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A new mobilities approach to re-examining the doctoral journey: mobility and fixity in the borderlands space

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Abstract: This paper explores doctoral candidates' experiences of progression-monitoring and making progress through the doctoral space at a UK university.

I engage concepts associated with the 'new mobilities' paradigm (Urry, 2007) to provide insight into the candidate experience of the doctoral journey; exploring specifically the interplay between the fixed structure provided by institutional-level progression frameworks that are commonly implemented by UK universities to measure 'timely progress' across disciplines and the borderlands space that enables and facilitates intellectual freedom, creativity, becoming and adventure.

Drawing on notions of 'moorings', 'home on the move', 'connectivity and transit spaces' and 'rhizomic thinking' I analyse narrative data generated through the reflective diaries of doctoral candidates at a modern university in the English Midlands to offer new insight into how universities can provide better doctoral education, that supports: candidates to make a contribution to knowledge; protects well-being; and facilitates timely completion.

Paper: In this paper I report on research with doctoral candidates at an English, medium-sized, modern university in the Midlands. I explore how we might theorise the doctoral space in order to understand more fully doctoral candidates' experiences of fixed structures, specifically progression frameworks and the creation of a fluid, open, borderlands space that enables them to be creative, to explore new topics, disciplines and perspectives and to generate new knowledge.

It is common in the UK for doctoral researchers to be required to submit evidence of progression on a six-monthly or annual basis. Requirements differ between institutions but often include submission of a work plan, literature review, ethics proposal, summary of work completed, chapter draft and training log. Some universities prescribe a fixed structure for the thesis with chapters to be submitted as part of progression monitoring in a prescribed order and against a fixed timeline. The progression requirements are usually set out in institutional regulations and are not discipline-specific. They may be administered by a central unit called a Graduate or Doctoral School, College or Academy. Failure to meet requirements can cause doctoral researchers to undertake a period of probation or to have their registration downgraded, restricted to a lesser degree, or terminated.

I use notions of mobility and fixity that are associated with the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller, 2013: 45) and the spatial turn to shed light on how institutional structures and processes and the personal agency of doctoral candidates interact with the multiplicities, interconnections and fluidity of the creative processes within the doctoral space.

Over a three-month period which began at the end of the first UK Covid-19 lockdown, six participants were requested to keep a reflective diary, particularly (although not exclusively) related to progression, learning, community, identity, and how they make use of timelines, training logs, skills frameworks and progression processes. Each provide a vivid depiction of their own doctoral space through their descriptions of a complex 'enactment' (Edwards, Tracy and Jordan 2011: 222) which sets out a network of actors (supervisors, administrators, doctoral candidates, committees), organisational structures (Doctoral School, Student Services, Library) and tools (laptops, software, alarm clocks, coffee) that they bring together to perform the doctorate across a variety of places at variety of times (Sheller and Urry 2006: 214).

I use theoretical understandings from the New Mobilities Paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006) to help us interpret the doctoral journeys captured in the diaries; and particularly the doctoral candidates' interaction with progression-monitoring processes. This New Mobilities Paradigm emerged across disciplines within social science as a new way of understanding the social world which embraced the role of movement (mobility) and fixed infrastructure (fixity) in ordering social relations. This conceptual shift defined mobilities in the new paradigm as spatial. It focused on flows of goods, services, objects, capital, information and people through 'physical movement such as walking and climbing, bikes and buses, cars and trains, ships and planes' (Sheller and Urry 2006: 212). I argue that the physical movement of people, goods and services that is theorised in the Mobilities Paradigm has much in common with the interplay between a fixed progression pathway and intellectual freedom in the doctoral journey.

I go on to explore the data within four groupings: institutional moorings and individual journeys; personal strategies for constructing home on the move; mobile mindsets and finding a way or getting lost. I focus in on the search for fixity through interaction with institutional frameworks, and I highlight the role that fixed frameworks appear to play for some diarists as a necessary, valuable, generative part of the doctoral journey. I also explore the negative impact of becoming submerged in the system-ness of moving through the doctorate and I question how a particular kind of mobility mindset might make doctoral candidates more susceptible to feeling overwhelmed. I also consider the role of doctoral candidates' agency in their doctoral experience and the importance of personal strategies for creating shape and structure and sustaining well-being.

I end with a number of areas for reconsideration in doctoral curriculum, pedagogy and policy and raise the following questions: (1) how can we develop a new research supervision pedagogy that better supports creative, intellectual pursuit within the context of formal learning structures, supervisory traditions and contemporary metric drivers? (2) Do progression policies that were designed to address poor completion rates two decades ago now constrain future innovation to meet more contemporary objectives?

References: Edwards, R., F. Tracy, and K. Jordan. 2011. "Mobilities, moorings and boundary marking in developing semantic technologies in educational practices." *Research in Learning Technology* 19

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