

# The Spaces and Places of Deaf Academia

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## Final Research Report for SRHE

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## Executive Summary

- There are a growing number of deaf academics working in Higher Education Institutions in the UK, but very little is known about their experiences. This study aimed to expand on that knowledge using visually motivated research methods and a focus on deaf spaces within Higher Education.
- There is evidence that deaf academics are excluded from fully participating in or contributing to collegiality in their HEIs.
- There is evidence that deaf academics are able to use their environments in creative ways to create and maintain deaf spaces within the academy.
- Visual research methods have been shown in this project to be particularly effective for working with deaf research participants.
- The research has been presented across a wide variety of networks in different modes and three research outputs are in preparation.

## Project aims and objectives

There is very little published literature on signing deaf academics' experiences within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK (however see, Jones and Pullen, 1992, Trowler and Turner 2002, O'Brien and Emery 2014, De Meulder 2017). The project aimed to contribute to three different areas. Firstly, to investigate the experiences of deaf people working in HEIs in the UK; secondly to explore the spatiality of these experiences; and finally to evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise of visual and participatory methods in research with deaf people.

## Outline of methodology and project timetables

### Methods

In depth qualitative interviews of six signing deaf academics in two stages were used during this project. Each of the interview stages was framed using different approaches. The first interview was a participatory walking interview, which took place in the participants' place of work, and the second was an interview structured around the creation of an eco-map describing their professional network within and beyond their home HEI.

Both methods were chosen as a way of exploring what has been coined the visucentrism of signing deaf people's experience (O'Brien and Kusters 2017). The use of visual research methods in this project was intended to further expand the use of such methods with deaf people, and make use of this visucentrism to elicit in-depth data about deaf people's experiences.

Walking interviews claimed to be more successful than sedentary interviews in producing 'data about the way in which people relate specifically to place' (Evan and Jones 2011, 856). They also have the advantage over sedentary interviews, which often miss out on the minutiae of everyday life (Kusenbach 2003, 462). Evans and Jones (2011) also suggest that walking with interview participants offers a more intimate connection with the environment and a deeper understanding of how people create spaces through their interaction with their environments (850), through using the environment itself as a prompt for discussion (Jones et al 2008, 3). The walking interviews in this project were conducted in BSL and recorded using a hand-held video camera as the participant led

me around the areas of the institution they frequented including their office, teaching rooms, recreational areas and. The camera was also used to record not only answers to interview questions, but also how we navigated these physical environments as deaf, signing people.

Eco-maps were first developed as a research tool by Hartman (1978) as an assessment tool to investigate the support needs of children and families by mapping out the major parts of their social ecosystem in a pencil sketch. The eco-map can be a relatively simple line sketch with the participants’ name in the middle and other individuals, agencies or institutions arrayed around it with lines of varying thickness or shape showing stronger or weaker or antagonistic or supportive relationships between them (Baumgartner and Buchanan 2010). They can be drawn either using a template, or with a free-form approach (Rogers 2017). In this project, we used the free-form approach and the participants were allowed to draw the map in whatever order they preferred. The drawing of the map was used as a framework to structure the interview, in which I periodically asked for clarification and explanation of the map as it was drawn and asked follow-up questions.

One challenge faced in this project was anonymising the identities of the participants. The academic deaf community in the UK is extremely small and very well connected meaning that even the smallest piece of identifying information could easily give away participants’ identities (Damianakis and Woodford 2012). In order to try and avoid this, all data presented in conference presentations or written papers was completely anonymised, with locations, names and gender all removed. While this may remove the context of the quotes used, it was felt that this was a lesser problem than risking identification of participants, as the data produced turned out to be of very sensitive nature.

### Project timetable

June to July 2018	Literature review, identifying and contacting potential research participants.
August to November 2018	Walking interviews with all 6 participants.
December to February 2019	Coding and analysis of walking interviews.
March to May 2019	Eco-map interviews with all 6 participants.
June to July 2019	Coding and analysis of eco-map interviews.
August to December 2019	Writing papers/presentations based on research findings.

### Analysis of results

For ease of discussion I have split the analysis into two sections, one examining the participants’ experience of the physical spaces of their HEI, the other the more metaphorical level of social/networking spaces.

### Physical spaces

Several important findings arose from the analysis of deaf academics’ experience of the physical space of their HEI. These were analysed using Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad of perceived, conceived and lived space. Perceived space is the common-sense everyday experience of space, the

relationship between institutional practices and daily experiences and routines. Conceived space is the space of planners and architects, those who design and organise spatial practices and behaviours from an institutional perspective. Lived space is the space in which alternative imaginations can appropriate the environment and lead to different ways of being and practicing (Simonsen 2005).

There were several examples of physical barriers in the perceived space of the workplace which would not be recognised by hearing colleagues or managers. These included narrow corridors, obstacles in corridors such as fire doors, excess furniture and so on which physically impeded signing deaf academics from communicating with one another when on the move through these environments. Teaching rooms were also set up in such a way as to be inaccessible to deaf staff, with rows of seats and desks impeding lines of sight and cutting off potential communication between staff and students. The fire alarms and other safety systems were also often inadequate for deaf academics, with participants reporting that requests for visual alarms were either ignored or delayed substantially, leaving their lives at risk.

Design decisions in the HEI also created barriers to deaf academics' involvement in the daily life and collegiality of their HEI. Many of the participants complained that there were no windows in the doors to their office, which left them isolated and cut off from institutional life outside. Not only were they unaware of what was going on outside their office, they were also left unable to tell if colleagues were present in neighbouring offices when the doors were closed. Design decisions also determined what sorts of activities were acceptable in different spaces within the HEI, but these were not always communicated clearly with deaf staff. Some participants remained unsure of the acceptable use of different areas of their HEI, for example, whether doctoral students were allowed in staff rooms, where informal meetings with students could be held, whether staff common areas actually existed on campus or not, and so on.

However, participants in the research project were also able to point to lived space, where they were able to exploit their environment in a way which made novel use of their surroundings. Most participants made a point of re-arranging the furniture in their offices, not only to improve their sensory reach, but also to mark the office as 'deaf space' and reclaim it from the audiocentric norms of their HEI. Similar practices were discussed in teaching rooms, where furniture was routinely moved around to create circular teaching spaces with shared eye gaze, the better to showcase the visucentric nature of deaf lives and sign languages.

## Social spaces

The eco maps showed several interesting tendencies in the experiences of deaf academics. Most reported that their professional networks were based more outside their home HEI rather than inside, and that they had significant difficulties engaging with colleagues within their HEI who could not sign BSL. Many of the participants invested considerable effort in trying to make their workplace more accessible for themselves and other deaf people, by running BSL sessions and being sociable, but often this investment saw little return. Most felt more connected to wider networks of deaf academics based internationally in other HEIs, rather than to colleagues within their own departments or institutions.

Eco maps also illuminated the often complex place of BSL/English interpreters in the workplace. Interpreters were important in allowing non-signing people to access the teaching and other work

the participants in this project did, and vice versa. However, it was usually left to the deaf academics to organise these interpreters, at a great cost of time and labour which they felt would be better spent on things more related to their jobs. The weight of making the HEI accessible was felt to be too heavily on the deaf person, with little effort coming from the management or leadership of the HEI to make accessibility possible.

Some participants were very clear that they felt under-valued by their HEI. They wondered whether this was because of their status as signing deaf people, but were of the opinion that lack of access to what was going on in their HEI due to communication barriers prevented them from contributing as much as they were able. Others, in contrast, felt that they were highly valued by their HEI, because they were able to offer something that other, hearing, academics would not.

There were clear barriers in place to deaf academics' collegiality within their home HEIs, and these barriers were only partially broken down by the presence of BSL/English interpreters. Often the need to book and pay for interpreters actually created new barriers for each one their presence surmounted.

## Project conclusions/outcomes

The findings show that deaf academics experiences of both the physical and social dimensions of their HEIs impact on the sense of belonging they have in their home HEI and in the academy as a whole. This project has contributed to the knowledge of deaf academics experiences working in HEI, and contributed to a growing body of work on deaf geographies with its use of Lefebvrian theory to examine these experiences. The use of two visually motivated methods, walking interviews and eco maps, further underlines the importance of using methods that can tap into the visucentrism of deaf people to achieve a deeper understanding of their experiences.

While it is not explicitly explored in this project, there is scope for expanding the methods and theories used for this work to other work and employment contexts to research deaf people's wider experiences of the workplace.

## Presentation of work

- 8 September 2017 – *'The Spaces and Places of Deaf Academia'* presentation at York St John's Research Reflections conference.
- 22 November 2017 – *'What are the experiences of deaf academics working in UK HEAs?'* contribution to the SRHE blog in BSL and English.
- 2 July 2018 – *'The deaf delegate'* contribution to Conference Inference blog in BSL and English.
- 26 October 2018 – *'Eco maps'* contribution to research workshop in Advanced Studies of the Humanities, University of Edinburgh.
- 13 November 2018 – *'Deaf spaces and places in education'* guest lecture for YSJ Geography programme Society and Space module.
- 4 December 2018 – SRHE Newer Researchers Conference poster.
- 25 January 2019 – *'Signing deaf academics in HEIs'* plenary presentation for YSJ Post Graduate Forum on Applied Linguistics conference.
- 23 February 2019 – hosting and presenting at YSJ Deaf Employment conference.

- 11-13 May 2019 – ‘*Mapping deaf academics’ places and spaces in academia*’ workshop at Deaf Academics Conference, Iceland.

## Publication of work

Two research outputs based on the work undertaken are currently in final draft stage:

- *Mapping deaf academics’ places and spaces in academia*, target journal Studies in Higher Education.
- *Space and place: Academic buildings and deaf academics*, target journal Disability and Society.

One is in early draft form:

- *Identifying, Navigating, and Resisting Imposter Syndrome*, book chapter for Palgrave, co-written with other deaf academics.

## Benefits of going through this process

I very much enjoyed the opportunity to attend the R+D Committee meetings, which gave a valuable insight into the workings of the SRHE, conference planning, and the review and selection process for research proposals. I also appreciated the opportunity to network with and meet established academics working in the field of Higher Education research and related areas. Running the project itself was very useful in that it allowed me to plan and run a small project on my own, giving me practice at budgeting, organising and conducting a small research project.

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