The university without walls

Space, time and capacities

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ABSTRACT

My concern in this article is how the university might become more distributed, less concentrated in particular places and times, and more permeable to different sorts of interests. In order to do this, I have written a partly autobiographical reflection on an attempt to practice the work of the university differently. It is the early story of a sort of 'research institute' which is attempting to take the problems of its city region seriously and find ways to connect the resources of a large elite university to many other organisations in its locality. In theoretical terms, the article uses the idea of 'social infrastructure' as a way of thinking about how an institution operates beyond its imagined temporal and spatial boundaries and co-produces with people who have different identities and capacities.

KEYWORDS

boundary object, civic university, engagement, impact, social infrastructure

A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks 'But where is the University? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University'. It has then to be explained to him that the University is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which all that he has already seen is organized. When they are seen and when their co-ordination is understood, the University has been seen.

—Gilbert Ryle (1949/1978: 17–18)

The idea of a 'university without walls' is one that was first applied to adult education in the United States in the early 1970s (Eldred and Johnson 1977), though it builds on a long tradition of 'extra-mural' education offered by universities to different types of students, perhaps in local community centres, and at evenings and weekends. In this article, I want to use the concept a bit differently, though not at all in contradiction to that earlier usage and think about what it might mean to distribute the university in terms of its teaching, research and impact. In other words, can we do the university differently? Can we, in Gilbert Ryle's terms, avoid what he calls the 'category mistake' of thinking that the university is buildings and professors, and instead think of it as a way of seeing organisation and co-ordination? Rather than asking, where is the university as a noun, should we ask, how does the university manifest itself as a verb?

This article is a partly autobiographical reflection on an attempt to practice the work of the university differently. It is the early story of a sort of 'research institute' – the Inclusive Economy Initiative – which is attempting to take the problems of its city region seriously and find ways to connect the resources of a large elite university to many other organisations in its locality. At the time of writing, this involves a basket of overlapping projects, some involving research by staff or students, some aiming at teaching and training, and some about a form of internal activism which encourages the university's employment, procurement, reward and volunteering policies to be oriented towards city region concerns.

It is also an account of just how some of the contemporary language of higher education might be understood and practiced in more radical ways. In the United Kingdom, there have been two centuries of criticism of the idea that universities are 'ivory towers', distanced from practical and worldly matters (Lawson 1998; Schildermans 2021). In the last few decades, this has resulted in a series of attempts to alter academic incentive structures in order to encourage 'relevance', 'innovation', 'partnership', 'collaboration' and 'co-production', and to focus on the 'impact' of 'translational' research, the 'engagement' of the university with various publics, 'third mission', and the idea of the 'civic' university as one that aims to be useful to its city and region (May 2019). The general diagnosis is that the elite university has become too inward looking, that academic boffins need to turn away from their obscure fascinations and find problems in the world outside that they can usefully address (for example, Brink 2018; Schwittay

2021; Sperlinger et al. 2018). It seems that insides need to become connected to outsides, but how?

In theoretical terms, the article uses the idea of 'infrastructure' as a way of thinking about how we might characterise the ways that any institution operates beyond its imagined boundaries. The idea that organisations have boundaries is a common sense one, but it normally refers to either a spatial distinction between the inside and outside of buildings, as in Ryle's visitor to Oxford, or a line conjured by some sort of business plan or mission statement. In the case of a university and a city, such divides are hard to draw because students and employees are continually reshaping the city – working in coffee shops, being the market for speculative accommodation developments, buying theatre tickets and driving up rents and house prices. Despite such obvious actual 'leakiness', deliberately producing 'impact' strategically and reflectively is hard to do because of the internal and compartmentalised nature of most academic practices. Back in 1963, Clark Kerr mused on the spatial distribution of the 'multiversity', and more recently other writers have put forward 'ecological' or 'practice based' versions of the institution that are also intended to question its imaginary as an institution which is closed off from the world (Barnett 2018; Schildermans 2021; Wright 2016). Building on these ideas, in what follows, I suggest that this means that some sort of 'social infrastructure' is required in order to ensure that any institution can effectively transact with other parts of its environment.

Finally, to emphasise what this article is not doing. I am not, here, primarily concerned with what teachers do in classrooms, how they teach or what they teach, or whatever it is that academics write in journals. I am not trying to argue for a different kind of leadership in universities or to suggest different sorts of fee regimes for students or career incentives for academics. Neither am I thinking here about all the ways in which the internal boundaries of the university, particularly around academic disciplines and functions, make the job of doing something useful so much harder. Universities, like all institutions, engage in a labour of division that prevents as much as it enables. All of these are implicated in what I want to say here, but my concern in this article is more about how the institution might become more distributed, less concentrated in particular places and times, and more permeable to different sorts of identities and capacities.

My new job

In 2018, I moved to the University of Bristol, a top-tier science-focussed institution based in a fashionable but very divided city in south-west England. For many years, I had an academic interest in 'alternative' forms of organisation and exchange, and an enduring sense that universities could and should be platforms for radical thought and experimentation (Parker 2018; Parker et al. 2014). Bristol is a city with a very rich and varied series of engagements with tilting towards a low carbon, high inclusion and high democracy economy, and it offered an extraordinary landscape for engaging with activists in just about every sector. The city is the base for many green organisations, was European Green Capital in 2015, has a rich tradition of co-ops, many employee-owned organisations and B-Corps, a large and active credit union, used to have its own local money, and the City Council declared a climate emergency in 2018. The leadership of a new research institute at the University became vacant, so I applied with a letter that outlined a programme of work focussed on the co-production of research and policy with the alternative businesses and networks that existed in the city region. This eventually became the Inclusive Economy Initiative (IEI).[1]

The 'internal' justification for the IEI was connected to the development of a new city campus for the university, about three miles from the part of the city where most of the university was based. This area was next to the main railway station, adjacent to a large area of underdeveloped land and near some of the more deprived neighbourhoods in the city. There was a strong sense that this represented the university coming down from the hill, and clear ambitions that the new campus – Temple Quarter (TQ) – should be open to the city both architecturally and practically. There were many discussions about how the ground floor of the main building could be opened to the city, how third sector and private sector organisations could be co-located there, how the buildings could stay open in the evenings and weekends and so on. There were also plans for programmes of support for encouraging job applications from under-represented groups, childcare provision, rooms designed to be used by the general public, procurement practices focussed on social value and so on. There was even support for a 'micro-campus' in a deprived area of the city, using shipping container offices to locate some projects several miles from the main site.[2]

The TQ 'ethos' was articulated as an embodiment of the university's civic ambitions, and hence by framing IEI as a TQ/civic project, it was

given support by senior university management. I was bought out for 50 per cent of my workload and given a small budget for administrative and other support. IEI echoed many other changes in UK higher education too. Ideas about encouraging and measuring the 'impact' of academic research had become embedded into the research audit process for a decade, and this had expanded out into a family of concepts and practices which were all broadly attempting to connect the classroom, laboratory and office to the concerns of the wider world. Even if this world was imagined in mostly commercial terms, as technology spin-outs, the language was reshaping the way that parts of the institution imagined how it was connected to the city, region and state. 'Catapults' accelerated 'innovation'; 'partnerships' and 'collaborations' focussed on 'translational' research; and the terms 'co-production' and 'engagement' seemed to be attached to almost everything that the university did with any outside organisation.

Nonetheless, for an elite university like this one, this was something of a challenge, and it was clear that many of the core parts of the institution remained comparatively untouched. The main income streams of the university continued to be teaching fees and research grants, and there were often references to protecting 'disciplinary excellence', which appeared to be code for business as usual. It was also clear that the driver for many of the changes was financial, with projections of potential income from intellectual property, patents, fees and contracts and the possibility of floating a wholly owned subsidiary to engage in these activities. Even some of the more radical versions of co-production were also justified in terms of the need for a pre-existing range of regional 'partners' who could be inserted into large research grant bids when needed. Many of the biggest grants were becoming complex multi-partner affairs, and so having a range of local third sector organisations that could represent 'inclusion' and 'diversity', was strategically sensible.

The idea of the 'civic' university as one that aims to be useful to its city and region (Hazelkorn et al. 2016) was hence in a certain tension with these more utilitarian justifications. Was a particular strategy being justified because it was good for the university or good for the city? However, rather like many of the words used to express some sort of movement of people, things and ideas across the boundaries of the institution, 'civic' was semantically flexible enough to mean different things to different people, and also to be combined with ideas about innovation, engagement, co-production to produce sentences that sounded broadly convincing and meaningful.

Despite different emphases, all these words seemed to be aimed at justifying or describing an imagined relationship between an organisation and its environment. The diagnosis was that the university was too 'closed', and the solution was that it needed to become more 'open'. Such a general statement would produce much nodding, but often not a great deal of discussion about exactly what should happen, or *not* happen, as a result. There were examples of projects, grants and teaching that were celebrated as examples of the civic, but not a great deal of systematic discussion about where and when the university wanted to be present, what it would pay for and how, who it would employ and on what basis, how it would incentivise its staff to be 'civic', who could use its facilities and so on. In a sense the discussion very often stayed at the level of 'values' or 'purpose' and did not engage with questions of 'organisation'. How would this new type of university be produced? Or, to put it another way, why was it not already happening?

Infrastructure

> Movement is what distinguishes infrastructures from institutions […] Institutions enclose and congeal power and interest and represent their legitimacy in the way they represent something reliable in the social, a predictability on which the social relies. (Berlant 2016: 403)

The term 'infrastructure' seems helpful in thinking about the sort of relations I am trying to describe here, in part because it does not limit itself to what happens within one particular organisation or encourage us to imagine that the agency of particular categories of human being – managers, academics, professionals, politicians – is the lever that moves the world. It is also a helpful mediating term in bringing together the social and technical – both people and things – and recognising that non-human materials such as buildings and computer systems shape the social and vice versa. Infra is that which is 'below', unseen and assumed. Social and organisational practice are channelled by existing patterns of infrastructure, and the channels that already exist shape the actions that are likely, and sometimes even possible. Here I am exploring what work the concept might do in understanding the problem of how the university might be 'distributed' more generously.

There are some clear connections here between ideas about social infrastructure and recent writings on how the university might become more connected, more embedded, in its contexts. Susan Wright (2016) and Ron Barnett (2018) both use the metaphor of ecology in order to insist that the cloisters need to be opened to the 'tissue of social relationships' (Wright 2016: 59) and not simply used as a tool for the economic interests of state elites. Ron Barnett's seven interlocking ecologies includes the economy, but does not subordinate the university to it, rather like Hans Schildermans' (2021) conception of the university as a 'bundle of practices' which cannot be reduced to either a defence of the solitude of the university against markets, or an insistence that the university should be reconstituted on the basis of market logic. More radical conceptions of such moves connect to ideas and practices which connect to decolonialisation and the respect of indigeneity, as well as attempts to represent the more-than-human within what could be said to be the most 'humanist' of institutions (Meyerhoff and Thompsett 2017).

In the spirit of building on these other ideas, I want to suggest that 'infrastructure' provides a way to materialise the relations between institution and 'environment' which all these writers are calling for. With an etymology that owes much to the military and construction, the term gained its social scientific usage following a paper by Susan Leigh Star which developed the sociology of scientific knowledge insight that 'plugs, standards, and bureaucratic forms' could be studied as an element of ethnographic practice (1999: 377). This decentred the human to some extent, encouraging attention to mundane bits and pieces, particularly those that connected things that seemed remote from each other, insides and outsides, times and spaces. This was a development of Star's work on 'boundary objects', which in turn was predicated on her empirical observation that co-operation very often happens without consensus. Since many groups with different interests do co-ordinate action together, but often do not share common understandings, then how does this happen? Her answer was that there can be agreements about the use of common objects, even if there was no agreement about what these objects were for. The use of the word 'object' here should not necessarily be taken to mean a non-human material 'thing', since it really means a 'referent', which could also be a language, a practice, a place or whatever. What is important is that it provides a common orientation so that co-ordination can happen. For example, a repository or

catalogue of singular objects might allow different categories of people to access the same objects without agreement about what these objects were for, and what could be done with them. Once such an arrangement becomes scaled up, or standardised, then it becomes infrastructure (Star 2010: 605).

It seems to me that infrastructure is centrally about repetition, and that it makes certain movements easy and others more difficult. In many countries, the road and rail infrastructure makes it easy to get to the capital city, but much harder to travel between smaller towns. Star suggests various characteristics of infrastructure that build on her observations in a variety of social settings. She suggests that it is often 'invisible', has temporal and spatial reach, is embedded in and embeds social arrangements and often connects to other infrastructures or tools in ways that sometimes make it hard to change (Star 2010: 611). It is 'installed' in keyboards and membership of particular groups, in clothing and qualifications, language and buildings, forms and budgets. It is also in movement, never final and finished because infrastructures can fall into disuse, fail or disappear, depending on how useful they are at structuring relations which need to be repeated. This allows us to suggest that a boundary object is ill-structured infrastructure, and well-structured boundary objects become infrastructure. The distinction is effectively one of how standardised the relations become, how routine and codified the movements across a boundary might be.

So how might we apply this concept to the problem of the 'civic' university and the claimed desire for the university to become more porous? Let's assume that the university has boundaries, and that these might be described in multiple ways. Where and when the university operates would provide a preliminary glimpse of such boundaries, policed by doors that can only be accessed by pass cards held on lanyards, are locked after 5:30 p.m., or have intimidating or confusing notices and perhaps people sitting at reception desks. Or perhaps just because they are located in certain parts of the city, where certain sorts of people feel more comfortable than others because of the colour of their skin or the cost of buying a cup of coffee.

But as Star's work suggests, boundaries can also be marked in other ways – by language, clothing, money – as well as built into application forms, rates of pay and indicators for promotion. And in our digital times, by access to particular websites and platforms, written by people who talk and write in particular ways. As Mary Douglas argued, institutions think through their forms of classification of people and things, their departments and faculties, the boxes and gaps which constitute what is comprehensible

and what is not, what can find support and resource, and what falls through the gaps and is rarely seen (1987). So, what and who did I see once I stepped outside the university?

Boundaries

The question of boundaries has assumed a particular importance in my thinking about the IEI, in part because I began by imagining it as something that would allow the university to 'reach out' into the city. Fairly quickly, the limits of that rather tentacular metaphor became clear and I began to think about involutions, semi-permeable membranes, colonies, skunk works and any other ways in which the definitions of 'inside' and 'outside' could be blurred and complicated. As my academic practice took me out of the classroom, and distanced me from the problems of teaching, assessment, grants and publications, so did I become more confused about what I was doing and how I was doing it. In this work, ideas about space time and capacities seem to have become categories that help me understand the nature of the problem that I was dealing with.

Space

This was the most visible difference because I simply spent less time in my office. Instead, I had meetings outside the university, visiting workplaces or cafes and buying people cups of tea. The university I work in is based at the top of a hill, with a mock Victorian bell tower that looms over the city, so the idea of 'coming down' into the city became an initial way to think about how space shapes expectations. Early on, I remember one activist asking me rather pointedly whether I would meet them in town, and I had the feeling I was being tested. We eventually met in a community café which grew out of a long-term squatted social centre project. It was furnished with scavenged school desks and tables and decorated with posters for a thousand lost causes. I had none of my usual props around me – no shelves of books, desk and dusty gown hanging on the back of the door. I felt vulnerable, but also more alert, confused about what I was doing there and how I could and should act.

   The problem was that when I did try to do things up at the university, the setting often got in the way. I remember a large event on community wealth building which I and others organised 'up' in a chemistry lecture

theatre to a good-sized audience but far too many of the questions ended up being about the university, and its various failures of commission and omission. The panelled wood pomp of the lecture hall – and the panel of speakers raised above the audience – was not an environment that made many 'non-university' people feel at home, so they were (quite understandably) pushing back. Why was the university becoming one of the biggest property developers in the city? Why was it so white and middle class? Why was more money being spent on one new university library than was spent on all the council libraries in the city? This was not their space, so it became the topic of concern, and often hostility. I began to feel defensive, as if their accusations were aimed at me, and I needed to explain that the university was not that bad, and it was doing some good things.

On a smaller scale I was asked by a local co-operative organiser whether a small left-wing group could get access to a seminar room in the evening so that they could have a reading group on classic and contemporary radical texts. It sounded like the kind of thing I should be able to arrange, but I rapidly discovered that there would be a form to be filled and authorised, that all external 'guest speakers' would have to be named and I would have to attest that they were not members of any radical groups, and that a substantial fee would have to be paid to cover the costs of having a 'porter' stay late and lock up the building when they had gone. I had begun our conversation by talking about my willingness to engage in doing helpful things in reviving the local co-operative development function and ended up by saying that I could not even arrange a room for a reading group. Or rather, that I could, but it would take a while and they would have to pay. (And even that payment would probably require that someone was set up as an external customer, with the appropriate code on our Enterprise Resource Planning software, and the timetabling request routed through the online room bookings system that is only available to employees, and even then only if you run a virtual private network on the device that you access it through.)

Taking the university out of the university meant that I could not access the props, but it also meant that the institution did not get in the way. A table in a café did not require any pre-planning or authorisation, and neither was it populated by too many expectations of what could or could not be done. It was, to a greater or lesser extent, a public space, one in which we could meet with less institutional baggage, and hence set aside (for a while) some of those positional questions. This was largely what the

'micro-campus' was intended to do but given that its opening was considerably delayed by COVID-19, it is too early to say yet how it is working. But it was clear to me that the most material parts of infrastructure, the Victorian buildings, needed to be avoided if I was not to be pulled into some predictable positions of relative power and status, entitlement and resentment.

Time

If the spaces of my practice were changing, and I could have some agency in that, it was (as Maria Piacentini et al. 2019: 330, have observed) more difficult to do something about time. Universities, like many large institutions, have a rhythm to their activities which is shaped by teaching terms and examination boards, grant deadlines and the glacial pace of academic publishing. Many of the people I was talking to (particularly those in 'business', whether conventional or alternative) simply did not understand why the university had to be so sluggish and why decisions could not be made within a week and resources deployed accordingly. Given the gravity and importance of the issues they were dealing with – poverty and austerity, racism and exclusion, climate change and so on – the idea that nothing could happen until this time next year was profoundly difficult for them to deal with. A quick bit of research for a small and vulnerable organisation could easily turn into a nightmare of full economic costs, pay rates, job adverts and interviews. (Unless it was done for free, and in your own time.)

One co-operative activist who I had been talking to for a while was keen to get some sort of position within IEI, and I was keen to support him. After some enquiries, I realised that the only way to do this was by filling in a form which specified what sort of visiting or honorary person he was – researcher, fellow, professor – and for how long I would want him. Each title came with particular demands and expectations, so I selected a title, asked him for a CV and some supporting information. However, IEI does not sit within the school and faculty structure and is effectively resourced and managed by the person responsible for TQ, the pro-vice chancellor for Research. This authorisation was not an option on the form, so I would have to get permission for the post within the departmental structure, even though it is an initiative that clearly does not sit within that structure. Even then, it was not clear who authorised this form. The faculty dean or my head of school? Eventually it went to my head of school, who refused to agree the cost-free appointment because they felt that the activist might be

competing with the School of Management for work with social enterprises in the local area. Something like nine months after I had agreed to support his request, I had to go back and tell him that I could not do it.

I simply did not have the authority or budget to cut through established protocols and get things done, and this often meant painful and embarrassing delays. One funded project which had been awarded EU money took eight months to move through finance, legal and contracts. Two academic friends agreed to work on it, unpaid, so that we would continue to be partners in this social economy network with eight other EU co-operative institutions and which by that time had already begun. It then took a further five months before I could untangle their payment, being accused along the way of breaking the university rules on appointment, pay rates, the employment of non-UK workers, and then later of being in danger of breaking contract with the network. Each part of the institution had its own imperatives – grant awards, finance, contracts, legal and finally human resources – as well as the usual delays due to holidays, pressure of other work and so on.

So speed was a problem, but on the other hand, taking time to create relationships was also important, and that often led to more leisurely cups of tea in cafes. Many of the activists I was talking to were profoundly suspicious about the university, seeing it as an institution which was far too white and middle class, and noting that – for the previous century and a half – it seemed to have been largely uninterested in the city that it was based in.[3] This meant that I could not assume that people would be enthusiastic about the idea of a white male professor from a School of Management riding to their rescue, and so I needed to spend time building trust before I could build anything else. Being around, and gradually getting recognised, seemed to mean that my name started to be passed around networks, and also that I could learn something about the histories of the city and its institutions. This was not something I could do rapidly, because being too instrumental, moving too fast, would not inspire the sort of confidence I needed to build durable networks.

In this sense, being a slow(er) academic was necessary in order that I was not simply seen to be someone who was engaged in the sort of 'extractive' research that involved people like me asking my questions, then collecting the data and then taking it back up the hill to write a paper. Many academics appear to assume that their research 'subjects' have the time to answer their questions, but it seems to me that ordinary people are just as distrustful of academics as they would be of anyone else who claims that

they are doing a survey but really wants to sell you something. The answer to the (often rather suspicious) 'who's asking?' question is often just to be recommended by people that the other person knows, and to some extent be a 'native' of their context. For me, this meant becoming knowledgeable about the existing boundary objects and infrastructure that tied them together, however loosely.

In other words, if I could say that I had a seat on the Bristol Green Capital Partnership, or that I had worked with a certain person in the City Council or some community anchor organisation or was able to show that I understood why it would be hard for this organisation to work with this other one, then I was showing that I understood context. I was demonstrating that I cared about Bristol and its people because I had been here for a bit and had taken the trouble to get to know something about its history, its institutions, connections and boundaries. To some extent, I was myself becoming a boundary object, someone who might usefully connect the insides of the university to the outsides of the city. But that was not uncomplicated, because it meant that interests had to be recognised and translated, and to do that, they had often to be named.

Identity and capacity

Sometimes it was an advantage being 'Professor Parker', and sometimes it got in the way. Either way, I was continually aware of needing to be conscious of my positionality, of my language, of deciding whether it was useful to conjure the university into the room, or to try and make it disappear. (The same was true of a multiplicity of other intersections of my identity too – white, cis-male, hetero, middle class and so on – but I will not be focussing directly on those here.[4]) Sometimes it was clear that a small organisation wanted the reflected status of having the university on board with their funding bid, or to be mentioned on an advisory board, or even getting some resources or money from an institution that they perceived to be wealthy and influential. They seemed to imagine me as a cash machine, or as having an influence 'up the hill' that I simply did not have. I tried to manage expectations, but I know I often disappointed.

On other occasions, I just did not have the capacity to help. I remember meeting with a small bike repair co-operative, and what they really needed was some help with their website, their marketing and their accounts. At that point, I had no way that I could help with something that small and

specific, no funds to employ someone to do this for them, despite the fact that I work in a part of the university where modules are taught on all these matters. They wanted something practical done rapidly and cheaply, and I had nothing to offer. My interests and theirs were aligned, but I could do nothing because I did not have the capacity to help them, and we have not met since.

On a later occasion, I was approached by someone from a small local financial institution who I had already met a few times at different events before. I asked, as I often do, whether there was anything I could help with, and she suggested a student project on branding, a piece of research on customer data, and contacts with the finance function at the university so that she could talk to them about a new savings product he was trialling with some local employers. To my pleasure and amazement, I managed to fulfil all the asks within a few weeks. Depending on the longer-term outcome of the three connections, I hope that she will now be telling other people that I am effective and can be trusted. In other words, she will be suggesting that my interests and capacities are aligned, and that the fact that I am a professor in a posh university up the hill might be an asset.

My point here is that identity and capacity are entangled in some complex ways. People might assume that I am a particular kind of person and that I can do certain kinds of things, and their assumptions might be more or less accurate. However, much of my capacity also depends on factors which are simply beyond my control, such as money that needs to be spent by the end of the financial year, the availability of a particular post-doctoral research assistant, or whether a senior member of the university sees an advantage in being attached to a particular project or organisation. Symmetrically, I might make all sorts of assumptions about the people I am trying to work with, but consequently misunderstand something about the way that their institutional or local context allows for or prevents action. Summarising these problems, Piacentini and colleagues (2019: 332) describe this as 'differing perspectives on resources and resource investments', 'competing goals and goal alignment', and 'diverse assumptions and views about the other party'. I do not like their language because it sounds a bit too objectified, but I think they capture the problem well enough.

There have been many projects that I have discussed in cafes that sounded excellent, and all parties finished their cake agreeing that we should move forward. And then we did not. I assume that part of the problem here was rather like the way that Star focussed on 'plugs, stand-

ards, and bureaucratic forms' (1999: 377), the connectors that allow work, time and money to move predictably between institutions. Identities and capacities need to somehow be made commensurable and 'formal' so that they can be comprehensible to forms and budgets. Without such infrastructure, boundary objects can easily fail.

Extra-mural

My father spent most of his career working as an 'extra-mural' lecturer for the University of Birmingham in the English Midlands, and he literally worked outside the walls of the university. He taught about geography and politics to adult students in libraries, church halls, community centres and schools. Though he did have an office at work, it was in a separate building where the staff like him worked, and his links with the departments of geography and politics at Birmingham were, to my knowledge, not very strong. This was a common model in UK higher education in the twentieth century, with almost all of the older universities having staff who taught extra-mural courses in poetry, botany and history across their geographical areas, turning up in a badly heated room in a small town and being 'the university'. These were not credit bearing modules, just adults who paid a small fee (heavily subsidised) for a cup of tea, biscuit, and a talk about something they were interested in.

   This seems antiquated now, as universities in my country have become fortresses which sell knowledge for a very high fee to people of a particular age (and often class and ethnicity too) who are taught in large groups within university buildings or using controlled access digital infrastructure (Barnett 2018; Sperlinger et al. 2018). The academics who teach them are rewarded for writing obscure articles that debate scholastic points and are often kept behind paywalls so that only other academics can read them. Either that, or those in science, engineering and medicine are imagined as researchers who respond to the desires of corporations, creating 'innovation' for capitalism. No wonder that many politicians, policy makers and ordinary people do not think that universities are for them, and that they are places that are populated by clever people who talk in mysteries and have no interest in them. The premise of this special issue seems to be that the university needs to be reimagined to prevent it from becoming an institution which is more concerned with its own reproduction than questions of social justice, climate change, democratic education and so on. This

article, ironically being published in yet another special issue in yet another journal, has aimed at showing why writing papers like this will never be enough unless we think hard about where, when and why academic labour is performed.

This is not to say that questions of teaching, writing and leadership disappear (Brink 2018; Schwittay 2021), but rather that it seems to me that they are often seen to be the only important questions, internal ones, while more structural issues concerning where, when and how the university is performed are then assumed rather than foregrounded. To put it simply, if teaching and research continues to take place within our existing institutions, it is unlikely to produce much that is different. A class on 'post-capitalist economy' taught by someone with a PhD in a university lecture theatre from 9–11 on a Monday morning to a group of 20-year-olds who can afford to pay £9,250 per year and not work much for three years is reproducing as much as it challenges. Along similar lines, that is why any notion of the academic as a heroic boundary crosser (or indeed, as a boundary object) is not particularly helpful. The point of this argument is to suggest that the durability of connections across boundaries is what is important in decentring the university, and not their personification in either myself, or my father. We both used what resources and routines that were available to us at the time.

Theoretically, this article is probably best understood as a meditation on the relationship between institutions, infrastructures and boundary objects. I'm assuming that these concepts are arranged here in a gradient between formalisation and vagueness, where the power of the institution is its capacity to organise its world, and the possibility of boundary objects opens up the idea that organising might be possible without strong agreements. Ideas about 'ecology' and 'practice' certainly help in describing the overall context (Schildermans 2018; Wright 2016), but it is the materiality of the concept of infrastructures that might help to understand how to encourage a more durable translation and movement of resources. This means that the university needs to actively participate in the co-creation of infrastructures, and that these might involve different understandings of where, when and how the university manifests itself. For Tim May, this is a process of 'active intermediation', the creation and curation of ways of working which 'build bridges', a very infrastructural term in itself. These would be 'experimental spaces to investigate the relations between expectations, knowledge and practice in systemic collaborations with groups outside the university'

(2019: 7). Being outside the walls then becomes a strategy which might enable a different version of the institution – teaching in a shopping centre, working with paid citizen researchers who define their own research questions, assessing students on how effectively they have helped third sector organisations, writing for a community newsletter.

But this is a frightening prospect for most academics. The boundaries of the university also shelter people who read journals like this one, they protect the mysteries within, and allow us to claim mastery over a small part of the world. It is precisely in this way that ideas about 'academic freedom' become defensive claims, and 'disciplinary excellence' a code word for a refusal to engage with anything else. In their monastic origins, universities are easily enough imagined as places of shelter and withdrawal, places that allow a very specialist practice to be conducted without too much interference from the hurly-burly of the world. This seems to suggest that any radical proposals to change the way that we organise work in universities also need to think about some of the ways that infrastructures organise attachment, emotion and identity. Lauren Berlant has referred to 'affective infrastructures', which I take to mean something about the halo of affect that hangs to any repeated social practice. Universities, with their imaginary accretion of ivy, their spectral quadrangles guarded by gateways, and endless rows of books, are marvellous examples of the pleasures and pains of institutions. Following Berlant, if we think about infrastructure as something which allows us to see and speak of patterns in social form – 'the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure' (2016: 393) – then the imaginary of the university needs to develop a new infrastructure too. Less Harry Potter theme park, more public library.

Monasteries aside, the other model for religious life was the evangelical one, mendicant perhaps, but certainly itinerant, going to live with the people and rejecting the cloisters. Or at least, only going back to the monastery on occasion, and not staying long. If the university is to be distributed, then not only does it need a new infrastructure to allow for it to manifest in shopping centres and the room above a pub, but it also needs a new conception of where, when and who academics are and what they do. That, I suspect, might be the hardest part of all.

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Notes

1. See https://brisiei.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/.

2. This was on the site of the original Bristol University Settlement from 1911. The settlement movement of the late nineteenth century saw several universities in industrial cities establishing satellites populated by volunteer staff and students dedicated to bringing knowledge and skills to the people of the city. It is an early example of the extra-mural distribution of the twentieth century university in the United Kingdom.

3. In addition, going further back, much of the money that had built some of the early buildings was donated by families that had become wealthy because of the Atlantic slave trade, a fact that the university now fully acknowledges.

4. I could have footnoted this sentence in brackets, but I've left it in the text, because I do not want you to think that I think it's not important. I just do not have space here to do it justice.

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