which the multiple ‘absences’ of the distance student could be anchored in a single moment of ritual through graduation. While some students weren’t remotely interested in attendance at graduation (“It’s a long way from Tanzania”), others saw their presence on-campus as marking an essential moment of passage; “I can’t imagine any circumstances where I won’t come to the city to graduate”, wrote one.

While campus presence and its possibility continued to have real significance, as the data above demonstrates, there were at the same time many instances where ‘sedentary’ practices on the part of the institution—emailing distance postgraduates about freshers’ week and parking permits, for example—had the effect rather of prompting students to construct the topology of the university as *networked* rather than bounded or ‘flickering’. If the campus still functioned to an extent as a guarantor of authenticity and presence, its unattainability tended to push students toward placing a greater value on the MSc programme itself and its networked relations:

⁵ All students have the opportunity to attend a semi-formal graduation ceremony in the virtual world Second Life. This event is well-attended by students and staff.

Lilia Banton: also i think that in my mind [Edinburgh is] mostly the MSc programme, i sort of do not associate it with the whole university. a little digression, i went to edinburgh last spring and had a walk round the campus, looked at the buildings, and thought gosh, i'm studying here and laughed cos it felt like a hoax but i felt good about it. sometimes i feel i miss out when i read about all the things that are or would be for me if i was a 'proper' student, all the clubs, festivals, extra seminars, even the library but then hey, maybe i wouldn't use them anyway, the whole infrastructure is of little significance for me, it's the course and the people who are directly involved in it that matter most.

So it was very common for our interviewees to strongly locate themselves in terms of 'course' and its community, rather than 'institution', and to see being 'at' Edinburgh as being an association primarily with their programme of study:

Selena Lamon: Being in Edinburgh would have been quite fun! But it would have been a little too cold! So I am quite happy to be "at" Edinburgh - in fact- really quite happy to have this experience - to be associated with the University and not having to be physically based in Edinburgh. It really would not have been possible. I guess, inline with what I have been saying earlier - we are connected online, so really, the location is not an issue. But if you were to ask me if I feel I am in Edinburgh when I am doing the course... In some strange way, I think I do think about the place - Edinburgh - one of the most beautiful cities I have been to.

In this focus on the 'course' and its connections, then, a network topology might be read as being enacted for the university, in which proximity is not measurable in terms of geographical distance, or authenticity indicated by the immanence of the campus, but university space is rather to do with 'the network elements and the way they hang together' (Mol and Law 1994: 649). 'The university' here is proximate, because its 'network elements'—students, teachers, texts, technological infrastructures and regulatory frameworks—are in intimate relation with each other as the work of the MSc programme is maintained.

The imagined campus

Lenore Pergande: I am based in Italy but travel a lot for work. As of now I am in Vienna.

Interviewer: you've been studying the course from outside Edinburgh these last 7 weeks?

Erik Credle: most definitely. Sonsini, Italy.

Penelope Carrera: I have studied all over...hotel rooms are good cos it feels like pleasure and it is a link to my normal life...always on my own, at home or in hotels, no one else around.

Lilia Banton: ha, for the last 5 weeks, i've engaged with the course from five different cities in three different countries. Staying over at friends, the selection criterion: internet access and fast connection.

...

Interviewer: could you tell me the cities you've been in?

Lilia Banton: York, Glasgow, Dusseldorf, Poznan (PL) and now Kalisz (PL)

We have looked so far at textual accounts of the university which differently foreground the topologies of region, fire and network (Mol and Law 1994; Law and Mol (2001), bringing us finally to the notion of fluid space, liquidity and mobility. The distance students in this study, as the excerpts above indicate, are often highly mobile, making their classroom in hotel rooms, offices, cafes, airports and buses, always via a bringing-together of multiple sociomaterial assemblages of laptops, dongles, internet connections, texts, teachers, and peers:

Allie Ruther: In Boston, I used a Verizon dongle to connect anytime to the course. The dongle was useful, as I also travelled a lot in the States to run workshops in different places, so the Verizon dongle was important to keep me connected to the course. ...In the UK, I have an internal Vodaphone dongle that kept me connected when I travelled around in the UK. Now, I am using my iPad 2 a lot to connect to the course. Much easier. I can carry it in my bag and connect in coffee shops, long bus rides etc.

Such entanglements enact an institutional space which might be described as 'fluid' in that students here operate within a material space of 'churn and flow' (Mol and Law 1994: 643). The networked relations with which they are engaged are continually in flux as students move between different elements of the programme (different 'courses' or 'modules'), between different learning environments (teaching takes place across multiple formal, social, open, closed, visual, textual, synchronous and asynchronous digital environments), between different course 'communities', between multiple means of access (laptop, desktop, smartphone, tablet) and equally across multiple regional boundaries. What it means to be 'on the course', or to be 'at' Edinburgh, is never one thing—it is always multiple, enacted differently for every student almost at every moment. The shape of the university here, its 'constancy,' is a question of 'flow', of 'variation without boundaries and transformation without discontinuity' (Mol and Law 1994: 658).

Within such a context, students seemed perfectly at ease with their inhabitation of a fluid university space which they were simultaneously inside and outside:

Erik Credle: The concept of being an Edinburgh student is something that I have been thinking long and hard about. It has not been completely resolved in my mind yet. I feel a sense of belonging to the University, but at the same time I don't feel that I am actually part of the University.

Matthew Gillon: In a strange way, I didn't feel that I wasn't in Edinburgh.

Nelson Ferringer: I felt when I was taking classes in Barcelona or in Santa Fe I was still part of the physical place [of Edinburgh university]—I'm very impressed with the work of Robert Adam ... and the old part of the university was designed by him; I had made trips to look at the structure's dome and place on the skyline so I would have a trace image when I was working far from school. I like the idea that space can be a mnemonic teaching inspiration and so the old school [university] buildings are important.

Phillip Walley: I may not be physically on campus, but ... the campus goes with me—as part of my cognitive real estate if you will.

These final excerpts are representative of the ability of students to hold notions of presence and absence in play, in a way which presents a creative alternative to the sedentarist tendency to privilege the ‘on-campus’ experience as authentic, described earlier. The university here is simultaneously real and imagined, absent and present, having a ‘constancy’ which is playfully and knowingly ambiguous, but nonetheless deeply significant.

Conclusion: ‘topological multiplicity’

Christian Meinecke: To be honest, the way that everything has been delivered, managed etc. has made me feel no less a part of the Edinburgh experience, than if I was actually ‘there’. As I am now of an age where i probably wouldnt frequent the uni bar (and indeed mrs. wouldnt let me!!) I could just as easily be living in the suburbs of edinburgh.

This paper has shown how the institutional space of a ‘traditional’ university is enacted by its distance students. In doing so, it has charted this space across four social topologies, in an attempt to make a case for ‘topological multiplicity rather than uniformity’ (Mol and Law 1994: 644) in our understanding of how the institutional space of the university works for distance learners. It has shown that the material campus continues to be a symbolically and materially significant ‘mooring’ for a group of students who may never physically attend that campus. Yet it has also argued that to define institutional and academic authenticity in terms of this bounded, ‘regional’ space is inadequate in the face of the fluid, networked and fire topologies which also operate throughout the accounts presented here. The university, like any ‘object’ is always enacted across multiple topologies, ‘dependent for [its] constancy on the intersection of different spaces’ (Law 2002: 98).

The rise of distance education is perhaps simply foregrounding new spatial understandings which are impacting on all forms of higher education, on-campus and off-. Sedentarist assumptions are problematic not only for distance students but also for those increasingly mobile learners who are materially present in the built spaces of the institution.

At the same time, the many choreographies of transnational education other than distance education are further re-working our understandings of university space: ‘branch campuses’ re-make the bounded campus in new national territories; degrees are franchised across national borders; joint degrees across continents transgress institutional boundaries (Clark 2012). In addition new university and commercial partnerships for MOOC provision promise a free education authenticated via national and supra-national ‘branding’, for example the UK MOOC platform FutureLearn; the ‘Aussie Coursera’ Open2Study (Counihan 2013); and the European MOOC platform OpenUpEd, which promises an education ‘reflecting European values’ (OpenUpEd 2013).

The new ‘enactments’ of the university are therefore multiple, and more research is needed into how these re-worked institutional social topologies are experienced and articulated by students. The study presented here offers a view from a particular group for whom mobility and questions of space are highly emphasised and a matter of the reflexive day-to-day. To be ‘at’ Edinburgh for this group is to be oriented in multiple ways to the institution, to be simultaneously inside and outside, in flux and in stasis, in presence and in absence. Their accounts ask us to think newly and creatively about how we conceive institutional spaces and their generation. We argue therefore for a nuanced theorisation of

academic geographies within higher education, one which takes account of the new mobilities and moorings enacted through online distance education and the changing relations of universities to their campuses and territories.

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