

Jen Ross, Philippa Sheail  
University of Edinburgh, UK

**Abstract:** The topic of this paper emerged from an analysis of interview data from a research project investigating postgraduate student experiences of undertaking independent research at a distance. These interviews exposed a number of 'counterfactuals' or 'if only' statements that identified difficulties or challenges in the dissertation process and attributed these to being an online distance student, while simultaneously constructing 'campus imaginaries' in which these difficulties would either not have arisen or would have been resolved by being physically located on campus. 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). Taking this definition as a starting point, can the campus imaginary be seen to enable the university and, if so, how? How should the existence of a campus imaginary shape our thinking about how we support online Masters students and their supervisors?

**Outline:** As opportunities for studying online increase, it is likely that 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; Butcher & Sieminski 2006; Evans 2005; Tweedie et al. 2013; Wikeley & Muschamp 2004; Wisker 2003), and the campus-based Masters experience for students and supervisors (Anderson et al. 2008; Anderson et al. 2006; de Kleijn et al. 2013; Demb & Funk 1999; Drennan & Clarke 2009; Dysthe et al. 2006; Ginn 2014; Maunder et al. 2012; Pilcher 2011; Rodrigues et al. 2005; Ylijoki 2001), no work has yet 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 course, and this paper aims to draw attention to and conceptualise the distinctiveness of the online student experience of independent research.

The wider study from which this paper is drawn looked at dissertation research processes and supervisory practices in the context of online distance postgraduate programmes, through interviews with online distance graduates, focus groups with dissertation supervisors, and by reviewing programme and course level information for students. This paper focuses on the student experience.

The topic of this paper emerged from the analysis of interview data from the research project, investigating student experiences of undertaking independent research at a distance. The eighteen participants were graduates from one of four online distance taught postgraduate degree programmes in different subject areas at the University of Edinburgh. Semi-structured interviews took place with participants via Skype or email, with one student being interviewed on campus. Interviews were then transcribed and a thematic analysis was undertaken. In the process of asking graduates about their relationships with their supervisors and other students, and their experiences of undertaking a large independent project, we heard a number of 'counterfactuals'. These were 'if only' statements that identified difficulties or challenges of the dissertation process and attributed these to being an online distance student, while simultaneously constructing 'campus imaginaries' in which these difficulties would either not have arisen or would have been resolved by being physically located on campus:

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)

This paper draws 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). What we saw in our interview data was a series of 'campus imaginaries' - imagined qualities of the sociomaterial space of the university which function as a source of counterfactuals to troubling or difficult experiences participants had as students on online distance programmes. While different participants presented different campus imaginaries, there appeared to be some overlapping qualities which portrayed the imagined institution as approachable, sociable, and a space which was designed for, and therefore more amenable to, the sorts of activities they found themselves undertaking as part of the dissertation.

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). Taking this definition as a starting point, can the campus imaginary be seen to enable the university, and if so, how? How should the existence of a campus imaginary shape our thinking about how we support online Masters students and their supervisors? And what are the further conceptual and theoretical contributions such a perspective might suggest?

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