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The 'campus imaginary': online students' experience of the masters dissertation at a distance

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Higher education research has overlooked online distance Masters students' experiences of independent research, and this is an important gap at a time when increasing numbers of taught postgraduate programmes are delivered online. This article discusses findings from interviews with eighteen graduates from four online Masters programmes. It introduces a key theme from the research: the concept of the 'campus imaginary', which emerged during analysis as a way of accounting for interviewees' tendencies to attribute challenging experiences to being at a distance from their supervisors, peers and the university campus. Common issues for Masters students, such as unexpected obstacles, difficult supervisory relationships, lack of time, and feelings of isolation were interpreted by students as features of the *online* dissertation process. We argue that the over-privileging of the campus and the face-to-face experience affects students' campus imaginaries, but that imaginaries also leave space for more productive ways of engaging with online students at the independent research stage.

Keywords

Masters dissertation, online distance students, imaginaries, independent research

Introduction

As opportunities for studying online increase, more students will have the experience of conducting a significant piece of independent research while at a distance from their university. While there is a growing international body of research addressing the online, distance and part-time PhD experience (Andrew 2012; Albion & Erwee 2011; Butcher & Sieminski 2006; Evans 2005; Harbon & England 2006; Tweedie et al. 2013; Wikeley & Muschamp 2004; Wisker 2003; Evans & Green 1995), and the campus-based Masters experience (which will be discussed later in this article), no work has been undertaken in the area of online Masters-level dissertation processes and outcomes. Student, programme and institutional success are at stake when students embark on the dissertation element of a Masters programme, and this article draws attention to and conceptualises the distinctiveness of the online student experience of independent research.

The study from which this article is drawn, a one-year research project based at the University of Edinburgh, aimed to understand how success should be understood in the context of dissertations at a distance. We looked at dissertation research processes and supervisory practices in four online distance postgraduate programmes (two in medicine, one in education, and one in law), through interviews with graduates, focus groups with dissertation supervisors, and analysis of programme and course level information for students. This article focuses on the student experience of dissertations at a distance.

We asked graduates about their relationships with their supervisors and other students, their experiences of undertaking a large independent project, and their definitions of 'success' in relation to this work. In response, we heard a number of 'counterfactuals' – 'if only' statements that express imagined alternative versions of actual situations (Roese & Olson 1997, p.1). These statements from interviews with graduates attributed difficulties or challenges of the dissertation process to being an online distance student, while simultaneously constructing what we refer to as 'campus imaginaries'. Stories that evoke campus imaginaries are those in which interviewees assume that difficulties would either not have occurred or would have been resolved by being physically located at the university. A typical example, and one we will return to later, is:

we never got to meet up but I do think if I had met him physically or something, on a more regular basis, it would have made a difference because sometimes I found that when I would speak to him on the phone, ...sometimes I kind of thought oh, he doesn't sound like he wants to talk that much. (Arnott, Masters graduate)

To contextualise these counterfactuals, we draw on the work of Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb (2014), who explored the relationship of online distance students to the real and imagined spaces of their university. Playfully characterising one of students' multiple orientations to the university as 'campus envy', Bayne *et al* described 'a tendency for students to view the campus not so much as a sentimental 'home'... but rather as a kind of touchstone – a *logos* - which functioned as a guarantor of authenticity of academic experience' (p.577).

Building on the idea of 'campus envy', we propose that what we observed in our interview data can be understood as a series of 'campus imaginaries' – imagined qualities of the University which function as a source of counterfactuals to difficult experiences participants had as students on online distance programmes. Taylor (2004) describes the social imaginary 'not [as] a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (p.2). While different participants presented different campus imaginaries, there are some shared qualities between them. Taken together these add up to a portrayal of the imagined institution and those in it as approachable, sociable, and a space more amenable to the sorts of activities interviewees found themselves undertaking as part of their dissertation. In part these imaginaries draw on assumptions about the advantages of 'in-person', as opposed to virtual, contact which are far removed from the experiences described in the literature on campus-based students' independent research experiences. A number of interviewees, even those whose overall experiences of their online programmes were extremely positive, appeared to ascribe negative experiences to their status as online distance students. For example, issues such as unexpected obstacles, troubles with motivation, difficult supervisory relationships, lack of time and space to focus, and feelings of isolation and doubt were interpreted as features of the *online* dissertation process specifically. As we will see, however, these issues are common features of transitions from taught courses to independent study; the nature of supervisor-student dynamics; and the inherent challenges of conducting research, particularly for newer researchers.

How students interpret problems they encounter matters both practically and theoretically. On a practical level, if students assume their difficulties are related to their mode of study and are therefore simply to be accepted, they may not discuss or express them, and may miss out on opportunities to face these new challenges in generative ways. On a theoretical level, there is a need to continue to address the over-privileging of the campus and the face-to-face experience, which leads students to default to an assumption that their own context is deficient.

The sections that follow introduce the theoretical concept of the imaginary, describe the research undertaken, and present interview data which show the campus imaginary in action. We then go on to present alternative readings, drawn from the literature on postgraduate dissertations and supervision, of the issues interviewees identified. The article closes by considering the theoretical implications of the presence of the 'campus imaginary' for online dissertation students, and setting out

some ways for supervisors to support online distance students to articulate and grapple with troubles they face, rather than assuming them to be fixed and unmovable.

Social, educational, campus imaginaries

The concept of the 'imaginary' as we are using it here has its roots in social theory (Castoriadis (1997) and Taylor (2002; 2004)). Drawing on Anderson (1991), Taylor (2002) defines the social imaginary as 'what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society' (p.91), and:

the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (p.106)

Taylor describes this understanding as normative, 'interwoven with an idea of how [things] ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice' (ibid). Imaginaries are 'largely implicitly learned', and emerge from practices (Strauss 2006, p.330).

Castoriadis (1997), in contrast, focuses on the imaginary as 'undetermined' and creative:

The imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other... The imaginary of which I am speaking is not an image *of*. It is the unceasing and essentially *undetermined*... creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question *of* 'something'. What we call 'reality' and 'rationality' are its works. (p.3)

Elliott (2002) discusses the role of Castoriadis' social imaginary in the 'constitution and reproduction of society' through 'active and creative imaginary representations' (p.144) – what he refers to as 'the representational and affective flux of the imaginative stratum' (p.151).

Castoriadis' and Taylor's visions are distinct, Strauss argues in her review of the imaginary: 'for Castoriadis, the imaginary is a culture's ethos;... [for] Taylor, it is a [learned] cultural model' (2006, p.323). This distinction will become particularly important in the concluding part of this article, where we argue that there is potential for the 'campus imaginary' to mean more than the learned models students may draw from previous experiences of higher education and from pervasive discourses and imagery of education.

The use of the concept of the imaginary in relation to education and pedagogy is not always explicitly linked to the work of Taylor or Castoriadis, but tends to echo it quite closely. Research drawing on the educational imaginary considers a wide range of contexts and topics, for example what first year distance learners in Turkey consider important in relation to their success or failure (Murphy 1991, p.29); the perceptions of disengaged young people that "the university" was inextricable from, and indeed synonymous with, their old ideas and experiences of compulsory schooling (McMahon et al. 2015, p.6); how a category such as gender or race 'may be perceived as socially constructed and simultaneously, discursively unfixed, [but] also remains a category around which education is organized (Loutzenheiser 2005, p.33); that

‘aspiration-focused education policies and programs and the contemporary marketing industry now share certain strategies for modulating social imaginaries to spur optimism about the future’ (Sellar 2013, p.32); and how media representations of schools and schooling in China constitute an influential educational imaginary (Xu 2006). Barone and Lash’s (2006) definition of the educational imaginary serves to summarise its use in these and other educational research articles: ‘a set of broadly disseminated images about what schools and school people ... are supposedly like... [eluding] the fate of objectification, its contents placed beyond the range of easy study, surveillance, and interrogation’ (p.22-3). The extent to which researchers are seeking to bring the educational imaginary into focus reflects an interest in discursive constructions of education that this article also shares.

Here we offer a specific kind of educational imaginary – a ‘campus imaginary’. We define this as the imagined qualities of the University: the ways that spaces, objects, time, people, practices and ideas are thought to be brought together to create a setting that is amenable to particular kinds of activities – in this case, independent research. In this article, campus imaginaries function as a source of counterfactuals in relation to difficult experiences participants had as students on online distance programmes. As Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb (2014) have observed, the campus can be of great significance to online distance students, regardless of whether they ever visit it in person:

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. (p.576)

‘Campus envy’, as Bayne *et al* have termed it, describes how online distance students position the campus as ‘a guarantor of authenticity of academic experience’ (p.577). Drawing from their prior experiences with higher education, the materials the university produces and widely disseminates to advertise its programmes and opportunities, sentimental connections, media representations, and so on, the campus comes to stand for the educational experience of being a student of the university (even if not ‘at’ the university). In the context of our research project, the imagined campus takes on a specific set of qualities and characteristics that the online student needs and *lacks* – they cannot successfully navigate the dissertation experience because they lack what they believe the campus provides. In this context, the campus imaginary is an obstacle – it allows students facing challenges and difficulties to too easily conclude that their own ‘distanced’ position is inherently deficient.

Context and methodology

This research was conducted at a time of rapid expansion of online education in a traditional, research-intensive university, and was funded, in part, to help the University understand the experiences online students might have as they reached the dissertation stage, and the support that might be required. Since 2010, the University of Edinburgh has made a significant investment in supporting the development of a number of new postgraduate courses and programmes designed to be available to students on a fully online basis. At that time, the University offered a small selection of postgraduate programmes online, across several disciplines, and all four of the

programmes represented in this research were amongst these early online programmes. From this starting point, plans were announced for a substantial development in online distance education, which would be increased strategically over a period of five years (2010-15); plans which proposed that ten years later (by 2020), the University would have, ‘as many off-campus as on-campus PGT [postgraduate taught] students’ (senior manager presentation, 2010).

Dissertations are the final element of most Masters programmes, and carry a larger credit-weighting than the individual taught courses students had studied to that point – normally 60 credits in this institution (where taught courses are normally 20 credits, and a whole programme is 180 credits). Students on programmes in this research had between 3 months and 1 year to complete the dissertation (depending on the programme structure).

The interview strand of the project comprised 18 interviews with graduates from the four programmes participating in the research. The programme director or organiser from each of the programmes was part of the research team, and they selected graduates to approach to be interviewed – including those who started but did not complete the dissertation, and those with unusual pathways through the dissertation – aiming to get a spread of location and dissertation outcomes and experiences. Medicine 2’s dissertation was optional, and at the time of the research there were no students who had completed the dissertation, so the programme director nominated graduates who had completed the programme’s 20-credit independent project, instead.

Table 1: Masters programmes in this research

Subject area	Number of interviews	Dissertation weighting	Timeframe for part-time students
Medicine 1	6	60 credits, compulsory for the degree	1 year, all begin in September
Law	4	60 credits, compulsory for the degree	3 months, all begin in May/June
Education	6	60 credits, compulsory for the degree	1 year, beginning at any point
Medicine 2	2	60 credits, optional dissertation or project (but interviewees had completed a 20-credit independent project, not a dissertation)	8 months, usually begin in September

The ethical procedures in place, which were approved by the School of Education ethics committee, were robust and protected the confidentiality of research participants. Although project team members were aware of who had been approached for interview from their own programme, they were not aware of who had ultimately been interviewed, and all interview data was fully anonymised (including anonymising each interviewee’s programme of study) during analysis, so only the principal investigator (who was also a programme director) and research associate were aware of the identities of the graduates cited in research materials. In addition, because all interviewees had already graduated, there was no risk in any experiences they described affecting their standing on their programmes.

Semi-structured interviews took place via phone or Skype (and in one case face-to-face), between November 2014–February 2015, and questions included:

- What were you hoping to get out of the dissertation experience? What did you think it would be like?
- Where were you based during the dissertation phase?
- How did you communicate with your supervisor? How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
- What kind of feedback did you get on your work during the process?
- Did you keep in touch with the other students on the course while you were working on your dissertation? How, when, why?
- What were the main challenges you encountered while working on your dissertation?
- Was there anything you found particularly exciting or motivating during the period of working on the dissertation?
- Overall, what do you now feel about your dissertation experience?

Thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted by both the research associate and principal investigator, independently and in discussion with each other, and themes that emerged included:

- personal and professional contexts of interviewees, including their experiences of work-based research projects, combining work and study, and their reasons for choosing to study online;
- a variety of experiences of the dissertation, including enjoyment, personal development, uncertainty about expectations, isolation, responsibility and different understandings of success;
- issues around place and time, mobility, disruption, and geography;
- supervisory relationships, practices and experiences of support;
- programme context, communication, support and how the dissertation was organised and managed;
- community and interaction during the taught and dissertation elements of the programme;
- the dissertation itself: topic, scope, methods, structure, genres, deadlines, assessment and experiences of thinking and practicing like a researcher;
- strategies adopted and lessons learned from the dissertation experience.

Across and beyond these themes, we began to notice, code and discuss examples of what we light-heartedly referred to as “when it was good it was very very good, but when it was bad it was the internet”. This was the observation that led to the development of the idea that underpins this paper – the ‘campus imaginary’, and how it came into play when interviewees reflected on challenging experiences of the dissertation. A key aspect of this research therefore relates to the epistemological status of the ‘campus imaginary’. In observing a tendency amongst online distance students to overprivilege the benefits of the campus, and arguing that this may impact their experience of independent research in problematic ways, it is important to consider the question of what we can know of what the *actual* experience of these interviewees was, and whether interviewees might, for example, have felt that they

needed to justify a poor performance by ‘blaming’ external factors¹. In this respect a few things may usefully be said. First, we saw instances of the campus imaginary from interviewees across the spectrum of achievement in the dissertation, from near-failures to distinctions. Second, we took steps in designing the research to ensure that, as far as possible, interviewees were not in a position to need to be defensive about their experiences (they had already graduated, and the interviewer was not known to them in the role of a teacher or programme director).

However, epistemologically speaking, we share Holstein and Gubrium’s (2004) view that interview situations always actively construct the past in particular ways that might shift the meanings made of experiences. In the case of justifications, however, these constructions may be precisely the point – that how students interpret or explain their experiences is revealing. We demonstrate this in the following section, which discusses how interviewees’ ‘campus imaginaries’ emerged in these interviews, and how they served to frame experiences of dissertations at a distance.

Campus imaginaries in action

Interviewees thought of their student experience in a number of ways, but most described their overall experience of being an online distance learner, and their programmes of study, positively:

one of the things that I hadn't kind of anticipated was the whole online community aspect of it, you know when you're meeting other students and all those interactions. I had just presumed that it would be kind of me and the computer... it was a revelation really ...it's actually fantastic, we're learning off each other, all these different experiences... I really, really loved that aspect of it at the start. (Leon, masters graduate)

The teachers, I think they found a very interesting way to evaluate you through the forums and through the questions they posed ...the teachers made sure that the discussion kept going by posting other ideas and... commenting [on] your answers and poking you intellectually to write something. (Fern, masters graduate)

I thought all of the tutors did a superb job in making me, as a student, feel valued and I think importantly, that distance wasn't an issue. As I say, my wife was doing a programme with [another university] online at the same time that I was doing this one, and her experience was very, very different. It was not well done in the same way. (Martin, masters graduate)

Positive comments from students about their online distance learning experiences centred around access to educational opportunities they might not otherwise have had, the quality of engagement amongst teachers and students, and innovative approaches to learning.

When things went wrong, however, even those who were enthusiastic about their mode of study were quick to attribute problems to their distance from the campus. Eva, for example, was positive about her experiences on her programme, but described feeling that her supervisor, while entirely professional, lacked some interest

¹ We are extremely grateful to the anonymous reviewer who raised this question and encouraged us to clarify these points.

in her project and her development. Despite her other positive online experiences, she attributed this perceived lack of interest to being a distance student: “we'd never met, I was like a distance learning student ... I wasn't problematic in that sense and ... I wasn't there, so perhaps it was like low on the list of things to do or important things to do” (Eva, masters graduate). She went on to imagine her supervisor's experience:

it was probably the fact that I wasn't there, you know, that I wasn't there in Edinburgh ... it was more like the kind of thing like you have to do at the end of the day, you know Friday and you have to sort of tick the box, say ‘I've done that bit’.

Eva imagined that not being physically in the presence of her supervisor meant that her supervisor saw her as an item on a list, rather than as a person. Being ‘there in Edinburgh’, on the other hand, would have meant that she *would* have been a priority, and would have been supported beyond the level demanded by basic professional courtesy.

Arnott had a similar assumption, that the lack of contact and interest he felt from his supervisor would have been different had they met face to face:

it was all this kind of, it was more like telephone calls we were having... I do think if I had met him physically or something, on a more regular basis, it would have made a difference because sometimes I found that when I would speak to him on the phone... sometimes I kind of thought oh, he doesn't sound like he wants to talk that much. (Arnott, masters graduate)

His supervisor's apparent lack of interest was, for Arnott, a partial explanation for his very difficult experience of the dissertation, where his result was worse than he expected and where he felt that his supervisor had advised him badly about aspects of his research process:

you know what was the most upsetting thing was, when I read the feedback [from the dissertation markers], the feedback was stuff that I had put in and my supervisor told me not to put it in. ... I followed my supervisor's advice. (Arnott, masters graduate)

For Arnott, a feeling of disconnection as a result of being an online student and not physically able to meet with his supervisor was to blame for this perceived tension between the advice given by his supervisor and the expectations and feedback from his markers. However, later in the interview, Arnott identified another member of staff who had given what he felt to be excellent support, entirely over the phone and by email. When the interviewer asked him about this, he said that the supervisor's skill might be more the issue:

maybe it is fine doing it online and distance learning as long as your supervisor is way more detailed, they will really look at your work. Because I definitely thought from that one experience with [the other staff member] that she was way better. (Arnott, masters graduate)

This indicates, as we will argue in the next section, that negative experiences might be read in a number of ways, with different consequences and implications, but that students might need help and support in exploring sources of difficulty – ones more amenable to being addressed than the intractable issue of distance from the campus.

Without such support, students are likely to assume that working online during the dissertation phase is entirely different from being on the campus. In addition, the campus itself is often imagined in ways that might feel quite unfamiliar to those based there. Terry, for instance, explained how he believed on-campus, full-time students were experiencing the dissertation:

I mean, if you are full time you can just pop in and see your supervisor, or you speak to his secretary and book an appointment to see him. I don't think there is a limit [on supervision contact] for a full time student. (Terry, masters graduate)

June, who worked in a non-academic role at another university, remembered her thoughts before the dissertation began, and her belief that it would be entirely different from an on-campus experience:

although I had done a dissertation from my undergraduate degree... it was completely different because I'm not on campus. I could see people at the university [I work at] who had dissertation supervisors and they had meetings every week... I had no idea how it would work. (June, masters graduate)

Studying on campus seemed to be well understood (or thoroughly imagined), from undergraduate experiences, while online study was seen from the outset as mysterious and difficult to fathom:

obviously my first thought was, oh yeah, [studying online] could work for me. But, of course, that sounds a bit dodgy, you know. How does that work exactly? So, yeah, it didn't sound all that convincing. (Eva)

June and Nieve, whose experiences had been significantly different in terms of dissertation outcomes (June graduated with a masters after a very positive experience on the dissertation, while Nieve intended to undertake the dissertation but found work and other circumstances prevented her from doing so), had very similar things to say about how they imagined their experiences would have been different, and better, had they been on campus:

doing it at a distance was really difficult ... not that the supervisor I was allocated was unhelpful, but I felt I really needed to talk to him way more often, but I know that would have been asking too much. So in the end I did feel quite isolated I think. And had I had other people to talk to about what I was doing it may be would've helped me rethink the ideas that I had... in retrospect had there have been options for me to do some of the subjects online and then maybe take six months and do the others actually on campus, in retrospect for me that would have been a much better choice... if I had of been more able to just talk with students who were doing the same subject then I would have got a lot further I think... so much about the learning experience actually is social experience. And when you take that away the learning is not as rich. (Nieve, diploma graduate)

That informal engagement, although you have discussion boards, is never the same because you have to write it all... I just think it would be nice to go up to an academic and say: 'You know when you said this, did you mean this?' Even though you could write that on a discussion board, but sometimes you don't

want to ask a stupid question in writing. You just want to go: ‘oh, did you mean so and so’, or you can overhear a conversation that they're having with another student that answers your question that is the bit that is really useful; that kind of, it's the stupid question moment and it's gone but you've had that chance to just say something. And they just go: ‘oh, no, it's not but I meant this or just look at this’. (June, masters graduate)

These clear visions of the advantages of co-location are prone to being disrupted, however. June initially put it bluntly – “I do think I would have liked to have gone on campus and been a proper student but I know that wasn't possible so I did the best thing I could” – but immediately went on to problematise this:

when I look at what's happening on campus I think being an online student is much better because of the sets of resources you have to have. The way the information is given to you is in so much more detail because you have to have the structure ...everything has to be there. ... I loved it but I would have liked more time just to be a student because when you're doing work and being a student it is hard.

Indeed, even when talking about how a dual approach might have suited her, June identified her own constraints as factors:

[at] Masters level I think it would be nice to meet up although, saying that, I couldn't do an Open University course because they insisted on having a week's residential where you did exactly that, and that would have put me off being a student online in Edinburgh if they had insisted on doing this residential because I couldn't spare the time or know when I had the time to do that, so I'm asking for the impossible. (June)

This tension, between the vision of the ‘perfect’ ideal mapped onto the campus experience, and interviewees’ own awareness of the ways in which real life (specifically, their own lives) differed from the circumstances required for such a vision, came up again and again in these interviews. Some interviewees, such as Fern and Terry, were matter of fact about their own circumstances and those of their peers, which would not have been compatible with different patterns or opportunities for contact:

I am not one of these “let’s get on Facebook and hold hands together”, that sort of thing. I go for an easy life, I’m too busy. ...I wasn’t interested [in keeping in touch with other students]. But that’s just me. I just wasn’t interested. ...I wouldn’t do that as a matter of, whether I was online, part time or full time. (Terry, masters graduate)

Fern, when asked to give advice to other students starting the dissertation period, suggested: “Maybe try to contact the others a little bit more than I did and also reach out more to the teacher, which I think I should have done more”. However, she also outlined some of the difficulties in doing so, for herself:

I never expected [to keep in touch with other students during the dissertation]. Because even in residential ones, of course there is some difficulty in keeping up with people, in the distance learning I would expect that it would be more difficult.... We were very spread across the world so we had different times,

different professions and different themes and backgrounds. (Fern, masters graduate)

What we see repeatedly in these interviews with graduates are strong beliefs about how their experiences would have been different had they been campus-based rather than online distance students during the dissertation; coupled with an awareness that such campus experiences were not possible for them for a variety of reasons to do with professional and personal obligations, personal preferences, geographical distance, and so on. What is clearly missing, though, is a sense on the part of interviewees that their campus imaginaries may not have matched reality even if they had been campus-based and full-time. Difficult supervisory relationships, issues with isolation, and troubles with focus and making time for study are issues that emerged in these interviews, but they are by no means issues specific to the online distance experience. In the next section, we go on to explore these issues in the context of the literature on campus-based supervision, and argue that supervision of online distance dissertations needs to incorporate a process of helping students reimagine their relationship to the dissertation not as one of deficit or fundamental separation, but of one in which their range of experiences are common, perhaps sometimes even inevitable, in the process of learning to think and act like a researcher.

Reimagining 'normal' in the dissertation

Research on campus-based masters dissertations is relatively scant, but in what is available there are strong resonances with the issues experienced and concerns raised by participants in this project's interviews. This section draws on this literature to emphasise one of this article's key points: that many issues online students may attribute to being at a distance from the campus while conducting independent research are shared by campus-based students. In particular, feeling a lack of connection, the challenges of focusing and making time for a bigger piece of work like a dissertation, and complicated or problematic supervisor-student relationships, are explored here.

Isolation, disconnection and the individual

The masters dissertation period is one in which the centrality of individual effort and agency is often foregrounded by both supervisors and students. Anderson, Day and McLaughlin (2008), discussing the results of their study of 91 masters students in Education, described participants' self-presentation as 'proactive, independent and shoulder[ing] prime responsibility for success and failure' (p.40). Participants emphasised the need to be 'strong', 'resilient', and 'tough' (p.40), and wanted supervisory input that 'gave [them] a distinct feeling of support without intruding upon, or detracting from, their own sense of agency' (p.44). This type of input can be difficult to achieve, however, as will be discussed in the subsequent section on supervision.

Despite this focus on individual effort, campus-based students still articulate a need for connection and integration with peers, programmes and departmental cultures. For example, in a questionnaire-based study of 220 graduates from Masters programmes in nursing in Ireland, Drennan and Clarke (2009) found that respondents, most of whom were studying part-time, were most dissatisfied with what the authors refer to as the 'intellectual climate' of their research experience:

students had limited opportunities for contact with other postgraduate students, perceived that there was a lack of integration into the community of the department, and that there was little or no opportunity to become involved in the research culture of the department (p.494)

The more extensive literature on campus-based doctoral study and attrition frequently cites social isolation as a key reason for student attrition from degree programmes (Ali et al. 2007) – this may particularly be an issue for students studying in disciplines which have what Chiang (2003) describes as ‘individualist’ structures of doctoral study. It appears to be the case that physical presence on the campus does not, by itself, resolve issues of isolation and disconnection that students can experience when conducting independent research.

Time, space and the challenges of doing research

Campus-based modes of study are far from immune to the difficulties of focus, time and intellectual challenge that independent research can bring. Demb and Funk (1999), in their interviews with 24 graduates from an American masters programme in higher education and student affairs, identified eight distinct phases of the dissertation, including conducting a literature review, analysis and writing, and at each stage challenges were identified – lack of information, time required, difficulty of undertaking new kinds of tasks, frustration, losing momentum (pp.21-2).

Ylijoki (2001) identifies narratives or ‘academic legends’ (p.23) of dissertation writing: heroic, tragic, businesslike and penal (p.25). The businesslike and penal stories are ‘stability narratives’, where there is ‘no crucial change during the working process in the relationship between the student and the thesis’. Heroic and tragic narratives involve a change of relationship – ‘progressive’ in the case of the hero, ‘regressive’ in the tragic case (p.31). Of the ‘tragic’ narrative, Ylijoki writes:

The student begins to work in earnest, proceeds well, but then there emerge obstacles in their path. There appears one specific problem—concerning, for instance, methods, theory, finding data or using a statistical programme—that gets the student bogged down. Even if the problem at first seems quite small, it gets bigger and bigger, and in the end the student does not have any idea how to proceed. (p.27)

The time needed for productive and successful study has to be created and protected regardless of mode of study – Anderson, Day and McLaughlin (2008) describe this as ‘carving out’ continuous time from home and social life, time which is at risk of being ‘encroached upon’ (p.41). It is particularly problematic for online students to assume these challenges are unique to their mode of study, potentially depriving them of support or alternative perspectives they could use to help shift their relationship to their dissertations onto more positive footing.

Supervisory relationships

Of the relatively scant scholarly literature on masters dissertations, articles exploring supervision practices and supervisory relationships with on-campus students are the most prevalent, and give useful insights into the complexities of these relationships. It is clear that supportive supervisory relationships are of great importance to masters students, but less clear exactly what the nature of that support should look like. Examining concepts of ‘control’ and ‘affiliation’ in a survey of 409 masters students at a Dutch university, de Kleijn *et al* (2012) found that students performed better and

were more satisfied with their experiences if supervisors were ‘personally involved’ in their projects, including by showing an interest in the topic or thesis. On the issue of how controlling supervisors should be, however, the picture was more complex, with supervisors advised ‘not to take a submissive role’, but also for ‘students to feel ownership’, and the conclusion that ‘some students will need more explicit structuring than others. Therefore, it is advisable for supervisors to check this with the students themselves’ (p.937).

Dysthe (2002) writes in detail about the nature of writing in a masters dissertation, and highlights differences in approach that come from what she identifies as three models of supervision: teaching, partnership and apprenticeship. A teaching model emphasises ‘asymmetry, status difference, and dependency’ (p.518), while a partnership model emphasises a ‘contractual nature of cooperation’ (p.519), and the apprenticeship model, most often seen in the sciences, ‘is characterized by the student’s learning by observing and performing tasks in the company of the supervisor’ (ibid). She notes a distinction between teaching and partnership models of supervision, which is in ‘teacher and student expectations of which texts can be handed in to the supervisor’ (p.524), but also highlights that ‘conceptualizations of supervision as teaching, partnership, or apprenticeship are not mutually exclusive, as elements of one may appear in another’ (p.537).

In considering the power relations between students and supervisors, Grant (2003) discusses the institutional positioning of the supervisor:

she/he is positioned as an experienced and successful researcher, an established authority in some area of her/his discipline, as ‘finished’, as an overseer of the student, as a source of various goodies including time, feedback, money, networks, recognition of the student’s worth, encouragement, and sometimes as the examiner. On the other hand, the student is positioned as not knowing, insecure, inexperienced, in process, needy, consumed by the project. (pp.180-1)

These positionings are complicated, however, by ‘the workings of identity and desire’, which ‘provide fertile ground for misreadings, resentments, confusions’ (p.187), and the ‘presence’ of the absent masters’ (ibid), all of which underscores the ‘strangeness’ of interpersonal relationships exposed within the supervision process (p.188).

Pilcher (2011) proposes that the Masters dissertation itself and the processes involved in it are changeable to the extent that it is best described as an ‘elusive chameleon’ (p.37). In such a context, it is unsurprising that students might experience difficulties, regardless of their mode of study. Indeed, the key issues identified by students in this research are echoed by the literature on campus-based Masters study. What this means, and what it implies for educational theory and practice, are discussed in the final section of this article.

Conclusions

Campus imaginaries are powerful; they shape online distance learners’ experiences significantly, as we have demonstrated. Imaginaries are not simply fantasies, and they may be resistant to change. Nevertheless, they do need to be challenged, because students may not talk to their supervisors, or each other, about difficulties they are experiencing if they assume those issues are solely or primarily related to their mode

of study. This might deprive students and supervisors of the chance to address specific issues. It may also mean that supervisors and programme teams do not hear about matters that they would want to consider how to tackle at programme design level.

Beyond these practical concerns, at dissertation stage students seem to be particularly susceptible to discourses which deprivilege the online distance learning experience, one which frames online learning as inauthentic, secondary to the campus, and inevitably inferior. Good online experiences and feelings of being disadvantaged by distance can go hand in hand. Graduates we interviewed tended to associate negative dissertation experiences with being at a distance, regardless of other positive experiences they had as online students. Whenever their experiences fail to match up to those dictated by the campus imaginary, the value of the experiences they *are* having is downplayed. That value might primarily be understood, as participants in this research described it, as the opportunity to conduct independent research in a professional context, to be immersed in practice settings while having a period of freedom to explore topics of significance and meaning in-depth.

In putting together their special issue on the topic of educational imaginaries, Barone and Lash (2006) asked contributors to respond to the question of whether, and how, scholars might work to influence the educational imaginary (p.24). Lopes and Macedo (2006) respond to this question by arguing that a multiplicity of ‘symbolic experiences’ can co-exist, and:

in that conflicting process of symbolic production it is always possible that subversive and transgressive cultural practices may emerge... resulting from multiple actions, among which we are emphasizing the action of a committed educational theory. (p.26)

Furth describes Castoriadis’ position on indeterminacy and creativity in relation to the imaginary as being that ‘indeterminacy is an obligatory positive affirmation of open-ended creativity and the warranty of genuine newness’ (Furth 2013, p.no page). For our purposes, this indeterminacy offers a productive space in which to influence campus imaginaries. In order to lay claim to such a space, the privileging and misrecognition of the campus has to be analysed and critiqued, because, as Loutzenheiser says in relation to identity categories, ‘[the] notion of educational imaginary acknowledges that while race, for example, may be perceived as socially constructed and simultaneously, discursively unfixed, it also remains a category around which education is organized’ (Loutzenheiser 2005, pp.32–3).

The privileging of the campus is also a category around which education is organised. Scholarly discussions about postgraduate education at a distance have been ongoing since the early 1980s, when White critiqued the tendency of commentators in the media and the field of Higher Education to conflate all forms of distance learning with ‘the unprincipled activities of “mail order degree” businesses’ (1980, p.194). In 1986, Bynner outlined contemporary thinking around the provision of Masters education at a distance, noting that ‘the standards of the Masters degree, it is believed, will be threatened if the university undertakes such work by distance teaching, and its credibility weakened’ (1986, p.23). Thirty years later in 2016, even while online distance education is in a phase of rapid expansion, many assumptions about its limitations persist, and students have incorporated these into their own understandings

of what is to be expected from distance learning. When all is going well, these assumptions might be obscured by the positive experiences they are having. When challenges emerge, ‘campus imaginaries’ may readily reassert themselves. Because the dissertation phase is, for most students, a challenging time, these underpinning assumptions may need to be surfaced and worked with more explicitly than they currently are – including in relation to the question of what constitutes presence in an educational experience, and how contact between supervisors and students, and amongst peers, needs to be navigated during this period. Online distance educators should seek to provide an alternative foundation on which students’ understanding of dissertations at a distance can be constructed.

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